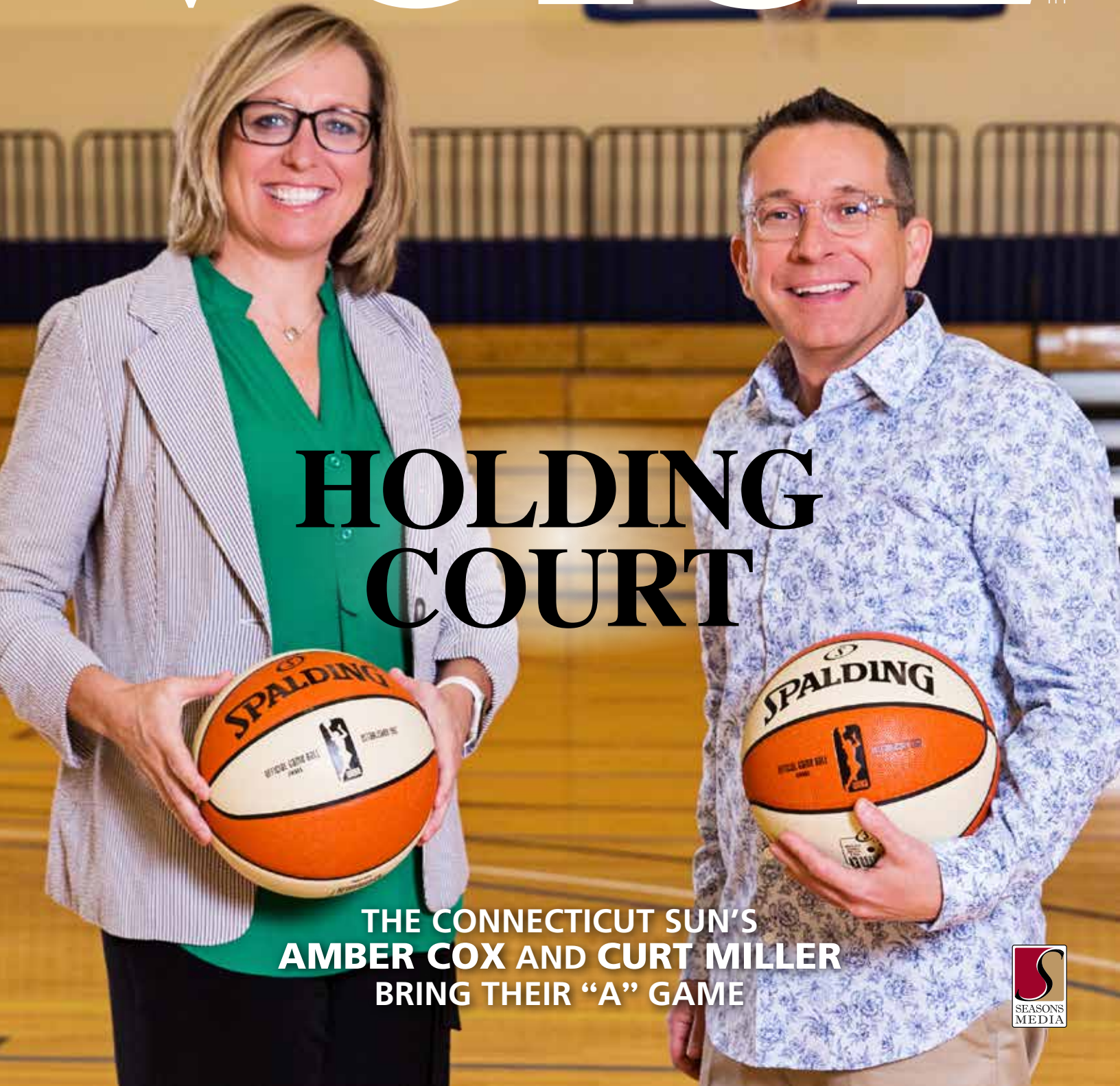


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CONNECTICUT VOICE™

EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome to the summer issue of *Connecticut VOICE!*

Thank you to everyone who has offered feedback, thoughts and suggestions following our launch in March. Your voice is an integral part of *Connecticut VOICE* and we want to hear from you. Whether it's through social media, email or in person, your insights play a crucial role – they help us bring you stories that will get you thinking and talking.

In this issue, our cover story showcases Curt Miller and Amber Cox of the Connecticut Sun WNBA team. Miller, the head coach and general manager,

and Cox, the vice president, share their coming-out experiences and reflect on how being gay has impacted their careers in sports. We also spend some time with playwright Jeremy O. Harris, check out the Open Door Closet at Southern Connecticut State University, and catch up with YouTube sensation Randy Rainbow.

On a more serious note, we look at the obstacles – and, in some cases, downright disrespect – that transgender patients can face in a hospital or other medical setting. And one mother shares her first-person account of what she thought and felt as she accompanied her transgender son on his surgery day.

It is summer, after all, so we have some lighter fare too: a trip to Palm Springs, advice on how to embrace healthy eating at home, and tips for how to travel in style.

Please connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and let us know what you think.

Happy reading,

Cara

Cara Rosner, Editor
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“MY MISSION
IN LIFE IS NOT
MERELY TO
SURVIVE, BUT
TO **THRIVE.**”

—Maya Angelou



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CT VOICE PREMIERE PARTY
PHOTOS BY TODD FAIRCHILD



We were thrilled to celebrate the launch of *Connecticut VOICE* with an amazing bash March 9 at The Avon Old Farms Hotel. Members of the LGBTQ community and their allies got a sneak peek at the inaugural issue of the magazine over cocktails, hors d'oeuvres - and, of course, some Barbara Streisand.





ARTS & CULTURE //



Writing His Next Act

**Playwright
Jeremy O. Harris**
looms large
as he talks about the
past – and the future

By **FRANK RIZZO**

Playwright Jeremy O. Harris has one overarching goal with his works: to make theatergoers think.
Photo by **FRANK RIZZO**

At six-foot-five, sporting a towering Afro and wearing a mustard yellow Acne Studios denim outfit and black Doc Martens, Jeremy O. Harris could stop traffic – or at least act as a warning to proceed with caution.

His two plays that premiered this past season in New York, “Slave Play” and “Daddy,” have proclaimed just as boldly that this queer, black playwright is someone to be reckoned with as he explores taboo subjects of sex, desire and race.

“There should be a 13th astrological house created to be able to comprehend him,” says James Nicola, artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop who put ‘Slave Play’ on the fast track to production last year. “It would be the House of Theatrics. Almost no one I’ve met has such a vibrant, innate impulse to dramatize, to tell a story. When we first encountered ‘Slave Play,’ this is what immediately struck me - his outrageous theatricality, coupled to his wit and his compassion.”

Arriving at Heirloom Restaurant in New Haven for this interview, his physicality is imposing at first but immediately softens with his broad, welcoming smile, warm exuberance, and casual chat about mutual acquaintances.

Throughout the burger-and-Coke lunch, Harris speaks with the speed, fluidity and flourish of a supremely confident young man on the run, dashing to meet deadlines and confounding expectations, while dodging people and policies that stand in his way. He speaks with humor, charm and frankness about a wide variety of subjects, including his experience at Yale School of Drama, his outlook on the changes in American theater, and his plans to live in Berlin, Germany.

In May, Harris, who turns 30 in June, graduated from the three-year graduate playwriting program at Yale School of Drama. While that would be seen as a career launch for most students, Harris is already in full orbit.



Alan Cumming (left), Ronald Peet and Charlayne Woodard (right) in “Daddy”

Last fall, his “Slave Play” was fast-tracked at the New York Theatre Workshop and received the kind of reviews that emerging writers dream about.

Jesse Green, writing in *The New York Times*, called it a “willfully provocative, gaudily transgressive and altogether staggering new play. ... [Harris] writes as if he’s known all his life how to twist audiences into all kinds of pretzels. In particular I can say as a white person that he manipulates white discomfort expertly to the advantage of his storytelling. Until I encountered his potent brew of minstrelsy and melodrama I hadn’t known it was possible ... to cringe and laugh and blush at the same time.”

Earlier this year, his second play of the season, “Daddy,” premiered at off-Broadway’s The Pershing Square Signature Center. A co-production of the New Group and Vineyard Theatre, the production starred Alan Cumming, Ronald Peet and a 27-foot by 10-foot downstage pool. The play centered on an emerging black artist and an older, wealthy white art collector and explored their complex relationship, dealing with role play, race, religion, the art world, and daddy issues. While it did not receive another critical embrace, it was undeniably ambitious and mesmerizing as it traveled its

ever-twisting, psycho-sexual path.

“I’m not a cubbyhole guy,” Harris says. “I don’t know how to be. I’m such a baby of the Internet that I have to be over-stimulated to stay on topic.”

This fall his new play - “A Boy’s Company Presents: ‘Tell Me If I’m Hurting You,’” billed as a revenge fantasy that centers on the relationship between two young men - will be produced at off-Broadway’s Playwrights Horizons. Another new play also is slated to bow next year at off-Broadway’s Vineyard Theatre that Harris describes as “‘The Colored Museum’ on crack.” He has several film projects, too, including a screenplay for “Zola” that he co-wrote with Janicza Bravo, based off the epic Twitter thread. Another film script is in development with producer Bruce Cohen (“Milk,” “American Beauty”). Broadway producer Scott Rudin has also commissioned two plays from him as other theaters wait their turns.

He is exiting Yale in voice-to-power style in a production at the Yale School of Drama’s Carlotta Festival of New Plays (the annual showcase for third-year playwriting students) that is sure to make some cheer and others squirm in their seats.

FINDING HIS VOICE

Harris spent much of his early life in Martinsville, Virginia. His mother, a single parent, was a hairstylist and it was in her salon where he became “socialized in this hyper-queer space. And I mean queer in the sense of the things that the women in my mother’s community talked about, such as the disparate politics that mark a true queer spirit. All of this was engendered in me at a very early age.”

“It’s a surprise to a lot of people who know my work, but my queer identity was more of a social than a sexual one for most of my childhood and teenage years,” he says. “I ended up going on this weird ride where I was socially hyper-queer but I dated girls. I didn’t know I actively liked boys.”

Harris was a voracious reader and an autodidact at an early age. He read, at the suggestion of a drama teacher, all the Pulitzer Prize-winning plays in an effort to know more about the theater. When he discovered that Marquis de Sade shared the same birthday (June 2), he decided at age 12 to read the author’s “Philosophy in the Boudoir.” But he also read and memorized major chunks of the Bible.

When asked if he was ever bullied as a kid, Harris says he was, “but everyone was, and I was also a bully, too. If I was bullied for anything, it was less so for being queer and more so for being pretentious, being the know-it-all who was also fey – that can go under the umbrella of ‘faggot.’ But for me, the reason you’re being called a faggot is that you’ve read all the books on the accelerated reader list. That’s what pisses people



Ronald Peet in “Daddy” by Jeremy O. Harris



Paul Alexander Nolan and Teyonah Parris in “Slave Play”

off. Whenever I was bullied, it was from people who I could immediately bully back because they weren’t smart. I was always surrounded by a clique of other kids who were into me being pretentious: the reading crowd. I joke that I don’t make friends with people who don’t read. All my friends here are people who read – a lot.”

It wasn’t until he went to DePaul University in Chicago that his queerness “took on less of a social lens and more of a physical one. In college, I had this moment at the end of my freshman year and it was like, ‘Oh, I’m gay.’ It was like an immediate recognition. I told my friends and it was very little Sturm und Drang. Two months after I came out to my friends, my mom said she felt I had a secret and I said, ‘Well, I’m gay. I like guys.’ She said she thought so but wasn’t sure. She was totally fine with that.”

He left DePaul after his first year to go to Los Angeles and eventually his paths crossed with Isabella Summers of the band Florence + the Machine, who said if he wrote a play, she would compose the music. He did, and “Xander Xyst, Dragon 1,” about a Grindr date with a straight porn star, was presented at a New York theater festival where he became hooked on writing for the theater. That was followed by an invitation to the MacDowell Colony, where in 2016 he wrote “Daddy.” That play proved to be a factor in getting accepted into Yale. While in New Haven, he wrote “Slave Play.” Both works deal with legacies of white supremacy and the complex issues of black identity.

THE YALE YEARS

When he was told he could not direct his proposed work for the Carlotta Festival, Harris withdrew it and wrote a new play that might make some at Yale cringe with its frankness about his experience there: “YELL,” subtitled “a ‘documentary’ of my time here.”

“It’s a rage play about what it means to be in an integrated education system my entire life, and the play asks, what does that do to the psychic life of a black queer person — and what’s that like here at the Yale School of Drama?”

Harris says his Yale experience is a complicated one.

“I thought the artist I articulated that I wanted to be when I came here, which was a political artist, would be super nurtured here,” he says. While he says allowance for that kind of work was often “great and amazing,” he had doubts if he received “the tools to facilitate interdisciplinary conversations” for the kinds of works he wants to do. He felt limited in breaking through to Yale’s other “academic silos” but still managed to find his own connections and colleagues at the schools of art, architecture, divinity and music.

“It’s been a really interesting push and pull because, like most institutions, they can’t completely say no to any student with enough ambition and will. But the emotional toll that it takes in getting the thing you need or want is a mess,” says Harris.

For example, during his first year, he put on “Water Sports; or insignificant white boys,” an unsanctioned,



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interactive production, during a school break and staged it at the art gallery.

“So much of the pedagogy here is centered on a production model that mimics the production model of Yale Rep. And if your work doesn’t work inside that model, then you’re sort of left out in the cold,” he says.

RELATIONSHIP WITH MCCRANEY

Also “complicated” is the arrival of Tarell Alvin McCraney, an American playwright and actor who came in for Harris’ second year to head the playwriting program. McCraney, who graduated from the Yale School of Drama’s playwriting program 12 years ago with a similar buzz to what Harris is experiencing, won with Barry Jenkins the 2017 Oscar for Writing (Adapted Screenplay) for “Moonlight.” He made his Broadway playwriting debut with “Choir Boy” this season and has created a new series for Oprah Winfrey’s network this summer.


As Harris describes it, “It’s been a very difficult transition going from having a person who very much took care of

us because she chose [the three students in the class]. “I’m not sure [McCraney] would have chosen me. He was also someone who was having a lot of balls in the air. But I think there are things that have been so great about having someone like Tarell here — and who has had such a similar trajectory as me.”

He adds: “But that’s one of the dangers of identity politics. It flattens things. One of the professors here who has understood the work I’m doing the best and whom I feel I connect to the most is [playwright] Amy Herzog, a white woman but her relationship to text is very similar to mine.”

Harris says he’ll be living in New York after graduation for a while, “before I go to Berlin for my new life.

I don’t know if I want to stay in America and be a playwright. I just find it limiting sometimes and there’s not as much space for growth.”

Was this a serious plan or more of a notion? Before I could follow through with my question, he was dashing off to his next rehearsal, his next play, and the next stage of his art. 



Frank Rizzo has written about the arts in Connecticut and nationally for more than 40 years; for the *Hartford Courant*, *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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Reel Talk

Best known for its annual festival, Out Film CT brings viewers together year round

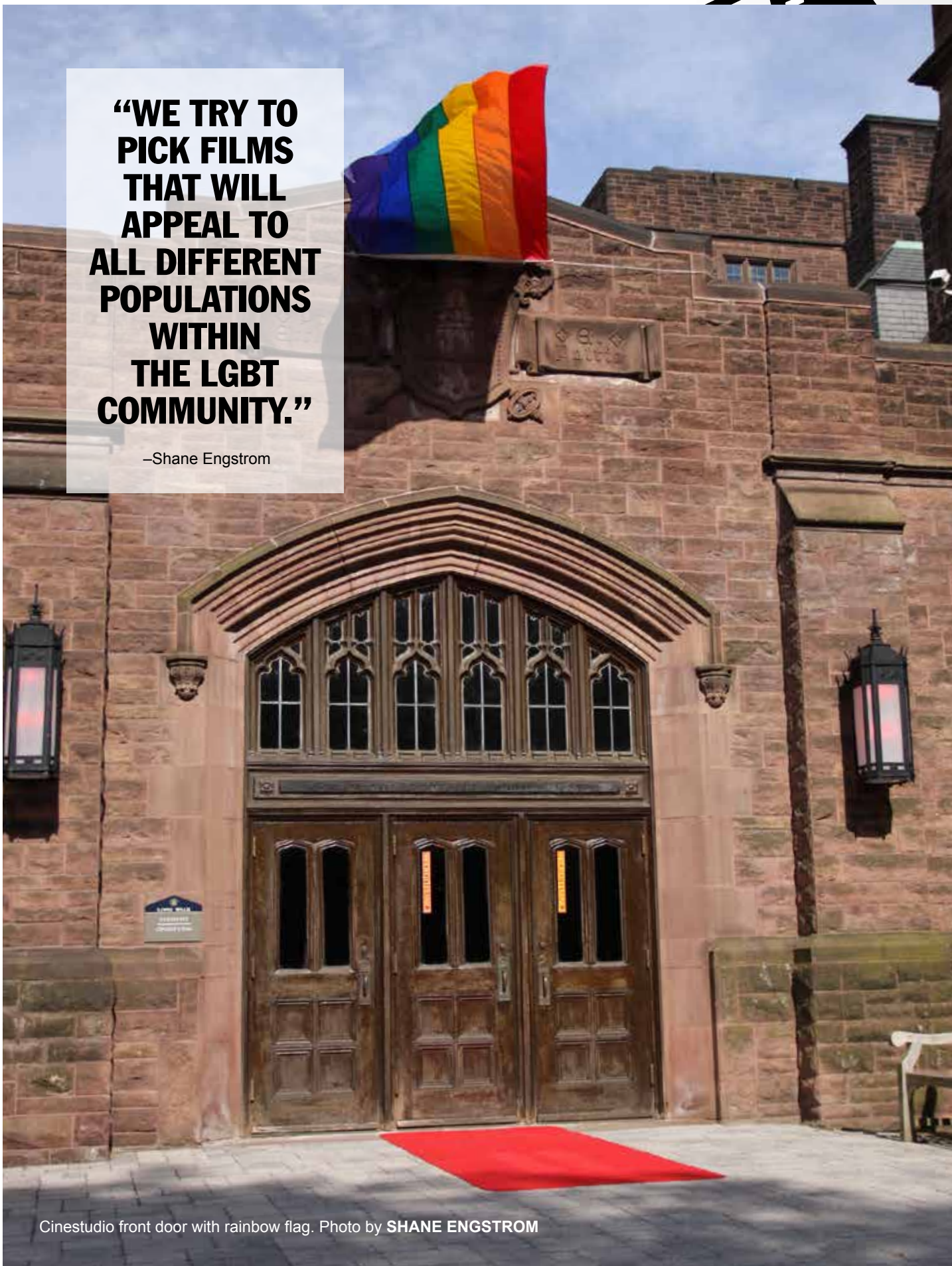
By CARA ROSNER

In an age when movies are so easily accessible on televisions, tablets and the like, there's still something special about sitting in a movie theater, surrounded by other people, waiting in anticipation as the lights dim and a film begins on the big screen.

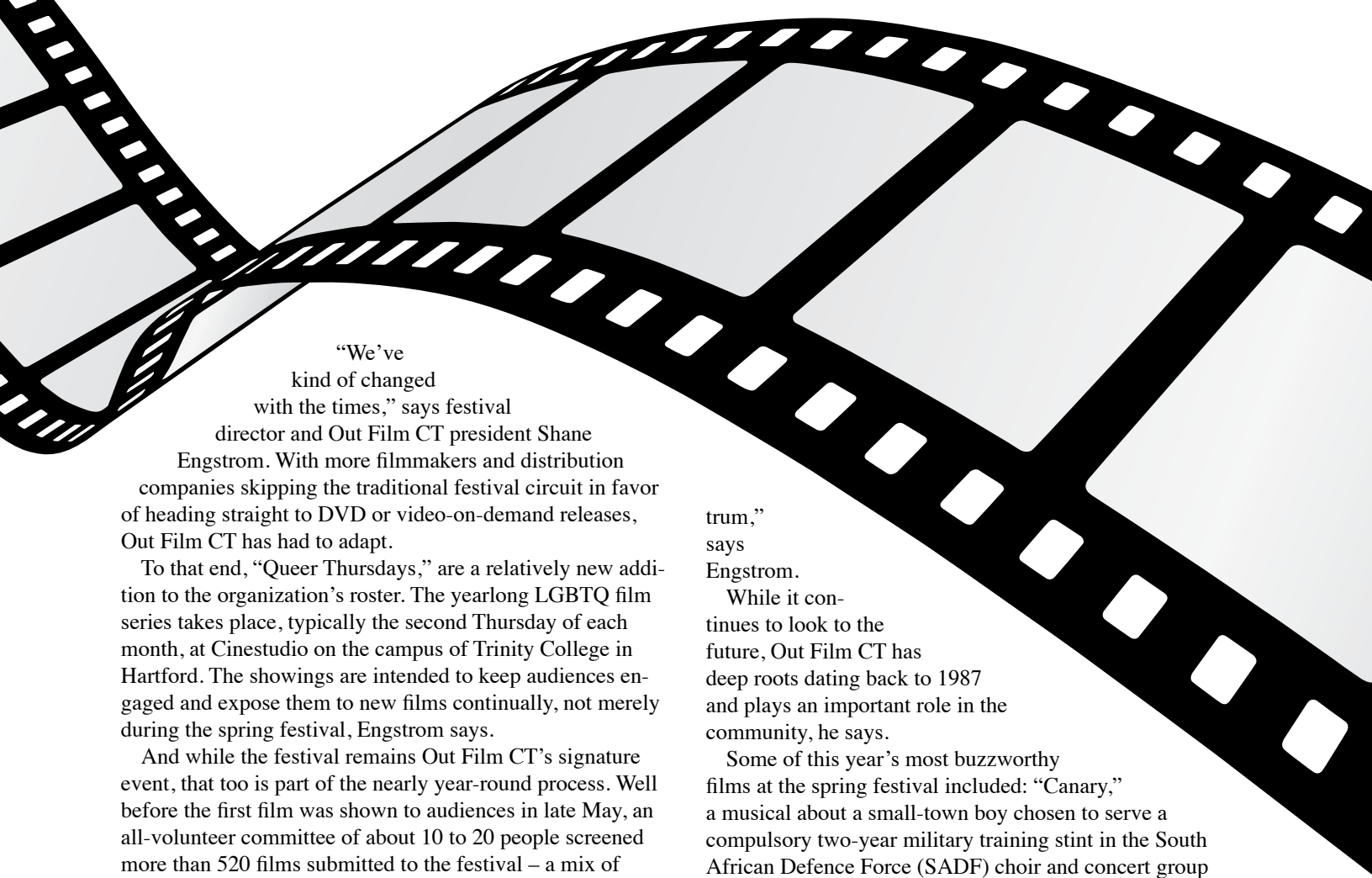
For the LGBTQ community, a driving force behind this type of experience is Out Film CT. Perhaps best known for its annual film festival, which draws about 2,000 attendees to Hartford (this year's event runs from May 31 through June 8), the organization is evolving amid a changing landscape – creating more of a yearlong presence along the way.

**“WE TRY TO
PICK FILMS
THAT WILL
APPEAL TO
ALL DIFFERENT
POPULATIONS
WITHIN
THE LGBT
COMMUNITY.”**

—Shane Engstrom



Cinestudio front door with rainbow flag. Photo by SHANE ENGSTROM



“We’ve kind of changed with the times,” says festival director and Out Film CT president Shane Engstrom. With more filmmakers and distribution companies skipping the traditional festival circuit in favor of heading straight to DVD or video-on-demand releases, Out Film CT has had to adapt.

To that end, “Queer Thursdays,” are a relatively new addition to the organization’s roster. The yearlong LGBTQ film series takes place, typically the second Thursday of each month, at Cinestudio on the campus of Trinity College in Hartford. The showings are intended to keep audiences engaged and expose them to new films continually, not merely during the spring festival, Engstrom says.

And while the festival remains Out Film CT’s signature event, that too is part of the nearly year-round process. Well before the first film was shown to audiences in late May, an all-volunteer committee of about 10 to 20 people screened more than 520 films submitted to the festival – a mix of shorts, documentaries and features. The festival accepted submissions from August through March.

Screening the films, and ultimately deciding which ones make the festival, are no small tasks, Engstrom notes, and organizers are seeking additional volunteers interested in helping with the screening process. Every year, the group is tasked with finding the right mix of films that offer something for everyone.

“We try to pick films that will appeal to all different populations within the LGBT community,” says Engstrom.

New this year, the festival has showcased youth-focused films at Real Art Ways in Hartford, in partnership with the venue as well as with True Colors, a Hartford-based nonprofit that provides education, support and advocacy for LGBTQ youth. Featuring these films, chosen from the broader group submitted to the festival, “allows us to put together a program of shorts that really represent the full LGBTQ spec-

trum,” says Engstrom.

While it continues to look to the future, Out Film CT has deep roots dating back to 1987 and plays an important role in the community, he says.

Some of this year’s most buzzworthy films at the spring festival included: “Canary,” a musical about a small-town boy chosen to serve a compulsory two-year military training stint in the South African Defence Force (SADF) choir and concert group during the height of apartheid; “Tell it to the Bees,” the story of a doctor in 1950s small-town Britain who develops a relationship with her young patient’s mother; and “The Shiny Shrimps,” about an Olympic champion at the end of his career who makes a homophobic statement on television



Image from 2019 film *Mapplethorpe* (starring Matt Smith as Robert Mapplethorpe) courtesy Samuel Goldwyn Films.



Image from 2019 opening night film “Tell It to the Bees,” starring Anna Paquin and Holliday Grainger.
Photo by **NEIL DAVIDSON LOUISE BEATTIE**

and, as punishment, has to coach a flamboyant and amateur gay water polo team.

For many people, the festival is an annual event they look forward to, knowing they’ll see films that will get them thinking – and talking. But the event wasn’t an immediate success when it debuted more than 30 years ago.

Initially, Out Film CT was known as *AlteRnaTiveS*, founded in 1987 by Bill Mann as a gay and lesbian cultural group in Hartford at a time when LGBTQ social activism was on the rise. The group’s first film festival in 1988 took place at Cinestudio, co-directed by Terri Reid and Paul Brenner. But organizers struggled to publicize it and had difficulty finding an audience in the early days. Saddled with programming issues and trouble filling seats, organizers wondered if the event would last past its fourth year, when attendance hit a low point.

Over time, though, the festival gained a foothold. One turning point came in 1992, when then-director Tyler

Polhemus focused on reinventing the festival. That year, queer icon Quentin Crisp attended the opening night screening of “The Naked Civil Servant,” a high-profile biographical film based on Crisp’s 1968 book of the same name. Under Polhemus’ leadership, the festival expanded from one weekend to two.

In 1994, the festival hosted the sold-out Connecticut premiere of “The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love,” fresh from the Sundance Film Festival, and the film’s director and writer, Maria Maggenti, attended the Hartford showing. Also that year, lesbian documentarian Barbara Hammer came to Cinestudio to discuss her work in South Africa.

Fast-forward to 2007: the festival earned the Outstanding Project Award from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism for its work to enhance arts, history, film and tourism in the state. That same year, the organization changed its name to Out Film CT to better reflect its film-focused






mission. Soon after, Engstrom became festival director and began working with committee members to further expand and enhance the festival.

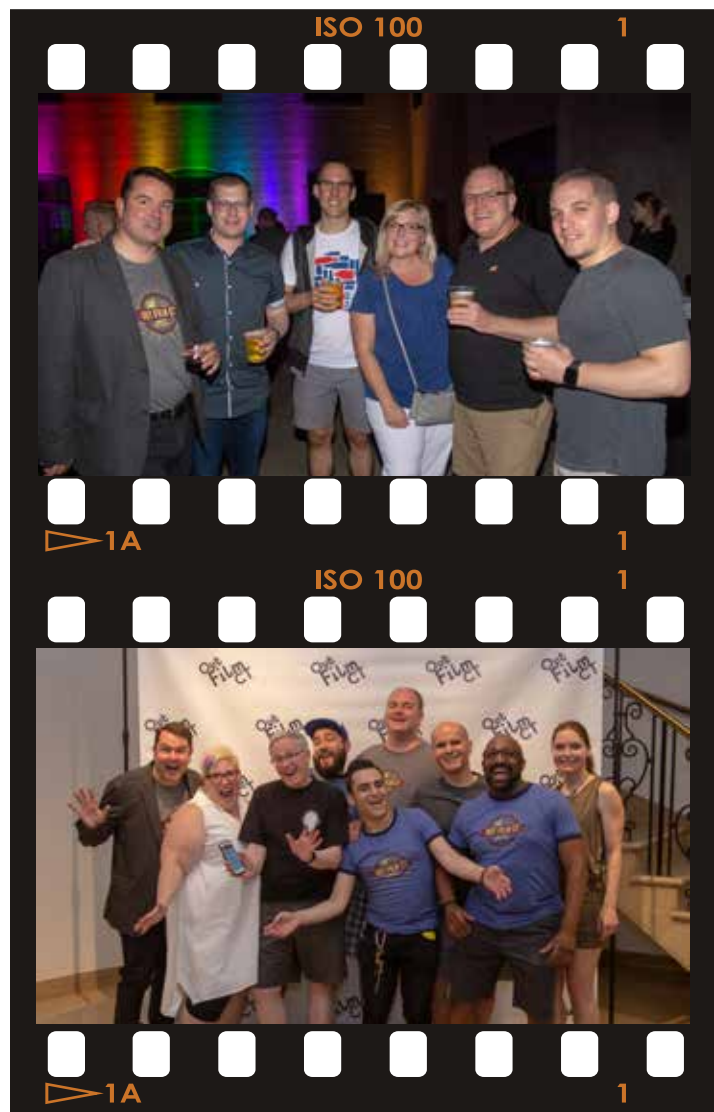
In an increasingly digital age, Out Film CT keeps changing with the times. Engstrom, for instance, remembers how filmmakers used to submit films on VHS in his early years as director; this year, the festival didn't even get any DVD submissions; they were all digital links.

But while technology and the organization's scope may change, Out Film CT remains steadfast in its mission to showcase quality work and bring people together – sitting in the same room, looking at the same screen - particularly at the annual festival.

“It's the state's largest LGBT arts event that we know of,” says Engstrom. “We think it's an important event to bring the community together, because there are so few of those these days.”

For more information about Out Film CT, including events and volunteer opportunities, visit outfilmct.org. 

Cara Rosner is editor of Connecticut VOICE. She has been a Connecticut-based journalist for nearly 20 years and loves writing about the people, places and organizations that make this state great.



Top left photo: Film Fest opening night party. Photo by Shane Engstrom. Top Right: Closing night party at the Wadsworth Atheneum, L to R: Shane Engstrom, Ryan Krupa, Jared Ragusett, Julianna Dupuis, David Kirk, Jason McDermott., Photo by Thomas Hurlbut. Bottom: Film Fest committee members at the Wadsworth closing night party, L to R: Shane Engstrom, Beth Scanlon, Mark Sliitt, Jaime Ortega, Josh Gordon, Bill Allen, James Rogers, Keith Jackson, Marina Yurieva, Photo by Thomas Hurlbut.

“OUT FILM CT REMAINS STEADFAST IN ITS MISSION TO SHOWCASE QUALITY WORK AND BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER – SITTING IN THE SAME ROOM, LOOKING AT THE SAME SCREEN.”



TRAVEL //

It's hip and happening, but Palm Springs also is beautiful. Mother Nature provides a breathtaking backdrop to the fun, fashion and style of this West Coast retreat.

Where Fun Springs Eternal

This California mecca serves as a playground, home and community for many who live under the rainbow flag

By **FRANK RIZZO**

Photography by **CRAIG WROE**

As the sun's fading light gave the San Jacinto Mountains a golden glow, it also cast a serene spell over those below, admiring the view in Palm Springs, to slow down, breathe deep – and maybe even have a cocktail.

A group of LGBTQ men and women of all ages gathered at the pool and rooftop lounge of the new Kimpton Rowan Palm Springs Hotel, an elegant-casual spot for such sunsets and an even better one to eye all sorts of pleasurable scenery of the human kind.

I was there in late summer for an annual national conference of gay journalists, many of whom were there for the first time. Others, like myself, had returned for another enjoyable escape; but some, too, had decided to live there, drawn to this odd oasis of under-the-radar delights in the desert – while still being within striking distance of a major city or two.

I wanted to know from this poolside crowd what the pull of this place was, acting as a playground, home and community for so many who live under a rainbow flag? How did it evolve and, most importantly, what is it like now?

But first I wanted to understand the lay of the land, and veteran visitors gave me the basics for this desert outpost most widely known for its hot springs (20 boutique mineral water resorts and hideaways), golf tournaments, rehab centers, mid-century architecture and its 20 or so clothing-optional resorts and spas, including some for the straight crowd. Here's what I learned:

It's a string of desert pearls (and some zircons). The area is made up of a series of small towns that extend from Palm Springs in the west all the way to Coachella in the eastern end. Among the two points are Desert Hot Springs, Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City, Palm Desert,

Indian Wells, Indio, and La Quinta. Palm Springs, however, is the hub of gay life.

The hipness factor went up and down, and then back up. The town, once a Mecca for Hollywood stars wanting a more private place to frolic, slid out of favor in the latter part of the 20th century when the studio system disappeared and new stars wanted fresh hideaways in St. Barts, Lake Como and Montana, leaving Palm Springs to older-generation celebs like Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and the town's former mayor and pop icon Sonny Bono, whose statue stands outside a mini mall in the heart of downtown. But a new wave of Hollywood stars, led by Leonard DiCaprio (who bought Dinah Shore's old manse), has brought a fresh generation of stars back to town.

Toasty temps. Yes, temperatures can get in the triple digits in the summer season, but it's a dry heat and mostly manageable. If it gets too brutal at the height of summer, common sense prevails and people just stay indoors during the few hours in the mid-afternoon when it's at the top end of the thermometer. But then the numbers drop a bit and out we go again, refreshed by the plentiful spraying "mist"ers" along downtown sidewalks that make you feel cooler – and moisturized. During the winter months, daytime numbers are in the 70s and low 80s, and evenings are in high 40s to low 50s. People actually own sweaters here for just that nocturnal occasion.

It may feel remote. It's not. Palm Springs is still close to major cities like Los Angeles (107 miles away) and San Diego (123 miles away), which are both about two hours or so away by car, depending on traffic. Phoenix is 260 miles away, if you want to add a southwest touch to the trip.

If you're driving in from Los Angeles, you first come across a great expansion of giant white wind turbines, which in this vastness of the desert landscape looks like



WELCOME TO PALM SPRINGS

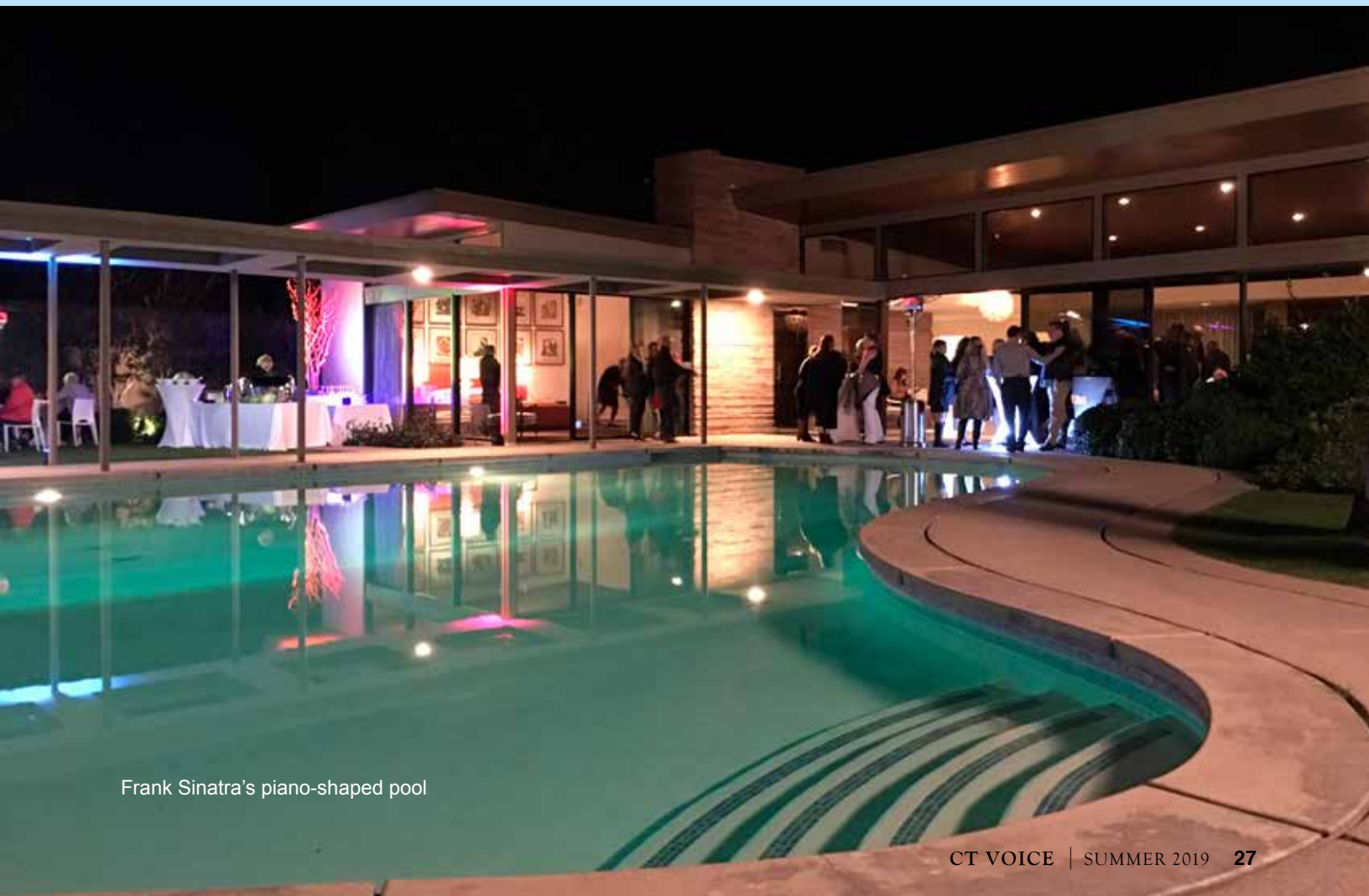
Palm Springs Airport



God's kinetic sculpture project. Then drive past date and palm trees as the mountains emerge, and as you enter a valley the first burgh becomes visible: Palm Springs, with its bustling downtown, yet kind of cozy and homey. Planning ordinances prohibit towering structures so buildings are of human-scale proportions.

If you're flying in, the small, easy-to-manage and partially outdoor airport gives you your first signal to relax. At the height of the winter season, direct flights are offered out of New York City on Jet Blue and United Airlines. You can also get connecting flights out of Bradley International Airport on American, United and Delta airlines.

Though many simply enjoy the passive beauty of the landscape, there is plenty to do for the activists among us: There are golf courses, tennis courts and activities for nature buffs who enjoy the hiking, biking and horseback riding trails in the Coachella Valley and Indian and Tahquitz canyons. There's winter cross-country skiing and snowshoeing in the back-country area of Mount San Jacinto State Park, accessible by the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, whose rotating cars climb a 2.5-mile ascent. Joshua Tree National Park also offers a wide array of activities for the outdoor-inclined. There's also the Living Desert Zoo and Gardens (open year-round). And the new 5.8-acre Agua



Frank Sinatra's piano-shaped pool





STARBUCKS

North Palm Canyon Drive in
Palm Springs, Coachella Valley.



Caliente Band Cultural Museum, showcasing the culture of the Cahuilla Indians Tribe, is slated to open next year.

But there's plenty of reasons locals, residents, weekend-trippers and longer-stay tourists also venture to the center of town – or to the other hamlets just down the road. All are filled with trendy and vintage restaurants, a lively arts scene of music, theater and galleries, hotels, shops and the occasional little oddity (like the bronze statue of Lucille Ball in full “Lucy” pose, the retro walk of fame or the Mark Pickford Museum). Oh yes, the region is also known for its alien sightings.

In terms of cool hotels, there are too many to mention though I can't resist suggesting the Kimpton Rowan Palm Springs for its stunning views; the Sands for its Martyn Lawrence Bullard-designed, Moroccan-influenced look; the just-opened Hotel Paseo, the area's first boutique hotel where you can even reserve the hotel's vintage 1950s Airstream Trailer, adjacent to the pool, as your room; and the more intimate La Maison in Palm Springs. OK, one more: the recently refurbished gem, the Ingleside Inn Palm Springs, a Spanish Colonial Revival design that harks back to the era of Sinatra, Hope and Marilyn Monroe (who, legend has it, was discovered poolside in Palm Springs).

For eateries, I love the casual atmosphere at Lulu California Bistro and Elmer's, both on Canyon Drive, for terrific breakfasts and lunches to more elegant dinners at LG's Prime Steakhouse, Eight4Nine, Alebrije Bistro México, and Johannes Restaurant or, for the quintessential deluxe Palm Springs eating experience, Spencer's.

MAKE IT GAY

It should be noted that Palm Springs is heavily Democratic, according to a spokesman for the Greater Palm Springs Visitors Center. The city is ranked first in the state and third in the nation among cities with the most same-sex couples per 1,000 households, according to an analysis of U.S. census data by the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law. Further down the valley, it's more “Orange County Republican,” with more strip malls and suburban-looking homes, some in gated areas. But Palm Springs and its immediate surrounding towns are true blue — and rainbowed.



House tour in historic Canyon View Estates during Modernism Week



Frank Sinatra's favorite place to perform in Palm Springs.

The entire city council is gay or bi or transgender. Mayor Robert Moon – a former military man – is gay, as is the city manager, city clerk and many business leaders.

In one area in the heart of downtown there's a cluster of gay bars, lounges, shops and cafes, all within a block or two, making it the easiest of bar-hopping experiences.

Palm Springs also avoids the logjam of June gay pride celebrations by having its events in late fall. (This year, it's November 2-3.) For the circuit crowd, its "White Party" is in mid-spring, and Palm Springs really goes all out for Halloween. There's a wide variety of gay-centric activities every week – from drag shows and strippers to yoga sessions, pool parties and karaoke nights.


The best way to check activities out is to go to visitgaypalmsprings.com.

Taking place the same weekend as the popular ANA Inspiration LPGA golf championship in April, the Club Skirts Dinah Shore Weekend is described as one of the largest, if not the most popular, gatherings of lesbians in the world.

There's also all sorts of conventions and gatherings in Palm Springs – ranging

from Wellspring, a wellness gathering featuring innovators, teachers and socially conscious companies (October 4 to 6); to a masturbation convention, organized by a group called Healthy Friction (May 9 to 12).

But my favorite gathering is during Modernism Week, held every February, when Palm Springs becomes a Mecca of mid-century modern architecture, art, interior and landscape design.

"It's not for everybody – which is one of the things I love about Palm Springs," says one of my new friends at the rooftop pool before we headed off for dinner and dancing. "When you come here, you can't have too many clothes because of the heat, so you have to physically disrobe somewhat – and I think that does something psychologically, too. You're not hiding so much. You're more revealed as well as relaxed. You're just more you." 



Paolo Andino (left) and his friend Dan Pelosi were among those who toured the mid-century modern trailer exhibit during Modernism Week.

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



FASHION YOUR SEAT BELTS

What happened to traveling in style?

By MAR JENNINGS

Think about this: you have in your hot little hands the tickets for your trip to ... Florence... Paris... Barcelona... San Francisco... Boise. You're packed, your passport is safely tucked away, your itinerary has been checked and confirmed, and your ride is outside, waiting for you. The details of your trip are all organized. It's a go! Vacation!

Oh, no, no, no! Wait one pretty, little minute there. Where are you going in that outfit? Sweats? Sneakers? A wrinkled shirt? Hold on now, we have lots of work to do. This is no way to start your trip, nevertheless end one. The art of traveling should be done in style and with sophistication, regardless of where you're going.

For as long as I can remember, I have

traveled. For equally as long, I have prepared all necessary items and details prior to flying – including what I am going to wear. This started for me at an early age when my mother would explain to me and my brothers the importance of putting together our clothes for our vacations. Of course, at the top of her list was how to dress appropriately, handsomely, and respectfully – for ourselves and whomever we would come into contact with. I appreciate this gift of proper organization and attention to not only what is being put in the bags, but also what is being draped on our backs.

The time and effort you put into arranging your trip absolutely warrants the consideration of how you dress for this occasion. Don't you want to begin your adventure looking your absolute best? Well, I sure you do and

I want that for you too!

That said, let's





Don't be a fashion "don't." Just because you're heading on vacation doesn't mean you should take a relaxed approach to how you look.

take a look at what has been corrupting the fantastic element of traveling these days. Namely, slovenliness. I do not understand, whether traveling for business or pleasure, why people will go to great lengths to prepare their trips and then saunter off in workout clothes. Do you know what I mean?

Wear your workout clothes to the gym for your athletic endeavors, not the airport. It is such an unhappy event to arrive and be seated in the waiting area with so many looking like they just got out of bed. In my book, if you look like an unmade bed, you're going to feel like an unmade bed. And how do you think that is going to portray you?

In addition to the public's lethargy, I feel the relaxation of the airlines regarding their own employees' looks is a major culprit in this crisis. The early formal uniforms that began the glamour days of travel have become much too casual. It seems to me even the once-lovely members of the customer service counters no longer give a hoot about their appearance. This troubles me greatly – but that, my friends, is another fish to fry (in a future article; I can't wait to do that one!).

I recently traveled with my dear friends, Lori and Jason, and their two children, to Florida, and because it was the first time traveling with this family, I was not quite sure what to expect. Thinking back, I can proudly say, "They've got it going on." This is what I remember most. Both of the children, ages 9 and 13, and the parents looked fabulous. I was proud to be part of their family vacation for that week, as the outfits kept getting better and better. I loved that Lori not only looked stylish and fresh but was careful to reapply her lip gloss after every meal. Good shoes, good hair, and the perfect accessories always accentuated her grace. As for the men, Jason and I held our own with our well-packed wardrobe. There was, even more, interest for what else? Shopping for clothes. This family knows just how to travel with the kids

What never goes out of style? An outfit that's put together well and shows you put some effort into it.





comfortably and attractively.

Putting that first foot forward in a neat, comfortable loafer or walking shoe is the beginning of presenting yourself appealingly. Pair those great looking shoes with a crisply pressed button-down shirt, slacks, and an all-around jacket and you're pretty much set. Layering is one of the keys to flying in comfort. It does get chilly on airplanes, so bring a fine-knit sweater that is thin and easy to roll up in your hand baggage or wrap around your shoulders for a look I personally love. Cashmere is an excellent choice and looks great with just about everything.

Ladies, camisoles and lovely tanks work beautifully under



One travel-fashion rule of thumb: give yourself options.

while never sacrificing style. Love that!

Now, to truly understand Mar Jennings, you should know that I love dressing my best. Whether in the garden working or dressing for a casual charity event, I love not only pulling it all together but planning for it. I even enjoy shopping for clothes. I'm fast, I find the deals, and I enjoy transforming myself and my friends into our better-dressed selves. I thank my mother and those old girlfriends in the '80s for letting me fine-tune my early fashion skills. I'm now referred to as an expert in this field. That said, I can help you fly both



Travel-ready Mar looking Mar-velous!


a blouse, V-neck sweater or cardigan. Be sure the fit is just right. Your clothes should fit well and look appropriate for a first-time meeting. You might want to include some lovely accessories to add a touch more elegance, but keep in mind, getting through security these days has become quite a project. Be ready to slip your shoes and belts off so as to make a speedy pathway for yourself and those on line behind you. It is nice to be nice. Again, simple but charming outfits even make this part of traveling a breeze.

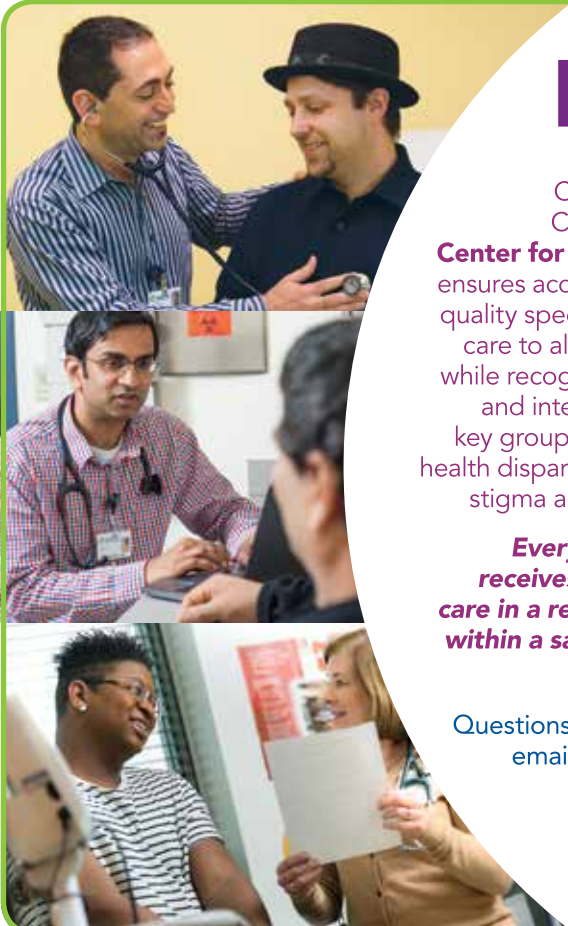
Before you rise in objection, take a look at how dressing well for traveling is a benefit to you and your fellow travelers. In many ways, the manner in which you present yourself is the way in which you'll be treated. I remember one time at the age of 25, working in Darien for a telecommunication company: a new client to the company approached me, assuming I was the manager entirely because of the way I was dressed. The customer admitted as much and added that if I wasn't the manager, I should be because I certainly knew how to dress for the job! Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so, by all means, give them flair and good taste.

Admit it: when you look good, you feel good, and that energy exudes from you. And when that happens, those around you treat you well. Don't you find that you also have

more patience and confidence when you are nattily dressed, not to mention graciousness? It's true! And what could be nicer than sitting next to someone, whether in the waiting area or on the flight, who you can see has taken the time to be respectful to themselves and others by taking care in their manner of dress? It is by far a nicer experience to be with and near someone who has thought about how they are presenting themselves. I, for one, truly appreciate their effort and will often compliment them for their looks. Even more importantly, it is up to us to teach the next generation how to travel well and stylishly. We owe it to them and to the world. Please!

Always keep in mind, with the amazing array of clothing options these days, there is no shortage of fine looking, well-made, and reasonably priced fashion that offers comfort and style. You owe it to yourself to present yourself in a manner befitting you; you totally deserve the great look which gets you off the runway in style. Come fly with me across oceans, mountains, deserts, and brightly lit cities to explore all ends of the world. Well-dressed, of course.

So the next time you're ready to travel, consider my simple advice. Looking your best will make us all look good. 



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MAKING THEM WHOLE

Dr. John Borkowski helps patients align their bodies with the person they are inside

By JAMES BATTAGLIO / Photography by STAN GODLEWSKI

Dr. John Borkowski helps patients align their bodies with the person they are inside. Borkowski, who performs gender affirming surgeries, has established his reputation as an expert in female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) procedures, and says he's "never seen happier patients."

In a soft-spoken voice that exudes empathy and compassion for the hundreds of people seeking to align their physical appearance with their true gender through gender affirming surgery, Dr. Borkowski, part of Middlesex Health's Transgender Program team of physicians, reflects on the plight of the transgender patients that have come to him for help - the majority of whom are FTM "top surgery" cases.

"I believe males wishing to be reassigned as females undergo more psychological trauma than do females transforming to males," he says. "Therefore, I think this is the reason we see more FTM patients. It's a serious issue." He says that gender dysphoria (a state of unease or generalized dissatisfaction because of a difference between sex assigned at birth and gender identity) is often associated with anxiety, depression,

higher rates of substance abuse and other negative issues.

Possibly, another reason for the disparity in the number of MTF and FTM cases may be the health insurance industry's refusal to recognize the need for breast augmentation surgery when it comes to MTF procedures. Dr. Borkowski deems this industry practice "absolutely discriminatory."

"Although I've not had any problems with Connecticut-based insurance companies covering mastectomies for FTM patients, chest augmentation surgery for MTF patients, costing thousands of dollars, must be paid out of pocket," he says, adding that "implants alone cost \$1,000 each."

Despite this disparity, he's seen positive emotional changes in the makeup of patients seeking gender reassignment.

"Decades ago, when I started these procedures, patients who came to me were much older—some in their 40s, 50s and even 60s—and they were definitely traumatized following years of psychological abuse," he says. "Today's patients are in much better shape emotionally, now that gender reassignment is more accepted. We're treating a younger population—many in their 20's—who don't have to go through decades of trauma as in the past. Post-operatively, they are the happiest patients I've ever seen."

Although all of his patients are resolved to undergo top surgery, most must first go through a series of psychological evaluations involving a spectrum of specialists. This process can take a year or more before gender affirming surgery takes place. He recommends that his patients first be seen by other specialists, such as Kathryn Tierney, an endocrinologist and hormone therapy specialist who serves as the medical director of Middlesex Health's transgender program.

"I will not operate on patients before they've had some counseling because the decision they've made is irreversible and they must know this up front," he says.

Middlesex Health wants all of its patients to have a full understanding of procedures. As such, many transgender patients see various providers before undergoing surgery, and their health team can include mental health specialists.

Most patients are first seen by a primary care physician, a psychiatrist or a psychologist, a licensed social worker who specializes in gender identity, and an endocrine specialist.

This process can delay surgery by at least one year after the start of hormone therapy, and sometimes two years after a patient first undergoes their mental health evaluation. "Once surgical procedures begin, the amount of time needed to complete a case var-



Middlesex Health's Dr. John Borkowski performs gender-affirming surgeries and has established a reputation as an expert in female-to-male (FTM) and male-to-female (MTF) procedures.

ies,” Dr. Borkowski says, “depending on the number of plastic surgeries the patient desires, including feminization or masculinization of the face.”

“They [patients] will tell me what they want done. For the most part, FTM want top surgery done — very few want bottom surgery — so that they may express their gender identity in a public way that conforms to how they feel inside,” he says. “For example, FTM patients may wish to go to a beach and at least wear a T-shirt [as opposed to going topless], thereby hiding the significant scarring associated with FTM top surgery. Despite scarring, no patient has ever expressed regret over their decision. Psychologically, they just want to get through this and they’re happy when it’s over.”

Following surgery, Dr. Borkowski sees patients once a week until their condition has stabilized. After that, he sees them quarterly for a year, which is about how long it takes for their post-op status to normalize. The average short-term recovery is three to four weeks before the patient returns to full activities.

The difference between a mastectomy for a cancer patient and one for an FTM patient is significant.

“Contrary to cancer patients, when we perform top surgery on an FTM patient we leave some breast tissue behind because we have to contour the chest in order to guarantee that the same amount of tissue remains above, to the side, and below the breasts. We save the nipple and the areola by taking them off as a graft and reducing them so they match the size of a male areola,” he explains. Lining up nipples, which he terms “the most difficult part,” is a process in which everyone gets a say.

“Nurses and even the anesthesiologist get to cite their opinion as to whether the chest looks contoured,” he says. “Repositioning nipples is tricky.

We don’t want them to be too close, too far apart or too low or high.”

Patients are made aware that they will not regain any sensation in their nipples once replacement takes place, due to the necessity of cutting all sensory nerves, he says.

Currently, only chest surgery is performed at Middlesex Health, but that may change as the health system’s transgender program continues to grow.

“Genital manipulation entails a very complex series of procedures,” Dr. Borkowski explains, adding that when

“Once I understood what these patients were going through, I didn’t hesitate to perform gender reassignment surgery.”

—Dr. John Borkowski

Middlesex gets a bottom surgeon, patients will also be seen by a urologist (following an orchiectomy, or the removal of testicles), as well as by gynecologists and psychologists.

Penile construction for FTM cases, often called a “free flap” procedure, is perhaps the most complex of all reassignment surgery, he says. It requires surgeons to reconnect a piece of tissue containing arteries, blood vessels and sometimes nerves in order to form a phallus. Following this process, a penile implant may be performed during a second or third stage operation, thereby enabling the penis to function normally. And while FTM genital reconstruction is a much more complex than the reverse, the outcome is better

than it used to be, according to Dr. Borkowski.


“In male to female surgery you can use penile skin to create a vagina and testicles to create the labia. But in the opposite case, there’s nothing to work with to create the entire phallus. Usually we use skin from the leg, hip, or side of the chest — wherever we can get an artery or vein to make a decent looking phallus,” he says. “It’s not a walk in the park. It’s definitely an uncomfortable to moderately painful operation.”

In addition to chest surgery, “we may do some facial rework, too, which involves trimming off excess cartilage to the Adam’s apple (for MTF patients) so that the apple is smoother and less prominent.” This procedure is not to be confused with surgery on the vocal cords, which Dr. Borkowski does not perform, enabling males to acquire a more feminine voice. “The process of MTF voice changing is something an ear, nose and throat doctor may get into later on, if the patient wishes” he says.

The effects of testosterone on females are something the doctor calls “pretty amazing.”

“For most of them, you can’t tell they were ever female...they look like good-looking guys.” Testosterone creates increased body hair and muscle mass and an increased number of red blood cells. In some cases, there is a redistribution of fat from the breasts, waist and thighs to the abdominal area. Most develop acne during the pre-op hormone therapy stage.

Summarizing his experience with transgender patients, Dr. Borkowski calls them “the most benevolent human beings I’ve ever worked with.”

“Once I understood what these patients were going through, I didn’t hesitate to perform gender reassignment surgery,” he says. 



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THE INTERVIEW //

Curt Miller, general manager and head coach of The Connecticut Sun, was the first openly gay male coach of any professional sport in North America, perhaps the world.





Game On

The Connecticut Sun's Curt Miller and Amber Cox set their sights on victory – and so much more

By JANE LATUS / Photography by ALLEGRA ANDERSON

It's another day of chasing dreams at Mohegan Sun casino, where a steady stream of gamblers, shoppers and vacationers head toward their destinations.

But no matter how great their luck, visitors are unlikely to beat the dreams-come-true being lived out unseen to them a few levels underground, down an unadorned concrete hallway and behind the office door of the Connecticut Sun.

There you find General Manager and Head Coach Curt Miller, who as his sister's biggest fan got hooked on women's basketball way back in second grade, and who in high school already knew he wanted a career coaching it.

He got his wish, starting as an assistant collegiate coach and reaching the big time in 2015, when Mohegan Sun hired him for his first job as head coach of a professional team.

Making it to the WNBA wasn't a big deal just for Miller; it had import for LGBTQ athletes and sports fans nationwide and beyond. Miller was the first openly gay male coach of any professional sport in North America, perhaps the world.

Also there is Amber Cox, vice president of the Connecticut Sun and the New England Black Wolves men's lacrosse team since 2016.

Cox is also a basketball junkie, and gay. She has several LGBTQ counterparts in the top ranks of professional sports administration. But Miller? "He is a trailblazer," she says.

"At the collegiate level," says Miller, "I was always open and living authentically with my partner and the twin boys we were raising. The bubble of the basketball community knew. There was never any secret." There just weren't any pronouncements.

That changed with his hiring by the Sun and subsequent flood of media coverage. And now that he has a platform, Miller plans to use it.

"I'm finally in a place where I'm no longer scared about advancement in the coaching profession, and how I would be judged as a coach, and so, after probably missing an opportunity to be an advocate, and to be a role model for LGBTQ youth, I'm at a place where I feel I can give back to the LGBTQ community."

His message: "For the LGBTQ youth who have a passion to chase a life in sports, be it an athlete, be it a coach, be it a general manager – there are people that have done it, and you can do it too. Don't let anyone tell you [that] you can't."

Miller is 5' 6" of condensed energy. "Coach is very passionate, I'll say that!" says Sun guard Courtney Williams.

"He's fiery," says Cox. "He has to burn thousands of calories on the sidelines."

Miller, 50, lives in Connecticut and, off-season, in Bloomington, Ind., with one son and three dogs. In October 2015, he separated from his partner of 20-plus years, with whom he raised his partner's sister's twins when she was unable to. Son Brian Seymour will graduate in 2020 from Indiana University. Son Shawn Seymour is the reason Miller uses his newfound platform for an additional cause.

"One of my twin boys fell victim to the opioid crisis that the whole country is dealing with,





2018-2019 CT Sun Top Row: Chris Koclanes, Peter Fee-
ney, Shekinna Stricklen, Alyssa Thomas, Chiney Ogwumike,
Jonquel Jones, Brionna Jones, Morgan Tuck, Rosemary Ragle,
Dustin Dobbs, Amber Cox. **Bottom Row:** Lexie Brown, Betni-
jah Laney, Courtney Williams, Steve Smith, Curt Miller, Brandi
Poole, Jasmine Thomas, Layshia Clarendon, Rachel Banham.



made a mistake and is currently incarcerated. This is my opportunity to speak on the opioid crisis, which I'm as passionate about as basketball," says Miller. "He became addicted to prescription drugs and made a poor choice because of that addiction. He's a great kid and deserves a second chance. And will get it."

Cox, 44, lives in Old Saybrook with her wife Kyle Hudson, director of team marketing and business operations for the WNBA. Like Miller, she never set out to be a role model, and until college didn't consider herself gay. "Looking back at how I identified, I was just a basketball player."

Now Cox and Miller are participating in select Pride events, hosting post-game panel discussions on LGBTQ issues, and seizing advocacy opportunities. (But Miller hasn't yet done the most fundamental of Pride events: "I've never attended a Pride parade." Cox says, "I've gotta get Curt to one!")

THE LOVE OF THE GAME

Miller grew up in Girard, Penn., "a Hoosier-type town, where it seems like everyone had a basketball hoop in their driveway or their barn. I grew up playing every sport you could imagine, with the exception of football." In high school, he excelled in basketball and track and field.

Brother Craig and sister Lori also were "terrific athletes" he says.

"And all three of us are gay. Unique."

In a way, Miller's career began at age 7. When Lori was in high school, "I was one of those second graders, ... sitting there with a notebook keeping all her stats so I would be able to tell her how she did. I was hooked because of her."

In the Fall season of his senior year, when no teacher volunteered to coach the middle school girls, the athletic director asked if he was interested. "I couldn't say yes fast enough," says Miller, who at the time was training and preparing for his senior basketball season. "That season absolutely solidified 'this is what I want to do.' I was a basketball junkie and couldn't get enough of the game. I knew that I wanted a career in basketball." The 1970s weren't the friendliest time to be a gay teen athlete in a small town, but Miller is unscathed.

"I knew back in middle school that I had feelings – but I suppressed them and hid from them. And one of the ways to do that was to be a good athlete. If I could shine in

different sports, I had a way of hiding.

"In the locker room, it wasn't always easy because of some of the things that were said about LGBT people. So while it was a little bit easier to hide in sports, you were subjected to, at times, things that would make you even more closeted," he says.

"I had a great childhood. While I was not comfortable with myself, I think friends knew," says Miller. "I was never bullied and didn't have the unfortunate experiences that other LGBTQ youth have to deal with."

Miller earned a bachelor's degree in sports management and business administration from Baldwin Wallace University. In graduate school at Kent State, he got his first break: his assistant coach was hired by Cleveland State as head coach of that team. "She hired me at 22 as a full-time assistant. At that point, I was the youngest Division 1 top assistant coach in the nation."

Miller – who served as assistant women's basketball coach at Kent State, Cleveland State, Syracuse University, and Colorado State; head coach at Bowling Green State University and Indiana University; and assistant coach of the Los Angeles Sparks – added to his extremely successful track record at every turn. He was named head coach of the Connecticut Sun in December 2015, and in his second season, led the young team to the playoffs for the first time since 2012. In September 2017, Miller was recognized as the 2017 WNBA Coach of the Year, WNBA Executive of the Year and Associated Press Coach of the Year.



Amber Cox is #50 in AC Youth Basketball.



Amber Cox, vice president of the Connecticut Sun and the New England Black Wolves men's lacrosse team.





Photo on left: #5 Jasmine Thomas drives for a layup against the Atlanta Dream. Photo above: From left, Courtney Williams, Layshia Clarendon, Jonquel Jones and Jasmine Thomas celebrate after Jones makes a shot.

Cox, too, was raised on basketball, in Monett, Mo. “I picked up a ball when I was 5 or 6 years old. I loved it. I was hooked very early,” she says.

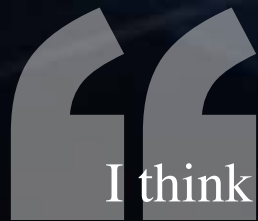
She played on a scholarship at William Woods University, where she earned her bachelor’s degree in communications/journalism, and stayed to earn her master’s degree in business administration.

“I didn’t identify that I was a lesbian until I was in college. Growing up in a small Midwestern town, clearly I was a lesbian – I just didn’t know it was an option,” she says. “And then I got to college and the light came on. You meet the first girlfriend and it’s like, ‘Oh, that’s it!’ It all becomes clear. And you look back and go, ‘No wonder it felt so weird dating those boys,’ you know? No wonder I chose going to

the gym on Saturday night versus going out with the guy who asked me out.”

It took a few years to come out to her family (“There was a little fear.”) but they were accepting. Early in her career, she hesitated whether to introduce her girlfriend as just a friend, but her fear proved unwarranted. Before coming to Connecticut, Cox was chief marketing officer of the Houston Dynamo (men’s) and Dash (women’s) professional soccer teams. She had earlier served as the associate commissioner for women’s basketball at the Big East Conference.

Cox also spent nine years with the Phoenix Mercury women’s basketball team, as marketing director and later as president and chief operating officer. “That’s really where I found my calling. I think there’s no better example of equal



“

I think there's no better example of equal opportunity than women earning a living playing professional sports.”

- Amber Cox



Alyssa Thomas and Courtney Williams in action against the Phoenix Mercury.



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10	1	7	1
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35	1	9	2
40	1	2	2

MIN	PTS	REB	AST
5	6	4	9
10	3	5	3

MIN	PTS	REB	AST
9	2	21	1
8	0	1	8
12	0	1	11
24	1	2	13
42	2	1	1

I'M THE ONLY GAY MALE COACH IN ANY OF THE PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAMS IN NORTH AMERICA AND IT'S STILL DOWNPLAYED BECAUSE IT'S 'JUST WOMEN'S BASKETBALL.' – Curt Miller

opportunity than women earning a living playing professional sports.”

BEING 'OUT' IN THE SPORTS WORLD

Early in his career, Miller feared complications from coming out. But not primarily for himself.

“When I was an assistant at the collegiate level, I worried, would an athletic director have the guts to hire an openly gay male as a head coach? But I also worried, as an assistant, would being an openly gay male hurt the school and head coach in recruiting wars? And would a family preparing to send their 18-year-old daughter off to college feel comfortable that one of the coaches on the staff was openly gay? I worried about hurting the institution that I worked for, hurting the head coach I was recruiting for.”

Miller was out to family and friends, but when he and his partner moved from Syracuse to Colorado State in 1998, “I knew this is who is important to me, and everyone’s going to know it. I feel like that was when I was truly out.”

He wondered if the pros would be as welcoming as the collegiate world proved to be. When Mohegan Sun approached him, “I shared immediately on that first phone call that I was a gay male. And they didn’t hesitate,” he says. “So any fear I had was quickly alleviated.”

So, once you’ve made it to the top, is it all clear skies? Not so fast.

“The frustrating part for me is, some people in our own LGBTQ community are the toughest critics. If I was coaching a men’s professional sport, they have shared with me that coaching at the highest level would be a huge deal. They perceive that women’s professional sports isn’t as big a deal,” he says.

“I’m the only gay male coach in any of the professional sports teams in North America and it’s still downplayed because it’s ‘just women’s basketball.’ It’s frustrating that

the community hurts itself,” he says.

Is it a burden being the first? “No,” says Miller, though he admits to anxiety about doing it well.

“While I’m getting more comfortable with my voice, my biggest fear is that I don’t have the right words at times on behalf of the community.”

Still, that’s progress. “For a long time, I was embarrassed that I had let down the community because my life isn’t perfect. My 20-year-plus relationship had ended, we had a child get in trouble with the law and, in my mind, I was going to be criticized by the naysayers who say that you need to have a mother and a father to raise children,” he says. “But I’ve come to peace with my imperfections, and now there’s a bigger cause in the opioid crisis that I need to use my platform for, and not be so fearful in my perception that I let the LGBTQ community down by not having the perfect life.”

Now Miller’s dreams are for the best for his sons, and for the Sun to advance past the second round in the playoffs and ultimately win a championship. And for himself? Pursue a hobby, perhaps? Well, he laughs, “Basketball is my hobby.”



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

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The Joy of Eating

Don't Be Afraid To Unleash Your Inner Cook

Written and Photographed by SARAH ALDRICH

It was the food critic and writer Michael Pollan who wrote, “Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.” This was his ultimate approach to eating healthfully and well.

Each element of the sentence describes a crucial piece of the joy of eating: the act of eating itself, the art of moderation, and the benefits of following a mostly plant-based diet.

From a purely biological standpoint, eating is pure nourishment. Eating is giving the body what it needs to survive and thrive. But is it just that? Anyone who’s had the pleasure of enjoying a slice of Frank Pepe’s pizza in New Haven knows that there is more to eating than just fueling. Indeed, the gustatory experience of a good meal can transcend both time and memory.

I remember this one particular meal I ate with my best friend and her parents – it was a salad, dressed with a simple oil and vinegar dressing, served with the most delicious crusty bread and a glass of red wine. That meal has stood out to me over the years not because it was complicated or fussy, but rather because the simplicity and quality of the ingredients made it so memorable.

But to a degree, I think many Americans have lost the simple joy of eating. It has become increasingly easier to order takeout or delivery than it is to cook a homemade meal. I know that I am certainly guilty of this. People who know me as a food photographer and blogger would be shocked to hear how often I’ve let restaurants cook for me. In my case, I think that I had come

“Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.”

—Michael Pollan

to conflate “food” with “work,” and slowly lost my love of preparing my own meals. For a time, cooking had become more of a chore than a path to happiness. But it doesn’t have to be this way, for me or for any home cook.

I believe that everyone can cook. Why? Because every single person is the arbiter of their own taste, the ultimate judge of what they love to eat. Anybody can learn to make a variety of meals that they will enjoy and savor. And don’t get me wrong, there is a time and place for eating out at restaurants. But there is something undeniably satisfying about enjoying the fruits of your own labor – the simple joy of eating a home-cooked meal.

Invariably, the question I get asked after making such a statement is, “How can I do this? How can I recreate my favorite restaurant flavors at home?” I used to be stymied by this very question myself. With so many different cuisines, ingredients, and techniques, the process of cooking can get very overwhelming. But there are simple tips and tricks that any home cook – or eater – can employ to make their food taste delicious.

My top suggestion is to be generous with salt. Ever wonder why restaurant food tastes so flavorful? The chefs aren’t afraid to use salt, and you shouldn’t be either! Salt itself is flavorless but acts as a magnifying glass that amplifies existing flavors in the food. Of course, over-applying the salt can render a dish inedible, but it’s been my experience that most home cooks under-salt their food. In general, a liberal pinch of salt can add an amazing dimension of flavor to your roasted vegetables, soups, and pastas.

My second tip is to familiarize yourself with sources of flavor, such as herbs, spices, and condiments. A homemade stir-fry can taste better than takeout with a simple splash of tamari (a variety of soy sauce). Even something as simple as a bowl of rice can be transformed with a handful of chopped parsley and a squeeze of lemon juice. Finding little ways to add flavor to your existing meals can transform them into something that’s truly delicious. Some of my favorite condiments and flavors include grainy, tangy Dijon mustard, spicy hot sauce, fresh citrus juice, apple cider vinegar, and nutty tahini.

My third tip, and the very foundation of my own culinary experience, is to read and cook from cookbooks. My copies of two of my favorite cookbooks, “My New Roots” by Sarah Britton and “The First Mess Cookbook” by Laura Wright, are studded with Post-it Notes and handwritten ideas in the columns. Learn how your favorite cookbook authors approach food and try applying their techniques to your own cooking.

At the very least, reading a variety of cookbooks will open your eyes to flavors and food combinations that you never would have considered before. In fact, one of the best pasta dishes I’ve ever had was from a cookbook; the sauce was a combination of tomatoes, mustard, smoked paprika, and sriracha. It was a combination that I read very warily, but the sauce turned out to be smoky, tangy, and bursting with flavor. It was one of the best things I had ever eaten! Keeping an open mind with your cookbook recipe selection can turn out to be the best thing you’ll do for your palate.

Armed with these tools and tips, the journey towards becoming a proficient home cook can be a delicious and joyous one. Food has the incredible power to nourish, to enliven, and to heal. So many of our societal joys are centered around food – the meal shared together on a first date, the gathering of family for Thanksgiving dinner, the barbecues that declare the start of summer – that it’s no wonder that it has undeniable powers to bring people together. People of all different cultures, backgrounds, and life stages can come together over a delicious meal.

Finding your inner cook and connecting to the joy of eating is a lifelong process that is rewarding in so many ways. Even something as simple as a soup recipe can be passed down from generation to generation, bridging families across time and space. The love of food, and the love of eating, is something that’s so universal and undeniably human. For all of you reading this, I wish you joy and happiness on your cooking and eating journeys! 🍷

Sarah Aldrich is a food photographer and blogger. Find her blog devoted to plant-based eating, [Well and Full](http://WellandFull.com), at wellandfull.com.

A top-down photograph of fresh ingredients for a Spring Panzanella Salad. On the left, a wooden cutting board holds several whole red radishes with their green leafy tops. To the right, a white bowl is filled with a finished salad, featuring sliced radishes, green leafy vegetables, and golden-brown croutons. The background is a light-colored surface.

SPRING PANZANELLA SALAD

SALAD INGREDIENTS:

- 4-5 handfuls of mixed greens**
- 4 thinly sliced radishes**
- ¼ red onion, thinly sliced**
- ¼ cup sunflower seeds**

DRESSING:

- Juice from ½ lemon**
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil**
- 2 tsp Dijon mustard**
- ¼ tsp salt**
- Black pepper, to taste**
- 1 Tbsp maple syrup**

CROUTONS:

- 2-3 slices whole grain bread**
- Drizzle of extra virgin olive oil**
- Salt and pepper, to taste**

METHOD:

Start by making your dressing. Combine all dressing ingredients into small bowl and whisk vigorously to combine. Taste, and adjust seasonings to your preference. (Please note that you may need to whisk the dressing again right before serving.)

Then, make your croutons. Cut each slice of bread into 16ths and add to a bowl. Drizzle the croutons with a little extra virgin olive oil, and sprinkle on a pinch each of salt and pepper, to taste.

Bring a large pan to medium heat on the stove. Add in the seasoned croutons, and sauté (flipping often) for about 5-7 minutes, or until bread is toasty brown.

Then, assemble the salad. In a large bowl, mix the greens, radishes, red onion slices, sunflower seeds, and croutons. Drizzle with as much dressing as you like (you may have some left over).

Serve, and enjoy!

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Building Better Care

5 TRANS-AFFIRMING TIPS FOR PATIENTS AND HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

By DAWN ENNIS

You don't have to be a doctor, a nurse or even someone LGBTQ to shudder at the things some healthcare professionals and their staff say to patients who identify as transgender. "Hello, sir. Oops, I meant ma'am. Sorry!"

Most people are cisgender, meaning their gender identity matches their bodies from birth, and many will eventually concede they have no idea what it's like to be transgender or gender non-conforming.

What most cis people rarely consider, however, is that most trans and nonbinary individuals cannot imagine what it must be like to have their perception of their own gender match the body they see in the mirror. This marginalized existence is made even more difficult by the things people say to them, and about them.

"Mommy, is that a boy or a girl?"

Connecticut Voice asked health providers at two of the state's leading healthcare institutions, and transgender people themselves, to help readers better understand what kinds of experiences trans patients endure when they show up at an emergency room or even their doctor's office, what

health professionals are doing right, and where they need to improve.

The key takeaways were:

DOCTORS: SEEK CLARITY ABOUT LEGAL NAMES AS WELL AS PREFERRED NAMES

"Transgender people have a right to their self-expressed gender identity and to be referred to by their name," says Britta Shute, APRN, a family medicine nurse practitioner at UConn Health in Canton, who works closely with transgender patients. "But unfortunately, the way that the billing process works, we still have to have whatever [name] is on the insurance card." The process of changing one's name is complex and expensive, she adds.

"We're trying to create an environment here at Hartford Healthcare, where we're much more open and willing to look at these issues," says Dr. Laura Saunders, assistant director of psychology and the clinical coordinator psychologist of an LGBTQ specialty track in Young Adult Services at Hartford HealthCare's Institute of Living. She works to empower LGBTQ youth and does a lot of training on campus.

“We know enough to move beyond the electronic medical record and really deal with the patient’s individual issues,” Saunders says. “And we know by statistics that LGBTQ people of all ages are less likely to reach out for medical support because of fear of stigma. So if the name on the chart says ‘John Smith,’ and I have someone sitting in front of me, I say to myself, ‘I’m not sure that this person goes by ‘John;’ let me ask their name and pronouns.’”

SUPPORT STAFF: GO BEYOND BINARY CLASSIFICATIONS OF SEX

At UConn Health, Shute uses a new kind of intake form, which goes far beyond the typical “male or female” category of self-identification, and includes what she calls an organ inventory.

“I don’t ask ‘sex assigned at birth,’” she says, “but I do ask patients to disclose their gender identity, and then later I use an organ inventory,” a simple, straightforward Q&A that helps her understand patients’ bodies no matter how they present. One is a list of “organs I have presently,” and the other is “organs I was born with.”

Shute champions UConn Health’s efforts to review and improve policies and practices, in hopes of receiving a positive score from Human Rights Campaign on its Healthcare Equality Index (HEI).

For 2018, only Bristol Hospital, Middlesex Hospital, the VA Connecticut Health Care System in West Haven, and Yale-New Haven Hospital sites in New Haven, Greenwich and Bridgeport participated in the HEI, receiving scores ranging from 95 to a top score of 100. UConn, Hartford Hospital and other medical centers across the state didn’t participate. Shute says about one-third of that ranking is earned by educating and training staff how to treat LGBTQ patients.

For example, here’s a routine question that may have nothing to do with a transgender woman’s reason to see a doctor, that’s difficult to answer without coming out: “When was your last period? Any chance you could be pregnant?”

At her first appointment with a new healthcare provider about six months ago, Nikki Houle of Mystic was asked that and other questions.

“First, she asked me, ‘When was your last mammogram?’” Houle, 35, recalls. “I’ve never had one,” she replied. Puzzled, her doctor then asked, “Ok, when was



A doctor at Hartford Hospital asked Nikki Houle of Mystic:
“When was your last mammogram?”
“When was your last pap smear?”
“When was your last period?”
And each time, Houle said something that baffled the doctor:
“I’ve never had one.”
Because she’s trans, and the doctor never thought to ask her that.

your last pap smear?”

“I replied, ‘I’ve never had one of those,’” Houle says. “At this point, she’s starting to look uneasy. She finally asked, ‘Well, when was your last period?’ I told her, ‘I’ve never had one.’”

“I’m a transgender woman,” Houle finally told her. “Nothing down here has been operated on yet.”

Hartford HealthCare’s Saunders says, “We call that courageous conversation. Step one in any of these situations, and I know this is hard, is to advocate for yourself.”

PATIENTS: ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELVES

“Speak up and say, ‘that’s not the name,’ or ‘that’s not the pronoun,’ or ‘that’s not how I identify.’ It has to come from the individual,” Saunders says. “I work with a lot of the individuals that I have here on a little bit of assertiveness. A little bit of advocacy can go a long way, and you’ll see how responsive people are when you assert yourself.”

She adds, “If they don’t feel comfortable coming out, they just have to answer [questions] as simply

and directly as possible.”

Saunders provides her colleagues with copies of the April 2017 report in the Journal of The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry titled “Ten Things Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth Want Their Doctors to Know.” For the report, New Haven trans man and trainer Tony Ferraiolo worked with psychiatrists at Harvard and Yale universities to query 20 teenagers from the Yale pediatric Gender Program.

Among the findings, the teens, who ranged in age from 13 to 18, said doctors need to understand: sexuality and gender are two different things, talking to strangers about these things is uncomfortable, genitals shouldn’t be asked about unless medically necessary, genital and breast exams can be particularly uncomfortable, and staff using the wrong tone or attitude with patients can cause patients to shut down.

“A study done in 2011 polled medical students to see how many hours were dedicated to LGBT curriculum,” says Shute. “And the average was five hours.”

HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATORS: MORE TRAINING AND EDUCATION NEEDED

“We know this is a problem,” says Shute.

In 2016, the National Center for Transgender Equality

survey of the trans community showed 33 percent of respondents had at least one negative experience with a medical professional related to being transgender, including “having to teach the health care provider about transgender people to receive appropriate care.”

That was the experience of Barbara Curry of New Haven, a trans woman who is not undergoing a medical transition for health and financial reasons. Many trans and gender nonconforming individuals reject medical intervention. Still, Curry decided it was important to disclose her gender identity to her new physician who was in private practice at the time.

“The doctor had virtually no idea what I was talking about when I told him I was transgender,” she says. “He proceeded to ask me all sorts of questions about my sexual history. I simply asked him, ‘Did you skip that day at med school?’ He admitted that he must have, because he didn’t recall any preparation in his education for this particular discussion. At the same time, he made himself open to learning and asked great questions,” says Curry, adding he’s now her medical champion and has since joined Middlesex Health.

Erica Anderson, a clinical psychologist in Oakland, Calif., was not so lucky when she met with an endocrinologist in Philadelphia to get a prescription for hormones to begin her medical transition.

“She did not look me in the eye,” Anderson says. “She told



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me that she didn’t do that — help trans persons with hormones.” Anderson persisted but the answer remained “no.”


“I was told that there would be no charge for the visit,” says Anderson. “Both the doctor and her staff, I felt they were repulsed by me. I felt shamed and shunned. They did not offer any other referral or resource. I felt horrible, as if I were a leper.”

In time, she worked up the courage to try again, this time with a referral from a psychologist specializing in gender issues.

PATIENTS: BAD EXPERIENCE? COMPLAIN!

What should patients do? “Speak out,” says Saunders. Both she and Shute agree: complain.

“Unfortunately, as an institution, sometimes that’s the most formal way that we can identify weaknesses,” Shute says. “We have a formal process that all our complaints and grievances are dealt with and are responded to, and that gives us the ability to improve care.”

Says Saunders, “People are not going to be 100 percent correct all the time. However, we are absolutely dedicated to correcting those situations.” 



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.



Racquel with Le Trois Femmes, 2018. Chromogenic print. © Mickalene Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: The Douglas Tracy Smith and Dorothy Potter Smith Fund, 2019.3.4.

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FRIENDLY COMPETITION

CONNECTICUT'S OLDEST LGBTQ SOFTBALL LEAGUE OPENS THE PLAYING FIELD TO ALL

By **KARLEIGH WEBB**

For Alege Hedwall, the end of winter means increased heat, beyond the weather. “There’s work involved every year,” the commissioner of the Southern New England Friendship Softball League (SNEFSL) says, “Getting fields can be difficult. Working with schedules for umps [is challenging], and there’s personality management to deal with. But, it’s worth it to get people together and have a good time.”

The SNEFSL started its 37th season of softball on April 28, extending a legacy that mirrors the growth and evolu-

tion of the LGBTQ community and its recent history.

Founded in 1981, the league began with three teams from Massachusetts and Connecticut, filled with mostly gay men and women seeking an outlet and community at a time when the greater movement for gay rights was still in its infancy. The league was a refuge and a chance to play away from a mainstream culture, still standing at odds with the LGBTQ community.

“If I hadn’t found this league, I would be isolated,” longtime player and manager Bob Wilson states. “You were around people in the same life, being comfortable to be who you are.”

Wilson was a competitive athlete from his youth through high school. “I always loved sports,” he says. “I grew up playing sports and I was a competitive figure skater. So, I was training a lot and had few friends growing up. I was a tall, geeky kid with glasses, so people had plenty of reasons to make fun of me.”

For much of his youth, Wilson was isolated and closeted, until a chance meeting at a Westport pub in 1989 led to his entry into the



Photo on left: Bob Wilson has played in the SNEFSL continuously since 1989. Photo on right: Joey Farrell readies for a ball to be hit his way.



Kris Tonski (left) co-founded the New Haven Barracudas in 2018.

SNEFSL. “There were two ladies whose car was stuck in the mud, so I gave them some assistance. The guy who was with them was the coach of a team, so he recruited me.”

What happened that season, and in the seasons to come, changed Wilson’s life.

There was a party every weekend, Wilson recalls. “There were good sports and people were competitive; we played hard and then, after the game, we’d head to the host bar and we would meet people. For me, it was my escape and my spot to be myself. In all these years in the league, I forged friendships through this league. I came out because of this league. I found my partner playing in this league. For a dozen years or so, I found myself crying at the end of the season.”

Another longtime player, Joey Farrell, who has competed since 1991, echoes those thoughts. The SNEFSL for him was a first chance to play. “I never played organized sports. I never even thought about sports, even throughout high school,” Farrell recalls. “I first came out around 1988, and the first person who really brought me out in the community told me about the league. I didn’t think I could play, but I tried it and found out I was pretty good.”

Farrell also has been the league’s “unofficial” photographer. He’s chronicled over two decades of play, fun, parties, road trips, and a lot of people finding themselves for the first

time. “The league was a lot more social back then,” he says. “We made sure that we met everybody in the league. We were a bar league in those early years. We played hard and we partied with our friends afterward.”

HOW ACCEPTANCE HAS CHANGED THE GAME

The SNEFSL is the smallest league in the 46-member North American Gay Amateur Athletic Alliance, the governing body representing more than 17,000 players in the United States and Canada.

The league had seasons where only two teams competed. According to commissioner Hedwall, that was the situation in her first year playing, in 2003. These days, the league has seven Connecticut-based teams, and the 2019 season began with membership on the upswing. An expansion team was added in 2018.

The league has been bolstered by growing acceptance within cis-het communities. In the 1980s and 1990s, the teams were sponsored exclusively by the local gay watering holes in their communities. A number of those are no longer operating. This season, three of Connecticut’s flagship LGBTQ establishments are team sponsors, but sponsors leaguewide come from diverse sectors.

Wilson notes that 25 years ago, there was one straight

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"Marvelous Marv" Throneberry has nothing on the 2018 New Haven Barracudas.

player in the league and "he was the brother of the owner of one of the gay bars that sponsored the team."

Now, Hedwall estimates that more than 40 percent of the participants in the league are straight. "I had straight people who said they just want to play ball and they don't care about who they play with."

Hedwall and Farrell both note the changes within LGBTQ circles as well.

"It's hard to get younger gay people interested. It's a lot more accepting and easier [these days] for people to meet people," Farrell says. "Also, younger people are seeking to be a part of a 'big gay event.' That is why many of us old-timers keep holding on."

Adds Hedwall, "The dynamic of the community has changed. When I first joined the league in 2003, there were two gay bars in New London, five in New Haven, for example. Today, there's one in Hartford, two in New Haven, one left in New London."

"Among the younger crowd, there's more competitions for those who want to play sports. As the world got more accepting, the options got wider," Wilson notes. "And con-

sider, you have Grindr and all the other apps. When I was first coming out, this league was our Grindr. This was our place to meet people."

Wilson view the change as positive. "If straight players want to come and play, let them. This is part of what we were fighting for: inclusion for everyone," he says. "We're always going to be who we are, and we continue to recruit players at Pride, for example, but I love seeing that the league is growing and brings in new blood."

GOING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

Kris Tonski brought in some of that new blood last season. A competitive softball player, Tonski joined the dominant York Street team in 2014. In 2018, she left York Street to co-found the expansion New Haven Barracudas team, sponsored by the Barracuda Bistro & Bar. On the field, they resembled the 1962 New York Mets, winning one game all season. But they symbolized the diversity within the rainbow community with a team that had gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and straight players throughout the roster.

"I joined the league to begin with because I needed com-



The SNEFSL is the smallest league in the 46-member North American Gay Amateur Athletic Alliance, but membership is on the upswing.



munity at the time and I figured there would be other lesbians around,” Tonski says. “To me, the more letters the better, especially when we can all come together and build community.”

The commissioner also notes a want and need for community. She came out as bisexual in the late 1990s. Joining the league in 2003 opened up a chance to learn and teach. “I worked with my friend Eddie Burke to get a New London team back in the league,” she remembers. “Coming out at first, straight people didn’t accept me and gay people didn’t accept me. Coming into the league early on, there weren’t a lot of women; it was mostly men. But you keep showing up. You keep changing minds.”

For many older players like Farrell, the new team, with new players – perhaps sporting different pronouns – did change minds. “I met maybe one trans person in my life before last season, and now I’m playing with a group of trans players who came into the league,” he says. “Having trans and questioning players in more numbers in the league helped make the league better.”

Hedwall notes that the new team did bring something else the league was perhaps missing – its spirit of community forged in the ‘80s and ‘90s. “It was great seeing a bunch of different people together and build their team,

SNEFSL Commissioner Edge Hedwall steps up to the plate on and off the field.

“I would like to put the ‘LGBT’ back in our league more and exclaim, ‘Yes! This is an LGBT league, and it’s a space for everybody to play and come together.’”

–Kris Tonski


their camaraderie, their community,” she says. “The Barracudas played together and with such joy. I think some of us lost that a little bit.”

Adds Wilson: “The new team showed us what we used to be. I know that some on the other teams were a little jealous of their spirit, and we’re all asking ourselves, ‘Why aren’t we like that?’ That’s how we used to be in the league, and I think going forward, we all need to look at how to get that back.”

Tonski says she wanted to put a team together with a goal of helping the league reclaim that founding spirit and push it forward. She has put her professional skills as a webpage developer to work, and built the SNEFSL its new website. She hopes that project will help reestablish the league’s roots.

“In some ways, I think we’ve forgotten the mission of the league or haven’t explained the mission and the history well,” Tonski says. “I would like to put the ‘LGBT’ back in our league more and exclaim, ‘Yes! This is an LGBT league, and it’s a space for everybody to play and come together.’”

Wilson says that even in an era where acceptance has grown, there will always be a value for the Friendship League, especially for those just looking for a place to be.

“A few years ago, I had a teammate who was hanging out with us and no one knew he was gay. He was hanging with us, playing with us, and then one game, he came out to us,” says Wilson. “It was memorable to see him become that comfortable within himself. It shows that the wins and losses isn’t all that this is about.” 

In the league’s early days, just one player was straight, and “he was the brother of the owner of one of the gay bars that sponsored the team.” Now, more than 40 percent of the participants in the league are straight. The league emphasizes friendship and having fun – a place where everyone can be comfortable, regardless of gender or orientation.



Karleigh Webb is a Connecticut-based freelance writer, videographer and broadcast journalist. She’s an avid runner, cyclist and lifelong Kansas City Royals fan who has a distaste for both the Yankees and the Red Sox. She also plays in the Southern New England Friendship Softball League.

THE PET DAD

**Noted playwright Jacques Lamarre
is a lifelong animal lover**

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

Met my friend Jacques Lamarre. At 50, he is married to the love of his life, Arthur Galinat, and the two are a busy duo.

Lamarre is director of client services at BuzzEngine Marketing & Events in West Hartford, the noted playwright of “I Loved, I Lost, I Made Spaghetti” and “Raging Skillet” at TheaterWorks, and the comedy writer for drag superstar Varla Jean Merman. Galinat is associate director of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Connecticut.

Amid all that, they are “dog dads” to Spanky and “cat dads” to Miss Abigail Von Boom Boom LaFontaine. Lamarre also is a co-founder of the “Bark Twain Bash...It’s the Cat’s Meow” event at the Mark Twain House, which supports and recognizes animal advocates across the state. (The author of this article is the event’s other co-founder.)

So where did Lamarre’s love of animals begin? Not from his parents or siblings, he’s quick to note. He’s the fifth of 10 children – some born in Pennsylvania, others in Massachusetts, and one in New Hampshire.

“We did not have any pets growing up,” Lamarre says. “This was due largely to three things: 1) My parents already had 10 mouths to feed. 2) My parents don’t like animals. 3) My mom likes a clean house and a pet would have been one more thing to clean up after.”

For some reason, he says, he was the only one of his siblings who was desperate to have a pet. He begged and

pleaded to have an animal of his own to love.

“I don’t know how I succeeded, but my mom took me to the pet store at the Nashua Mall [in New Hampshire],” he recalls. “This was back when you could buy puppies in a mall! Of course, we did not get a dog. We left with the cuttiest thing my mom would allow: a hermit crab.”

His first pet, Hermie the Hermit Crab, was a crustacean that wouldn’t come out of its shell. Within a week, it died. Admittedly, Lamarre was a big, sobbing mess: “You would have thought my grandmother had passed. Come to think of it, I think I cried more over that crab than when my grandmother actually died.”

After a few more crab failures, his mom allowed goldfish. His first pair were named after his dad’s secretary and her husband: Val and Bob. It was alternately hilarious and devastating when his parents discovered the secretary and her husband floating in their bowl.

Again, defying all acceptable behavior in their house, he was allowed to graduate to pet mice. This was particularly bizarre as it was the type of animal that you would normally catch and kill in your home. Jacques was assured that he had two male mice. In short order, that turned into about 15 mice, much to his mother’s horror.

His parents wouldn’t allow a cat or a dog. His mom would say, “When you get your own home, you can have a zoo!”

“When I got my first apartment, I bought a parakeet I named Mr. Oui Oui. He died pretty quickly,” Lamarre says.



“I think being the only gay child out of 10 kids may have had something to do with being the only child who really wanted a pet.”

—Jacques Lamarre



“Then I got a goldfish for my desk at work, named Mr. Crabs. He died. I don’t know why pet stores even sold me animals.”

Eventually, he adopted his first rescue cat, named Kitty Carlisle, after the legendary Broadway star and game show panelist – except his Kitty Carlisle was a boy. He later became dad to another cat, Knockers, before taking in Miss Abigail Von Boom Boom.

“On my first date with my future husband, Abbie jumped up on my shoulder to inspect him more closely,” he recalls. “Now she sits on his face when he tries to sleep. Miraculously, she is getting close to 21 years old.”


Galinat, for his part, grew up around dogs and when they moved in together, Lamarre saw a dog in his future. Cats allowed for a more flexible schedule, and Lamarre would never have been able to pull off a dog on his own.

It was love at first sight. “As one did for men at that time, I turned to Craigslist for a hookup, which is where I found my first dog, Dino,”

Lamarre says. “Supposedly a yellow Lab-corgi mix, but he definitely had some pit bull in him. I adored this recently re-homed stray instantly and he made me laugh every day. We lost him last year to cancer and, for the first time, I was truly, truly heartbroken over the loss of a pet.”

The year after they got Dino, they rescued Spanky, a small puppy thought to be some sort of beagle mix, from the Sadie Mae Foundation. He’s now 85 pounds and thinks he’s a lap dog. Spanky is the sweetest thing imaginable, and it’s been a bit hard for the couple to watch him adjust to life without his adoptive brother. They’ve amped up the love and attention and he seems to be doing better.

Lamarre is known throughout Connecticut to be full of creative energy, a lover of the arts, and a big supporter of all things local – particularly when it comes to the LGBTQIA+ community. Those who have a chance to see his work or be a part of his energy can feel his love of people and pets.

“I think being the only gay child out of 10 kids may have had something to do with being the only child who really wanted a pet,” Lamarre reflects. “I was maybe a bit more sensitive, maybe a bit more nurturing. I wasn’t interested in sports and wasn’t allowed or encouraged to do the types of things my sisters got to do. All I know is, that I loved animals then and I love them even more now.” 



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.



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MEET //



Randy Rainbow Returns to Ridgefield

By DAWN ENNIS

He's back, bitches!

Political satirist and YouTube personality Randy Rainbow returns to Connecticut June 13 and 14 at the landmark Ridgefield Playhouse, entertaining audiences with live musical parodies and classic clips of his viral videos.

Although he's a familiar face to millions who watch him online, Rainbow, 37, considers himself first and foremost a musical theater queen who always wanted to be a star. And that, he says, is in large part because of how he was raised.

Born on Long Island, N.Y. and raised in Florida, Randy Rainbow now calls Queens, N.Y. home. But he says everyone fantasizes about living in Connecticut.

“I come from musical people. Everyone’s a musician or a comedian,” says Rainbow, whose father was also a talent booker. “My mother would put me to sleep with cast albums like ‘The Music Man’ or ‘Oklahoma.’ It was really just kind of in my blood from birth. That was my original dream – to land on Broadway.”

In high school, bullies taunted “the gay child-nerd” until he joined the drama club and starred in all the musicals. “Kids thought I was cool all of a sudden. And that was my saving grace,” Rainbow recalls.

Born on Long Island and raised in Broward County, Fla., he dropped out of college in his 20s and moved to New York City, but his Broadway dreams soon seemed out of reach. Rainbow waited tables at restaurants, hosted at Hooters, and answered phones for a Broadway producer. He started a blog to develop his own comedic voice, then a decade ago began cranking out homemade videos.

His breakout viral hit was his 2010 video, “Randy Rainbow is Dating Mel Gibson” which featured leaked snippets of an abusive telephone conversation the actor had with a girlfriend, intercut with Rainbow talking into the phone. He hit the big time in 2016, with his “Braggadocious!” video, mixing a presidential debate with a twist on one of the original Mary Poppins classic showtunes. It garnered nearly 28 million views in just two days. More recently, in April he released his “Cruella DeVos” spoof of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Ten years later, he still works alone, writing, acting, singing, recording and editing each video, all in about 48 hours, from inside his studio apartment a few subway stops away from Manhattan, where he lives with his cat, Moshi.

Connecticut Voice: Millions of people know your name – which I read is indeed your real name, and I’ll bet you get asked that A LOT?

Randy Rainbow: Number one question!



Yep. Randy Rainbow is his real name. Photo courtesy of Spectrum NY1News

CV: You say even went so far as to show a reporter your actual birth certificate. It clearly states your name is Randy Stewart Rainbow.

RR: Yes, that is the name on my birth certificate. It sounds like the hokiest, worst stage name that you can imagine. But if I were to pick one, it would not have been that. My whole father’s side, my great-grandparents and beyond, are Rainbows.

CV: You’ve said it was your grandmother who was your inspiration. How did she inspire you?

RR: My grandmother saw me succeeding even before I did. She believed in me,

Props are an essential part of Randy Rainbow’s act, and the beauty is that he finds many, if not most, of them at second-hand shops.



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Randy Rainbow's favorite musical?
"The Sound of Music."

nurtured and loved me. It is her belief in me that makes her my inspiration.

CV: What was it like growing up in Plantation, Florida, before and after you came out?

RR: I grew up in a gay-friendly community in Florida with a supportive mother so I had it easier than most.

CV: Your mother told you she knew you were gay, even before you came out to her. And it was your mom who introduced you to musical theater, too. How much did that all that support mean to you as a young man?

RR: My mother made it so easy, didn't she? That is one of the many reasons I love her so much. I grew up feeling supported by both my mother and grandmother. I can't imagine what it must be like to have little or no support. Sadly, I know it exists. We all know those who did not have that advantage and, although it is very sad, I see that is probably why the LGBTQ+ is one of the most connected communities out there. We just need to continue to support one another and stand up for each other.

CV: What's your favorite musical of all time – and are its songs something you randomly hum or sing along to, more than any other?

RR: "The Sound of Music," and I find myself humming, "How Do You Solve A Problem Like Maria?" And the Maria is me! [This classic showtune inspired Rainbow's video "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Korea?" After "Braggadocious!," his most viewed viral video is "Desperate Cheeto," a take on Justin Bieber's "Despacito," followed closely by his Gilbert and Sullivan spoof, "A Very Stable Genius" – each of those two parodies has been seen by YouTube users more than two million times.]

CV: Of all your videos, do you have a favorite?

RR: I imagine they are like having children; how can you pick just one?

CV: This tour stop at the Ridgfield Playhouse in June is your second trip to this landmark theater. Your home base is somewhere in New York City, but have you spent any time in Connecticut, and maybe thought about moving here?

“I am completely open minded when it comes to dating.”

TICKETS

to the Ridgefield Playhouse are available online at ridgefieldplayhouse.org or call the box office at (203) 438-5795. Randy Rainbow is set to appear in Ridgefield June 13-14, in Provincetown July 27 (two shows) and in Boston July 25 and 28.

More information about his tour is available at randyrainbow.com/tour.

RR: I actually live in Queens and I think Connecticut is lovely. I think everyone that visits Connecticut fantasizes about moving there.

CV: Are you dating anyone and would you consider dating someone who lived as far away from Queens as Connecticut?

RR: I am completely open minded when it comes to dating.

CV: You’ve said that starring on Broadway remains a goal, but there was chatter on Twitter and even an online petition earlier this year, demanding that you should host an awards show, like the Academy Awards. If you had to choose between being on stage and being on television, which one would you choose?

RR: I love the theater - that will always be my first love – but I see people that do theater and are also on television and film. I hope I am one of the lucky ones that get to experience all three! ♡

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The Longest Short Drive

SURGERY MARKED A MILESTONE IN MY FAMILY'S TRANSGENDER JOURNEY

The author and her son, Elliott Jones, this time on a literal journey: atop Black Balsam Knob in the Appalachians of western North Carolina.

By JANE LATUS

It was just a car ride. I clicked my seatbelt, opened Google Maps and spoke into my phone: “Dr. Garramone.” In a few minutes I, my son Elliott and his friend Emmy were there, at an ordinary suburban office center in southern Florida, opening the door to a waiting room that looked much like any doctor’s.

The roomful of patients could have been teleported into any dentist’s office and looked like they belong.

Everything appeared so – usual.

But I’d driven my kids to plenty of doctor’s appointments, and this time my heart was racing like it had powered me up a mountain. And my son was 24; he didn’t go to the doctor with his mother anymore.

This was not usual. In fact, the patients themselves were not as they appeared. Or, to be specific, as they wanted to appear. Which is, of course, why they were there.

The trip to this nondescript office took years longer than the 10-minute drive, and the directions aren’t on any GPS. It took a years-long identity crisis and Elliott’s determination to make it here. And by “make it,” I mean in every sense.

A year before our Florida trip, Elliott wrote to our family, who until then knew him as her:

“There’s something I need you to know. It’s that I’m male - I’ve always been. The term transgender is used as an umbrella term by many people to describe different things, but I can tell you about my experience. Up until now, I’ve always battled a sense of deep loneliness and non-belonging, being weighed down by an overwhelming sense of feeling hopelessly invisible, misunderstood and most of all fake. My real identity and sense of being is completely the opposite of the body that I was born with.”

He told us, “I’d like you to respect my gender identity by referring to me with male pronouns, and to please make

an effort not to call me or refer to me as my birth name, as it's embarrassing and upsetting (and foreign) for me to hear."

But what set off my maternal adrenaline (my husband's paternal instincts too) was this: "People say that this must be a difficult decision to make, but I explain that this isn't a decision at all; it's either this or not living."

Wherever Elliott's transition needed to take him, we were raring to go.

There's no one way to be trans, as Elliott said. For him, it meant male pronouns, a name change, hormones and the top surgery that brought us to Florida. No one step was "the one," and only he and time will tell if there'll be more.

If you assume that surgery was the most important step, that's only because it is an observable effort with physically apparent results.

The real work was Elliott's, before he told anyone "I'm male."

Getting to a doctor's office in Florida is just a trip. Knowing, declaring and reclaiming yourself is the real journey.

Not to say it was that easy to get to this doctor. Geographically, it required airplanes, taxis and driving from Connecticut and North Carolina to Florida and back. Practically, it took an Airbnb rental followed by a stay on Elliott's couch in North Carolina. Financially, it took the generosity of friends and family. Logistically, it took navigating crazy bureaucracy.

And this was only part, of just Elliott's, journey. There were a dozen others in that waiting room that day.

It was pre-surgery consultation day. Most patients were in their late teens or 20s, there with a parent or friend (lucky Elliott had both). Quiet conversations revealed they'd come from all over the country and Europe. They'd come because there was no comparable surgeon at home, or because – as in Elliott's case – their insurance didn't cover this care anyway, so they might as well choose the doctor they most wanted.

This wasn't a roomful of people waiting for something innocuous like a teeth cleaning.

Near us was a man, maybe 40, also there with his mother. She was chatting with another woman. "People at my church think it's okay, so I support her," she said.



Also newly comfortable in his skin, Elliott points to a butterfly. Photo by Lainey Harrison.

"He," the man corrected his mother.

"And she's changed her name to Evan, so I'm getting used to that," the mother went on.

"He," her son repeated. And so on.

Eventually, the weary Evan leaned toward me and asked, "Will you please talk to my mother?" We mothers talked. Turns out it's harder to break a 35-plus-year pronoun habit than a 20-year one. I bet she's got it down by now, because

EVERY MILESTONE WAS A CELEBRATION. HE TOLD ME IT WAS A GOOD THING THAT CHANGES FROM TESTOSTERONE ARE GRADUAL, BECAUSE WITH TOO MUCH CHANGE TOO SOON, HE WOULDN'T RECOGNIZE HIS OWN BODY.

her heart was in the right place.

When you love someone who is trans, and you are not, you learn it's not only okay, but appreciated, to ask questions. Like, "What pronouns do you use?" (And a tip: it's "use", not "prefer" – because, as Elliott says, "It's not a preference. It's an existential truth of someone's human identity.") And if you slip up sometimes with pronouns, it's okay, as long as you're trying.

Just don't ask me if my son, or anyone in that waiting room, was confused. Or if it's a whim. Or if kids these days are doing this for attention. Or what if they change their mind. Because I will think unkind thoughts. Because no one was at that doctor's office for fun. Because no one knows themselves better than those who are compelled to question who they are. Because so what if my child does (and he won't) "change his mind." Because I prefer my son alive.

When Elliott told us he was trans, we'd been half expecting it. We were relieved! I thought, "This explains everything." There was now a reason for the ineffable something that was wrong.

There were lots of little things, like how he covered up every possible bit of his body with long sleeves, high necks and jeans, even on hot days. How he guarded any topic remotely personal. And how he shrank from hugs.

From now on, things would get better and better! And they did. But it was a roller coaster, one with real-life victories and terrors. It's not a good ride to go on alone.

The day of his first testosterone shot, Elliott texted a photo of the hormone vial in his palm and wrote, "This is the closest I've ever felt to happiness in my life!" I was elated, for a second, until the implication struck me – had he been unhappy all these years?

Every milestone was a celebration. He told me it was a good thing that changes from testosterone are gradual, because with too much change too soon, he wouldn't recognize his own body. He said he'd looked down and thought his

arms had gotten shorter, then realized they'd gotten bigger around.

But there were times he was struggling so hard that it was terrifying. We were buoyed by support from the new trans and ally acquaintances we sought out: other parents at PFLAG meetings. Tony Ferraiolo, who as a trans man and life coach gave us insight into Elliott's struggle. Don Arsenault, who runs a parents' support group in New Haven while down the hall Tony meets with LGBTQ kids. Don made an unforgettable prediction: "You'll become closer to your son than you've ever been or could believe possible."


Wow, was he right. We are so very close now, all of us. Elliott says he'd kept his distance because he didn't think we'd ever know him. Now we talk about everything. And we hug, long ones. (And on hot days now? He's in shorts, and shirtless!)

At the time of Elliott's surgery, four years ago, we weren't at that comfortable point yet. We knew we were on the same team, but were so tense. Who wouldn't be? After all, it was for him a life-defining surgery.

Adding to the tension was a Florida law requiring the surgical center to use the name on his government ID. Although he'd changed his name, his new driver's license was in the mail. To him, the possibility of being called into surgery by the wrong name was unbearable.

I called the center, where a kind woman assured us that despite the name on his file, they would call him Elliott. Unlike many medical offices, this center was accustomed to transgender patients. Unfortunately, though, his hospital bracelet would have to have the wrong name.

The pre-dawn drive to the surgical center was surreal – as in, I couldn't believe we were really there. A few minutes after checking in, a nurse came out and called, "Elliott?" By noon, I was wheeling him toward the car. Before leaving the building, I pulled out the scissors I'd packed, cut off the bracelet and threw away that old name.

Ten days of recovery later, we went back to the waiting room where we joined most of the same people, there this time to hear the doctor say, you can go home now – as you newly are, but also always were. 

MAKING IT BETTER

State Comptroller Kevin Lembo loves all that's great about Connecticut – and has rolled up his sleeves to help fix the rest

By CAROL LATTER

For nearly a decade, Kevin Lembo has been Connecticut's State Comptroller. Essentially, he is the state's "chief fiscal guardian," keeping a close eye on its financial status, serving as administrator of its electronic accounting system, and coordinating the payroll and health care for its working and retired public employees.

Born in Paterson, N.J., he spent many years as an independent advocate in New York State, finding ways to improve the healthcare system for the benefit of patients and families. Lembo helped design and implement a home care program that kept seniors from prematurely – and often permanently – being admitted to long-term care nursing facilities. A member of the LGBTQ community, he also served as program director of an AIDS education, prevention and primary care program.

After coming to the Nutmeg State, he was appointed the first state healthcare advocate. He later became Assistant Comptroller and in 2010, was elected Connecticut's State Comptroller. He's been repeatedly re-elected to serve in that role, most recently in November 2018.

Advocacy groups have given him top marks for his work to promote public access to information about the state's financial dealings. But his job involves more than money. He continues to make the case for quality, affordable healthcare, and for preventative care initiatives that both

improve patients' well-being and reduce healthcare costs. In collaboration with the University of Connecticut, he spearheaded "Man Up," a statewide effort to help men (and women) enjoy longer, happier lives.

His path to Connecticut – and public office – was a winding and somewhat unexpected one, but he couldn't be happier with his career, his adopted state, and a family life that includes three children. He currently lives in Guilford with his husband, Charles Frey.

Lembo spoke with *Connecticut Voice* magazine about what brought him here, why he plans to stay, and the challenges that the LGBTQ community – and the state as whole – must still work to overcome.



CV: What was your path to becoming state comptroller?

KL: I began interacting with government during the early days of the AIDS epidemic and that interaction was fueled with people becoming ill and dying, and the government being unwilling to respond. The government wouldn't talk about it, *the New York Times* didn't print it, and the president would never mention it.

With equal parts advocacy and lobbying, we did some work around identifying what the needs were in the community and what funding was needed, and began petitioning the government for that.

After a while, I got a little tired of banging my head against the wall. I thought, 'If I got on the inside and started pulling doors open for others



Kevin Lembo greets voters on the campaign trail. Photo courtesy of the STATE OF CONNECTICUT COMPTROLLER'S OFFICE.

to come in, then maybe we could make a difference.' I ended up doing work in New York, mostly on the public health and healthcare delivery side.

I came to Connecticut to work for then-Comptroller Nancy Wyman and I fell in love with Connecticut. As the state's former healthcare advocate, I ran the state agency that advocated for and helped patients when insurance companies denied their claims. It was really heady work. That was about 20 years ago, but never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd ever run for office. I wasn't even my high school class president. I just was not that guy. But after a lot of years of helping to develop public policy and helping elected officials do that, the deck chairs began to move, and in 2010, I decided to run for state office. I'm starting my third term as state comptroller, which really does feel impossible.

CV: What do you love most about your job?

KL: I still would contend that I'm an advocate even in this role, for taxpayers or for patients in the healthcare space, and for transparency, good public policy, and good economic policy.

Combined with that, it's a good place for a data nerd. I like to use the numbers to make the case for social change. It's a pretty good place to be.

It's work that I love. I spent months looking at a possible run for governor. I decided not to. Political people don't understand when someone says I'm not going to climb to the next highest level available. I happily reverted to a re-election run.

There are lots of opportunities [for improvement and change in Connecticut], and all you need to do is look for the bills that are coming through the legislature. In

this session, among other things, the state is looking at pharmaceutical pricing and trying to wrangle what have been ever-increasing prices for pharmaceuticals. We're also national leaders on the creation of a possible public healthcare option.

In addition, I've been doing more transparency work – it's a passion of mine inside government. In 2011, Connecticut got a 'C' grade by national standards on transparency. Since then, we've got an 'A' or an 'A-minus,' up from a 'C.' We're always trying to author and pass more transparency bills. I'm happy to dive in and support legislative initiatives.

The new administration is incredibly collaborative and I'm appreciative of, and excited about, the possibilities.

CV: How has being part of the LGBTQ community influenced your life and career?

KL: I think back to being a young gay man and not seeing at that point, in the '70s and early '80s, any example of what it was to be a fully participating person in society. Most examples of gay people were hairdressers, Broadway entertainers, or serial killers. It was a terrible list of opportunities. None of us wants to wear the mantle of being a role model. But whenever I go out to high schools or colleges, I always find a way to come out to the crowd. I know that at the back of auditorium there may be a little queer kid who's looking for someone who relates to them.

In government and the policy-making law process, nobody can speak for us [the LGBTQ community]; we have to speak for ourselves. And even then, we can only do that narrowly. The diversity of the community is pretty significant but having diversity at the table makes for a better product in the end.

We're very lucky to live in Connecticut – not that we don't have to be on guard. But I think we are lucky to have statewide officials who are sensitive to the LGBTQ community and their issues.

We have a real fire wall against many of the worst instincts of this present White House, and so we will always do our best to defend not only the LGBTQ community but also those who are defined as 'other.' The attorney general [William Tong, the first Chinese-American attorney general in U.S. history], in particular, is very supportive. We are grateful for his willingness to stand up for people who are defined as 'other,' whether it's African, Asian, gay, or even female. We have a female Secretary of the State [Denise Merrill-D] and Lieutenant Governor [Susan Bysiewicz-D]. But in our collective power, across our differences, we

really can do great things in protecting each other and our community.

CV: What are some important issues that still need to be addressed?

KL: The trans community, in particular, needs more support and possibly more legal protection than they already have. It's really an evolving issue and we need to stay on top of that.

Young gay people, especially those who find themselves in the foster system or out and alone, are not well-served. They have some unique needs. My husband and I are adoptive parents and we have foster children. There need to be more families that engage in the foster process. We all need to step up so there are places for young people to go, and resources for them, regardless of their race, gender, ability, or disability. They need families who can identify with people like them.

Suicide is another huge problem for LGBTQ youths. We want to promote the idea of reaching out to them and letting

them know that there are role models, that there are resources, that we are extending a hand to them, and that we are ready, willing, and able to help.

We need to have zero tolerance for bullying and targeting. In addition to dealing with the bullies themselves, we really have to make people who are in charge of buildings – like school principals and superintendents – personally and professionally accountable for how they fail to abide by the law to protect these kids.

We need to stop giving lip service to addiction and mental health issues. We need to support and give funding to those things.

When people look at our legacy, we hope people won't look at our press releases but at our budgets to see what we really believe in. Not what we talked about, but what we paid for. If we're not putting our money where our mouths are, then shame on us.

CV: What are some of the specific challenges faced by the transgender community, and how can we as a society make things better?

KL: The most important thing is to welcome and accept transgender people, without reservation, in any setting, and to educate those around us. One of the things that we do as a family – our oldest kids are 31 and 34 – we go to Family Week in Provincetown [which this year is July 27 to August 3]. It attracts LGBTQ families from all over the country and from all over the world. It's not only uplifting for the

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families who attend – it does a lot to promote awareness, especially in people who may not be part of that community.

Our little one is now 19. He'll say, "My name is Jordan, and my pronouns are"

There was this moment where I realized that, generationally, this was going to take care of itself. We'll take care of it as human beings. I'm very hopeful that those who can't or won't or refuse to understand will eventually flush themselves out of the system. As for the next generation, I have high hopes for them.

We want to support transgender youth, and we also want to support their parents. I think most parents aren't really shocked when it occurs [when young people reveal they're transgender]; they often will have a knowing sort of sense, but may think, "Well, I'll just wait for the right time to talk about it."

My advice would be, "Believe your children when they tell you something." But then I think you need to not slam on the gas or the brakes. You need to go slow. They [the children] had time to process it, and you need time to process it. As parents, you need the resources to help you process it. Just know that it's the same kids that you loved yesterday – they're still going to leave their clothes on the floor, they're still going to be annoying or wonderful – but you will still love them anyway.

CV: Why is it important for young people to get involved in advocating for the LGBTQ community?

KL: There's a saying that if you're not at the table, you might be the entrée. Whether it's running for student government or running for the local school board or attending school board meetings and asking questions, that is the beginning of getting involved. I think there are lots of great young people, straight and LGBTQ, who have reengaged or engaged for the first time or are just feeling their way, so they're becoming part of a much larger effort. We are already that community that we want; we just need to fix it up, straighten it up. And if not, stuff will be done to us.

CV: We hear a lot in the news that people are leaving Connecticut. What's your take on that?


KL: I wasn't born here, so the fact that I live here wasn't an accident of birth. I came to live here because of the values of this state, and the laws and policies and administration

of this state. We have some great economic challenges and reinvention opportunities. Those make me excited; they don't scare me off. If people just want to complain, "The state is x, y or z, and so I'm going," then I say, "Go." But if you love all that's great about this state, then roll up your sleeves and get to work. If you don't like the fiscal policy, just engage, and we can have a conversation about it. It's a great state and a smart state. We're very lucky to live here.

Job number one is always to get our own house in order and great strides have been made over the last eight years to correct the sins of the past. No one likes it when we say, "This is how we got here." But if we don't understand the past, we won't understand how to fix it. That's got to be step one. Then we have to make the decisions that are needed to put us on the right and strongest footing. We have to think innovatively about who we are and what are our strengths are. Get off the "woe is me" kick.

We need more smart young people inside government. We have more of that now than we did, but we still need more. Trans is still a huge part of that.

One of the things I'm perpetually concerned about is new workers who may be inclined to leave Connecticut. What do they want? If they say, "We need good infrastructure, a good transportation system, and high-speed Internet, and we need to live in urban areas," we have to believe them, and act on it. If you address those things and get them thinking about the other strengths we have as a state, then we can keep the workforce here. If I can keep a young smart person in Connecticut until they fall in love and want to settle down and raise a family, then we've got them.

We know what a great place this is to raise a family. It's the middle spot – their 20s – where they think we may not be as hip as some other places, but there's nothing we can't fix. We have never taken full advantage of the power of place – our position between New York and Boston – and we need to leverage and exploit that position. What can we do to set things up, so that technology and cargo comes through us? We've got clean, smart, data-driven businesses in insurance and other industries. We need to build on those and build the rings of the supply chain and ancillary supports that surround the central hubs of those economic centers. I'm pretty hopeful and enthusiastic about what I'm seeing as part of the new administration and I'm committed to working as a partner to get all that done. 



Carol Latter is a resident of Simsbury, a long-time writer and editor in Connecticut, the editor of five editions of *Seasons Magazine* and, like Kevin Lembo, an import to the state.

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Dressed For Success

SCSU's new clothing and toiletries closet helps and uplifts LGBTQ students

By **CARA MCDONOUGH** / *Photography by DANIEL EUGENE*



The “Open Door Closet” isn’t your typical closet.

Yes, it takes up a corner space in a room, has drapes that act as doors for privacy and includes many of the accoutrements a closet might have (and then some) – from dresses, T-shirts, shoes and work outfits all the way to toiletries, accessories, and even wigs.

But while it’s clearly functional, providing items to anyone who needs them at Southern Connecticut State University, the closet is more than a necessity: it’s a space for gathering, support, encouragement and, sometimes, transformation.

The closet is a new addition to the university’s Sexuality and Gender Equality (SAGE) Center, which provides a wealth of programs and general support on campus and beyond, including its scholarship and “Ally in Progress” programs, an online map of all-gender restrooms on campus, and much more. In April, the center held its third annual “Lavender Graduation,” celebrating the accomplishments of

graduating LGBTQ individuals.

“A lot of what we do is about creating safer spaces,” says Jenna Retort, assistant director in the Office of Student Conduct and Civic Responsibility, and coordinator of the SAGE Center. Safer, because people there recognize that when it comes to sexuality and gender, education is an ongoing process – not something wrapped up in one training session.

The SAGE Center, located in the university’s Adanti Student Center, is a cozy enclave decked out with colorful décor, plentiful seating and a friendly roster of student staff and interns. It’s a place that conveys an immediate sense of welcoming and warmth.

While the closet is located there, nestled at the back of the room with neat rows of clothing and other supplies, it isn’t only meant for the LGBTQ community the SAGE Center serves.

The Open Door Closet grew out of a planned clothing drive for an outside agency, says Retort. The drive soon yielded a sizable collection of clothing, shoes, wigs, accessories and toiletries. That’s

when the event's organizers started looking at the university's own population with the donations in mind.

"We have a lot of students right on campus that have need," Retort says, noting that the university already had a food pantry, but no clothing or toiletry items for those in need.

So staff and students working in the SAGE Center spent their winter break stocking and organizing the closet and put a call out to the community when school reconvened in January, letting faculty and students know that supplies and clothing were available to anyone who needed them.

The center's website lists clear directions for getting access to the closet, whether visitors want to come to the site first, or call the office to ask about a particular item. "Students may need to utilize the Open Door Closet for a variety of reasons at various periods during their time at Southern and are always welcome to come to get items, no questions asked," the site says. It also lists acceptable items for donation, and how to donate them.

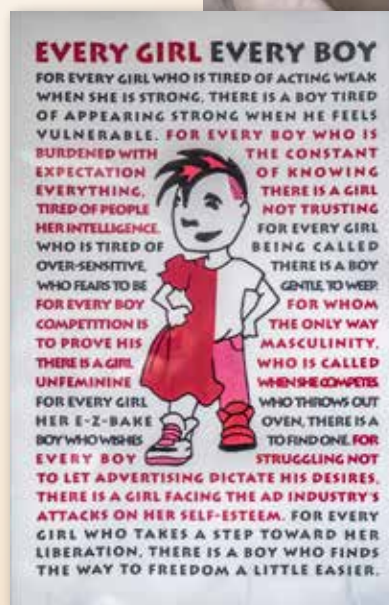
"Getting students connected to resources is a way to help them feel comfortable during their time at the university," Retort says.

As a truly "open" resource, the Open Door Closet might help students in a number of circumstances, whether they want the visit to be confidential, or want help from the supportive staff and students who help run the center. One student may simply visit to access needed toiletries, like toothpaste. Or the closet might provide professional attire to students who are doing their first internships, or need clothes for a job interview. Staff is happy to provide guidance on what clothes are appropriate to wear.

The closet also, importantly, may be a source of clothes for students who are questioning their gender, transitioning or simply want to experiment – and aren't sure where to turn for guidance.

For various reasons, the closet might be especially important to the LGBTQ community, says Retort. "Scarcity of resources impacts the LGBTQ+ community more than others." Research backs this up: the American Psychological Association states that the LGBTQ community is "especially susceptible to socioeconomic disadvantages," due to discrimination, marginalization of youth, and other factors.

"We are an institution committed to access, and our students are



coming to us with barriers to success," says Retort. "We all work together to ease that burden for our students."

Other Connecticut universities are considering similar measures meant to help students explore and connect. The University of Connecticut's Rainbow Center in Storrs – which hosts a wide range of events, discussions and programming, including a lecture series, "safe zone" training and its own Lavender Graduation – is planning to host a clothing swap sometime in the future, says Julia Anderson, the center's program coordinator.

Demetrius Colvin, director of the Student Resource Center at Wesleyan University

in Middletown, says the center hosts a monthly clothing swap social on the first Friday of every month, highlighting community materials they collect for everyone in their areas of focus, including those in underrepresented racial, socioeconomic and sexuality/gender groups. Donated items include clothing, accessories, shoes, hygiene products, shelf-stable food and condoms.

“First and foremost, our monthly clothing swap socials are about community building amongst underrepresented and marginalized students at Wesleyan University,” he says. “So we purposefully collaborate with student performers, DJs, and organizations during our socials that reflect the values of our center to uplift the communities that we serve. Between the free clothes, great music, free food, and community engagement, there is something for everyone to

get out of stopping on by.”

It’s clear that Connecticut’s institutions of higher learning are heeding a call, looking to help assuage need and ensure students are comfortable and supported while they do it.

“For me, it’s important for us to do this because there are students who are questioning their gender identity and might not have the resources to dress the way they want or express themselves,” says Mary Fitzgerald, a grad student who is getting a degree in social work and doing an internship at the SAGE Center.

She was at the center when a student in that position was trying on clothes from the Open Door Closet with support from her and others. “The joy that it brought ... it was awesome.”



Cara McDonough is a freelance writer who lives in Hamden with her family. You can find more of her work at www.caramcduna.com.



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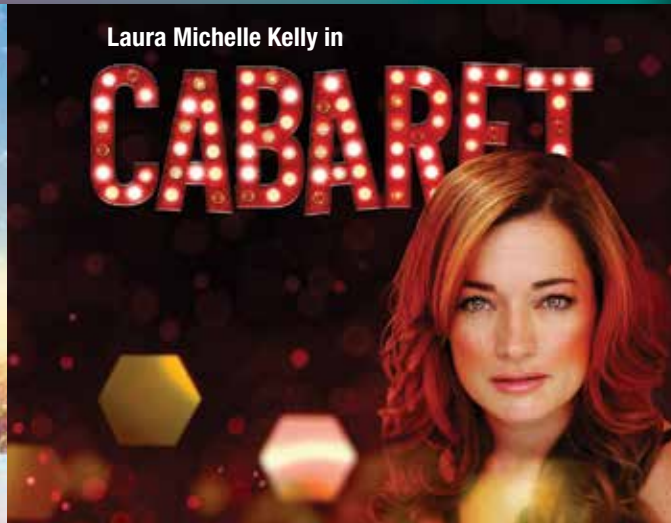
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Simple Pleasures

By **MATTHEW DICKS** / Illustrated by **SEAN WANG**

When I was 16 years old, I marched in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as a member of my high school band. I pounded on my bass drum as we made our way down a frigid Sixth Avenue while mobs of people lined the streets and enormous balloons danced overhead.

I remember being excited and cold that day. Mostly cold. I also had to pee for much of the parade, and given that it was New York City, peeing was not really an option.

Mostly I was cold and had to pee. But the balloons were amazing.

When I was 17 years old, I marched in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena on New Year's Day. We stood alongside enormous floats made entirely of flowers. A small earthquake shook the bridge beneath us while we waited to begin marching.

Californians laughed as we New Englanders trembled in fear. Two teenage girls sitting on a curb remarked that I looked a lot like Tom Cruise. I've clung to those words for the past three decades. I loved those girls despite their obvious visual impairment. I still love them.

These were big parades. Possibly the most notable and famous parades in the entire world, and I was fortunate enough to march in both. My high school marching band also paraded down Main Streets in both Disneyland and Disney World.

I also marched in many hometown parades throughout my childhood, first as a Cub Scout and later as a flutist and drummer. Too many hometown parades, if I'm being honest. Once you march down Main Street a few times, it gets pretty old.

Years later, I would stand on a sidewalk in Willimantic,

Conn., watching the world-famous Boom Box Parade march by. This tradition began in 1986 when local residents learned that there would be no parade that year because the high school had no marching band. In lieu of live music, the local radio station was convinced to broadcast two hours of marching band music on the Fourth of July. Residents then obtained a parade permit, dressed in red, white, and blue, and carried boom box radios with them.

More than 30 years later, this parade has grown into a hilarious and unorthodox spectacle featuring trucks that spray water from hoses onto paradegoers, fire-breathers and fire-eaters, and a little girl campaigning for the presidency in 2048.

But the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, the Rose Bowl, and even the Boom Box Parade pale in comparison to the parade I've witnessed for the past five years on the Fourth of July.

On that most patriotic of days, my family and I travel to Monterey, Mass., home of my in-laws, for their Fourth of July hometown parade and celebration. It's fantastic. The best parade in the country, in my humble opinion.

The parade itself lasts about nine seconds. It's about 47 feet long. It consists of a single high school band that marches two blocks to the center of town, where it stops and faces a church. Moments later, the band members erupt into the Star-Spangled Banner, reading the music off those small, portable music stands attached to horns, clarinets, and drums.

(I hate those little music stands. When I was marching, we didn't read music. We memorized our music. Committed it to our hearts and minds. And don't you think for a minute that I sound like an old man lamenting the good old days. Those stupid, little music stands existed in my day, but no self-respecting marching band would've been caught dead with them.)

When the band is finished playing, a couple of local officials tap on the microphone of an aging, failing sound system and attempt to stir the gathering of folks with some unprepared, stumbling sentences. Last year, the sound system failed completely, forcing officials to shout their uninspiring remarks to all who would listen. Thankfully, the

town's center is tiny. It consists of a post office, a library, the church, and a general store, which is inexplicably closed, seemingly, every Fourth of July.

After those few remarks, the band turns and marches up the hill. Fire trucks pass by. Maybe a Boy Scout troop or two. An ambulance or a police car. Candy is sometimes tossed. Small American flags are handed out. Children laugh.

A few years ago, the drag queen son of the town cop drove through in a convertible. People cheered. It might've been the most exciting thing that had happened to Monterey in years.


Paradegoers follow the trucks up the hill to the firehouse, where firefighters are standing by to give away free hot dogs and soda to all who arrive. An ice cream truck is parked alongside the firehouse, waiting to give free ice cream to anyone willing to wait in line.

Hot dogs, soda, and ice cream are amazing foods in their own right. Some of the best ever created. But when they are free and attached to a parade and patriotism, they are elevated to new heights.

Monterey residents and the occasional interloper like myself sit on the lawn and eat. We aggressively ignore our children. Face painters and balloon artists sometimes offer their wares free of charge. One year, my son arrived back at our blanket with what was supposed to be a balloon sword but was so phallic in nature (not to mention flesh colored) that I was sure the balloon artist had made it on purpose. Who makes penis-colored balloons?

It's all over in less than an hour. Parade. Hot dog. Ice cream. Penis balloon. Then we turn and head home, feeling like we've had a real adventure. A day filled with memories to last a lifetime, and photographs that we will treasure forever.

All in the span of about 60 minutes.

The Fourth of July parade in Monterey, Mass. is a reminder that not everything has to be a "thing." It's also a perfect reminder that there is nothing better on a summer day than a free hot dog and a couple of small children waving tiny American flags as a band marches by. 



Matthew Dicks is an elementary school teacher, bestselling novelist, and professional storyteller. He's a 39-time Moth StorySLAM champion and founder and artistic director of Speak Up, a Hartford-based storytelling organization. He and his wife, Elysha, host the podcast "Speak Up Storytelling."

Sean Wang, an MIT architecture graduate, is author of the sci-fi graphic novel series, Runners. Learn more at seanwang.com.

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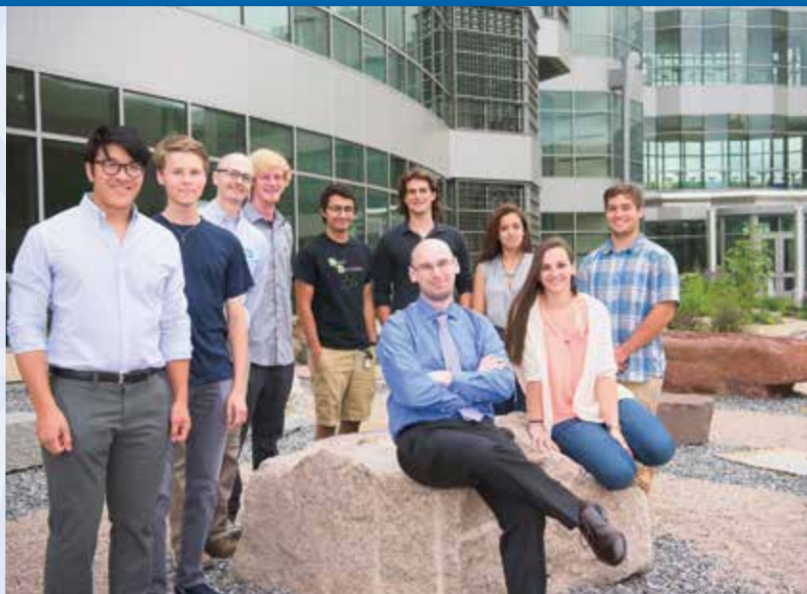
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