

# VOICE<sup>TM</sup>

CONNECTICUT

WINTER 2019

Our Journeys:  
Readers Share Their

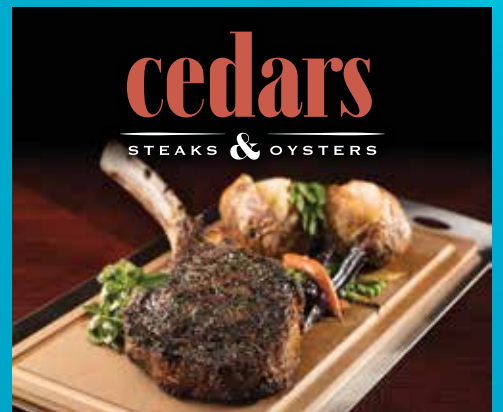
## Coming Out Stories

**MEET ELLA BRIGGS**  
Connecticut's Kid  
Governor Has a Lot  
On Her Mind

**HITTING THE GYM**  
Fitness Centers Aim  
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# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## EDITOR'S NOTE //



It's hard to believe that this is the final 2019 issue of *Connecticut VOICE*. In the past year, over four issues of this magazine, we've been fortunate to share so many stories from the LGBTQ community – many uplifting, some heartbreaking, some lighthearted, all thought-provoking. We hope you have enjoyed the first year of this trailblazing journey as much as we have.

I'm especially excited about this issue, in particular, because it includes the voices of so many of our readers. Thank you to all who shared your coming out stories

with us for a feature showcasing the varied paths you took to living your truth. We also spoke to readers about the challenges of being bisexual in today's world.

This winter, we also shine a spotlight on Connecticut's LGBTQ youth. We caught up with Connecticut Kid Governor Ella Briggs, who took time out of her busy schedule to reflect on her term, which is coming to a close. We also visited colleges in the state to learn about ambassador-type programs they offer to help LGBTQ students arriving on campus.

I'm very proud of this magazine, but the conversations started here extend well beyond these pages. I invite you to connect with us on social media. Join the discussion, tell us your ideas, share your story. Let your voice be heard.

Happy reading and see you in 2020,

*Cara*

Cara Rosner, Editor  
cara@ctvoicemag.com

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*Connecticut VOICE™*  
is published by Seasons Media

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**“THE MOST  
WASTED OF  
ALL DAYS IS  
ONE WITHOUT  
LAUGHTER.”**

*—E. E. Cummings*



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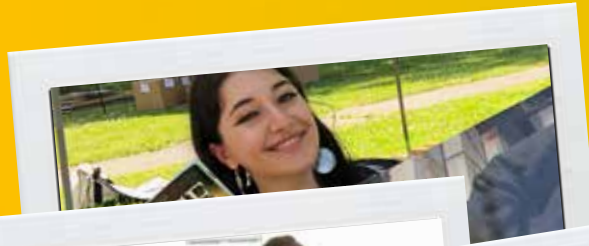
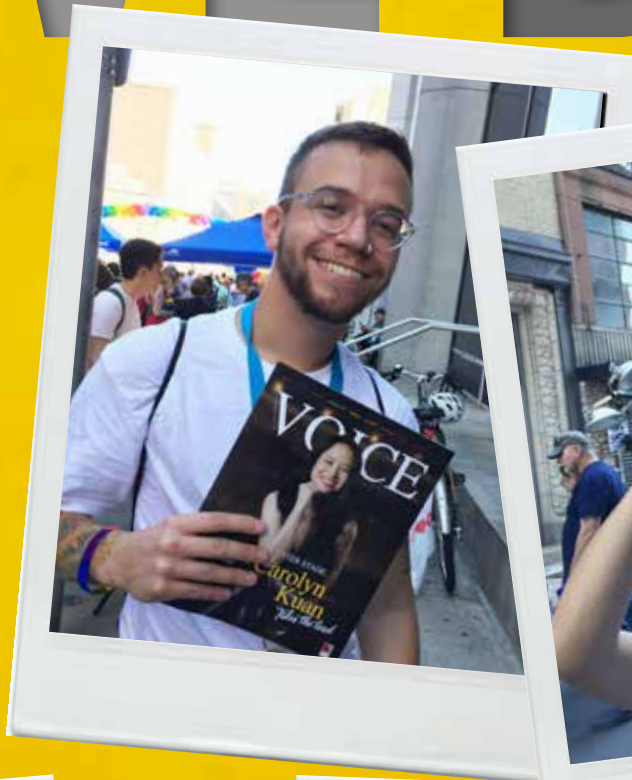
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# WE'VE BE

There have been many LGBTQ Pride events over the past several months, and *Connecticut VOICE* has been at nearly all of them!

It has been great connecting with LGBTQ individuals and allies at festivities statewide and beyond. Maybe you saw us at Pride Night at the Hartford Yard Goats, Fairfield County's Pride in the Park, Pride Night at the Connecticut Sun, New London PRIDE, New Haven PRIDE, or PRIDE Day at Six Flags New England.

Here's just a small sample of the fun we had. Keep an eye out for *Connecticut VOICE* at future events!



# EN BUSY!



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FEATURE //



# Coming Out!

**Scary, sad, surprising, and joyful tales of that life-changing moment**

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*By* JANE LATUS

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**“Coming out” – is there a more fraught term?** Why should you have to explain yourself? And if that’s the case, why shouldn’t everyone have to do it? But maybe you have to, for practical reasons like documentation. Or deeply essential reasons, like being called the right name. Maybe you want to proudly proclaim who you are. Or need to defend your identity, as Laverne Cox did by titling her speaking tour “Ain’t I a Woman?”

**T**he only certainty is that each experience is different. Did you come out 30 years ago or recently? Who did you come out to? Who did you come out as? What generations and beliefs did you come out from?

Coming out as a gay man 40 years ago was traumatic for my brother. It was a non-event for my son, who at age 15, within minutes of the Connecticut Supreme Court’s 2008 ruling on same-sex marriage, changed his Facebook status to “Gay and proud of it!”

I didn’t see his post, but my phone started buzzing with congratulatory messages.

“Hey, I hear you’re gay – that’s great!” I said when he came home from school.

He seemed puzzled and said, “Oh. I thought you knew.”

Well, my husband and I did know, but still ... this not-coming-out was a sweet coming out. He recently joked, “Being gay is so passé.” If only that were true, as well as for being transgender – because our other son’s transition was, I’ll just say, hard.

We asked readers to share their experiences: when they came out, what happened next? Here are their stories, diverse, scary, sad, wonderful, surprising and joyful.

**Vincent Dawes, 35, Middletown  
Server, The Flying Monkey Grill and Bar**

When Vincent Dawes’s mother worked the night nursing shift, his drunk, factory-working, Jamaican-born father would come into his room to say good night – and add, “Get a good job so your hands don’t get dirty, and find a nice woman to marry so you don’t grow up to be no faggot.”

“I was like 9 or 10 years old when I realized I had an attraction to other boys,” says Dawes. Through eighth grade, he went to a Baptist school where the message was clear: homosexuality is sinful. “It was my freshman year of high school when Matthew Shepard was beaten and hung on a fence.”



Vincent Dawes

In these circumstances, he says, “You’re like, ‘I’m not telling anyone. I’ll take this secret to my grave.’ I actually went to eight proms with eight girls.”

He came out to his mom and his siblings as an adult, when he met his now ex-boyfriend. “She knew. It was mother’s instinct. We’re very close.” They were all accepting, he says. His father was by then so ill from alcoholism that he was, and still is, unaware.

Dawes says being gay has never been an issue at work, with his friends, or where he lives. “I’ve been very



**Jonathan Orellana, 27, West Haven  
Co-owner, Your Time Homecare Companions  
Student preparing for a nursing career**

“Technically I’m gay, but I don’t like the word because in my country, to say somebody is gay is like an insult,” says Jonathan Orellana, who moved in 2017 to the United States from Ecuador.

“Here, all the people I meet know I’m gay, but in my country, only my mom knows.”

Orellana recently told a cousin in New Jersey, during a visit with his husband (Mike Keller – see below.) “The reaction was really, really good.”

In Ecuador, Orellana never dated so never felt he had to hide. “I just didn’t say anything to anybody.” He told his mom after moving in with Keller. She was fine, he says. “My mom is my best friend. If anyone else in my family finds out and doesn’t like it, I don’t care.”

He assumes his father suspects – he has, after all, sent Orellana some big hints: “conversion videos featuring

Cas Pereira

fortunate. I’ve always just been who I am – I’m Vinnie. I’m not the black guy or the gay guy.”

**Cas Pereira, 20, South Windsor  
Criminal Justice student, Fisher  
College**

“My whole life I felt like I didn’t fit in,” says Cas Pereira. “I felt like my brain never matched what my body showed. When I was 15, I came out to my family as a lesbian. They were accepting of that, and everything was fine.”

In college, after research and reflection, Pereira says, “One night I turned to my girlfriend and said, ‘I think I’m trans.’ She was the first person I came out to. She was very accepting, but unfortunately it wasn’t in the cards for us.”

Then he told his family. “My family’s great,” he says. “My mom introduces me as her son. My sister – I appreciate her more than anyone in this world. I don’t know what I’d do without her. And my dad tells everyone he has a son.” His stepmother, too, “is very supportive, very loving.”

“I think my dad had a lot of visions of me being his little girl, and dancing with me at my wedding. But he realized we’ve always done father-son things together.” And if he marries, “I told him we can still do the electric slide.” Which raises a remaining worry: “One of my biggest insecurities is whether someone can love me for who I really am.”



Jonathan Orellana and Michael Keller

priests who'll 'change you.'

He says that with friends and co-workers, it's a non-issue. "I feel free here. I feel comfortable. All these people don't care."

**Michael Shawn Keller, 45,  
West Haven  
Co-owner, Your Time  
Homecare Companions  
Writer ("Room 308" and  
"Bullies Among Us")**

Would you believe that a gay man who married in 2019 at age 45 had come out to exactly no one until two years prior? A new life came fast for Mike Keller.

"I grew up Catholic. One priest literally told me, when I told him in confession, 'You are going to hell.' For a long time, I actually believed it," says Keller.

"I just fought it. I was, for a long time, confused. I became a heavy drinker so I wouldn't think about it. It was bad. In my 30s, I knew I needed to change. I started to love myself and stop drinking."

He turned to writing, especially thinking of his nieces and nephews. "The biggest mistakes I made were when I was in the closet. I don't want kids to make the same mistakes and end up getting hurt or sick."

In short succession, he met Jonathan Orellana (see above), finished his book, *Room 308: Awkwardly Coming Out of the Closet*, and gave the book to his mother. (His father had passed away.)

"She was shocked. She had no idea," he says. So was Keller, because "She was 100 percent fine. Then she met Jonathan and she loves Jonathan more than me!"

The whole family was accepting, he says. "A lot of the time, it's all in our heads. We worry for no reason."

**Dawn Ennis, 55, West Hartford  
Managing editor, *Outsports* magazine  
Journalism, advertising and public relations  
teacher, University of Hartford**

At work, anyway, Dawn Ennis's coming-out as a transgender woman started smoothly. It quickly turned public and painful, thanks to the New York City tabloids.

Ennis, 49 then, was overnight assignment editor at ABC. She came out to family, friends, the world via Facebook, and at work. In the newsroom, she says, "Everything was fine. The boss gave me flowers, and there was a standing ovation." Two weeks later, the media mockery began, with the *New York Post* inaccurately describing her workplace



Dawn Ennis

coming-out as a one-sided demand.

About two months later, Ennis had a seizure that caused amnesia. "I didn't understand why my license said I was female. I said I wanted to be a man and change back to my old name. I was in a delusion," she says.

The *Post* reported, "I'm a guy again! ABC newsman who switched genders wants to switch back." The article was picked up worldwide and treated, generally, as a joke.

After recovering, Ennis tried to resume her transition "quietly, privately at work." But continued publicity took its toll. She says that technically she resigned, but really was let go because the publicity bothered ABC. "I was getting more attention than Diane Sawyer."

The *New York Daily News* declared, "ABC producer who changed gender three times was fired in May for performance-related issues," adding, "A gender-flipping producer from ABC News now has a pink slip to go with her pink slip."

Ennis was married with three children throughout this. Once, Ennis was out in public presenting as a man "but it was very apparent to everyone that I was busty and no longer trying to hide it, as I had for decades. I thought I could get away without binding, until relatives expressed discomfort and mocked me, and neighborhood children bullied my oldest child. It hurt me so bad, I agreed to wear chest binders from then on."

Ultimately, Ennis realized "I was denying myself for the



TF

sake of my wife, my family, my job.” Her wife, Wendy Ennis, “was very clear that it would mean a divorce.” Wendy was ultimately supportive of her wife’s transition, “although it broke her heart,” says Ennis. Wendy died of cancer shortly before their divorce could be finalized. The children are now thriving, says Ennis.

Ennis was a child model. “When I was 12, I was very effeminate. I was thin, and I had a higher voice prior to puberty.” With her mother’s okay, advertisers had her portray a girl in radio spots and photos. “I used to take Flintstone vitamins,” says Ennis. Her mother, worried about losing the work to puberty, gave her daughter new “vitamins” from a round, plastic case. Not until Ennis was in her 40s did she learn she’d taken “1970s, high-test birth control pills for four years.”

One day, her father accompanied her to a photo shoot and discovered what was happening. “He dragged me out. It was humiliating. There was a huge fight at home that night behind closed doors. There were no more vitamins. I went through traditional male puberty at 18,” says Ennis. She had enjoyed her “sneak peek at what I was supposed to be.”

**Zulynette, 31, Hartford**  
**Artist, poet and performer**

“I didn’t explore the idea of queerness until I was an adult. I grew up in a family rampant with homophobia, so I didn’t think it was even an idea,” says Zulynette. She dated men, but when at age 24 a woman pursued her, “I realized, ‘OK, I’m queer.’”

Zulynette introduced the woman to her mother, who acted “super uncomfortable. She immediately knew, because of how she dressed. Two days later, my mom asked, ‘Are you attracted to women?’ And I said I’m attracted to whoever I’m attracted to.” She told her mother she’d likely date “a spectrum of people.”

“She said it was the worst thing one of her kids had done to her, the neighbors were laughing at her, and everyone was talking about her. All that was not true. I was the last kid, and she had put me on this pedestal and I took a big leap off it. I was torn up for a few days. I hated to see my mom torn apart. But I couldn’t allow it to shape who I was. It was brutal in that moment, but it was also a relief.”

One sister told Zulynette not to say the word “gay”



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“She said it was the worst thing one of her kids had done to her, the neighbors were laughing at her, and everyone was talking about her.”

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Zulynette



John Pica-Sneeden

around her son, but the rest of the family's reaction was "It's cool – we don't care. We still love you," she says. Her stepfather "doesn't care – in the best of ways." She's glad her teenage nieces and nephews "have seen me in relationships with men and with women, and they're comfortable with asking me questions." However, she says, "My mom is still homophobic. She's missing out on part of my life."

**John Pica-Sneeden, 62, East Windsor**  
**Owner, Surroundings Floral**  
**Executive director, Connecticut Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce**

"I never came out because I was never really in. I always just acted this way. So it was not a very big deal to people to tell them I was gay," says Pica-Sneeden.

"In high school in the mid-'70s, we didn't have couples – we had gangs! We didn't call it dating. I went to five proms! Girls asked me. I said yes because the whole gang would go together.

"I was about 20 when (my mother) finally asked, 'Are you gay?' I asked, 'Do you want the truth or do you want me to lie?' She said, 'I want the truth.' She already knew. My mother's far from stupid. It's a large Italian Catholic family. They love their religion but they love their family more."

Raising five children with his husband Brian Pica-Sneeden was "when I really started coming out," he says, living quite publicly as a gay couple. He joined the Connecticut Gay Men's Chorus, chaired the town Board of Education and serves as cantor in church.

"I just lived my life and no one cared," says Pica-Sneeden. "I'm just very lucky I didn't have any pain or suffering in what you call today 'coming out.'"

**David Grant, 34, Hartford**  
**Executive assistant and LGBTQ+ liaison, Office of Mayor Luke Bronin**

David Grant grew up in a family of "machismo Mexican Catholics. My dad and brother used to call me fag. I didn't know what it meant. I knew it was bad. You know when you're being made fun of. I didn't know what it meant until junior high, and at that point I repressed it." Grant

took cover by playing football and baseball and dating girls.

He came out the day before his 22nd birthday. "I told my friends first. They were very supportive and were like, 'We already knew.'" He then told his sisters (one straight, one lesbian and one bi), who outed him to their mother during an argument in defense of the lesbian sister. His father had passed away when Grant was 16.

His mother suddenly became distant. "She wouldn't call me. She made excuses to not get together. My friends became my family for about two years. Then we started to get close again. She asked me questions and used the term 'boyfriend.'" Time was the answer, he says. "I think she missed me."

He married Chris Grant in 2016. "She loves Chris. She calls him her son." And when discussing his childhood, "She apologized for not sticking up for me.

"In the closet, you go through this period of intense shame. Then there's a period of acceptance when you realize you're who you are and can't do anything about it. Then, if you're lucky, there's a period of celebration. You lose the expectation, too, of having to get a wife and a house with a picket fence. We are part of a unique culture. I can sing and dance and play in glitter, and do whatever I want to do! You get to feel like you can do anything and be whoever you want to be."



David Grant

**Azua Echevarria, in her “midlife journey”, Hartford  
Owner of Age Into Beauty health, beauty and wellness services  
– and –**

**Toni Johnson, 48, Hartford  
Owner of Rework Creative jewelry**

Azua Echevarria followed the “traditional binary path,” marrying a man and having two children. But in 2008, after 16 years of marriage, her “best friend,” her mother, died. “I knew I didn’t have a moment to waste to be myself.”

The couple divorced. A few years later, Echevarria went on dating sites but sought out only men. Through her work and interests, she started connecting with women online, and noticed a pattern: women of color were flocking to her as either a maternal figure or potential romantic partner. She thought, “What’s going on?!”

Enter jeweler Toni Johnson, then of Texas, whom Echevarria met via Instagram. They conversed online, by text, and finally by phone – eventually daily. “I think we were both falling in love from the first phone call,” Johnson says.

Echevarria invited Johnson to visit her in Hartford for her birthday. “It was like fireworks,” Echevarria says of meeting in person. “I told the kids, ‘I fell in love with someone, and it’s a woman.’” Her son and daughter (who had already come out herself) were happy for her.

“I like to be identified as a spirit,” says Echevarria.

As for Johnson, “I knew early on I was this gay, black, creative soul. In 1989 in high school, when I came out, I was so happy, I went home and told everybody, ‘I’m in love! And it’s a girl!’” Her conservative family did not react well. “I took it as, that’s their problem, not mine. They’re just opinions.”

Johnson admits, though, that being cut off by her lifelong best friend “was some serious hurt.” It means a lot to her that the friend recently called to apologize.

“It’s a blessing to have had this experience. There is no trauma around



Toni Johnson and Azua Echevarria

my queerness,” says Echevarria, adding, “I know it’s very rare to be able to hold my partner’s hand in public and not feel at risk.”

**Charmagne Glass-Tripp, 46, Bloomfield  
Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter  
Co-owner, Gripp Productions creative  
consulting team**

As a teen, Charmagne Glass-Tripp became so involved in the church where her best friend’s father was pastor that it became “all consuming.” She shared a dream (that she thought innocuous) with the pastor, who saw it differently. “He gave me a tape all about homosexuality. It said it’s perverted thoughts.

“I really didn’t understand why he gave me that tape. Then I go to college and it’s like ‘Oh, that’s why.’” She had fallen for a woman. “I was genuinely concerned. I told the pastor, ‘I don’t know how to control this.’ They suggested I to go to one of those gay camps.”

While Charmagne was home on break, her mom said,

“We need to talk.” Her mom “claims she read my journal because it was wide open. She asked was I sure I was in love with this woman.” Charmagne told her about the conversion camp, and her mom said “Absolutely not!” Her major concern was that Charmagne might have a harder life.

When Charmagne then told her siblings she’s lesbian, “it seemed nobody flinched.” Well, except briefly! One sister complained, “I’ve been sent to the principal’s office and suspended for fighting for you because people are saying you’re gay, and I said you aren’t, but you’re dating a girl?!”

The pastor sent a cold letter kicking her out of the church. She also lost her best friend. “It was really shitty.”

**Tianna Glass-Tripp, 35, Bloomfield  
Playwright, comedic writer and storyteller  
Co-owner, Gripp Productions creative  
consulting team**

“I always had some kind of indication that I was probably not normal. I knew I was weird across the board,” jokes Tianna Glass-Tripp. When a teenager, she brought it up with



friends: “You know how you all want to kiss girls? They were like, ‘Nah.’” She saw plenty of public examples of gay men, but few lesbians. “There were no black lesbians. Even Ellen wasn’t out.”

Her mom was the person gay friends came out to. So she asked her mom’s advice. “I know men can like men. Can women like women? She said, ‘Of course they can.’”

In college, Glass-Tripp came out as a lesbian (she now identifies as queer) to everyone, and to her amusement, the

biggest surprises came from her mother. “She said, ‘I’ve never seen you operate a power tool. You love wearing dresses. Where is this coming from?’ She knew a lot of gay men, but all she knew about lesbians were stereotypes.”

Also, her mother’s greatest fear – that her daughter might get pregnant while unmarried – now morphed into the fear “that I may not have a wedding and have kids.”

Her dad’s reaction? “Baby doll, I love you.”

Charmagne and Tianna married in 2014.



Tianna and Charmagne Glass-Tripp



Brent Chaney

**Brent Chaney, 42, Vernon  
Business Intelligence Professional  
and Graduate student in Instructional Design,  
UMass Boston**


“I didn’t come out to myself ‘til I was 21 or so,” says Brent Chaney. “It’s taken me a number of years and a lot of reflection to realize I was so deeply closeted as a teenager. Home wasn’t peaceful to begin with. I had to remain closeted to myself in order to survive.”

The relationship with his mother and stepfather “was fraught in general,” he says.

In his early 20s, Chaney felt an attraction to someone, but wasn’t sure what it meant. “Scientist that I am, I thought, ‘I need data!’ I kissed him. He outed me, in a very short period of time, to all my friends. When

I confronted him, he lied about it. But my friends were all very supportive. It was always a total non-issue with my chosen family.”

A few years later, he came out to his dad, who at the time belonged to an especially conservative church. “He asked me, ‘Are you gay?’ I remember kind of staring at him. I was weighing what was going to happen next. To his credit, he said, ‘I’m going to need a little time with this. Give me a little time.’”

His father left the church in support of his son. “He flipped from this place of disapproval to a place of ‘What’s wrong with these people’ who disapprove? That meant a lot to me.” His stepmother and sisters are “wonderful,” he says. His mother died in 2016, still in deep denial. 



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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# Mann of His Word

**Author tells tales of history, Hollywood, and life through a gay lens**

By FRANK RIZZO

**B**est-selling author, professor, activist and chronicler of gay life, celebrity and history for more than 35 years, William J. Mann remembers an incident in 1991 when he was still in the closet to his family – even though he was co-editor of *Metroline*, Hartford’s periodical for the gay community.

At the time, he was covering the passage of a gay civil rights bill at the state Capitol for *Metroline*.

“The crowd was cheering, chanting, ‘We won! We won,’ and I’m there writing it all down,” says Mann from his office at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, where he teaches history. “A reporter from the *Hartford Courant* came up to a group of us and asked for our names and I thought, ‘Please don’t publish my name because I haven’t come out to my parents.’”

But hadn’t he had been writing for and editing *Metroline* at that point for several years?

“My parents never read *Metroline*,” he says, smiling, “but they did read the *Courant*, and not only was my name in the paper but also my photo. I

called my parents and said, ‘Umm, yeah that’s me.’”

And the reaction?

“It didn’t go well at first. My father was city treasurer in Middletown and once ran for mayor. My mom worked at the Superior Court and my older brother worked for [former U.S. Senator] Chris Dodd. We were a very political-type family, and there was my face in the *Courant* as ‘the gay guy.’”

But family attitudes gradually improved so much “that within five or six years, my parents were basically PFLAG people. They both ended up loving my husband, coming to our wedding in P-town, and my husband and I were with my mother when she died. That’s how close we all became.”

## “I liked boys.”

Mann says he knew he was gay growing up in Middletown “as soon as I learned the word ‘homosexual,’ which was probably in the fifth grade or so. I knew then what I was. I liked boys. It’s interesting now because I have so many students who identify as nonbinary or trans but I never questioned my gender. I always liked boys and I always felt very boy-ish.”

Mann, 58 – and still retaining the boyish charm – received his undergraduate degree at CCSU in 1984. He followed that with his master’s degree from Wesleyan University in Middletown in liberal



Author, activist and professor William Mann



Mann says he knew he was gay when he was in elementary school, but it wasn't until many years later that he came out to his family.

studies with a concentration in history and film, graduating in 1988. He met his husband, psychologist Dr. Timothy Huber, in 1988 and they have been married for the past 15 years.

“I had a game plan,” says Mann of his life then. “I wanted to write books and, at the time, I really wanted to write novels.”

*Metroline* gave him his first bylined story – and a taste for advocacy journalism, too. Within a few years, he and Sarina Kahn, a Pakistani Muslim lesbian, were running the

magazine – first as co-editors and later as co-publishers at a time when the AIDS epidemic and the fight for gay and lesbian civil rights and visibility was at its height in Connecticut and nationwide.

“It was a transformational period and we were covering it all,” says Mann, who also co-founded the first gay film festival in the state in 1987, Out Film CT.

But the emotional and financial pressures at *Metroline* eventually took their toll. “Sarina and I never got any money for doing *Metroline*. We couldn't, because we had to pay

the staff and to keep the thing being published. I had a boyfriend, now husband, who was working but I don't know how Sarina got through it. And all during this time, friends were dying all around us."

### Escape to P-town

Many who were ill relocated to a supportive gay community in Provincetown, Mass. In the mid-'90s, Mann left *Metroline* – and Hartford – and relocated there, too.

"A good friend of mine, Victor D'Lugin, was very sick. He was a professor of political science at the University of Hartford and he was one of the [first] activists I met. He was a huge influence on me and my husband. He taught me in some ways how to be gay and how to stand up for who you are."

Mann and Huber cared for D'Lugin until his death in 1996, just missing the emergence of azidothymidine, the drug more commonly known as AZT, which gave many with AIDS a new lease on life.

"By that time, I'd fallen in love with P-town and I knew I wanted to make that [place] part of my life," he says. He and Huber still have a home there, as well as residences in Milford and Manhattan.

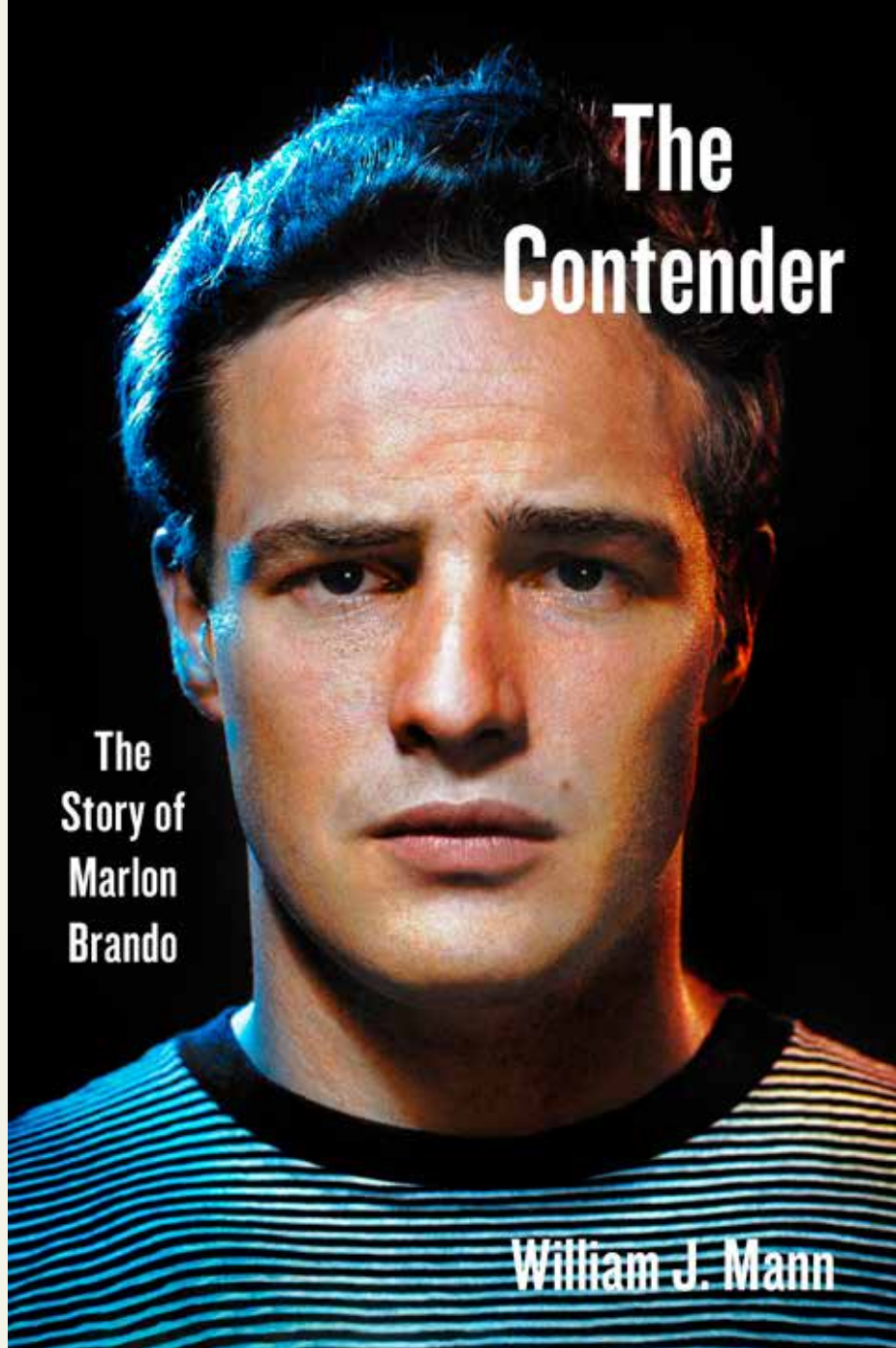
While on the Cape, he began writing his gay-themed novels, first with 1997's "The Men from the Boys," followed by "Where the Boys Are" in 2003, both set in Provincetown; then with "All American Boy" in 2005, "Men Who Love Men" in 2007 and "Object of Desire" in 2009.

He segued into the world of non-fiction with a series of Hollywood-based books. In 1998, he drew widespread attention with "Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines," writing about a leading man of the 1920s and '30s who was Hollywood's first "out" star. Mann earned the Lambda Literary Award for the book.

That was followed by "Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910-1969" in 2001, and "Edge of Midnight: The Life of John Schlesinger" in 2005.

Mann reached mainstream readers with his insider celebrity biographies, exploring the early fab of Barbra Streisand ("Hello, Gorgeous: Becoming Barbra Streisand"), a revealing portrait of a nonbinary Katharine Hepburn ("Kate: The Woman Who Was Hepburn") and the allure of Elizabeth Taylor ("How to Be a Movie Star: Elizabeth Taylor in Hollywood").

Mann hit the best-selling lists in 2014 with the movie



# The Contender

The Story of Marlon Brando

William J. Mann

Mann's latest book, "The Contender," takes a deep dive into the life of actor Marlon Brando, who died in 2004.

capital crime saga set in the 1920s, "Tinseltown: Murder, Morphine, and Madness at the Dawn of Hollywood." The book won Mann the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America. It's now in development for television.

"I'm a historian and that's my strength. I love research and digging into old records. But all the books I've written, there's been something gay in all of them. Even the Roosevelts with Eleanor and a few of the nephews," he says referring to his last book, "The Wars of the Roosevelts: The Ruthless Rise of America's Greatest Political Family."

## Taking on Brando

For his just-published book, “The Contender,” Mann takes on Marlon Brando, who died in 2004 at the age of 80.

“I tried to see him in a different way and go beyond the Hollywood image and the stereotypes.”

And how did Brando, whose career exploded in the late ‘40s and never stopped, view homosexuals?

“In various interviews in the ‘70s he would say things like, ‘Now the homosexuals are claiming rights, and this is a country about people coming forward and claiming their rights.’ He was seeing the gay movement as part of the civil rights movement. But Brando did not take a participatory role in the gay rights movement as he did in the African-American and Native American civil rights movements,” says Mann.

“He very specifically talked about his own [same-sex] experiences. He said as part of a larger interview, ‘Like many other men, I have had these experiences and I feel no shame in it.’ But he didn’t see himself as a homosexual – and I don’t think he was. He was a heterosexual who was fluid. His only ongoing male relationship was with [French actor] Christian Marquand. They were buddies who sometimes fooled around, and sometimes that included with women as well.”

What would Brando, who abhorred publicity and attention on his private life, have thought of Mann’s book?

“He didn’t like people writing about him or analyzing him. But Mike Medavoy, the film producer who was one of his executors, said Brando would have appreciated this effort. At least I tried to understand his point of view, which no one ever did before. But I’m sure he would also say, ‘You’ve got this wrong,’ because he was also someone who was constantly trying to rewrite his own story.”

As a historian, Mann often is included as a source in other people’s books and documentaries. He is featured in the 2017 documentary “Scotty and the Secret History of Hollywood” about Scotty Bowers, who died this fall at age 96. Bowers allegedly arranged secret sexual liaisons for the stars for decades beginning in the ‘40s. “I believe him 100 percent,” says Mann. “I went to Gavin Lambert, one of the great Hollywood historians, and Dominick Dunne, who knew everybody and everyone, and I asked them if I could believe Scotty and they said, ‘Yes, believe him.’”

## Reaching a New Generation

Mann says “Tinseltown” is being developed for network TV but, for the first time in years, he doesn’t have a book project ready to go. He has another year in his contract to teach at CCSU but isn’t sure what lies ahead beyond that.

But his time at the university has been invaluable to him, surrounded by “Generation Z” students.

“Our generation has failed somewhat in communicating our [LGBTQ] history to them. I took 11 students to NYC last spring for a Stonewall history tour and I led them around the Village, Chelsea, and all sorts of places like that. Seeing the way that the students looked at these things and listened to these stories...” Mann says, his voice trailing off. “I know this sounds corny, but it does give me hope. This is a generation that has been brought up to say, ‘We matter just as much as anyone else.’ This is the Parkland student generation and their attitude is, ‘What do you mean I can’t do this because of the color of my skin, or because I’m gay, or because of my gender identity?’ It’s unthinkable to them and, ultimately, that power is going to rise to the surface.”

A little oppression goes a long way because it forces you to create these cultures, communities and alternative safe spaces. It’s a little sad for me as a gay man because I see my culture – the culture I loved so much and that nurtured me – kind of disappearing.

But as some things are lost, there are also gains.

“They are not gay and lesbian kids in the way we were, and they see their world differently, they live in the world differently, they identify differently. They don’t need to go to P-town the way we did. That’s not a big draw for them,” Mann says.

“That doesn’t mean they don’t face discrimination. They certainly do. It’s just that they interact with the world differently. But we have to find a way to connect with them because we have so much history we can share so they can understand how we got to this point. That’s why these last two years [at the university] have been so important to me – because I realize that that’s something I can do.”



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





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"I appreciate the need for everyone to have a safe space," says personal trainer Marannie Bauer, in her New Haven studio.



# Working It Out

## Some facilities embrace inclusivity, but LGBTQ gym-goers still face obstacles

By JANE LATUS / Photography by STAN GODLEWSKI

**W**ho doesn't have residual gym class locker room trauma? Especially if you were overweight or in any way different, or worse, under suspicion of being – gasp – gay. What if you couldn't stand the sight of your own body for a most existential reason?

Locker rooms remain a source of anxiety even for cisgender, straight adults. Getting to a gym is daunting as is. Once you push past inertia and choose to exercise, it takes guts to find a place to do it. Fitness centers are intimidating.

But there's intimidating, and then there's dangerous.

"I'll admit, I'm afraid to join a gym. Even with the laws on my side," says long-distance runner and budding triathlete Karleigh Webb, a transgender woman from Bristol.

"I feel unsafe in the hyper-masculine atmosphere of most gyms," says transgender Olympic athlete Chris Mosier.

LGBTQ exercisers, gym owners and personal trainers say that being L, G or B doesn't raise many issues in gyms anymore, but that transgender and gender nonconforming people have to be careful.

And it isn't only gym-goers who are cautious; queer gym owners try to avoid unpleasant surprises by making their orientation obvious.

Kristyn Mastroianni, owner of Move Strong in Manchester and a lesbian, made sure her tattoos and backward cap are prominent on her website. "It's important that people coming into my business don't judge me – not just for my sake, but for my clients. If they're going to judge me, they're going to judge anybody. My clients feel this is home to them."

### An Exercise in Equality

Finding a safe space is the main challenge, especially for trans and gender nonconforming exercisers.

This is why savvy chains market themselves as LGBTQ-inclusive, like Planet Fitness (which famously

terminated a Michigan cis woman's membership for repeatedly complaining about a trans woman using the women's locker room – a case still in the courts) and CrossFit (where competitions are trans-inclusive).

It's also why more trainers are filling a niche by catering to gender nonconforming customers. And why, when fitness centers make LGBTQ clients feel welcome, word spreads.

Jessica Firrin of New London, a lifelong athlete and transgender woman, says that before transitioning, she had "such bad body dysphoria in high school that I quickly showered and ran in and out as quickly as I could."

She joined Planet Fitness in Waterford partly because of its no-judgment motto and says the staff has made her feel welcome, including finding a computer work-around to correct her name.

Still, Firrin takes pains to avoid "getting called out" in the locker room. "The challenge for me is figuring out what I'm going to wear. I'm always looking for something comfortable and feminine, and it's difficult to hide," she says. Compression tights help hide a bump, but hurt and make working out difficult.

She has also sacrificed swimming. "I absolutely love swimming. Since my transition, I have done no swimming at all. With bathing suits, and kids coming in and out, and community showers – I'm just not doing it. I feel like someday I'll do it," especially if she has bottom surgery, she says.

### Trainers Who Understand

It's important to find a trainer who won't make assumptions based on your appearance. It's incorrect and insensitive to assume, based on someone's looks, that they want to lose weight, masculinize or feminize.

Even for cis, straight exercisers, assumptions don't hold water. [An aside: as a personal trainer, I've had a straight, cis male client try hard to not bulk up. His job requires an expensive wardrobe, and he doesn't want to need new suits. One cis woman built muscle intentionally, so much so that when she punched her husband (back), he needed stitches in his lip. "I didn't



Marannie Bauer

## Want to learn more?

We couldn't locate any trans or gender nonconforming personal trainers or gym owners in Connecticut. (We hope we just missed you; let us know if you're there.) Here are some sources mentioned in this story, and others:

Move Strong, Manchester:  
[Movestrongct.com](http://Movestrongct.com)

NLTN Studio, New Haven: [Nltntct.com](http://Nltntct.com)

Nonnormative Body Club,  
Philadelphia, offers online training:  
[nonnormativebodyclub.com](http://nonnormativebodyclub.com)

Alien Athletes, Providence, offers online  
training: [alienathletes.co](http://alienathletes.co)

Justice Roe, a trans male trainer in  
Boston: [justiceroetraining.com](http://justiceroetraining.com)

Scott Turner Schofield's online  
course "Everybody Changes":  
[speakingoftransgender.com](http://speakingoftransgender.com)

[Decolonizingfitness.com](http://Decolonizingfitness.com), a social  
justice platform owned and operated by  
black trans trainers, has an extensive  
resource list and trainer finder

Look for trans trainers like Jesse  
Diamond ([@jessediamondfitness](https://www.instagram.com/jessediamondfitness)),  
Shawn Stinson ([@coachshawn\\_fit](https://www.instagram.com/coachshawn_fit)), and  
Gus Lanza ([@gus\\_lanza](https://www.instagram.com/gus_lanza)) on Instagram



Kristyn Mastroianni and her dog Burton.

know I got that strong!” she said, smiling and flexing her biceps.]

More women want to be muscular, and that’s great for Firrin, she says. “Women are feeling comfortable in being strong, and it’s definitely a good thing. I fit in now!”

Many trans clients also need a trainer who understands their medical issues: estrogen and spironolactone change fat distribution and decrease muscle mass; pre-surgery clients may need to build strength; post-surgery clients need to work on range of motion.

And then there are chest binders, the subject of a notorious *New York Times* story this year that focused on potential health risks, at the expense of recognizing that binders save trans men’s lives. An uninformed trainer might say to not wear one; an aware trainer can teach helpful myofascial release, as well as breathing and stretching exercises.

You can’t safely wear a binder while working out, so you may have to temporarily wear a sports bra – and clients are much comfortable doing so with a trainer who’s been there, says Alex Weaver, owner of Alien Athletes in Providence, R.I. Weaver is queer, trans and non-binary, and most of their clients are queer and trans.

Weaver says they aim to “allow people to continue to have the tools they need to live authentically and also have tools to manage their body, like mobility and stretching.”

### Room for Improvement

Just as the U.N. and International Olympics Committee have called access to sports a human right, so LGBTQ advocates say this of fitness.

Besides being essential to physical health (and the only way to counteract muscle loss from aging), exercise helps manage depression and anxiety.

“We know exercise contributes to trans health and happiness,” says Scott Turner Schofield of California, a trans man and educator whose course “Everybody Changes” is used by gyms, municipalities and schools to learn how to make a space safe.

The city of Santa Monica asked Schofield to train employees after “they had a lot of rough moments, like an adult freaking out on a child in the locker room of the aquatic center.”

It’s surprisingly easy, he says, “the ease with which we put this ‘problem’ to rest.”

Schofield has people list acceptable and unacceptable locker room behaviors. They

immediately recognize they already have procedures to address every bad behavior. “It’s very black and white what’s acceptable and not in a locker room. It’s about what you’re doing, it’s not about who you are,” he says.

Schofield feels an urgency to raise awareness, given that a 2017 study by The Williams Institute of UCLA found that 27 percent of youths identify as gender nonconforming.

Connecticut is one of 18 states (plus the District of Columbia) that prohibit discrimination based on “sex, gender identity or expression and sexual orientation.” But that doesn’t put Webb at ease. “Laws, rules, and regulations are one thing, but attitudes are another,” she says.

Webb transitioned two years ago at age 46. “I’ve played sports my whole life,” she says, but only now does she have to “negotiate all these things. I wear very cute clothes, partly because it’s the path of least resistance, so I can avoid embarrassing or dangerous situations.” Yet, there’s a fine line. “If I look too feminine, people come at me – ‘That’s a dude.’ ”

Being a woman of color ups the danger, she says. “The femininity of a woman who is not white is always questioned, and often denied, whether you’re trans or cis.”

Cost is also a barrier to access. For that reason, Weaver of Alien Athletes uses a sliding scale, and doesn’t sell packages that require a big upfront outlay.

### In Search Of A Place For All

Webb says she’s uncovered several welcoming gyms in the state. One where she feels especially comfortable is

NLTN, a holistic personal training studio in New Haven owned by Marannie Bauer.


Bauer, a lesbian, says she doesn’t go out of her way to cater to LGBTQ clients. But she’s had lesbian and trans staff members and clients, so somehow the message has come across. “I appreciate the need for everyone to have a safe space,” she says.

Webb has advice for gym owners. “There are more and more inclusive places out there. What gyms have to do is come out and say it. Businesses have to get past the idea that they’ll alienate people by saying they welcome all people. A rainbow flag in the window – it can be that simple.”

For Mastroianni, word of mouth spreads news of her inclusiveness. “If people are cool enough to come here and work out with me, who’s obviously gay, they know they’re OK with everybody.”

Asher Freeman is queer, trans and owner of Nonnormative Body Club in Philadelphia. “Almost all of my clients are people who’ve either felt unwelcome, unsafe or intimidated in conventional fitness spaces for various reasons,” they say. Gym owners should “think through how your physical space impacts your clients. At most fitness centers, everything is super gender-centered.”

They add, “Do you have to ask clients’ gender? I can’t think of any reason. Asking people’s pronouns is much more important.”

“The pronoun discussion better not last more than 10 seconds, or we’ve got a problem,” says Webb. 



Kristyn Mastroianni

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Hilary Russo continues her in-depth look at how Middlesex Health’s Transgender Medicine Program continues to thrive.

### “The Contender”

Frank Rizzo sits down in Hartford with LGBTQ advocate and author William Mann who shares more on his new book and the Hollywood legend behind it.

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Medical receptionist Christina Williamson is often the first friendly face to greet patients at Circle Care Center.



# Full Circle

## Norwalk-based health center provides quality care for all

By CARA ROSNER / Photography By DANIEL EUGENE

**A** lot can change in seven years. When Circle Care Center opened in Norwalk in 2012, remembers CEO Mark Hammond, “it was formed basically as a men’s center to treat HIV.” As such, it gained a reputation as a welcoming atmosphere staffed with knowledgeable medical experts for members of the LGBTQ community, particularly gay men.

These days, the AIDS epidemic is waning in Connecticut. According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, the number of new HIV infection cases dropped from 812 in 2002 to 281 in 2017, the most recent year for which data is available. That’s a great thing, but the trend means Circle Care Center has needed to shift its focus to stay relevant.

“Over the years, it has morphed because [the disease] has morphed, and the treatment of the disease has morphed,” Hammond says of the center. “We have very few new HIV-positive cases; we have a couple a year, which is great.”

Adds Medical Director Dr. David Rubin, “The AIDS epidemic in Connecticut is sort of folding down, so we’re not really seeing many new patients [for that].”

Against that backdrop, the center’s concentration now is largely on HIV prevention, particularly with the advent of TRUVADA for PrEP. The prescription medication can help reduce the risk of getting HIV through sex when taken daily and used with safer sex practices, according to its manufacturer Gilead. PrEP

stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis.

“I have more people on TRUVADA for PrEP than I do under treatment for HIV, and that’s the goal,” says Dr. Rubin. While “gay men are the easiest people to give it to, because the risk is the most obvious,” he adds, many within the LGBTQ community can benefit from it.

The AIDS epidemic in the United States will end “soon,” says Dr. Rubin, but it’s unclear exactly how quickly that will happen. In the meantime, TRUVADA for PrEP – the only medication of its kind, for now – is a powerful tool.

Another change? Staff are increasingly treating transgender patients.



Mark Hammond is CEO of Circle Care Center, which was founded in 2012.



The center, located in Norwalk, began as an HIV treatment facility serving mainly men. Over the years it has expanded its services and the quality of the medical care provided attracts LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ patients alike.

“We have many, many transgender patients, whereas five or six years ago we did not,” Hammond says of the medical center as well as counseling services. “A very large portion of our population is transgender.”

Overall, the center has more than 1,000 active case files. Its staff is comprised of Dr. Rubin and a family nurse practitioner, both of whom specialize in HIV and related illness treatment; one registered nurse; two medical assistants; a licensed clinical social worker; and two office staff, according to Hammond.

The center continues to play an important role in the LGBTQ community but also treats a growing number of non-LGBTQ patients.

“We treat everybody,” Hammond says, noting the facility is a primary care center by license, but specializes in sexually transmitted diseases and sexual health.

Whether they’re LGBTQ or not, patients are drawn to the center’s high-quality and personalized care, says Dr. Rubin.

“We’re a very welcoming, patient-focused practice. Our priority and our mission is patient-focused care,” he says. “When a patient walks through our door, it doesn’t matter to me or my colleagues who that patient is. It doesn’t matter who they are, we’re going to take care of them.”

Many patients first come to the center for sexually transmitted disease testing and end up liking the staff and atmosphere so much they opt to receive their primary care there, he says.

“We try to spend as much time as possible interviewing the patient and getting to know their needs,” says Hammond.

In some cases, LGBTQ patients had primary physicians elsewhere whom they liked – until the topic of their sexuality came up, says Dr. Rubin. Some patients may feel uncomfortable, self-conscious, or judged at other practices.

“When they come here, they see the level of medical care is very high and, at the same time, they can discuss their



sexuality and their needs,” he adds. “The word gets around that we’re that kind of center, and it’s attracting patients.”

Demographically speaking, Circle Care Center’s patient roster runs the gamut. The facility treats people from teenagers to the elderly.

“My oldest patient is 94,” says Dr. Rubin. That patient, he adds, was dishonorably discharged from the military following World War II because he was gay and later received a presidential apology from Barack Obama’s presidential administration.

Providing care at the center is more than merely a job for Dr. Rubin; it’s a calling. He is an HIV specialist who has focused his career on the disease. Prior to coming to Circle Care Center, he administered an AIDS center in New York City for 27 years. He also specializes in treating Hepatitis C.

“My interest and passion is HIV, and working with patients to get them the latest and best treatments,” he says. “It’s becoming less complicated and it’s becoming something that doesn’t require as much time as it used to.”

The center houses a specialty pharmacy, staffed by two pharmacists and two pharmacy technicians. Any profits made by the pharmacy are reinvested into the community,

says Hammond – another attribute which makes the center’s model unique.

Among those community investments, Circle Care Center in 2014 began funding the Moore Place Housing Program at Mid-Fairfield AIDS Project. Since then, the center has granted more than \$500,000 to support the project.

In addition, since Circle Care Center’s inception in 2012, it has granted more than \$1 million to Triangle Community Center (TCC) to expand TCC’s programming and services. In 2015, Circle Care Center granted TCC funding to launch its case management and social service navigation program for LGBTQ individuals.

“We put a lot back into the community,” says Hammond. “That’s where we really stand out.”

It’s a model Hammond hopes to extend, with preliminary plans in the works to grow Circle Care Center’s footprint beyond Connecticut.

“We are looking to expand the model to other regions,” he says. “There is a need. And if we can fill that need, not only in Fairfield County, it makes sense to expand the model and give back to those communities.”





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# HOLISTIC HEALING

*For LGBTQ patients, the Middlesex Health physical therapy department can help with the usual issues, and some not-so-usual ones*

By CAROL LATTER / Photography by CT HEADSHOTS

**P**atients come to see Lisa Gramlich, lead of the pelvic health program at Middlesex Health, for help with a broad range of medical complaints – from chronic pain and other orthopedic issues related to the hips, back and pubic bone ... to constipation, incontinence and intimacy problems like erectile dysfunction and pain during intercourse.

Gramlich and her team members – fellow physical therapists (PTs) Marilyn Gross and Sarah Deacon – also treat patients with pregnancy or postpartum issues, or problems related to surgical procedures, such as hysterectomies and prostatectomies.

“Our role is to treat any patient, from the pediatric population all the way through adulthood, with any issue involving the abdominal or pelvic area,” says Gramlich. “I say to my patients, ‘Anything from the belly button to your thighs, we’ll address that.’”

For members of the LGBTQ+ community, the pelvic health team offers assistance with all of these issues, and more.

“Everyone needs a pelvic health PT,” says Gramlich. “The LGBTQ+ community has the same issues as the general population, so they can have constipation, pain with intimacy, they’re leaking, they have endometriosis. Really, the diagnoses are largely same in terms of the problems we treat, whether it’s surgical or body system wise or pain or dysfunction wise. The difference is that many people in the LGBTQ+ community don’t seek out care because they don’t feel like they can find a practitioner who has a good comfort level treating them.”

Gramlich, Gross and Deacon are not only sensitive to the particular issues affecting the LGBTQ+ patient population – including, many times, a history of sexual or other types of abuse – but are also trained in transgender care. In fact, Gramlich is a member of Middlesex Health’s transgender committee and recently became the co-chair of its LGBTQ+ employee and ally resource group. As an openly gay woman, she is a fierce defender of, and advocate for, the LGBTQ+ community.

Gramlich and her team members often help transgender patients opting for gender-confirming surgeries, both prior to and after procedures like mastectomy, vaginoplasty (surgical creation of a vagina) and phalloplasty (surgical creation of a penis). They counsel patients about what happens during surgery, what anatomical parts are removed or modified, and what is different afterward, then provide intervention to assist with a full recovery.

For instance, patients who undergo “bottom surgery” will find that their glans or clitoral tissue, involved in orgasm, is now in a different place than for a cis male or female because of the way in which the genitals are reconstructed. In patients who undergo a phalloplasty, the clitoral tissue is at the base of the penis. In a vaginoplasty, the glans becomes the clitoris. Helping patients relearn what gives them pleasure, or how to interact with their partners, is important to a successful transition. Even for patients who don’t choose bottom surgery, sexual counseling can be extremely helpful.

“We’re not sex therapists, but because we understand the anatomy, we do a lot of work around intimacy issues,” says Gramlich. “Obviously, the way in which a man and woman have intercourse is different than the way the LGBTQ+ community may experience intimacy – and especially after gender-confirming surgeries, it’s completely different. So that is our job, to help you [understand and become comfortable with it].”

She says she is very passionate about sexual education and helping patients make their sex lives what they want them to be. “When I talk to my LGBTQ+ patients, I don’t judge any form of intimacy, as long as it’s not abusive. I’m there to support people.”

## FINDING HER PATH

For Gramlich, now in her sixth year at Middlesex Health, the road to her current position as a provider with expertise in and empathy for the LGBTQ+ population is deeply personal.

“I guess I would say my life has sort of been a journey. I started out as a young PT working in a trauma hospital, doing acute care. From there, I started to specialize and work in

the NICU with premature infants. I did some outpatient pediatrics and came back to acute care. And then my path called me to step out of my profession for a bit of time. I homeschooled two of my three children, which was the most fabulous, phenomenal experience,” she recalls.

After her divorce, as a single mom, she re-entered the workforce. “I had a daughter who was diagnosed with ADHD and medication wasn’t working so I needed an alternative. My path led me into integrative manual therapy. I learned about functional medicine and holistic healing, and she completely transformed within the span of a year.”

Integrative manual therapy, or IMT, is a gentle, hands-on approach to health that looks for the underlying causes of a person’s pain or dysfunction from a spiritual, emotional, and physical standpoint, and also includes nutritional coaching to promote wellness.

After completing three years of training in the field, Gramlich worked privately and in nursing homes before switching to Middlesex Health, where she could treat patients without the overhead costs of having a private practice.

In a serendipity moment, she bumped into physical therapist Carolyn Daniels, who had started the pelvic PT program at Middlesex Health “as a one-person show. She learned that I had these integrative manual therapy skills and she said, ‘Hmm, why don’t you come observe me for a day?’ ”

A day turned into a week, a week turned into a month, and soon, Gramlich was assigned to the a Middlesex office in Madison, doing outpatient pelvic health. A year later, she was offered the role of lead PT for the Middlesex program in Middletown, where she now not only treats patients but spreads the word in the community and throughout the health system about the critical importance of comprehensive pelvic physical therapy for both cisgender and LGBTQ+ patients.

“My role is really to progress our pelvic health program, make sure we’re really up to date with treatment techniques and education, and bring our pelvic health PTs to the next level. I feel like my path has taken me here because it’s where I need to be.”

Her personal life was also transformed. “I was married to a man for 17 years. I know what it’s like to be a cisgender female, married to a man. And I know what it’s like now, to have a female partner,” so the experiences of many of her patients are very relatable for her. Having seen



Sarah Deacon, PT, DPT, Marilyn J. Gross, PT, MS PT, IMT-C, and Lisa Gramlich, PT, IMT-C help patients suffering with everything from chronic low back pain, abdominal pain and hip problems to sexual issues related to gender-confirming surgery.

first-hand the inequalities and discrimination experienced by the LGBTQ+ community, she does everything possible to assist her patients but also empowers them “to take ownership for their own well-being and healing.”

She and Gross are both certified in integrated manual therapy (IMT), which Gramlich says “has given us a better grasp at looking at every person who comes into our treatment room from a spiritual, emotional, and physical aspect.”

Deacon rounds out the pelvic health team trained in transgender care. Her vibrant and caring personality helps patients throughout their treatment, and she, like her colleagues, is a champion for the LGBTQ+ community.

## AMAZING RESULTS

Gramlich feels the results achieved by Middlesex’s comprehensive approach to physical therapy are nothing short of amazing. “I’ve had many patients who have been sexually assaulted and molested, throughout their lifetime, and come in with pelvic pain, difficulty with intimacy, constipation and urinary incontinence. After seven to eight visits, they’re better.”

She adds, “Their constipation resolves, their urinary incontinence resolves, and they’re actually able to have pain-free intimacy, so it’s huge. Now, there are patients who then have to continue on, obviously, to process some of the emotional stuff due to their abuse. But I can think of several patients who were cisgender and LGBTQ+ where this has happened, and they have a completely new outlook on life.”

She says Middlesex Health offers a comprehensive, wrap-around approach to physical therapy, “which is why I feel like our program is one of the best in the state. We all have had patients who have come in from other therapists and have been treated with just biofeedback, or exercise.” But she says understanding how the external and internal pelvic floor works, and taking the time to evaluate it, is key.

Gramlich says patients often end up at Middlesex six months to a year after seeking treatment elsewhere because their problems were not resolved.

“If you have a patient with really high pelvic floor tone but you just give them strengthening exercises, they may come back a week later with more pain than they had when they started. Well, it’s because they needed the internal pelvic floor evaluation and a program that includes biofeedback and meditation along with exercise and manual therapy,” she explains.

“My patients may come in, saying, ‘Well, I’m just here for constipation,’ but they’re also having pain with intimacy and they’re leaking. And I say, ‘My job is to treat all of that, because I’m not going to get you better completely or holistically if I don’t address the other areas.’”

As a pelvic health therapist, she may encounter an 18-year-old trans youth who is going to become sexually active, or

who is sexually active but is having pain or difficulty with intimacy. “If it’s a physiological issue related to the pelvic floor, we could definitely treat that.”

Patients are typically offered an external and internal physical examination that may provide useful information about pain weakness and whether the patient has scar tissue from a previous surgery, for example. The PTs also do biofeedback assessments to assess the tone of the pelvic floor and an orthopedic assessment, looking at a patient’s hips and back, and how they walk.


“We also teach patients the basics of meditation, because if your pelvic floor is tense, we need to teach you how to relax it.” And, she notes, she and her team members practice what they preach – Gramlich meditates using transcendental meditation twice a day for 20 minutes. “I have to make the time to do it, but it really has changed my life.”

Basic diet modifications are also part of the therapy. “Again, we’re not nutritionists, but we talk about bowel and bladder irritants, and adequate hydration. We see patients coming in with IBS and Crohn’s and we start to try to help them identify, with diet logs and food logs, any irritation that could be happening with their daily diet. We also offer home exercises and advise them on position modification for work activities, sex, and labor and delivery. So it’s a really encompassing program. With some patients, we only do parts of the program. We never force anything on anyone. But with most patients, they develop a comfort level with us and I say to my patients, ‘My room is a safe room. No question is stupid. I want you to ask it. And if I don’t know the answer, I will find the answer.’”

## FULL SPEED AHEAD

Middlesex Health has received a lot of positive feedback for its work with the LGBTQ+ community, as has its pelvic health team. “Are we perfect? No. Are we really trying to make sure that every patient who comes through the door has a safe experience and that staff is compassionate and caring? Yes.”

While they may not have had all of the same experiences as their patients, “we all have experienced loss. We all have tragedy. We all have pain. We all have grief,” says Gramlich. “But there’s also hope. I wear my necklace every day and it says ‘hope.’ And I think our pelvic health team gives hope not only to the LGBTQ+ community, but to people suffering from any pelvic dysfunction at all.”

It’s clear that she finds her job extremely rewarding. “I’m obviously very grateful and thankful to have the job that I do. Is it emotionally exhausting? Some days, it’s like, ‘Wow, today was a really heavy day. Lots of people had a lot of stuff going on.’ But on that eighth session, when your patient walks out and they have a completely different look on life and all of their goals have been met, you feel like you’ve changed the world.” 



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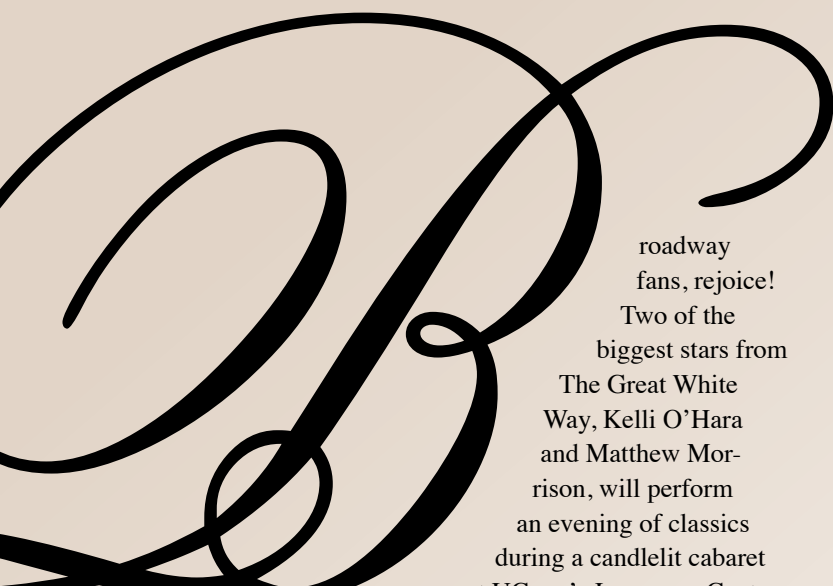
[MiddlesexHealth.org/LGBTQ](http://MiddlesexHealth.org/LGBTQ)



# It Takes Two

Stars Bring a Taste of Broadway to Connecticut

By CARA ROSNER / Photography by MATTHEW MORRISON



roadway fans, rejoice!

Two of the biggest stars from

The Great White Way, Kelli O'Hara and Matthew Morrison,

will perform an evening of classics

during a candlelit cabaret

at UConn's Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts in Storrs

on Nov. 16.

"An Evening with Kelli O'Hara and Matthew Morrison," sponsored in part by *Connecticut VOICE*, will reunite the two stars, who starred opposite each other in the Tony Award-winning 2005 Broadway musical "The Light in the Piazza" and again shared the stage in the 2008 revival of "South Pacific." At Jorgensen, the two will be backed by the New Hampshire Symphony Orchestra.

"Matt and I have done two Broadway shows together, one of which marked a sort of launching point in our careers, so we started this [tour] together, in a way," says O'Hara. "Our friendship was immediate and we love to be together and work together. I think we just respect

each other a lot, professionally and personally. It feels best to work with these kinds of partners."

Fans know O'Hara from her long list of Broadway credits, including "The Bridges of Madison County," "Nice Work If You Can Get It," "Sweet Smell of Success," "Follies," "Dracula," "Jekyll & Hyde" and more. She earned a Tony Award for playing Anna in the 2015 revival of "The King and I."

Morrison is well-known to television audiences for playing Will Schuester on the hit show "Glee." On Broadway, his credits include "Hairspray" and "Finding Neverland." He also appears on the current season of "American Horror Story."

O'Hara's love of theater started at an early age.

"The first time I ever sang in front of a crowd was my fourth grade school talent show," she recalls. "I didn't even know if I should be singing but, surprisingly, it went well. After that, I was hooked. I had heard about a voice teacher named Florence Birdwell when I was five, and I never forgot her. So, after grade school and high school productions and summer programs, I went to college at OCU [Oklahoma

City University] to study with her, and she really set me on my path."

She adds, "What I love the most [about my job] is bringing joy to people. The hardest part is juggling work and being a mom."



Photo courtesy of Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts

CONTINUED ON PAGE 50






Toes are sure to be tapping when Matthew Morrison and Kelli O'Hara perform some of their favorite Broadway classics at UConn's Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts on Nov. 16.



“Matt and I have done two Broadway shows together, one of which marked a sort of launching point in our careers, so we started this [tour] together, in a way.” – Kelli O’Hara

Morrison and O’Hara first starred opposite each other in the 2005 Broadway musical “The Light in the Piazza” and again shared the stage in 2008’s revival of “South Pacific.”






Many know Morrison from his role as Will Schuester on the hit show "Glee," but he's no stranger to the Great White Way. His Broadway credits include "Hair-spray" and "Finding Neverland."

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

Asked to name her favorite Broadway tunes, she's temporarily stumped: "This is impossible to answer, so I'll throw out three titles, but my answer will change tomorrow." She goes with The Carousel Waltz from "Carousel," Finishing the Hat from "Sunday in the Park with George," and Love to Me from "The Light in the Piazza."

An Evening with Kelli O'Hara and Matthew Morrison begins at 8 p.m. Nov. 16; doors open at 7 p.m. Cabaret fare, a cash bar and desserts will be available. Tickets are \$20-\$55 and available at [jorgensen.uconn.edu](http://jorgensen.uconn.edu) and by calling 860-486-4226. Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts is located at 2132 Hillside Road on UConn's Storrs campus. 



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# Family Matters

LGBTQ parents-to-be can face unique challenges

By CARA MCDONOUGH / Photography by TONY BACEWICZ

**T**he decision to start a family often comes from the heart. But for many, the path to having children isn't an easy one, requiring unanticipated medical procedures, time and, sometimes, a significant financial investment.

In the LGBTQ community, the issue often presents even more hurdles; simply getting access to information about available options can be difficult. Plus, once a child is born, there may be extra steps necessary to ensure both parties in a couple have the same parental rights.

That's where fertility clinics that specialize in working with the LGBTQ community can help, providing the latest technology and a wealth of resources, while advocating for the rights of their patients.

"Depending on the situation, there are lots of physical and biological challenges. We need both eggs and sperm to



Paul Verrastro, CEO at the Center for Advanced Reproductive Services

create embryos. There may need to be a gestational carrier," says Paul Verrastro, chief executive officer of the Center for Advanced Reproductive Services in Farmington. "All of those things are manageable today but one challenge is information. A lot of the time, people don't have access to all the facts."

The center works to bridge that gap to access. As one of the largest and most successful in vitro fertilization (IVF) programs in the state and nation, it has deep ties to the LGBTQ community that "go way back," says Verrastro.

The group has helped roughly 1,600 LGBTQ individuals or couples achieve successful births over nearly 40 years.

Initially, patients were mostly lesbians or lesbian couples, Verrastro says, but now the center serves a much broader swath of the population, including single gay men, gay couples, and transgender individuals.

"We are very proud of the fact that we were really at the



forefront of this in the early 1980s, and that we've continued to serve the community as their needs and the technology has evolved," Verrastro says. The center's mission includes ensuring people across the state get the up-to-date information they need, like when it hosted an LGBTQ Family Building Symposium with the New Haven Pride Center this summer.

He is also proud that the organization employs a number of individuals in the LGBTQ community, starting at the top.

"I think the fact that in 1999 the organization was willing to hire an openly gay [chief operating officer] probably had to do with the fact that they've been serving the community for so long," he says, referencing the beginning of his own career at the center.

Verrastro, whose background is in business, says having a job where he can use his expertise to "literally change people's lives like this" has been rewarding.

"I feel incredibly blessed and fortunate to be part of an organization whose mission it is to help create families – gay straight, single, it doesn't matter," he says. "Information is power and if people understand the options, they can make choices."

Southington residents James and Jason G. learned this firsthand when they became patients at The Center for Advanced Reproductive Services, eventually having a daughter through an egg donor and gestational carrier in 2018.

"We both never thought that getting married was something that would have been possible and certainly never gave having a child a second thought," James says of the hurdles they initially faced.

But after a meeting at the center, and realizing the myriad options available to them, they took the plunge.

"I'm a natural born caregiver, and my husband saw that in me. He saw the love and joy that I would have and get from caring for our nieces and nephews – and wanted to make that dream come true for us," James says.

Today, their daughter is 14 months old; Jason says that they "could not be more in love" – and are back at the center to try for a sibling.

For prospective parents looking to go this same route, getting all the information they need means understanding that, socially and legally, there are still challenges facing the LGBTQ community when it comes to family planning. Depending on an LGBTQ couple's specific journey





The team of lead physicians at the Center: They are, from L-R, Lawrence Engmann, MD, MRCOG; Daniel Grow, MD, MHCM; Claudio Bena-diva, MD, HCLD; John Nulsen, MD; Kim Crone, PhD; Andrea DiLuigi, MD; David Schmidt, MD.

to parenthood, the parent not biologically related to a child may have to go through an official adoption process to have equal rights.

The law of the land is that gay people can get married, Verrastro says, “but other laws have not caught up.” He’s hopeful that process will become easier in coming years. A bill called the Connecticut Parentage Act, sponsored by Rep. Jason Rojas (D-East Hartford), would help clarify current laws for these couples. The bill is based on the 1973 Uniform Parentage Act, which was revised and passed in several states in 2017.

Despite some hurdles, Verrastro says, starting a family is within reach for most people who want one.

“There honestly aren’t any challenges right now where there is not a doable workaround,” he says. “There is no reason why anyone who wants to have a genetic child should not do it, because we can get everyone where they want to be, both clinically and legally.”

With adequate access to information, advocacy and the latest medical innovation, the possibilities are endless, agrees Dr. Mark Leondires. He is founder, medical director and a partner in reproductive endocrinology at Reproduc-

tive Medicine Associates of Connecticut (RMACT), which has offices in Trumbull, Stamford, Norwalk and Danbury, as well as Poughkeepsie, NY. In August the practice announced it is the only freestanding fertility clinic in New England to earn the “LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader” designation in the Human Rights Campaign’s Foundation Healthcare Equality Index.

Leondires also is medical director at Gay Parents To Be, an organization founded in 2012 as a resource for the LGBTQ community, providing resources for everything from medical options to legal counsel. The group’s website provides comprehensive information on egg donation, IVF, surrogacy and more, including success rates, as well as links to upcoming events and seminars on the topic.

“If you’re in the LGBTQ community, you’re going to need a donor. You need education, you need to think about how you’re going to talk to your kids in the future and to think about the mental health part of it,” he says. “Many families will need a good lawyer so that they can understand their rights.”

The process can be challenging, he adds, “but it’s definitely getting better.”

Leondires takes his work and personal passion out into the world on a regular basis, speaking locally and nationally to groups, including companies, about LGBTQ employees and their health insurance benefits – or lack thereof.

“One of the things that many people don’t realize is that to have access to fertility benefits, you have to be ‘infertile,’” he says, noting that for gay, lesbian and transgender individuals and couples, this designation might not technically apply when looking to insurance for fertility treatment.

He wants Connecticut fertility law to change to better serve the population. And he wants everybody to know the basics of planning, so they can take steps sooner rather than later. He is quick to remind those thinking of transitioning, for instance, that they can freeze eggs or sperm and it leaves the doors wide open for future family planning. He also encourages women approaching age 35 to have their fertility assessed.

But until laws change for the better, he’ll be encouraging employers to do what’s right.

“I proudly push the boulder up the hill to try and be treated fairly,” he says, adding that in his talks, he explains that the LGBTQ community doesn’t want anything different; they just want the same benefits as everybody else.

And when it comes to selecting the right provider, he notes not all practices are truly friendly to the community. He’s proud to be part of one that is. Small details matter, he says. A few years back, his clinic went through every single piece of paper they produced, ensuring copy included the words “patient” and “partner” on it, rather than gender-specific words.

“Those things really make a difference,” Leondires says. It’s a difference the families that work with him and his team can clearly feel.

“We felt welcome from day one at RMACT with Dr. Leondires, but also felt comfortable on day one with his staff. His nurses, coordinators and all others are professional, knowledgeable, and encouraging and welcoming for new families, including us as gay parents,” says Adam Eckhart of Melrose, Mass., who has three children with his partner, Prescott, born through treatment at the clinic.

“For many gay couples, I think there’s a certain amount of anxiety that accompanies new situations, such as meeting new doctors. It’s always a question of how and to what



extent we’ll be received and made to feel comfortable. With RMACT, those anxieties were immediately put to rest,” says Crissy McCaw of Glen Spey, N.Y., another patient. She and her wife have two living children – 4 and 2 years old. They also lost a baby when their twins were born 17 weeks early. She says the RMACT team treated them “like family” through the happy and hard times.

“From the very beginning, we felt completely welcome and at home, and we never once doubted whether we made the right choice,” she says.

Leondires said that hearing from joyful families after they’ve had their babies are the “punctuations marks to his day.”

“What’s really exciting about it is to help people who thought having children might not be a possibility,” he says. “To help them realize that dream is such an honor and a privilege.”



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



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YOUTH //

# On Her Own Terms

**Connecticut's Kid Governor looks to the future**

*By CARA MCDONOUGH / Photography courtesy of The Connecticut Democracy Center*



Ella Briggs' official portrait



Ella taking the Oath of Office from Secretary of the State Denise Merrill.

**E**lla Briggs is nearing the end of an epic year as Connecticut's Kid Governor. Her term has included meeting state dignitaries, talking to classrooms of fifth grade students about the issues that affect them, and recently making the rounds on a statewide library circuit to greet fans and encourage them to get more involved with her platform.

To put it simply, this young politician is for one idea above all else: Love is love.

The exuberant 11-year-old Briggs, a lesbian, remembers recognizing her true identity and coming out at an extremely young age – and gaining the immediate support of her parents. Her experience as a member of the LGBTQ community inspired her run for Kid Governor. The program, now in

its fourth year, is organized by the Connecticut Democracy Center and aims to teach fifth graders about civics through an annual real-life election.

Briggs, an East Hampton resident who started middle school this fall, won that election in November of 2018 when fifth graders across the state watched campaign videos from a group of finalist candidates and cast their ballots. She ran on a platform promoting LGBTQ youth safety, with three specific points: promoting adoptions for LGBTQ youth who are homeless, training teachers how to work with LGBTQ youths, and creating programs for LGBTQ youths and their allies. She was sworn in this past January and it's been a whirlwind since. But she's not slowing down anytime soon. We talked to her about her experience in the role, and what's next.

**Q: How did you become Kid Governor?**

A: In the beginning of fifth grade, we learned about Kid Governor and what it's about. We watched videos of Megan Kasperowski, the past Kid Governor, and my teacher was like, "Do any of you want to be Kid Governor?" All the kids in my class raised their hands! I was like, "I'm not sure I can do this – how could I win?" But we wrote speeches about something that's important to us, and how we were going to help on those issues. Everyone writes three plans they would do if they were elected. Then the classroom chose the top three, and then we chose the top three from the whole

fifth grade, then from the whole school, and then there was voting across the whole state.

**Q: Do you like the Kid Governor program and would you recommend it to other schools?**

A: Yes! It's a great way to learn about civics!

**Q: How has it felt to be Kid Governor so far?**

A: It's been really great to be Kid Governor. It just makes me feel like there's hope in the world, and that in our small little state, I can try to bring a little light to the kids who



Ella with her Cabinet.



Ella and her Cabinet reviewing poster entries from her Pride-Hope-Love statewide poster contest in partnership with CT Family Day and the Department of Children and Families.





**“You are amazing and fabulous, and you just need to be yourself.”** – Ella Briggs

need help. And just getting people of all ages inspired to make sure that they’re showing love and support to everyone every day makes me feel so good. It’s a pretty busy schedule but I enjoy it.

**Q: Do you feel like you’ve been able to accomplish a lot in the role? How does it feel to see progress being made on issues that are important to you?**

A: I feel really proud of myself for what I’ve been able to accomplish this year as just an 11 year old, and I’m also really proud of everybody else who has supported me and who is trying to find themselves, and trying to know themselves a little bit better. The things I’ve accomplished this year ... I think they’re pretty good. I’m still not satisfied, because I never really am, but I’m trying and I’ll keep trying once my role is over. I’m going to continue to start gay-straight alliances in schools. I’m going to keep donating and visiting and helping fellow students who need help with coming out or finding themselves. I want to make sure that everyone feels loved and safe.

**Q: What was it like to come out at a young age? Do you have advice for other kids who want to come out, but are nervous about it?**

A: I was about 5 or 6 years old and we went on a trip to Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark. And in Denmark there was a photo of two moms – one with short hair kind of like mine, and then another mom, welcoming home a baby that they’d just adopted. I looked at the poster for a few minutes and I was like, “Look Mommy! It’s me and my wife!” And my parents were like, “Nice, honey!” I really

didn't care about keeping a secret from anyone from then on. If you don't accept me for this, then don't hang out with me. I don't want friends who aren't nice, and I've been pretty open about it. I'm not making a big deal about it. I'm just being myself. What I would tell someone if they were nervous is: I am here for you, I love you, and support you. You are amazing and fabulous, and you just need to be yourself.

**Q: Do you have advice for kids who want to get more involved in leadership roles, like you did?**

A: I'd say it's a lot of hard work, but nothing you really want to do comes easy, and in the end, it's worth it!

**Q: What's next for you? Do you have goals in mind for the next few years, or after?**

A: I was thinking of maybe becoming a civil rights lawyer; I don't really know yet. Or maybe just helping friends and starting clubs. I just really want to be there for people.

**Q: Would you like to stay involved with organizations here in Connecticut?**

A: Yes. I would visit every pride parade that I can. I would help school organizations or go to True Colors [a youth LGBTQ advocacy group] to help.

**Q: There is a lot going on in the world today. Some of it is worrisome, but a lot of it is hopeful! What are you most hopeful about? What makes you excited for the future?**

A: I am hopeful because a bunch of fifth graders voted for this animal-loving, outspoken lesbian – and they voted because they liked that. So I'm looking at our generation right now and I'm feeling so excited because there are older people who are still homophobic, or they just don't understand, and then there's this group of fifth graders who are knocking down all the walls. I just feel so happy and excited for our generation.

**Q: What would you say to the next Kid Governor?**

A: I would say to try your best and really make a difference. Your plans might get fumbled around a little and changed, but it's going to be great! 🍇



Ella speaking with students at Sunset Ridge School in East Hartford.



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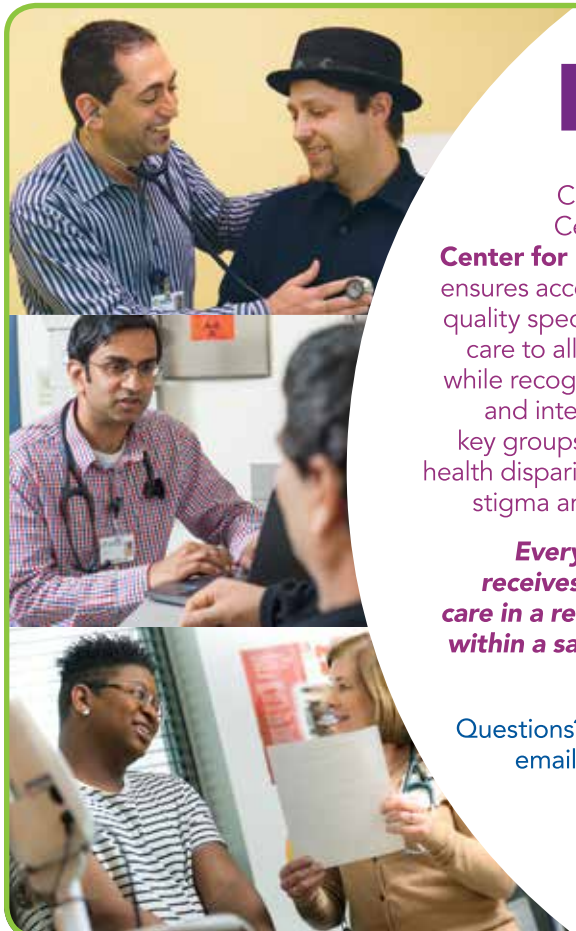


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PERSPECTIVES //



# IT'S NOT A PHASE:

**Bisexual People Know Exactly Who They Are  
Being bi, but not believed,  
sparks depression, says a new study**

By DAWN ENNIS

Vickey Allen of Middletown is 32, and has known she's bisexual since she was 12.

**T**he struggle of leaving the closet, coming out and living authentically is one of the biggest challenges anyone LGBTQ can face. Fears of rejection by family and friends, doubts about job security, and the threat of being judged a sinner can nail that door shut for years, even decades.

Fortunately, many gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and queer folks feel coming out today is easier than it was just a few years ago.

Acceptance of same-sex couples, their rights to marry and equal career opportunities has never been higher, according to Gallup's most recent poll. Yet there are still haters, bigots, and zealots who refuse to open their hearts, here and beyond Connecticut.

In fact, a GLAAD survey in June found LGBTQ acceptance has actually dipped among Americans ages 18 to 34. It was the second consecutive year that this age group has shown a drop.

It's to be expected that changes in our culture, our state laws, and a remarkable revolution in religious tolerance won't be universally embraced. But who knew those advances might benefit certain members of our community more than others?

"An ex-girlfriend once exclaimed, 'I just don't understand how you can be attracted to men and women,'" says Vickey Allen of Middletown. "Luckily, my response – 'I don't understand how you're only attracted to women' – clarified it for her."

Allen, 32, works as an office administrator at a church in the United Church of Christ – known as the most progressive mainline Protestant church – and she is pursuing a master's degree in religious studies at Hartford Seminary. "I feel blessed to have grown up in a denomination that never told me I was going to hell because I'm not straight."

She was 12 when she first realized that she was bisexual, Allen says. Since then, she says, "I've encountered plenty of biphobia."

Biphobia can occur both within and outside the LGBTQ community. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) defines it as "prejudice, fear, or hatred directed toward bisexual people. It can include making jokes or comments based on myths and stereotypes that seek to undermine the legitimacy of bisexual identity, like 'bisexuality is a phase' or 'bi people are greedy,'" according to HRC.

"I've known I'm bisexual all my life," says Jamie Fernandez of Greater Hartford. "I came out to friends as bisexual and was quickly called 'greedy,' told to 'pick a side' or asked if I flipped a coin to decide. For many years, I denied part of myself."

Fernandez, 43, is a bisexual transgender woman in a poly-



Jamie Fernandez, 43, is from Greater Hartford and is in a polyamorous relationship.

amorous relationship with her husband of 14 years, and now a girlfriend. She works as a dishwasher, and says being trans has its own challenges apart from being bi.

"The only complications I've had are getting a job and being respected for the person I am," says Fernandez. Her gender transition – fully separate from her sexual identity – included an awakening of what being bi really meant for her.

"I didn't have issues with me being bisexual; others did," Fernandez says. "And I internalized that and did the same harmful behaviors others do in dismissing the validity of others' lives."

Those behaviors can include rude assumptions that bi people are straight or gay based on the gender of the person they are currently dating. They're also often excluded or feel erased in LGBTQ spaces and conversations about LGBTQ issues.

A study published in the *Journal of Self and Identity* in May found that bisexual individuals often experience identity denial. In addition, bi people may feel discriminated against, and develop stress and depression because others question or deny their sexual identity, researchers said.





“Our findings suggest that the unique experiences of discrimination that bisexual individuals deal with on a regular basis may negatively impact their own feelings of acceptance in the world and their mental health,” says Melanie Maimon, lead researcher and a graduate student of social psychology at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

HRC says bisexual people typically suffer significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety, domestic violence, sexual assault, and poverty than lesbians, gay men, or straight cisgender people. Bisexuals also face major health disparities and poor healthcare outcomes from a lack of adequate preventative care.

“Doctors can sometimes be an issue,” says Fernandez, who adds she’s not afraid to confront bias and ignorance, especially when it comes to her orientation. “I think it’s ignorant to think people’s sexuality is a phase,” she says.

That word – “phase” – is perhaps the most common misconception about bisexuality; that either someone cannot choose between being gay or straight or is temporarily caught in between those orientations.

In addition to soliciting opinions from across Connecticut, we sought the perspectives of bi people around the country via social media about their orientation being nothing more than a “phase.”

“If it is,” says Caleigh Price, 47, “It’s a reeeaaallllyyyy long one.” Price is a married, work-from-home mom in Alamogordo, N.M.

Eric Reber of Atlanta is 48, and a media librarian at CNN who’s been observing biphobia for decades. “My favorite from the ‘90s: ‘He’s confused about his lifestyle,’ from other gay men. And also, ‘You need to choose because of AIDS.’”

Melody Mitchell, a 47-year-old bi truck driver from Arkansas wrote on social media: “Nah, bell-bottoms were a phase. I think of myself as bisexual, because I see the beauty in all forms of love between consenting adults.”

“I say it’s as much a phase as heterosexuality is a phase,” says Erin Bigelow, a 36-year-old TV studio manager for Verizon in New York City. “I’m bisexual even when I’m in a committed relationship because I’m attracted to the person, not their gender.”

“Everything is a phase. Life is a phase,” says Jen Carpenter, who works for a supermarket chain in Delaware. “To invalidate anyone’s sexuality based on a time frame is to invalidate life. Nothing is finite, most importantly life. But is that to say that we are not alive just because one day we will not be?”

“I choose ‘queer’ these days because my bisexuality feels more complex than the term implies.”



Bridie Pearce of Winchester, NH is 45 and identifies as bisexual and genderfluid.



Eric Reber, 48, lives in an Atlanta suburb and works in television news.

Carpenter adds. “But I knew at a very young age that I was attracted to the opposite and the same sex. So, I don’t get wrapped up in the word ‘phase.’”

Sometimes, terms are applied with too broad a stroke, and misunderstood. For example, bisexuality is not the same as pansexuality. Pan is from the Greek root meaning “all.” So, pansexual people are attracted to people of all genders, regardless of how they identify, be it cisgender male, cisgender female, non-binary, agender, transgender, and so on.

Bisexual people, by contrast, are not limited to only two identities in terms of attraction. Bi folks are attracted to two or more gender identities – but not necessarily all. Some are, some aren’t, some rule out or rule in certain sexes. It’s very individual, and for some non-bisexual people, confusing.



Erin Bieglow, 36, is deputy head of studios for Verizon in New York City. Photo by Gino DePinto.

But it’s ironic that there’s so much confusion about bisexuals, given that studies show that as many as half of the LGBTQ population identify as bi, making them the single largest group in the community. That’s according to research by the Williams Institute at UCLA in 2011 and the Human Rights Campaign.

A study by YouGov (yougov.com) updated that statistic in

2018: when more than 1,000 adults were asked how they identify, the vast majority – 86 percent – said straight, but 2 percent said either gay or lesbian, while 3 percent responded that they identify as bi.

In the 1970s, Woody Allen – or was it Rodney Dangerfield? – joked that “Bisexuality automatically doubles your chances for a date on Saturday night.”

All joking aside, more and more celebrities now identify

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as bi: late night talk show host and YouTube personality Lilly Singh; NFL free agent Ryan Russell; actresses Sara Ramirez, Michelle Rodriguez, Shannon Purser, and Drew Barrymore; singer-songwriters Janelle Monáe, Miley Cyrus, as well as the late David Bowie and Freddie Mercury. And there are bi politicians, too: Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona are America's first out bi governor and U.S. senator, respectively.

Those big names, and more, often take part in Bi Visibility Day (also known as International Celebrate Bisexuality Day) on September 23, which falls during Bisexuality Awareness Week, or BiWeek. The goal is to create a platform for advocating for bisexual rights and to promote acceptance of the bi community.

That's also why the city of West Hollywood, Calif., famous for hosting its LA Pride Parade every June, was the location for the second annual WeHo Bi Pride Celebration in September. The event is billed as the first city-sponsored bi pride event in the world, and a welcoming place for bisexual singles, as well as couples.

"I came out to my now-husband after we were engaged. This was 1993," wrote Bridie Pearce of Winchester, N.H. "My husband is a cisgender straight male. I am a bisexual gender-fluid person." Pearce, 45, works as a layout graphic designer and webmaster. Her husband is an IT project manager.

"We have been married 25 years and have four kids," she says: two girls and two boys, ranging in age from 5 to 25. Their 24-year-old daughter is lesbian, an 18-year-old son is asexual, the oldest son is straight, and their youngest daughter "hates all boys except her father and brothers," she says.

Pearce says she dated a girl in high school, back in the early 1990s, when "it was not safe for us to be out." But as to whether she wished she had married a woman instead of her husband, she says, "No. I fell in love with a person."

She said she is flexible as to how she identifies, going by whatever pronoun suits her presentation. "I prefer she and they," Pearce said. "Within my marriage, I can be me. My husband supports me expressing myself in my outward appearance.

"However, in our bedroom, with just the two of us, I use

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additional methods to represent my masculine side," she says. "And while he is 100 percent straight, he has also been 100 percent in support of our change in roles."

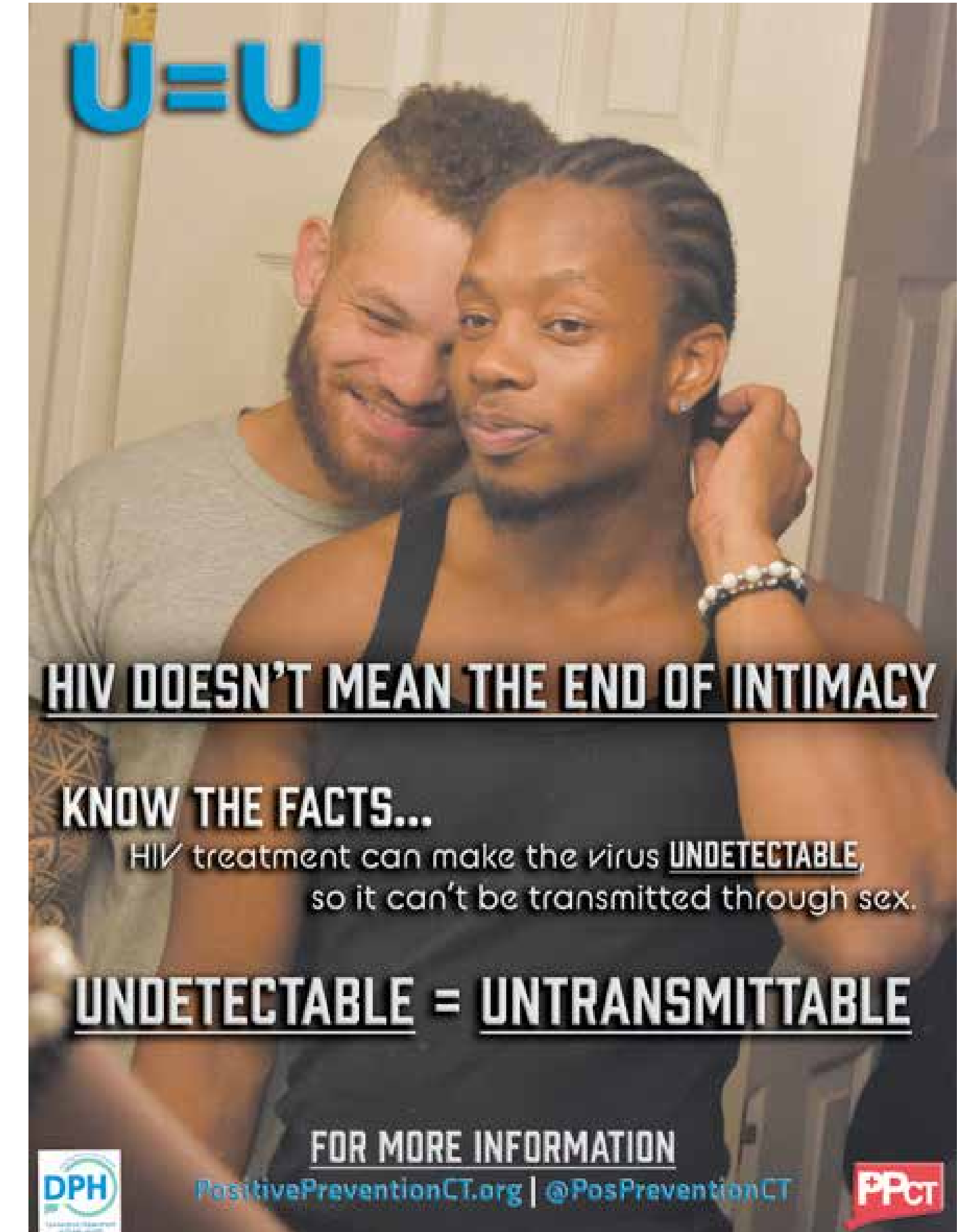
Pearce was candid about what it's like being in a monogamous marriage as a bisexual woman. "I do not think being bi has more or less complications in a marriage, but I do think it opens up real self-examination as well as exploration," she says. "Communication of both of our needs and desires really has kept our marriage working."

Of course, the one constant for almost any woman in a relationship with a man is patience. It's no different for Pearce and her husband.

"There are some things a straight cis male has a difficult time understanding, but the fact he is working through those things with me, still, after all these years? I am more in love with him now than I was back then, at age 19." 



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



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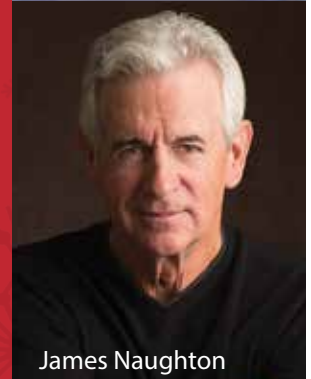
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## PETS //



Steve Albert (left) and Jim Bozzi met through mutual friends in 1997. Though they came from different career paths, their love of dogs - and one another - unites them.

# WARM, FUZZY FEELINGS

**Jim Bozzi and Steve Albert share a deep love  
for each other – and their pets**

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

**J**im Bozzi is vice president of marketing at Live Nation Connecticut and his husband, Steve Albert, is a vice president of a high-end window manufacturing company.

Their love of music, interior design, food, and pets unites them in a beautiful and strong relationship.

Bozzi got his first pet at the age of five. Gypsy, a beagle, was a rescue from Bideawee, a pet welfare organization serving New York City and Long Island.

“Since then, I’ve always been partial to beagles, or smaller dogs with round heads and floppy ears and big eyes,” says Bozzi.

Bozzi grew up in Williston Park, N.Y., with three siblings: twin brothers Stephen and Tommy, and sister Dina. His entire family was and still is passionate about pets. In fact, you could say he and his siblings were raised amongst a variety of lovable creatures.

“From rabbits, dogs, hamsters, did we mention rabbits, a parakeet and, if space allowed, they would’ve had a horse,” Bozzi recalls. “In fact, my mother probably would’ve let the horse stay in the house if there were room! Oh God, did I mention rabbits?”

Bozzi credits his brother Stephen with creating a healthy, respectful environment for animal care and advocacy.

Throughout adulthood and his career, Bozzi has surrounded himself with family members’ and coworkers’ pets and sought out pet-friendly environments.

Another passion for Bozzi is music. His love affair with music actually precedes his love for dogs. Growing up with variety shows on TV, Casey Kasem’s Top 40 on radio and *Billboard* magazine, he knew at a young age that a career in the music and entertainment industry was his destiny. His father, Steve Bozzi, introduced the arts to him at a young age.

“I remember my father as having a beautiful tenor voice and music was always played in the house, from Sinatra to Diana Ross to all the Italian classics,” says Bozzi.

Inspired by family acts of the 1970s – The Partridge Family, The Jackson 5, The Osmonds, The Carpenters, and The DeFranco Family – he and his brothers formed a band called “The Bozzi Brothers” that would entertain not only the family but the neighborhood.

“Every Friday night, we would hold ‘Hootenannies with the Bozzi Brothers’ in our garage,” he recalls. “This was a big deal. Flyers would go out, picnic benches would be set up, and the parents knew where their kids were. My mom, Anna, would even have us play at Tupperware parties.”

The first concert Bozzi himself attended was The



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Osmond Brothers in 1972.

In 1984, Bozzi's first job in his current profession was at the legendary New Haven Coliseum as group sales director, which led him to become its marketing director. He later came to the Toyota Oakdale Theatre as its marketing director and he's been there ever since, through many changes as a family-operated business to its current status as a part of the Live Nation family. Live Nation Connecticut, where he is vice president of marketing, includes the Xfinity Theatre in Hartford and Live Nation-promoted shows at the XL Center, Webster Bank Arena, and Mohegan Sun Arena.

He met Steve Albert on Oct. 4, 1997 through friends. Albert and Bozzi definitely come from two very different career paths, but their love for one another and their love of their dogs unites them passionately. Albert is vice president of sales at Tischler und Sohn USA, a manufacturer of custom mahogany windows and doors.

After their first meeting, Albert had to leave for a business trip to Germany for two months. During that time, they had no contact. Upon his return, they decided to go on a special date to see one of Albert's favorite artists, Lisa Stansfield.

Bozzi remembers in great detail: "He was wearing a glen plaid suit with a red tie, and I never felt so out of my league."

Albert's first impression? "His (Bozzi's) charm and magnetic sense of humor sealed the deal and kept me interested

in having another date."

Like Bozzi's, Albert's upbringing included a love and respect for pets. He remembers his first pet fondly. "A mixed border collie named Toby, she was found by my older brother but soon became my shadow and taught me unconditional love," says Albert.

Albert and two older siblings, brother Tom and sister Judy, lived with parents Carolyn and Bob in Youngstown, Ohio. Albert remained there until he found an opportunity in Connecticut after college.

Bozzi and Albert enjoy the love and support not only from their families but from their respective employers as a loving married couple.

"We're very fortunate to have a fulfilling life," says Albert.

Adds Bozzi: "We've worked hard for all we have, living our lives as a productive and loving married couple. We're proud of who we are, what we've accomplished in our life together."

The couple united households in December 1998 and have been together for 21 years. Their first pet together was Henry, a soft-coated wheaten terrier-cocker spaniel mix, a gift to Albert from Bozzi.

"Henry completely changed our lives and became a loving member of our family. He was our precious little boy," says Bozzi.



Henry became the talk of the neighborhood going on walks and he also had a fan club at their home on Fire Island. He was lost too soon at the age of 9 after a battle with kidney cancer. Henry continues to leave his mark, as many of the couple's friends now have wheaton terriers. Still pained by his passing, Bozzi and Albert still cannot talk in too much detail about Henry.

Mabel came into their lives Christmas 2008, two months after Henry's passing devastated the household. Something was missing and Mabel filled the void. They came across Mabel, a white cocker spaniel with a caramel-colored patch on her right eye, and she immediately "stole our hearts," Albert and Bozzi say in unison.


You'll often find Mabel riding the ferry to Fire Island, chasing after her beloved "babies" in the yard and she even has her own Instagram account @Mabel\_thespoiledspaniel.

The two say they can't imagine life without Mabel; she's

part of the family. Luckily, Live Nation is a dog-friendly company and many of the employees bring their dogs to work with them. On any given day, you may be greeted by up to four dogs at the office!

They say there is no better way to start or end their days than with Mabel.

Bozzi and Albert were married on Oct. 12, 2013 in a private ceremony surrounded by close family and friends at The Study at Yale in New Haven. They enjoy the company of their family and friends, and people just want to be around them. They exude positivity, happiness and most, if not all, who know them will tell you, they make you laugh. They make each other laugh, and what ties them together? Their love of Mabel, good food, and great music.

Next time you find yourself on the ferry to Fire Island or at a show in Connecticut, look out for Mabel. 



Renee DiNino is the director of community affairs for iHeartMEDIA in Connecticut, the mid-day 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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EDUCATION //



# Friendly Faces

## Universities foster connections, encourage leadership roles among LGBTQ students

By CARA MCDONOUGH

Campus life at a new college or university can be overwhelming for anyone. Students worry about finding their way to class, or navigating choices in the dining hall, not to mention sharing a small dorm room with a total stranger.

There are potentially bigger challenges, too, like making new friends and establishing a sense of “community” in an unfamiliar place.

For LGBTQ students, getting used to life on campus as a freshman or transferring student may be even more difficult. Meeting other students who identify as LGBTQ, however, can make a big difference. So can seeing these students front and center on campus in leadership and mentoring positions.

That’s why there are initiatives at many Connecticut-based campuses intended to make the transition for LGBTQ students easier, as well as provide ample opportunities for socializing and taking on leadership opportunities. Proponents say

these programs help LGBTQ students feel more welcome, ensure a diverse student representation in a variety of campus roles, and provide trusted individuals for new students to turn to when they’re looking for resources, advice – or just a friendly chat.

At Southern Connecticut State University, the SAGE (Sexuality and Gender Equality) Center’s ambassador program is in its fourth year.

The program was built with a larger initiative on campus in mind, says Jenna Retort, assistant director in the Office of Student Conduct and Civic Responsibility: to develop meaningful student employment opportunities, with the goal of students learning transferable skills they can use in their respective fields down the line.

The ambassadors serve as peer educators and resource providers to teach the university about the LGBTQ community. Students in the program help to develop social and educational programs, connect with new and existing students who visit the SAGE Center, serve on panels, and facilitate events, she explains. And the students who fill the

roles all have a “deep passion for advocacy.”

“I love doing activist work,” says Hannah Cianciolo, a junior at Southern who recently transferred to the school and is a SAGE ambassador. “So it feels pretty great giving resources to students in need.”

She says that being in the public eye in a helping role is important for other students – LGBTQ and otherwise – to see, perhaps encouraging them to take on similar roles. “It definitely helps people in your community to succeed,” she says.

And, for Cianciolo, being in the program served its larger purpose, too, preparing her for bigger steps down the line. “Working here has pushed me more towards my goal of becoming a gender studies professor,” she says.

Marlena Oliveri, a SAGE Center graduate intern, says watching the program in action illustrates the value of students being role models and resources for other students, which can have an enormously positive effect on new students who identify as LGBTQ.

“I feel like it’s important because it’s peer-to-peer education. I feel like with me, being an intern, there can be a disconnect with other students, but if it [the message] is

coming from a student, they may be willing to connect,” she says.

This past spring, the SAGE Center began a new program called “Leaders with Pride.” Unlike the ambassador program, which trains students to fill the ambassador role specifically, Leaders with Pride recruits LGBTQ students for leadership positions that already exist on campus, including at the SAGE Center or leading PRISM meetings. PRISM is an undergraduate club that works towards educational awareness of different sexualities.

“These partnerships were designed to recruit and retain student leaders who identify in the LGBTQ community, because their representation in leadership positions is critical and enriches our community,” says Retort. She says the SAGE Center is looking forward to watching the program grow.

Other universities are making concerted efforts to reach out to the LGBTQ community as well.

Sometimes when you’re new on campus, you simply need a friend who already knows the ropes. That’s the idea behind the University of Connecticut’s F.A.M.I.L.E.E. Mentoring Program, run by the university’s Rainbow Center. The acronym stands for Fostering Academics, Maturity, Independence, Leadership, Empowerment & Excellence; it’s a tall order but the program is up to the task.

The mentoring program is centered around the LGBTQ experience on campus (although no one who takes part is required to identify as LGBTQ or disclose identity) and its purpose is to foster strong ties and a community experience.

The program ensures first-year and transfer students feel welcome and comfortable on campus by matching them with upper-class peers, says Steven Feldman, a graduate assistant at the Rainbow Center, who helps coordinate the mentoring group and helps run graduate and young professional groups.

The mentors are required to have two semesters of experience on campus; be allies to all communities of gender identity, expression and sexuality represented at the Rainbow Center; and it’s recommended that they have a strong grade point average. Mentees are any first-year or transfer students who want to take part.

Mentors and mentees are paired based on applications and meet regularly in the fall to secure their relationship, says Feldman. There also are social events that take place throughout the year, including “F.A.M.I.L.E.E. reunions” where the entire program comes together.

Once they’ve experienced the program, participants are encouraged to take on more leadership roles within it, or otherwise at the Rainbow Center, ensuring there is always



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a roster of LGBTQ student leaders ready to help out wherever they can.

Feldman says that his own academic studies have included research on the LGBTQ community and higher education, so he finds the work he does at the Rainbow Center particularly intriguing.

“I think that different communities in different colleges face different issues,” he says. “Transitioning to a big university like UConn can be challenging, especially for the LGBTQ community. It can be challenging to find your own community on campus. I think the F.A.M.I.L.E.E. program really helps those students find their community.”

Working on the program and observing it in action is incredibly rewarding, he says.

“To see folks come in for those first weeks of school and want to be part of this speaks to the power of community,” he says. “For me, it’s really empowering to know that a program like this can have an impact here.”

Programs that welcome LGBTQ students on campus, as well as those that prepare them for leadership roles, are particularly important right now, says William J. Mann, the LGBT Center faculty director at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain.

Mann, who is an author, journalist and community activist, says recent studies indicate that more high school students than ever before are identifying as part of the LGBTQ spectrum, and college campuses need to be ready to serve that growing population.

“It means we need to really be prepared for how to welcome these students and make sure their needs are being addressed, so it’s very important to have programs in place that are relevant to these students’ lives,” he says. “That means that right away, they get involved and know that the campus is a welcoming place for them.”

CCSU has just finished a strategic planning program that will, hopefully, integrate all of the school’s LGBTQ resources on campus, in order to recognize the specific needs of this population, he says. Not only is the population growing, he notes, but it is increasingly becoming less white and less cisgender.

“We need to have people on campus that reflect this changing demographic, and we need to make sure these students see themselves reflected in the leadership,” he says. “And these students themselves need to become part of the leadership.”



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FEATURE //



# Don't Say That!

40 of the worst words, phrases, and language likely to offend someone LGBTQ – a guide for our family and friends

By DAWN ENNIS

Once you tell the world you're gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer, intersex, or any of the other identities out there, sooner or later, you can count on people outside of the community to ask you... pretty much everything. And some questions, frankly, just plain suck.

These folks would probably never say some of some of these things out loud, if only they knew how incredibly offensive, rude and inconsiderate those words are. That's where this guide can help.

This is for our well-meaning relatives, curious coworkers and awkwardly too-familiar acquaintances who embarrass themselves – and us – when they say the wrong thing. Even your straight BFF might slip up without realizing their faux pas. Whether they realize it or not, these words aren't just taboo, they're cruel.

Now here's another shocker: Every once in a while, one of us steps in it, too.

In some cases, it's a word that's being "reclaimed," like "queer," "dyke," or "fag." And for every person who considers those words badges of honor, there are likely 10 people who cringe upon hearing it or reading it.

One more thing: before I pull back this guide's glitter curtain, let's be clear: this list of 40 is, of course, by no means complete. And I expect some folks to question, even disagree, with the selections therein. Let *Connecticut VOICE* know by sharing your thoughts with us on social media.

## Don't say that ...

### To a gay person:

#### 40. "Which one of you is the wife/the husband?"

Gay couples aren't straight couples, and to suggest they must adhere to heterosexual societal norms is not only sexist but homophobic. They can couple without the need for one of them to assume a "male" or "female" role. Don't get hung up on what society considers male and female roles.

#### 39. "You just haven't met the right girl/guy yet!"

If you're only sexually attracted to people of the same sex, meeting someone of the opposite sex, even "the right" man or woman isn't going to change that. That's homophobic.

#### 38. "But you don't act/seem/look/sound gay!"

Girl, please. A lot's been written about "the gay voice," effeminate men and butch women, but stereotypes only serve to reinforce bias and oppression.

# Don't Say that!

## To a gay or lesbian woman:

### 37. “Why do you call yourself that?”

“Lesbian” is not universally accepted, and more and more women reject being called anything other than “gay.” Some prefer “dyke;” others find that word offensive. Activists who worked to win their place in society and are proud to be called lesbians recognize it’s not for every woman. But it is the one word that men cannot claim, and lesbian feminists pride themselves on that. Use of the L-word by transgender women has also become a flashpoint for anti-trans feminists.

### 36. “Were you a ‘tomboy’ growing up?”

Lots of gay women have always enjoyed being a girl and never wanted to be anything else.

### 35. “You must be really handy around the house!”

Another stereotype that presumes gay women are more masculine. Some women are indeed handy with tools.

### 34. “Would you be willing to join us for a threesome?”

This is a question gay women and lesbians get asked by couples all the time. It can be annoying to those who aren’t “unicorns” — usually, bi/pansexual women who might say “yes” to this question. They’re rare, hence the name.

### 33. “Doesn’t your desire to be penetrated mean you actually want to have sex with men?”

Wanting to have a part of your body sexually satisfied has nothing to do with men, or their body parts. Grow up.

### 32. “With that haircut, I almost mistook you for a man/trans woman!”

This is stereotyping of the worst kind. Ask your stylist how many women prefer their hair short! And unfortunately, there have been cases of cisgender women with short hair being removed from women’s bathrooms under the mistaken impression that they are transgender.

## To somebody bisexual, pansexual or polyamorous:

### 31. “You’re just greedy!”

No, bisexual and pansexual people love who they love. That’s not greed, that’s being open-minded.

### 30. “Why can’t you make up your mind?”

Attraction to more than one gender or one sex or more than one person is not indecision. It’s a valid orientation. Don’t be so judgmental!

### 29. “Being bi is just a phase!”

No, it’s not. See our article on page 69, which also explains the difference between bi and pan.

## To a trans woman:

### 28. “Have you had ‘the surgery’?”

As Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera informed Katie Couric in 2014, what’s between the legs of a trans woman is no one’s business but hers, her partner’s and that of her doctor. When asked this question, I typically respond with a question of my own: “How was your last pap smear/prostate exam?”

### 27. “Are your breasts ‘real’?”

Hormones help trans women achieve a more feminine physique, and that includes growing breasts, to varying degrees. Whether any woman gets breasts implants is her business, even if she’s trans. Unless you’re interested in having sex with a trans woman or you’re her doctor, why ask?

### 26. “I can touch your ass/breasts without your permission... because I’m gay!”

NO, IT’S NEVER OKAY. That’s a violation of someone’s body. Hands off, dude.

### 25. “You’re a man/not a ‘real’ woman/‘transgendered’/a biological male!”

Trans women are women. Although trans woman are not the same as cisgender [not transgender] women, to suggest a trans woman is “not a real woman” or a “fake” woman is to invalidate her gender identity. “Transgendered” is not a word; use “transgender” or “trans” to show respect, understanding and knowledge of the community. The phrase “biological male” is popular among opponents of transgender rights. It’s used to call out trans women as separate and unequal to cis women, and reduce them to the sex they were assigned at birth.

## 24. “You’re a ‘tranny’ ‘transvestite’/‘he-she!’”

“Tranny” is a slur. Some trans women, like Laura Jane Grace, have sought to reclaim this word. But for most, the T-word is the equivalent of the N-word. “Transvestite” is an outdated word for cross-dresser, and not a synonym for “transgender.” Use it only to refer 1970s cross-dressers. “He-she” is a slur that originated in pornography. Don’t say any of these. Ever.

## 23. “How long have you been wearing women’s clothes?”

A doctor at a Connecticut hospital actually asked me this during an examination. I told him, “I’m a woman, so they’re my clothes.”

## 22. “Aren’t you really just a gay man?”

Some transgender people are gay, some are straight, some are bi or pan, and some asexual. But no trans women are men. Sex and gender are two different things. Author and scholar Jennifer Finney Boylan famously said, “sex is who you want to go to bed with; gender is who you want to go to bed as.”

## 21. “You’re just looking to trap a straight guy into having gay sex!”

Trans women are often misconstrued as gay men pretending to be women, and trying to deceive straight men. Violence and murder have too often been the result. Also, the truth is, if a trans woman is gay, she’ll want to have sex with other women, not straight men. And actual gay men aren’t interested in straight men, either.

## 20. “You’re trans? Wow, you fooled me!”

This is meant to be a compliment, to say that a trans woman “passed” as a cis woman. The problem is, trans women aren’t trying to fool anyone; they just want to be seen as the authentic women they are. It’s also insulting to note when the opposite is true, like if a trans woman’s voice is a baritone, or when her hands are compared to that of a cisgender man. Lots of cis ladies suffer from “man hands,” unfortunately, so it’s not as surefire a telltale sign as one might think.

## 19. “Welcome to womanhood!”

Another back-handed compliment. While cis women often say this to trans women to show commiseration in the experience of being a woman, the upshot is that the trans woman feels she will always be seen as someone who previously was male. It’s best to avoid saying this, even with the best of intentions.

## To a trans man:

## 18. “Are you a ‘real’ man?”

As with trans women, this question suggests trans men are just pretending or dressing up like men, and invalidates their authentic gender identity.

## 17. “Do you have a penis? How do you ‘get it up?’”

Why, why, why is this anyone’s business?

## 16. “You’re trans? I wouldn’t have guessed! I just thought you were short...”

Like the “You could have fooled me” trope for trans women, this only serves to stigmatize trans men, who are sensitive to physical comparisons to cisgender men. Reducing trans men to just the characteristics that are apparent is an affront to them and objectifies their effort to live authentically.

## To any non-binary person:

## 15. “But how can ‘they’ be singular? ‘They’ goes against the grammar rules we all learned in grade school!”

Oy vey! Language evolves as is needed. The Associated Press now accepts “they” as an option instead of “he” or “she.” Merriam-Webster, America’s oldest dictionary, added a definition of “they” as a singular, non-gender-specific pronoun in September 2019. And the truth is, the use of “they” as a singular pronoun has been around a lot longer than people think – since the late 1300s, according to a Merriam-Webster blog.

## To anybody and everybody LGBTQ:

## 14. “How do you have sex?”

Privately, and with anybody other than you. Why ask this?

## 13. “What will the children think?”

They’ll think you’re a bigot if you cannot accept LGBTQ people as equals.

## 12. “Do you have to go and flaunt your gay sexuality like that?”

Why is this a problem given that straight couples hold hands, hug and kiss in public everywhere and all the time?

## 11. “I have no problem with gays/lesbians/transgender people, I just don’t want to have to serve them/deal with them/ treat them/see them.”

Well, at least in Connecticut, the law says you do. Federal laws are a different, sadder story.

## 10. “I’m in favor of equal rights for everyone, but I don’t believe in ‘special rights’ for anyone!”

Rights are not a pie. Giving rights to protection from discrimination to the marginalized does not mean fewer rights for the majority. And there are no laws or even proposals for “special rights” that would only benefit LGBTQ Americans, even here in Blue State Connecticut. There are, however, ongoing conflicts elsewhere, over the right to religious freedom and the right to be free from discrimination. The U.S. Supreme Court is to decide three cases involving LGBTQ employment rights during this term.

## 9. “You are mentally ill!”

In 1973, the American Psychological Association removed “homosexuality” from its official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In 2012, they removed “Gender Identity Disorder” and renamed it “gender dysphoria,” to remove the stigma of it being considered a mental disorder. In May 2019, the World Health Organization stopped classifying gender dysphoria as a mental illness. Also note: “transgenderism” is an outmoded word used by opponents of trans rights to describe being trans as if it were an illness or medical condition, as opposed to it being a legitimate gender identity.

## 8. “You’ve been brainwashed!”

For generations, parents and spouses of LGBTQ people have convinced themselves their loved ones had been brainwashed to think they’re gay or lesbian or trans. This gave rise to conversion therapy, a practice illegal in more than a dozen states. It’s bullshit. You can’t change a gay person into someone straight any more than you can brainwash someone into being gay.

## 7. “You’re not suitable to raise a child.”

This argument has been used in several states to deny adoption rights to LGBTQ individuals and couples. Studies show a child who is raised by parents who are members of the LGBTQ community suffer absolutely no harm, and in fact, thrive.

## 6. “How do I know you don’t have HIV or AIDS?”

There is still a stigma associated with being HIV positive but that has started to change. Advances in medications have made it not just possible, but typical, to live a full life with HIV. Screening for the virus is only necessary with intimate partners and medical professionals. You simply cannot get HIV or AIDS just by being in proximity to someone who tests positive.

## 5. “What you’re doing is illegal/a sin according to God!”

Laws against sodomy still linger on the books in some states, even though the Supreme Court struck them down in 2003 in *Lawrence v. Texas*. As for the Bible, many things people do now were considered sins when the scriptures were written. Interpretations, of course, vary across many religious beliefs,

and so we’ve put a call into God to ask for clarification. We have not received a response as of press time.

## 4. “That’s so gay!”

Homophobes and 12-year-olds are the only ones who still say this. It’s really bad.

## 3. “You’re queer/a fag/a faggot/a fag hag!”

These are words that some people have reclaimed as their own, and while they won’t offend everybody, chances are you’ll offend somebody. That last one is sometimes used to describe a straight woman who associates with gay men as friends. Unless you’re a writer on “*Will & Grace*,” avoid using it.

## 2. “Have you any regrets about coming out?”

This question raises the possibility that being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender can be “fixed,” or that we can be “converted.” It gives fuel to the enemies of the LGBTQ community that our orientations and identities are something we adopt like an affectation or a lifestyle.

And please, don’t say this number one worst word or phrase to anyone:

## 1. “I have no problem with you, personally; I just don’t agree with your ‘lifestyle!’”

Sigh. Is being straight a “lifestyle”? Don’t say “lifestyle.” It’s a crutch for bigots.

The reason “lifestyle” can be more offensive than any slur or insult is that it seeks to invalidate that thing we’ve discovered about ourselves that every straight person takes for granted and understands without thinking: their genuine identity.

A recent study debunked the myth of a “gay gene.” But the researchers concluded that even in the absence of such definitive proof that LGBTQ people are “born this way,” it does not follow that being who we are is a choice or a lifestyle. The scientists called our orientation and identities “a natural part of our diversity as a species.”

So, share this with your straight friends: when they review all the awful words compiled here, please consider that nothing could hurt us – their LGBTQ friends, coworkers, employees and relatives – more than questioning how we know what we know in our heart of hearts.

We are who we are, and we’d appreciate it if you would avoid calling us any of the other 39 insults, too. 🍆



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# Heart Families

## Choosing your family is an emotional and rewarding adventure

By KEVIN LEMBO / Photography by TODD FAIRCHILD

**J**ust a few years ago, I found myself at the kitchen sink. A sweet four-month-old – we’ll call her “baby girl” – was babbling and bouncing away in her Boppy chair.

The phone rang.

It was a call from the state Department of Children and Families (DCF), asking us if we were interested in adopting this sweet baby girl who was temporarily staying with us through the foster care program. A lifetime flashed in my mind. I was 54. We could do this, right? But by the time I put down the phone, I was looking at baby girl with a lump in my throat. She had no idea, but it was a terribly difficult moment. We could not be her forever family.

Fast forward to today: Baby girl is exactly where she should be, and she’s still in our lives, too. For special occasions, for apple picking, or for no reason at all, we get to be together. Whatever our parallel paths, she is forever in our hearts, because she gifted us with just a moment of her life.

While we didn’t adopt baby girl, our family knows firsthand the joy of what it’s like to build your forever family through adoption.

My goal, my hope, in sharing this story is to get members of the LGBTQ community to consider becoming foster or adoptive parents. Might I also suggest that if you’re not ready for that level of commitment, there are kids in our community who could use some support and direction as a mentor?

As the state comptroller – and Connecticut’s first openly gay person elected to statewide office here – I am grateful to live and serve in a state with comprehensive anti-discrimination laws. I’m proud that our state laws prohibit denying a petition to adopt based on sexual orientation, and that our

courts have found that a foster child can and should remain in the stable, loving placement of same-sex couples.

More than simply following the law, Connecticut’s DCF has made it part of its mission to reach out to LGBTQ families, so we know that we are welcome and needed.

The world wasn’t always this kind, as our family understands – from the time that my spouse, Charles, and I first embarked on our adoption journey in the state of New York in the early 1990s.

We are now the proud parents of three children. Our youngest, whom we adopted as a newborn, is now breezing through college and running track, and our two oldest – now independent working adults – were adopted more than 20 years ago from the foster care system when we lived and worked in New York.

Back on adoption finalization day for our two oldest sons, in 1993, all of us dressed up and, ready to celebrate our new life together, we headed to court. What should have been a simple proceeding ended with a denial and gavel.

The reason: Our family was deemed by the judge to be not just untraditional, but unfit. My spouse and I, simply because of our marital status and sexual orientation, were considered not good enough to parent these amazing children who had been through so much hardship.

In the end, our family was one of the lucky ones. Charles and I had the hearts and means to fight for our family all the way to the New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division, establishing a precedent-setting case, “In the matter of Byron K.” (1994). That final decision ultimately made our family whole, and hopefully helped other families that followed – but only after unnecessary disappointment, heartache and rejection.

By the time we adopted our youngest son, the landscape





State Comptroller Kevin  
Lembo (right) with his  
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had changed dramatically, allowing us to grow our family without the same obstacles.

With our three sons grown or growing, we became licensed foster parents in recent years. Our family thought long and hard about this. As state comptroller, so much of what I do in that capacity is 30,000 feet high, broad fiscal and health care policy work. It's important work that I truly enjoy, but foster parenting gave our family an entirely new and different opportunity to do something more direct, immediate and necessary – literally down on the floor with little ones.

That experience was a whole new adventure!

Following comprehensive training and support from DCF, our family quickly welcomed respite placements – short-term foster care.

It has been some time since we've had a placement, but our home has, at times, been a beautiful and emotional whirlwind of pots-and-pans playtime, Cheerios turning up here and there, little voices, book reading, intermittent tears, squeals and laughter – and a whole lot of emotions, including the excitement, fear and joy with each arrival and a quiet sadness with each departure.

If you are considering becoming a foster or adoptive parent, here are some things to know:


The state Department of Children and Families is here to support you through licensing and, longer term, through caring for your child.

What it takes: You don't have to own your own home (renting is fine). You simply need financial stability and good health. You don't have to be married. DCF values all types of families. You do have to be at least 21 years old.

Different approaches: Some families may want to provide long-term placement, while others may prefer to provide short-term respite.

Training: DCF provides training, background checks and a home visit to make sure you are prepared to succeed at providing a safe and loving home for a child who needs one.

Learn more: To start a wonderful journey, please call 888-KID-HERO or visit [www.ctfosteradopt.com](http://www.ctfosteradopt.com).

Alternatively: If you think mentoring may be the right place for you, please contact True Colors at 860-232-0050 or [www.ourtruecolors.org](http://www.ourtruecolors.org). They particularly need mentors in New London and Bridgeport. 

*Kevin Lembo is serving his second term as Connecticut's state comptroller. He and his husband live in Guilford.*

# Expect to Find Your Place at Southern.

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