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EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome to the first *Connecticut VOICE* of 2020! Thank you for being part of this journey as the magazine enters its second year.

In this issue, we are excited to bring you an interview with Matthew Lopez, the playwright behind “The Inheritance,” the epic two-part, six-hour play that recently debuted on Broadway following a successful run in London. Lopez and the play have strong ties to Hartford Stage.

We also examine how homelessness is affecting LGBTQ youth in our state, and

the meaningful work organizations are undertaking to combat the problem. On the lighter side, we take a look at the changing dating landscape and sit down with “The Singing Chef” Neil Fuentes.

As always, you – our readers – are a crucial part of what we do. In this issue, transgender readers share their stories about the emotional journey of changing their names. We also asked our social media community to share favorite pet photos with us and we’re sharing some of those on these pages as well.

I hope you will connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, so we can continue to hear your ideas, share your stories, and spread your voice.

Happy reading,

Cara

Cara Rosner, Editor
cara@ctvoicemag.com

**The Winter 2019 issue did not include a photo credit for our cover photo of Azua Echevarria and Toni Johnson. The photo was taken by George Lee, and we regret the omission.*

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Connecticut VOICE™
is published by Seasons Media

Publisher /Owner

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Cover Photograph

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**“SPRING ADDS
NEW LIFE AND
NEW BEAUTY TO
ALL THAT IS.”**

-Jessica Harrelson

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It's the Broadway epic everyone's talking about. "The Inheritance," and playwright Matthew Lopez have strong Connecticut ties.



The Inheritance

Photo by **Allegra Anderson**

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George Takei's Gay Trek of a Life

The TV Star and Activist Reflects on His Journey

By **FRANK RIZZO**

At age 68 in 2015, George Takei — most popularly known as Hikaru Sulu, helmsman of the USS Enterprise in the '60s television series “Star Trek” — came out publicly as a gay man. It was a watershed moment because of the widespread popularity of the series and its subsequent film spinoffs.

In February, Takei, who turns 83 in April, received International Festival of Arts & Ideas' annual Visionary Leadership Award in New Haven. The award is presented “to a leader whose trailblazing work impacts the world.”

I talked with Takei about his eventful life: when he was four and his family was imprisoned for nearly four years in internment camps during World War II because they were of Japanese heritage, then his career as an actor in stage film and television — but I most wanted to know what his life was like as a first-closeted and then as an out gay man. He lives in Los Angeles with his husband, Brad Takei. They have been together for 33 years.

“The government imprisoned me for four years for my race; I imprisoned myself about my sexuality for decades,” he says. “You can't imagine the kind of sentry towers you can build around your heart. Throughout most of my adult life, I was imprisoned behind invisible barbed-wire fences that had the sharp, hard barbs of prejudice against LGBTQ people.”

Q: When did you first think of yourself as gay?

A: The word “gay” was unknown to me [when I was young]. I was about eight or nine years old and I noticed the other boys would say things like, “Sally's cute.”

I thought Sally was nice but I didn't get excited like they did. And in junior high school when Monica was blossoming out into womanhood, they would say, “Wow, Monica's hot.” I didn't feel the way they did. I thought Monica was nice, too, but it wasn't anything to get excited about. But all I thought to myself was, Bobby was really so cute and had the sweetest smile.

There were other kids in school who were kind of effeminate, carrying their books pressed to their chest, or had a slight swish, and the other boys would look down on them. I didn't want to be one of those. I had prejudice against me already for having been in a prison camp, so I tried to act like the other boys. So I, too, went, “Yeah, Sally's really nice.” But that was acting on my part. My imprisonment when I was a child was possible and rationalized because we were visibly different, and now I was discovering I was different in ways other than my Japanese face. But I didn't want to be sneered at yet again, so I acted like the other boys.

It wasn't until into my teens that I heard the word “gay.” At that time, I thought I was the only one who felt the way I did. It was a gradual realization over a long period of time that I understood exactly what it was. That's what most people don't understand. You don't suddenly become gay. It was a growing realization. At least for me.

Q: When was your first sexual experience?

A: I was 14 at summer camp and there was this good-looking, blond camp counselor and he wore tight T-shirts and he had a good build. What struck me about him was — you know when blond people get tanned and their forearm hair turns a shiny, glistening yellow? That to me was sexy.



Known best for playing Hikaru Sulu on "Star Trek," George Takei didn't come out publicly as a gay man until 2015, when he was 68. These days he is a vocal advocate for LGBTQ rights, and he recently was in New Haven to accept the International Festival of Arts & Ideas' Visionary Leadership Award in New Haven. Photo courtesy of George Takei.



At age four, Takei was imprisoned with his family in internment camps during World War II for being Japanese. "The government imprisoned me for four years for my race; I imprisoned myself about my sexuality for decades." Today, he's been happily with his husband, Brad, for 33 years. Photo courtesy of George Takei.

One night he came to my cabin and started toying with me and he exposed himself to me and I was excited by that. My first one was this golden Greek god.

Q: Sulu was kind of a sex symbol, too. In one episode of 'Star Trek' he was shirtless and brandishing a sword. Did you get fan mail?


A: I did, and one was really rather creepy [and enclosed something disgusting] and sent from Brooklyn. So whenever I was in New York City, I was always skittish about going to Brooklyn. (Laughs.)

Q: Did you wish Sulu was gay?

A: For the most recent "Star Trek" motion picture in 2016, they recast a younger actor, John Cho, as my character, and the writers were planning to honor me for my activism with LGBTQ issues by making Sulu gay and they asked me what I thought about it. I asked them to let me think about it. Then I thought Sulu was

created as a straight character because he could not be gay [when the series ran in the 1960s].

In fact, Sulu had a daughter who became a helmsman in "Star Trek: The Next Generation." But rather than me being honored, the right person to pay tribute to was Gene Roddenberry, who created the show with Sulu being straight, so I felt that would not be honoring him. The real tribute should be to Gene. The writers could have created a new character who lived in the 23rd Century as a gay man, and how that was an asset to the fleet because he saw things from another vantage point. But they didn't.

I once told Gene, "You're breaking new ground here with the series," because up until then, Asians were always portrayed in stereotypes, and here for the first time was an Asian character who was a proud member of the leadership team and the best helmsman in the Starfleet – who also had a great build. 



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



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Laurie Scott-Smith, left, and Rev. Sara Scott-Smith of Bridgeport in a candid moment on their wedding day.

Swipe Rights, & Wrongs

LGBTQ online dating survival stories

By DAWN ENNIS

In our modern divided society, there are two things that unite all of us: our need for a human connection beyond ourselves, and our frustration with the result. Nowhere is that truer than in the interweb dedicated to finding love, pursuing passion and, well, hooking up.

As one gay man tweeted in the hashtag #gayonlinedating: “I feel like gay online dating is sending messages that will not be responded to, and not responding to messages you get.”

Given the way that internet use has exploded in the two decades since 2000, is it any wonder that online dating within the LGBTQ community has both created new opportunities to connect and left us feeling more isolated than ever? And it’s not always a lack of responses that are a problem; catfishing is rampant across the online dating universe.

But for the millions of those willing to take the risk, many permutations are possible: virtual relationships that can range from long-distance romances to finding matches within walking distance; one-on-one interactions for those seeking to couple up, be part of a “throuple” and more; plus, there’s everything from kinks to platonic friendships, in which people share mutual interests and a thirst for companionship without the sex.

We’ve collected a few stories from LGBTQ folks in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, willing to share their happiness and their heartbreak. Our first couple channeled their interest into creating a community.

They developed an online dating app right here in Connecticut. It’s called #open (pronounced hashtag open), a tiny competitor

compared to the big guys like Grindr, Tinder, HER, SCRUFF, TSDates, as well as those appealing to mostly cishet monogamy-seeking couples like eHarmony, OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, Match and Bumble. #open is a relative newcomer in the field where LGBTQutie, Scissr and Chappy have attracted members of the LGBTQ community.

The difference is #open’s dedication to being an inclusive, sex-positive community, 40,000 strong, that welcomes those who don’t want to be limited by a gender binary, a given orientation or relationship style. The founders advertise it as an app for those seeking “people who share your passion.”

Amanda and David

“We met on an app,” says internet entrepreneur David Epstein, one he described as “set to a little bit of a different tune” than the popular dating apps. Amanda Wilson, with a background in game theory and human behavior, says her first reason for swiping right on Epstein’s profile in March 2015 came down to what she saw.

“He was exceptionally handsome to me from the very beginning, on the very first picture, and I don’t know necessarily what specifically made me swipe right. But I do know that pretty soon after actually chatting and talking with him, when it came time to meet, he made me feel exceptionally comfortable,” she says, detailing Epstein’s thoroughness in sharing details about himself. “He basically let me know that I was going to get through this encounter, this meeting, alive.”

The middle-aged couple, who identify as bisexual, co-founded the #open app, launching



Amanda Wilson, left, and her husband David Epstein co-created #open, a new dating app with headquarters in West Hartford.

it on the Apple App Store in December 2018 and in the spring of 2019 on Google's Play Store. They run it with a small staff out of an office with an incredible "Truman Show"-esque view overlooking West Hartford Center. Their motivation was their own interest in connecting with others in a way that traditional dating apps didn't offer.

"Much of it was really driven by our own observations about our own sexuality," Epstein says over lunch with Wilson. "We saw broad societal acceptance of female bisexuality, but almost none of male bisexuality, and we wanted to know why that was and to be able to study how it changes."

"We don't really have a lot of research into human sexuality," adds Wilson.

For example, a study of 12,000 students, published in March 2019 in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Sex Research*,

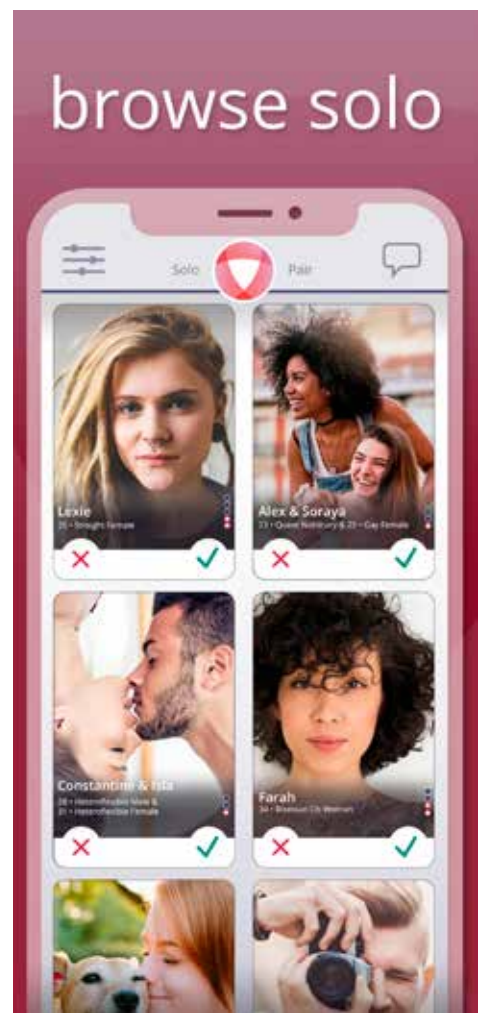
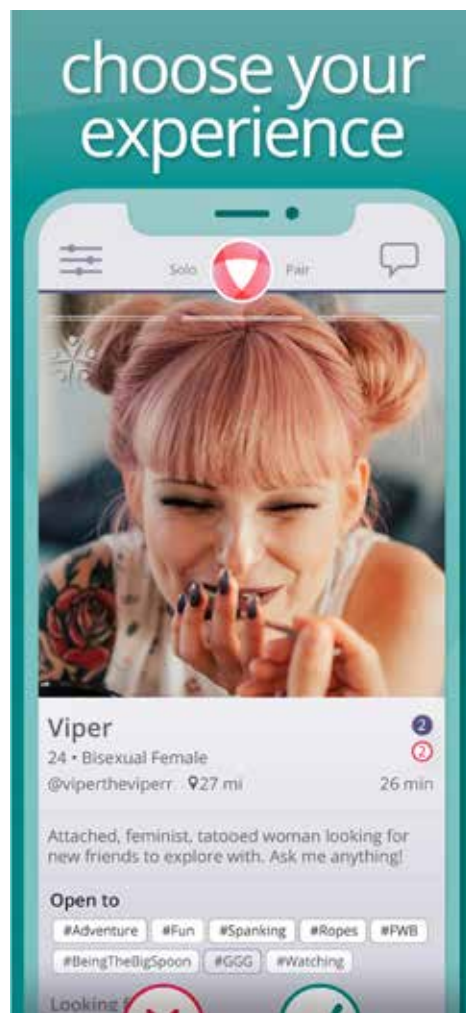
relied entirely on self-reporting. Researchers found that the students experienced substantial changes in their sexual attractions, partners, and sexual identity, beginning in late adolescence to their early 20s, and from that point, into their late 20s.

Nine out of 10 men taking part in that study reported they were straight; one in six women identified as bisexual.

Contrast that with #open, where 41% of users are straight, fewer than 20% call themselves bi, and more than 11% fall into the "other" category which lumps together everything from "gay" to "skoliosexual," a term for those attracted to intersex/DSD, non-binary and genderqueer individuals.

As for gender identity, which is different from sexual orientation, almost 9% of the #open community identifies outside the binary.

"We think diversity is better represented when people are



The creators of #open call it an app that goes beyond dating, offering an inclusive community “where people can form genuine connections.”

free to self-identify,” Epstein says.

When #open users create a profile, they can choose their gender and sexual preference from a very diverse list, or create their own and describe themselves in terms of their interests. In addition, users choose hashtags that express those interests and even define where their boundaries are.

“A lot of the other dating apps are trying to push people into two binary boxes that don’t fit the actual way users inside of the app want to identify,” Wilson adds. “So, users are having to come up with all of these different kinds of workarounds, which is frustrating for them, and frustrating for the other users of the app.”

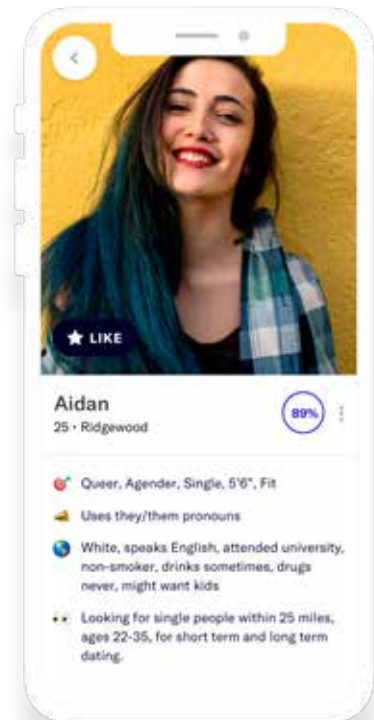
A spokesperson for OkCupid wasn’t taking any trash talking from the #open folks.

“We have 13 orientation options

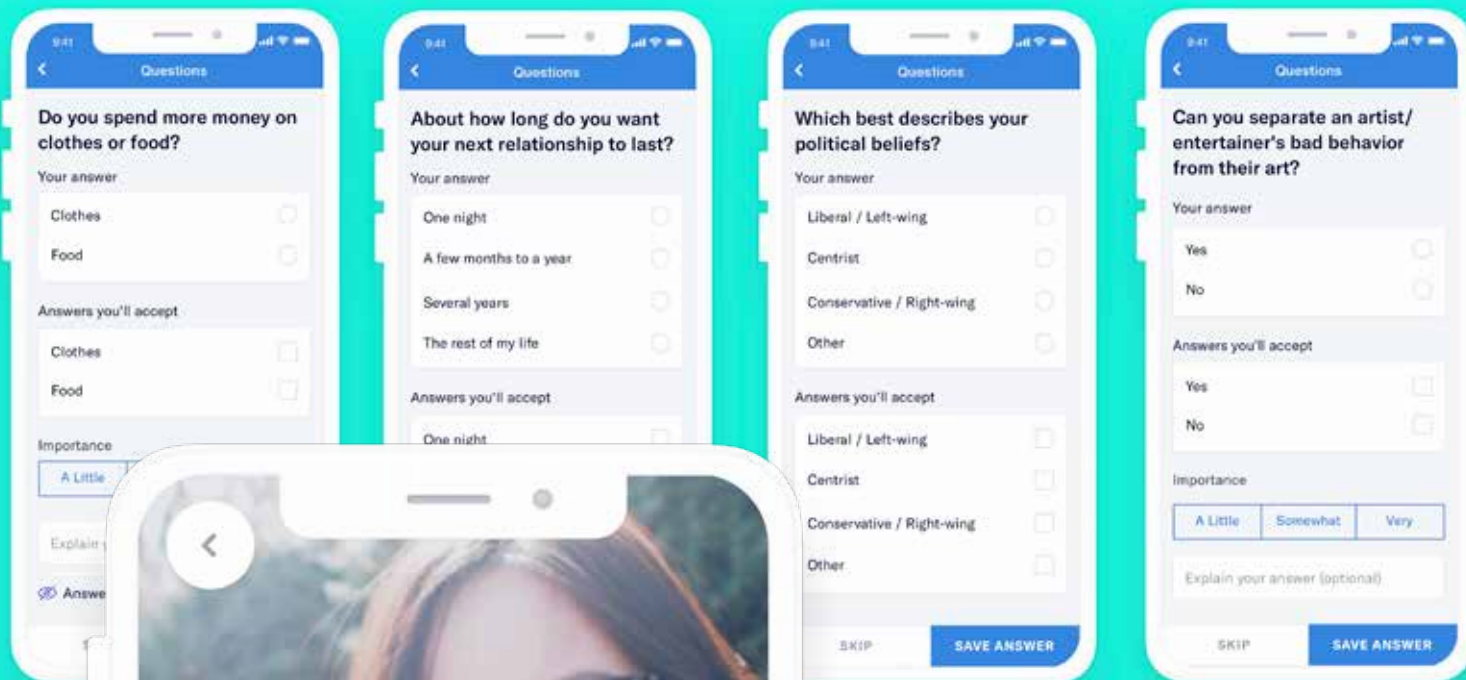
and 22 gender options available for our members to choose from,” counters Michael Kaye, global communications manager at OkCupid, in an email to Connecticut VOICE. “Members with LGBTQIA+ profiles can choose pronouns to display on their profile. People can choose between he/him, she/her, they/ them, or they can write in their own. We welcome everyone and support all types of relationships, including non-monogamous ones, on OkCupid.”

The catch, as Epstein and Wilson point out, is that traditional dating apps like OkCupid do not allow couple or joint profiles; #open does, giving its users options to search with their partners and on their own, if they wish to be non-monogamous.

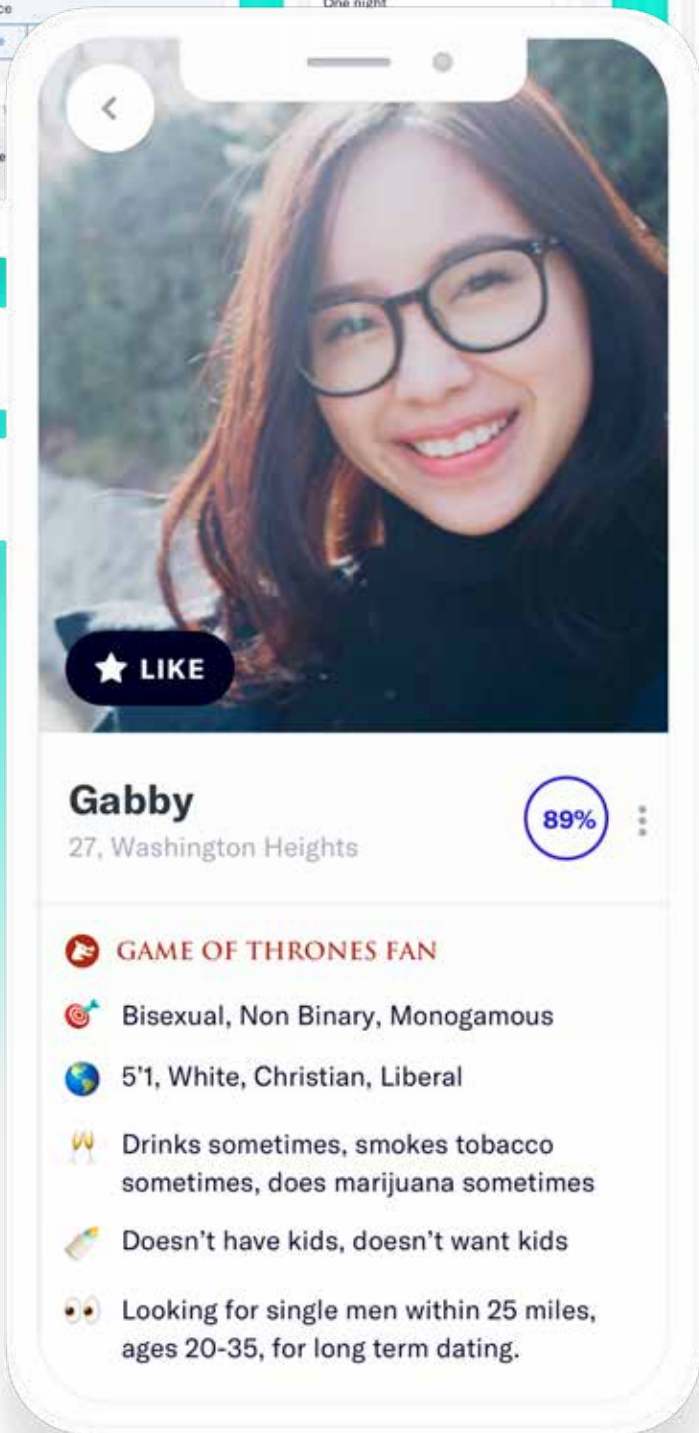
“You can have a solo profile, or you can partner up with someone



OkCupid welcomes people of all identities, but does not allow couples to create joint profiles for meeting other couples or singles.



Users of OkCupid can show their diverse interests to prospective matches by answering questions on the app, but many users ignore them.



inside of the app and have a partner profile,” explains Wilson. “So, you know, for David and I, I have my solo profile, David has his solo profile, and then we have our shared partner profile. We feel like we’ve got the platform that really allows our users to be as authentic as they want to be and really speak their voice no matter what that is, or their truth, an app that can be as fluid as they are,” she says.

“Not only do we offer partner profiles, but 37% of the profiles on #open are partnered profiles, and 60% of those are “Confirmed Partners.” Partnered profiles can be accessed from two different devices to ensure more than one person is participating. This is more open, honest, and ethical – and helps reduce instances of catfishing on dating apps.”

Laurie and Sara

For those LGBTQ singles looking for “the one,” it can be frustrating, says Laurie Scott-Smith of Bridgeport. She was just about to give up on Match.com, founded back when the word “app” meant “appetizer,” when she and her wife found each other on the site.

“We were two older lesbians, living single lives 60 miles apart, wishing we weren’t,” Laurie wrote in an email to us. “I was two years into launching my travel business in Old Saybrook and ready to search for the last love of my life. Match.com wasn’t a very successful source for

me, as I really don't fit into boxes that Match suggests. I was a young-at-heart 61, an artsy, ethereal, out-of-the-box, woman-loving woman: I love to fish and hate to cook. I'm a social justice geek with a passion for travel. I had just about given up."

Laurie went on a few dates, about to throw in the towel, when she met Sara, a Fairfield County minister.

"She was a tomboy who wore makeup and lipstick, but looked hot in a baseball cap," she wrote. "She was from the South, where I'd spent 20 years. Our values were in sync; she was lovely and smart and spiritual.

"Our texts were constant. Within a few days, we agreed we had to meet. We met halfway between Old Saybrook and Fairfield for one date, then another, and another, each time closing the restaurant. We knew this was something extraordinary. Within two weeks, we were making the kind of plans you usually don't make with someone you've just met," recalls Laurie.

A group trip to Morocco sealed the deal in January 2019, Laurie wrote. "On the third day, I proposed to her in the midst of 3,000-year-old Roman ruins. Two days later, she proposed to me on a dune of the Sahara at sunset."

They wed the following September.

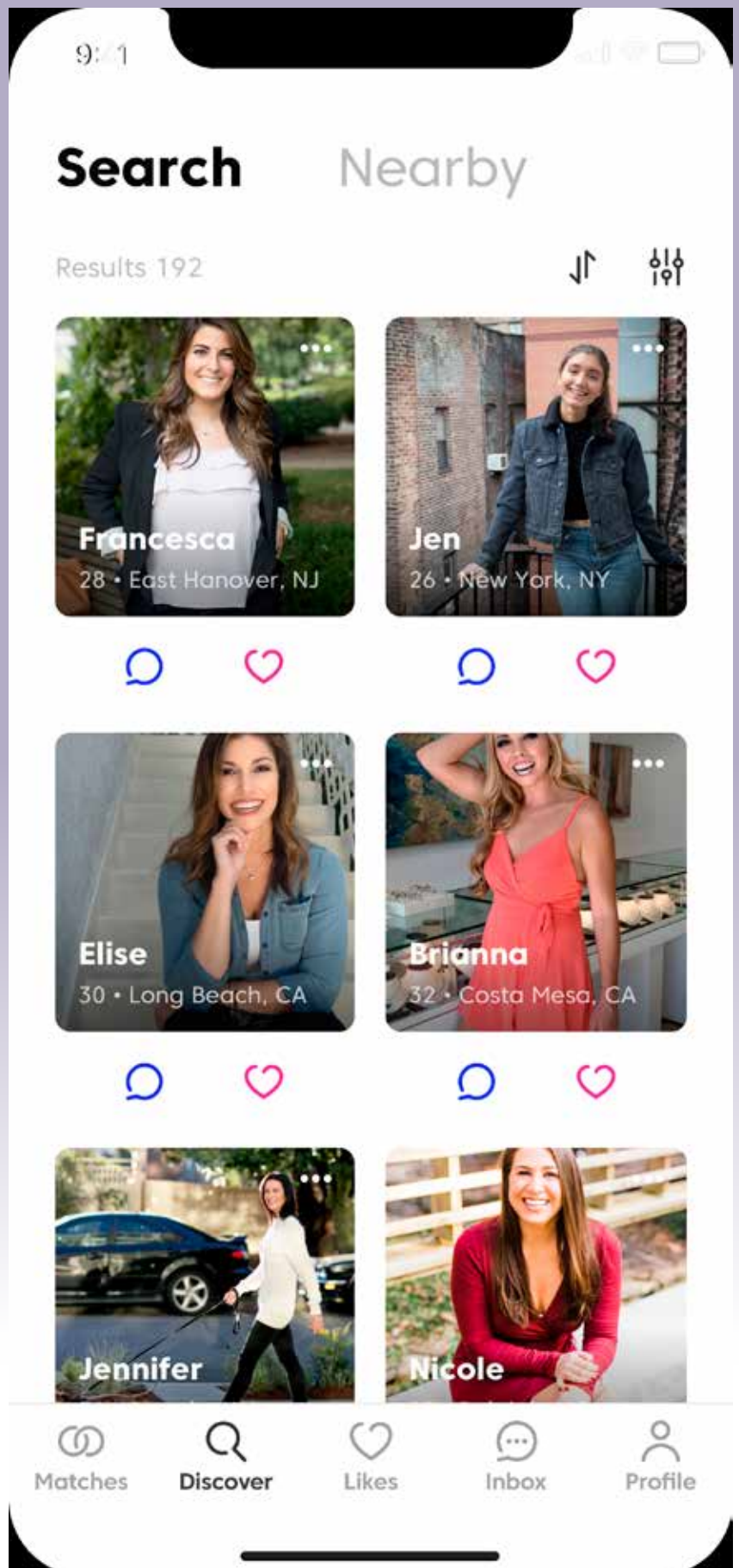
"Did I ever think that I would find my one-and-only on Match.com? Never. But where else would you find a middle-aged minister who wears a collar every day, loves to cook, with a sparkle in her eye? And where would she find an art-loving, out-there, mother of twins who twirls when she talks? Simply ... a Match."

But as the ancient proverb made famous by the rock group Poison goes, "every rose has its thorn." Some cautionary tales of online dating filled our inbox.

The Reverend Daniel Rodriguez Schlorff

"As a pansexual cis male, I find it hard to get dates with straight women," wrote Schlorff, a 39-year-old chaplain from Wallingford. "As soon as they hear I have had and enjoyed intercourse with other men, they immediately ghost me."

He continues, "Another sad but true fact is that many in the LGBTQ+ communities project all sorts of negativity onto queer people of faith, calling us self-loathing, in denial, assuming we approve of clergy abuses, and that we are generally living in the dark ages. It's a reactivity to religious trauma rather than an experience of the person whose profile they are viewing."



Laurie Scott-Smith said she was just about to give up on online dating when she found Sara on Match.com. They married less than a year later.



Melody Maia Monet is a popular YouTube personality who has been hounded by catfish, and recently came out as asexual.

Deja Nicole Greenlaw

Greenlaw, 68, is a columnist, retired and a straight transgender woman from Enfield who's been living as her authentic self for almost 13 years. She met several cisgender men through TSDating, all of whom knew she were trans before they met in person.

"On my first date with a man, it felt great, but very different sitting on the other side of the car, especially when the kiss came. It was sweet, but now I was a woman with a man instead of a man with a woman!

"Another time, a different guy kept looking around when we were sitting in a booth at a Panera. He was afraid that he would see someone he knows and here he was with a 6'3" trans girl."

Greenlaw also gave Facebook Dating a go but chose not to disclose her transgender status until meeting one cisgender man, in person and in public, in September 2019.

"He kept on cocking his head as he looked at me throughout the date. He didn't realize that I was a trans woman. We talked about the '60s, music, drug use, etc., and things were going okay. After about an hour I finally told him I was a T-girl [transgender]. Then he asked me if I had 'the operation,' and I told him that I hadn't, and that changed his interest in me. He then treated me like I was a guy friend and wasn't interested in me. I decided, at that point, to end the date. He did walk me to my car, though, and when we got there, he asked me if I could score any acid. Lol, what a date!"

Josephine Altzman

Altzman, 50, is from Teaneck, N.J. and a transgender woman who came out four years ago. She's an Orthodox Jew who described herself on National Coming Out Day as a "proud gay woman." In late 2019, she told her Facebook friends she had started a "a new job and career in a new company and begun yet another personal relationship."

Her online dating experience was discouraging. Altzman recalls having 16 people in a row turn her down during online or in-person encounters, in which her prospective paramour would say something along the lines of, "You're pretty and smart and I like you, but I can't date someone who's trans."

"Number 17," she said, referring to her new girlfriend, "remains to be seen." Weeks later, she noted, "this last one seems to be a keeper, I'm happy to say."

Melody Maia Monet

The 49-year-old Orlando, Fla.-based YouTube personality, writer, singer, and photographer told us by phone she has had very little success with online dating since coming out as a transgender lesbian a decade ago. She says one time she inadvertently set her account to "interested in men," and almost immediately, "I was flooded with contacts, like 45 in 24 hours." A year ago, a cisgender lesbian fan of Monet's connected with her using the HER app, but their relationship fizzled.

"What I have found is that, at my age in particular, I'm

not getting nearly as much interest as I used to, and when I do find someone, the conversations don't last very long, or they're catfish."

"Catfish," for those unfamiliar, are internet trolls who connect with lonely hearts with the goal of reaping a financial windfall, either through cash sent online or by obtaining enough personal information to steal an individual's identity and ruin their life forever. Others do it just for emotional reasons, to get attention and feel attractive, Monet said.

"One particularly bad week, I got catfished twice," Monet recalls.


Here, she shares some of the catfish warning signs she's learned to spot:

Unbelievably gorgeous profile photos, often stolen from unwitting social media accounts.

An almost immediate response to a connection: "Most women won't reach out right away, so if you get a message within a minute, it's almost always a catfish."

Changing locations: A lot of times, the distance between you and the person contacting you will suddenly change, from a few miles to thousands of miles, given that some of these catfish are based overseas. Apps like HER allow users to change their locations for privacy and to gauge if they might find a date in a city they plan to travel to. "So that's a feature, not a bug."

Unusual questions: "A catfish will ask questions that would not be the first thing you'd ask someone you just met online: How long have you had this account? What are you looking for from this app? Also, they'll be instantly overly enthusiastic with praise, calling you beautiful, darling, etc."

Members of the military: "A sure catfish sign is if they say they're in the military, because they're almost always not." The founder of the HER app once told Monet that a good friend of hers, who actually served in the military, wanted to mention that in her profile. She advised against the idea, saying, "They'll think you're a catfish!" 



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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Hitting Home

Youth Continuum takes an innovative approach to tackling homelessness

By JANE LATUS

On Grand Avenue in downtown New Haven – a short walk from Yale University and sharing the block with an Italian bakery, flooring store and dry cleaner – is a nondescript building where young lives are being changed. And when renovations are complete in 2021, the larger, more distinctive building will have a correspondingly new and unique program going on within: the first in the state (and second in the nation) student-run program for homeless young adults.

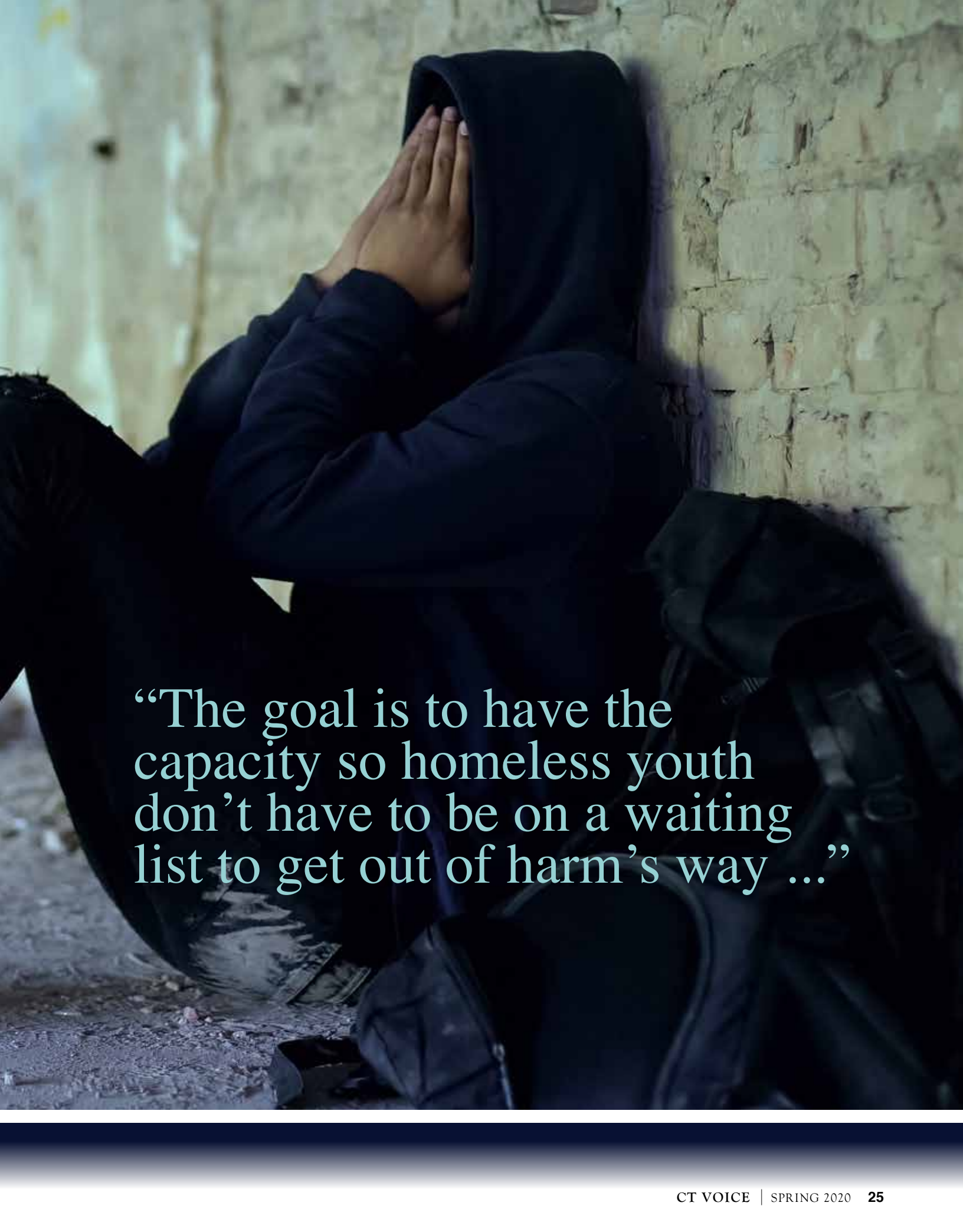
The Grand Avenue building is already home to New Haven's only drop-in center for young homeless adults (ages 16-24). Every year, nearly 200 new youth and young adults enter the center run by Youth Continuum, the most comprehensive service provider to homeless youth in the state.

There, homeless young people have – most important of all – a warm, safe place to spend the day. And while inside, they have access to basic needs like food, showers, laundry, computers, hygiene supplies, clothes and diapers. Case managers and mental health providers are always available, no appointment necessary. Youth learn life skills like how to budget and interview for a job. They get help finding jobs and permanent housing.

But the center is only open 9-5 weekdays, so at 5 p.m., out they go. And although Youth Continuum has 12 beds, they are in another location. And they are the only beds in the city reserved for young adults. And they are never enough.

This will change thanks to Youth Continuum's new program Y2Y New Haven, which stands for Youth-to-Youth, and renovations that will provide room for 24-hour services and crisis housing for 20 young adults.

"The goal is to have the capacity so homeless youth don't have to be on a waiting list to get out of harm's way," Youth Continuum CEO Paul Kosowsky told Connecticut VOICE in January, at which time there were eight people waiting.

A person wearing a dark, heavy hoodie is sitting on the ground, leaning against a rough, light-colored brick wall. Their hands are pressed against their face, covering their eyes and nose, suggesting a state of despair or distress. The lighting is dim, creating a somber and gritty atmosphere. The person's clothing is dark and appears worn.

“The goal is to have the capacity so homeless youth don’t have to be on a waiting list to get out of harm’s way ...”



Y2Y pilot program volunteers, all Yale students. In the front row are Sarah Jho, Obed Gyedu-Larbi, Ida Brooks, and Shannon Puah. In the back row are Adnan Askari, Justin Nguyen, Zodi Chalaf, and Esther Ritchin.

Construction is expected to begin this summer and finish within 12 months. The estimated \$4 million project is being funded primarily by \$3.25 million in state bonding, with Youth Continuum raising the rest.

New Haven's homeless youth are no different from elsewhere, say Youth Continuum's staff. They have been neglected, abused, trafficked for sex, or experienced horrors at the hands of adults. Odds are high (see sidebar, "Connecticut's Homeless Challenge") that they are LGBTQ.

New Haven's LGBTQ youth also become homeless for the same reason as elsewhere, says Youth Continuum Director of Community Programs Kathy Grega. "I can't think of one that hasn't been [the result of] family rejection," she says.

Complicating matters is that LGBTQ youth "are much more hesitant to access services. Their experiences are horrible, and they've earned the right to be cautious," says Grega.

If it weren't for Youth Continuum, most young adults wouldn't seek shelter at all, Kosowsky says. "There are adult housing (centers) but they don't want to go to them. A lot of kids had bad experiences with adults, so it takes a long time to gain their trust."

Kosowsky shrugs his shoulders and turns up his palms. "They're just normal kids. It doesn't take much for young people to get thrown over the edge and become homeless."

WHAT MAKES Y2Y DIFFERENT

The secret is in the title: youth-to-youth. Youth Continuum trains volunteer college students to collaborate with staff to provide programming specific to, and driven by input from, the youths they serve.

Y2Y New Haven is modeled on Y2Y Harvard Square, which opened in Cambridge, Mass. in 2015 and is the first student-run shelter for young adults in the nation.

Y2Y Harvard Square co-founder Sam Greenberg says, "About a third of our young people have identified as LGBTQ+. In all likelihood, more are LGBTQ+ but don't self-identify. We've worked really hard to make our space gender neutral. We've worked really hard to train our staff."

He says clients "report that Y2Y feels different because of the trusting and safe relationships they build with each other and with staff."

A noteworthy 81% of Y2Y Harvard Square's departing clients "tell us they're leaving Y2Y on what they feel confident is a pathway out of homelessness," says Greenberg.

Youth Continuum is aiming for that same success in New Haven.

Y2Y New Haven's mission is "to disrupt the cycle of homelessness for young people" via three steps: "sanctuary, pathways and advocacy."

"If you can't get them into housing, you can't help them," says Kosowsky of providing sanctuary.

"Pathways" refers to services provided to lead clients to stable housing.

Finally, Y2Y hopes former clients will become leaders in ending youth homelessness.

WHO'S VOLUNTEERING, AND WHO'S HELPING WHOM?

Youth Continuum started training Y2Y volunteers in 2017, so students have already been at work in the Grand Avenue day center.



Volunteer Esther Ritchin

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Connecticut's Homelessness Challenge: Young LGBTQ Adults

Youths without homes at higher risk for dire outcomes

BY JANE LATUS

Homeless young adults are exceptions to the Connecticut's otherwise declining rate of homelessness.

"The 18-to-24 range is where we really see an emerging population of homeless individuals. The problem is worsening," says John Lawlor, director of homeless youth/young adult programs for The Connection Inc. of Middletown.

This category is the only one to have increased each year. Advocates say that improved methods of locating these young adults don't account for the increase.

Overall, the number of homeless people identified in Connecticut's 2019 annual "Point-in-Time" count, conducted on a single night in January, was 32 percent lower than the first count in 2007, and the number of long-term homeless people was 75 percent lower than in 2014, according to the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.

But the news is not all good. The state's "Homeless 2019 CT Youth Count," conducted from January 23 to 29, 2019, identified 302 homeless and 428 unstably housed 18- to 24-year-olds. Among those aged 17 and younger, 35 youths were found to be homeless and 246 were unstably housed. The study extrapolated from these findings that 9,303 youths (ages 13 to 24) are homeless or unstably housed statewide.

Among those homeless youth, "it is usually between 25 and 30 percent of the whole count who are LGBTQ," says Lawlor.

Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness Youth Systems Coordinator Carl Asikainen says, "Of the 4,700-plus surveys we did during the count in 2019, we had 705 LGBTQ+ respondents, and of this group, 18.3 percent were unstably housed and 5.4 percent were literally homeless. This is a high rate of homelessness and it follows results from previous reports and nationwide trends."

Robin McHaelen, executive director of True Colors, calls queer 18- to 24-year-olds "one of the biggest issues" in homelessness statewide. There is no safety net for this age group, and once they become homeless, LGBTQ young adults are at a disproportionate risk for horrible outcomes compared with heterosexuals their age, she says.

"Kids aren't under bridges. They are couch surfing or getting nefarious adults to house and feed them in exchange for sex," she says.

A youth homelessness study by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall reported that "nationally, LGBTQ+ youth, including transgender youth, were found to have 120 percent increased risk for homelessness and housing instability."

Once homeless, the report found, "They are also at greater risk for experiencing high levels of hardship, including higher rates of assault, trauma, exchanging sex for basic needs, and early death. Black LGBTQ youth, especially young men, have the highest rates of homelessness."

Why is this happening? And what can be done?

Family rejection is by far the chief cause of homelessness in this group, studies and advocates say. It isn't always a case of outright eviction, says Lawlor, but often abuse and ridicule – such as throwing clothes away – that make a household too toxic for a young adult to handle.

The solution is to address the cause, says Lawlor. What is needed, he says, is "an enhancement of mediation services to go out to speak directly with the family. Even if initially there is a rejection within the family, eventually, a lot of them come around."

Meanwhile, more crisis beds are needed, as well as continuation of training like the kind True Colors does for shelter staff, to help make shelters safe and comfortable enough that a young trans person would choose to stay there.

The Reaching Home Campaign, a coalition working to end homelessness in Connecticut, has a Youth and Young Adult Homelessness Workgroup that is focusing on this unmet need. Lawlor, McHaelen, and representatives of multiple state and private agencies serve on the workgroup, which is chaired by attorney Stacey Violante Cote, director of operations for the Center for Children's Advocacy, and director of Right Direction: Homeless Youth Advocacy Project.

Other contributors to homelessness in this population are low income, high housing costs, incomplete education,

substance abuse, and other issues that also affect heterosexual youth but at lower rates. Young LGBTQ adults additionally face housing and employment discrimination.

Once 18 and homeless, the government-mandated safety net offered through the Department of Children and Families disappears. "It is really hard to get any benefits," says McHaelen.

Their options, says Lawlor, are to: look for help in their own personal network, including friends' parents, or go to a shelter or an outreach worker.

Even if they know to call 211 for help, anyone who is both homeless and LGBTQ is "much, much less likely to want to go to a shelter. Particularly, trans youth have a very understandable discomfort with going to a shelter," says Lawlor. He says there is no longer discrimination getting into a shelter in Connecticut, but he knows from trans clients' experiences that they are sometimes subjected to harassment once in.

All shelters in the state will technically accept young adults, but the likelihood of getting a bed is low if you are young and

healthy. Connecticut received a major assist in 2018 in the form of a \$6.5 million Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program federal grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that, among other things, funds beds designated for those aged 18 to 24. There are eight shelters with such beds, located in the state's seven biggest cities (two of them are in Hartford).

More beds are needed, at least 10 in Hartford alone, says Lawlor. The Connection calls its housing "unshelters" because they are actually apartments. "Our goal is for a young trans person to say, 'I'd take that bed.'"

Without such a safe space, the outlook is grim, says McHaelen. "Youth are pretty resilient and creative, but they also need more than the systems are able to provide. Over the last 10 years, most of the kids we tried to find spaces for, they just haven't done well. I know of, for sure, one who didn't make it to adulthood."

But with a home, Lawlor witnesses the best part of his job: "young people on the upswing." Having a safe home, he says, "that's 90 percent of the game. Then they can work on other issues, like family relations."



**If you or someone
you know is homeless
Call 211 or visit 211ct.org.**

Encourage family members to seek out
information and support from PFLAG
at pflag.org/find-a-chapter or from
True Colors at ourtruecolors.org

When the program is in full swing, Kosowsky expects to have 50 volunteers from New Haven’s several colleges.

Already, Youth Continuum’s staff sees the benefits of pairing youths with youths.

For one thing, young clients are more at ease with people their age. “Kids get a lot more out of a basic conversation over a deck of cards,” says Director of Housing Programs Tim Maguire.

Students are also a powerful complement to staff. “They bring enthusiasm, creativity, resources, motivation – clients see them in a different way than they do the professional staff,” says Kosowsky.

The program is also a two-way street. “Our kids see it as an opportunity to teach Yale kids what it’s like to grow up without any parents, or not the best parents,” says Grega. “There are a lot of honest conversations on the realities of city kids’ daily lives.”

“A kid at Yale and a kid with no home realize how easily they could be in each other’s positions. It’s a very powerful realization,” adds Kosowsky.

LESSONS IN BRAVERY

Esther Ritchin is a member of the Y2Y New Haven Steering Committee and a 2020 Yale graduate. “I’m queer and have a lot of friends who are queer. I saw first-hand and learned about the real epidemic of homelessness in queer communities. I have friends who were kicked out of their homes and struggled with housing and having a safe place to stay. I was all too cognizant of how lucky I was to be loved by my family,” she says.

She started volunteering with Y2Y in 2018. “It’s really wonderful to be able to bond with someone in your age group who might be able to understand some of the things you’re dealing with, even though you don’t have the same problems,” she says.

Ritchin wishes everyone would understand that people aren’t to blame for their homelessness. “There is no fundamental difference between people who have housing or don’t have it. It’s circumstance.”

She tells of one client whose family kicked her out because of her sexuality. “She was smarter, more confident and more competent than I am, and we became friends.”

Ritchin says it’s possible that volunteers benefit more from clients than vice versa. “I’ve learned so much about strength and perseverance and bravery.”

Ultimately, she says, one of the most worthwhile things about volunteering is when clients find housing. “It’s always really wonderful to hear about it,” she says – including the

details, like one man’s excitement over his dishwasher and under-cabinet lighting.

LIFE LESSONS, AND LIFE NECESSITIES

Of those who walk through the Grand Avenue center’s doors each year, “90 percent are constantly looking for shelter or stable housing,” says Grega.

One of the luckier kids, says Maguire, was a 21-year-old with a good income but living in his car. “He had a great job but needed to save money for a few months” to afford a security deposit.

Another young man moved to New Haven from Puerto Rico and needed help getting a birth certificate and other documents. “He’s employed off and on. We are still housing him,” says Maguire.

Even after finding good jobs, many can’t find housing without help, says Grega. “Landlords otherwise wouldn’t return a call from an 18-year-old. They can’t get a lease without being hooked up with a program like ours.”

“Many have dropped out of school, or a combination of lack of education and job experience makes long-term success not great,” says Kosowsky. “We teach budgeting, cooking, how to be a good neighbor, how to interview. They may have never seen a parent pay a bill. They have no concept what it means.”


Intervene now, and you can prevent generations of shelter families, he says.

PART OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

“Initially, we had a fairly small but significant group of people who were opposed,” says Kosowsky of the zoning approval process. “Some people were thinking this would be an adult shelter, and there’d be lines out the door.”

But, he adds, “These kids are with us every day already. This is a continuation of what we’re already doing.” The only change will be that as many as 20 youths will be off the street overnight.

Youth Continuum spent a year meeting with local property owners, city officials and residents to garner support for the project, resulting in 120 letters and 180 petition signatures of support to the City Plan Commission. “That level of support really overwhelmed all of us,” says Kosowsky.

Youth Continuum has more plans for Y2Y, including collaborating with specialty fields of study at local colleges such as law schools, and engaging with the neighborhood by opening a youth-run storefront. 



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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In Vogue

New Haven choreographer embraces true self through dance

By QUINN ROBERTS

When you think of vogue and ballroom culture, you may think of fame and fortune – RuPaul, Beyoncé, Madonna, all these glamorous, wealthy

Hollywood stars. You might be vaguely aware of vogue’s origins in queer, black communities, and you might want to try it out for yourself, but you look on TV and shake your head. How could you ever dream of looking so fierce?

Anthony Duff Jr. is here to change the narrative surrounding vogue and ballroom dance. The New Haven-based instructor hosts workshops across Connecticut, including at the New Haven Pride Center. His hope, he says, is to create a space where vogue can be separated from profit-driven exploitation and misrepresentation, and where queer people of all backgrounds and identities can build self-love and shared community values.

Here, Duff shares offers a glimpse into his passion and inspirations.

Q: What is your history with vogue/ballroom culture? What is it about vogue that you love so much?

A: My personal history with ballroom culture started when I saw the movie “Paris is Burning” [the 1990 documentary that chronicled New York City’s drag scene during the 1980s]. Like many people who grew up with no representation for black and brown queer and trans people, that’s where much of it starts. For ballroom to be presented to me through such a powerful film, I was immediately enthralled to see a space that is specifically designed for us.

From that movie, I grew a love and passion for vogue.

I love seeing people expressing their unadulterated selves and being confident. It was a feeling that I had been deprived of growing up. To learn to vogue was a huge stepping-stone to fully embracing who I am as a person. And I felt that among other categories and art forms from ballroom, vogue stuck with me because it’s a sensation that lingers in the muscles. Many people with an affinity for dance will say that the muscles don’t forget it. The same way you remember how to drive, that’s the way I feel when I vogue. What I love most about vogue fem is that the elements give you structure, so no matter what, you look good, but I also find that the moves are soothing for the body. It simply feels good to vogue. It can be graceful, it can be passionate, it can be exaggerated but also minimal.

Ballroom culture is so intricate. It was underground for decades but the fact that it is becoming more popular had nothing to do with my interest; it was the feeling of family that it gave me. Many times in my life I’ve hidden certain parts of myself from my family, but ballroom allowed me to recognize those parts as aspects of me as a whole.

Q: Queer communities of color have historically attached a social objective to vogue. For many queer youths, the houses were not just figurative shelters, they were literal shelters too. Do you have a social/political objective to your voguing practice?

A: There are plenty of social issues that affect black people, both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, regarding





Vogue is an instrument for addressing social issues, but in a more personal way, according to dance instructor Anthony Duff, Jr.

access to employment, access to education, access to basic resources. That was what I wanted to combat prior to becoming familiar with the ballroom community. Now, I view vogue as an instrument for addressing the social issues, but in a more personal way. People think activism is just marching, picket lines, shouting, screaming, and chanting. While that exists, there is also a more individual and artistic activism that is less visible.

Vogue is a type of activism that involves embracing who you are and foregrounding your marginalized identity. It is definitely political, because we are implicitly told on a day-to-day basis that we are “less than.” We are “second-class citizens” in the eyes of those who hold power. I am fighting that by actively deciding to love myself. A major part of that is presenting myself as a man who can be flamboyant. Black men are allowed to be flamboyant when it’s funny, but I also embody this when it’s not funny. I cannot change something that is so innate. By giving visibility to ballroom, I am in a small way connecting people to an LGBTQ-affirming space.

Q: Where do you seek inspiration for your choreography and lessons? How do you stay motivated and inspired as an artist?

A: I watch hundreds if not thousands of vogue performances regularly, both old and more recent, on social media and the Internet, but most importantly by going to the balls. Much of my inspiration does not solely come from watching others vogue, although most of it does. When I see dramatic expressions of emotions, that can be translated into vogue. At a cultural level, we use gestures but only after we give meaning to them. When the City Girls say “period” and swipe their hands across their collarbones, we know what that means because we implicitly know what “period” means. So, if you take a gesture and perform it in a way that fits into the conventions of vogue, then it’s a move.

Most of the time, I don’t need motivation because I can’t go without vogue, just as I cannot go without drinking water. But eventually I reach a point where I don’t have the urge to get up and move, and in those times I get external motivation from seeing people vogue well. From



Dance instructor Anthony Duff Jr. says he loves seeing students “expressing their unadulterated selves and being confident.”

my perspective, you can tell that vogue is being executed properly when it raises your blood pressure and makes you want to get up out of your seat. In addition, when I see someone present something that looks unique, I say, “Sheesh, look at the creativity and artistry. How am I contributing to the culture?”

Q: How would you describe your teaching style?


A: My teaching style comes from performing on a step team and having to explain different moves to the other team members. I also have experience in a traditional classroom and draw from the times that I have seen Leiomy Maldonado teach vogue. No one can deny that Maldonado is a great teacher. [Maldonado teaches at the Broadway Dance Center in New York and travels the world teaching vogue workshops and

performing.]

My style of teaching involves little affirmations when people correctly pick up on what I’m doing. I want to be like a friend showing you the ropes, but also convey credibility in my execution. But if I keep explaining this, then I’ll be giving away all my secrets.

Q: What would you say to people who want to take your classes but are afraid they can’t bring it to the center?

A: First and foremost, when I started vogue I was on YouTube watching videos, and trying to copy the moves, without mirrors and without feedback. I looked a hot mess, and sometimes hot messes look cute. But it is important to take it upon yourself to start. Understand that no matter your situation, if you have a body that moves, you have what it takes to learn.

You don’t need structured training to learn to vogue. You might find that you are more comfortable imitating and practicing what you see from the confines of your home. You might also find that after practicing at home it’s time to get taught in a structured, public setting. There are multiple ways to get to the point you want to reach, and they are all valid – as long as you’re true to yourself and having a good time. 

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SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

Middlesex Health helps transgender patients build a voice to match their identity

By CAROL LATTER / Photography by CT HEADSHOTS

For transgender patients, transitioning is often a journey fraught with numerous challenges. For each individual, the hurdles may include any or all of the following – coming out to family, friends and coworkers, finding skilled medical guidance and support, assessing insurance coverage, managing hormonal treatments, undergoing surgery, obtaining new identity documents, and changing their outward physical appearance and wardrobe to better match their gender identity.

Yet even after all of this, for many people, another issue remains: having the voice and mannerisms that match the male or female they know themselves to be.

“Sometimes, transgender people are outed because of their voice, or they won’t speak because their voice is not as feminine [or masculine] as they would like. That’s an unfortunate situation,” says Rebecca Burrell, MS, CCC-SLP. Burrell is inpatient therapy manager at Middlesex Health, where speech therapy to help transgender patients change their voice and mannerisms to become consistent with their gender identity has been offered since May 2018.

She says in addition to personal preference, having a voice that matches their appearance can be a safety issue for a patient, especially given the ongoing spate of violent attacks on transgender individuals seen across the country.

Burrell says while testosterone therapy usually lowers the voice of a person transitioning from female to male to a range that is typical for a man, not all female-to-male transgender patients choose to undergo hormonal therapy – either because they hope to have children in the future, or for other reasons.

Also, explains Burrell, unlike testosterone, estrogen does not affect voice pitch or tone in male-to-female transgender patients, which can tempt them to consider vocal surgery.

Burrell doesn’t recommend that, and she says most of her patients are not pursuing this type of surgery, for a number of reasons. First, there are not many physicians in the United States who perform surgery to alter the vocal tract to increase the pitch of the patient’s voice. And those who do are usually reluctant to perform voice surgery until all other surgeries associated with transition have already taken place, since the intubation required for the other procedures can ruin the results of the voice surgery.

Even more importantly, she says, “Voice surgery has not been

perfected and the outcomes are not great at this point.” While there have been some successes, “I don’t think that it’s a good enough surgery yet. I don’t bring up surgery unless they [patients] do because at the moment, I don’t have anyone that I would recommend.”

AN EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE

The good news is that Burrell and her fellow speech therapist at Middlesex Health, Meghan Wright, MS, CCC-SLP, are now offering speech therapy that can help patients change not only their mannerisms and the way they speak but their actual voices. Burrell and Wright treat both male-to-female and female-to-male transgender patients and non-binary patients.

The therapy begins with an evaluation and 12 one-hour follow-up sessions. “I teach them about pitch and resonance,” Burrell says.

The pitch of someone’s voice – whether it’s a deep, more masculine voice or a higher, more feminine voice – depends on the vibration of the vocal folds, also known as vocal cords. The larger a person’s larynx is, the longer and thicker their vocal folds are, the lower the number of vibrations per second, and the lower the pitch of their voice. Women tend to have shorter, thinner vocal folds, more vibrations per second, and a higher voice. Typical male voices range in pitch from 85 to 180 hertz while female voices are usually 165 to 255 hertz.

“Some of my patients have done some research, so they’ll say, ‘I have to have 180 Hertz or higher to be in that female range.’ And while it’s been scientifically kind of shown that a trans female is often in the 150 to 180 range, if she has all the other things going for her – the resonance, the nonverbals – then that can make her voice sound just as feminine as someone who is a true 180.”

Overall, she says, “I look at voice as a package. It’s not just pitch. Resonance and intonation are also important.”

And what does she mean by resonance? Simply put, the sound created by a person’s vocal cords is changed and amplified by their throat, mouth cavity, and nasal passages, creating their recognizable voice. “Females tend to speak more from the front of their face,” Burrell says, “whereas males are more chesty and more in their throat” when they speak.

For male-to-female transgender patients, she says, “we teach them the processes that bring the resonance forward for them.” For female-to-male patients, “we work with them to promote more chest resonance.”



Rebecca Burrell, MS, CCC-SLP, not only provides voice therapy to transgender patients but manages the inpatient-physical therapists and assistants, occupational therapists, speech therapists and assistants, speech-language pathologists, and the behavioral health occupational therapy department at Middlesex Health. She and Meghan Wright, MS, CCC-SLP are helping to change patients' lives for the better.

When it comes to intonation, “females have an upward trend to their voices; sometimes we sound like we’re asking questions, whereas the male voice is more direct. And males use less colorful language – fewer adjectives and less descriptive terms. A male might describe something as red, whereas a female might call it magenta.”

Burrell and Wright also teach general mannerisms, including hand gestures and the way people sit. “Occasionally, we get to singing and yelling, but that doesn’t mean that every patient is interested in those things.”

Each course of treatment is tailored to each individual patient and their needs – how their voice and mannerisms are currently, their preferences for what they want their voice to sound like, and even what kind of work they do. For instance, college professors and customer service representatives may use their voices a lot, whereas other patients don’t talk much in their day-to-day lives. “Those are the more challenging ones,” says Burrell. “They don’t have as many opportunities to use what you’ve taught them.”

Key to a successful voice transition is a commitment by the patient to do the exercises taught by Burrell and Wright. Patients learn to do certain voice exercises during their appointments and are then asked to practice them at home.

“And I always have them do some sort of integration exercise, like call somewhere and ask for something. A lot of my [male-to-female] patients get ‘sirred’ a lot. People call them ‘sir,’ especially on the phone. They’ll come back and tell me, ‘I got [called ma’am] for the first time.’ It’s a really great moment for them. And this usually happens anywhere between sessions six and nine. I always think that that’s a huge victory for them. And for me, I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, I hate it when people call me that. Don’t call me ma’am!’” she says, laughing.

A LIFE-CHANGING TREATMENT

Burrell, a trained speech-language pathologist, became involved in transgender care a few years ago, when a colleague at Middlesex Health, who also sat on the hospital’s transgender committee, raised the need for transgender voice therapy. Burrell joined the committee and was tasked with building the program.

She notes that voice therapy for transgender patients has transitioned from a rather rare situation to something that is becoming much more common. “When I was in grad school, it was kind of a boutique thing,” Burrell says. Although health insurance companies in some states consider it “cosmetic” and won’t cover the cost, that’s not the case in Connecticut.

Now, she is eager to spread the word. “I’d like for patients to know that when they’ve gone through their physical transformation, there’s something that can be done when it comes to their voice,” she says.

For many patients, voice therapy is truly a life-changing treatment, raising patients’ self-esteem, allowing them to “fit in” in social situations, and making them feel accepted and safe. All of this makes Burrell’s job tremendously rewarding.

“I actually recently had an experience where I was giving a presentation at a program that we held for transgender people [and supporters] here at Middlesex Health. I was waiting to present and one of our psychiatrists, Dr. Shelton, came up to me and said he had referred a patient to me,” she recalls.

“I had been seeing her since July and she had just finished with me. We went through the 12 sessions and she did amazing – her pitch, her mannerisms. I mean, you would not even know that any masculinity was left in her voice. She was an optimal patient. She went home and practiced every night for an hour. Dr. Shelton told me he had seen the patient the other day and it was amazing how much her confidence level, the way she carries herself, and how happy she is with herself had all improved now, with her voice change.”

Needless to say, Burrell was thrilled.

“That just really touched me, that he as a physician had noticed the positive changes in this particular patient. When I first met her, she barely talked. She was reluctant to talk on the phone; she would text all the time. She was reluctant to even talk to people in her circle: her mom, her grandmother. And now she’s out there, and she wants to tell her story. Whereas I think before she wasn’t able to tell her story because her voice wasn’t there. She didn’t feel comfortable. She didn’t feel confident. So, I think that the voice can be incredibly important.”


For loved ones, a change in voice – especially a significant one – can be something that takes a little getting used to. Some patients have shared that their parents were having a difficult time adjusting to the change. For others, it’s the delay in voice transition that’s causing a problem. One patient brought their spouse into therapy, “and I think it was emotional for them” because the patient’s voice did not match her appearance and she didn’t want to use her voice as much around her spouse.

Burrell says that while her best outcomes have been among people in their 20s, success can come at any age. Her patients range from teenagers to people in their 60s. Most are between the ages of 20 and 40.

Another of her success stories involves an “extremely dedicated” teenaged musician. “I think having a musical background is helpful in this case, because a lot of what I do is self-reflection on their voice. We’ll record [voices] and I’ll say, ‘Which one do you like better? A, B, or C? Why do you like that one better, and what can we do to get you closer to that?’”

For someone who initially wanted to be an attorney specializing in elder law – and found speech pathology through a somewhat serendipitous route when a professor introduced her to the field – she is enjoying her career immensely.

She’s also grateful for the close-knit team of healthcare professionals at Middlesex Health who work together to ensure that transgender patients – and all LGBTQ patients – receive the highest level of care and attention possible.

The job is not without its challenges. She has had cases where patients find they can’t commit to regular practice of the voice-altering exercises, or have unrealistic expectations, wanting a voice that they aren’t able to achieve. So, what to do? In the first instance, she may need to give the patient space, and allow them to take the required steps when they’re ready. In the second, “I have them bring in clips of people that they like. And through our process, we find the voice that is achievable. I would say that in the end, it’s about finding your ideal voice.” 

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Making Beautiful Music Together

“The Singing Chef” and his husband are living their dreams

By **MAKAYLA SILVA**

Photography by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

Achieving culinary prowess is a labor of love requiring both talent and devotion. Perhaps the same can be said of show business. Dedication and passion are usually the ingredients for success, whether you dream of becoming a singer, dancer, or actor.

So, is it possible to attain mastery as both a chef and an entertainer? Neil Fuentes might say yes.

A Venezuela-born chef, Fuentes has worked in Connecticut kitchens for the last two decades, including at Southport Brewing Company (SBC) and as executive chef and partner at Branford’s Venezuelan restaurant Jojoto.

Widely known by his adopted moniker, “The Singing Chef,” he makes regular appearances on WTNH News 8 and on national cable programs like the Food Channel’s “Hot Spots” and the Food Network’s popular cooking competition “Chopped.”

Fuentes also is a formidable showman, and since 2012 has run the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts along with his husband, Billy DiCrosta, also a singer.

Raised on a 17-acre farm in Venezuela as the youngest of five brothers, Fuentes started his





Neil Fuentes (seated/right) and his husband, Billy DiCrosta, make beautiful music together - in life, and in their work as leaders of the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts. Fuentes is widely known by his nickname, "The Signing Chef" and regularly appears on local and national cooking programs.

culinary journey at a young age. When his older siblings went off to high school and college, he was the only one left to help his mother.

He came to Connecticut in 1995 after traveling the world as a flight attendant for three years and began working in the restaurant industry to make money, tabling his passion for show business temporarily.

"My first love is the performing arts. Cooking, for me, was a way of survival in this country. It was a way to form myself as an individual in the American society. It was a way to get to know the culture of the United States, but it was never what I always wanted to do," Fuentes says.

Completely self-taught, working his way up the ladder within the local SBC Brewery & Restaurant chain in his 12-year tenure there, Fuentes eventually became the director of catering and training for all of the restaurants.

Then, while singing at an SBC karaoke night in 2009, he was approached by WTNH News 8 to appear on its midday lifestyle show "Connecticut Style." For his first segment, he recalls, Fuentes went in dressed like Ricky Ricardo, "with the ruffles and everything," singing an improvised song to the tune of "Cuban Pete" by Desi Arnaz. And voila – The Singing Chef was born.

Unlike plenty of esteemed chefs, Fuentes has always been a natural in front of the camera, with numerous YouTube shorts online. Whatever "it" is, he's certainly got it. He appeared on "Connecticut Style" 112 times in five years and his local TV appearances led to national exposure.

From there, Fuentes was cast as a brand ambassador for Sabra in 2013, appearing in six commercials with Food Network chefs Maneet Chauhan and Chris Cheung, where he cooked recipes using assorted Sabra hummus flavors and salsas.

"The casting director for that particular show is the same casting director for Chopped. So I was cast on Chopped. And I was chopped," Fuentes says.

Fuentes later went on to host episodes of Food Channel's "Hot Spots," which spotlighted New Haven's Rubamba, Cromwell's Chicago Sam's and the Redding Roadhouse.

From there, he was invited to compete on Food Network's "Rewrapped," a competition show where chefs innovate

with respect to America's most beloved snacks. Chefs are asked to recreate the original food item from scratch, and then they're tasked with using that snack food in an original dish.

Fuentes and his competitors were asked to recreate Swiss Miss Triple Chocolate Dream pudding and use it in a dish.

"I made a turkey sandwich. With chocolate pudding," Fuentes says.

And he won.

Having been a three-time celebrity chef at the Greenwich Wine + Food Festival and as his popularity as The Singing Chef continues to grow, Fuentes says he's happiest doing exactly what he's doing now: teaching voice and performing.

"When I was a child, the only thing I wanted to do when I grew up was put on shows," he says.

Since 2013, Fuentes and DiCrosta have helped thousands of students launch and develop their performing arts journey at the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts.

"At New Haven Academy of Performing Arts, we don't do recitals, we don't do competitions, we do productions," Fuentes says.

DiCrosta, an international coach and vocal artist, has been performing professionally for roughly three decades. The youngest of an Italian family of six, DiCrosta started singing at age seven and fell in love with being a stage performer. He studied acting and vocal performance at Western Connecticut State University and, subsequently, musical theater at The Hartt School.

He has made his living as a performer, working in New York, on Oceanic and Celebrity cruise ships, and doing musical theater, concerts, and more. Most notably, DiCrosta has landed roles as Tony in "West Side Story" and Mike in "A Chorus Line," and performed for the Clinton family at The White House in 1997.

Says Fuentes: "While I was appearing as The Singing Chef, my husband was traveling the world, singing on cruise ships. And after six years, I told him he needed to come home and be with his husband."

Before founding the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts, DiCrosta worked with a handful of students, teaching voice out of the front porch of his home, through the Billy DiCrosta



Fuentes and DiCrosta have been married since 2007, having met online three years earlier.


music lessons, and acting classes to 250 students each week from around the world.

“Everyone teaches voice in a specific genre, whether pop, rock, soul. We teach the individual from the science perspective how to use the vocal apparatus, regardless of whether you’re a man or woman,” Fuentes says.

Or, if you’re transgender.

“When you have a boy who wants to sound like a girl, or vice versa, you have to work with transgender people to help them find their voice when it comes to singing,” Fuentes says.

Fuentes met DiCrosta in 2004 on gay.com. They married in East Haven in 2007.

“All of my life, I have been extremely open with my sexuality. Because I came from a country where I couldn’t. Being gay was not an option. When I got here, I said, ‘I’m going to be who I am and that’s the end of it,’” Fuentes says. “I believe that by being true to ourselves, Billy and I are more successful in every way, shape and form. We have a lot of LGBTQ students who want to come here and see us as a power couple to look up to, that they can do it too.” 

Vocal Studio. When the opportunity arose to share a studio space with Broadway Dance, owned by longtime friend Gina Helland, DiCrosta moved into her East Haven studio.

DiCrosta is accredited by the International Voice Teachers of Mix, and is an area administrator for that organization, helping educate new teachers. His students travel from all over to study his technique, and those who can’t travel take lessons via Skype or FaceTime.

For Fuentes, one of the most rewarding aspects of his role as an instructor is working with many children who have special needs. Two years ago, Fuentes was asked to join Vista Life Innovations, an organization preparing individuals with special needs with life skills, in the group’s production of “The Addams Family.”

“It was so amazing. I have never experienced someone who tells you every single day how grateful they are to have you. They are so genuine. I began teaching voice lessons for them and will be directing their next performance, ‘All Shook Up,’ in the spring,” Fuentes says.

In the last six years, Fuentes and DiCrosta have taught music, theater and dance through summer camps, private vocal and



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



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INTERVIEW //



The cast of "The Inheritance" at The Rum House. Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for **MurphyMade**, 2020



Matthew Lopez's “The Inheritance” ‘queers up’ “Howards End” and reveals a gay legacy

By FRANK RIZZO

“**T**he play and the project began very humbly,” says Matthew Lopez from his Brooklyn loft, munching lunch and looking back at his now-not-so-humble play’s early development.

He’s talking about “The Inheritance,” the two-part, nearly seven-hour work, which was a sensation in London and is a major event of the current Broadway season, sure to earn an armful of awards and prizes this spring.

Setting the Stage

Though it ends its run March 15 due to ticket sales, it remains a theatrical piece that is audacious, ambitious, theatrically thrilling, and deeply emotional – the end of Part One leaves many in the audience sobbing. The work touches on themes as sweeping as what it means to be a gay man through several generations, and as intimate as asking, “How do you discover your authentic self?”

When Lopez was selected eight years ago to be the next Aetna New Voices Fellow at Hartford Stage, which included commissioning and development of a new work, he pitched to artistic director Darko Tresnjak and associate artistic director Elizabeth Williamson an unusual idea for a play.

“Matthew said he was always obsessed with E.M. Forster’s ‘Howards End,’” says Williamson, “but it wasn’t until he was in his late 20s that he realized Forster was a closeted gay man. He said he had an idea for some time to go back and really ‘queer up’ the book, setting it in New York now and involving three generations of gay men.”

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Arturo Luis Soria, who plays Young Man 8/Jason #2/Clinic Worker.
Photo by **Allegra Anderson**



Dylan Frederick, who plays Young Man 4/ Young Walter/Tucker. Photo by Allegra Anderson



“The Inheritance,
is just one story. It’s
just my story.” – Matthew Lopez



Arturo Luis Soria, Andrew Burnap and Dylan Frederick are all graduates of the Yale School of Drama. Photo by **Allegra Anderson**



Andrew Burnap
who plays one of
the leading roles
of Toby Darling.
Photo by **Allegra
Anderson**



The Broadway poster for "The Inheritance"

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45

The 1910 novel dealt with class and social differences in turn-of-the-last-century Edwardian England. Lopez wanted to see it through a gay spectrum of Manhattan men he had known a century later. But where to begin?

In June of 2013, Williamson helped organize a forum of Hartford-area gay men of different generations so the playwright could tap into their personal experiences about coming out, the gay rights movement, and the impact of AIDS on their lives.

"I had no intention at first of speaking for a generation or writing a grand statement," says Lopez. "Honestly, it was as simple as taking my favorite novel and re-examining it – and it grew from there. As it turned out, I had a lot on my mind."

Lopez began working on "The Inheritance" in earnest during the 2013-14 season, when his play "Somewhere" was presented at the theater. But by the time his play "Reverberation" premiered at Hartford Stage in 2015, "The Inheritance" had become the beginnings of a two-part play.



Playwright Matthew Lopez



The cast members are (mostly) barefoot in the production for practical as well as symbolic reasons throughout the play. The three Yale grads were also barefoot for the *VOICE* cover photo shoot. Photo by **Frank Rizzo**

“It grew to fit the dimensions that it clearly wanted to fit,” says Lopez.

Forster himself became a character – a kindly counsellor of sorts, guiding a group of urbane gay young men who are struggling to tell their own stories, and of one young man in particular and his journey that in a meta-moment resonates with Lopez and the play itself.

Hartford Stage also produced “a cold reading” of Part One in New York in June 2015, which featured Michael Urie, Simon Callow and Jonathan Groff.

Hartford Stage also produced another New York workshop during the summer of 2016 of Part One and a reading of Part Two. It was then that Stephen Daldry (“Billy Elliot,” “The Audience,” Netflix’s “The Crown”) became involved in the project, after Lopez’s agent Olivier Sultan sent the high-profile director the script.

With Daldry on board and now collaborating with Lopez, the play was scooped up and taken to London’s Young Vic Theatre. In March of 2018, the production of the two-part “The Inheritance” had its world premiere, featuring designs by Bob Crowley and a cast that included recent Yale School of Drama grad Andrew Burnap who plays the dazzling, impetuous, and tormented Toby Darling, and Vanessa Redgrave in the only female role in the play, giving the work its concluding state of grace.

With raves from the critics, the show made a beeline for the West End, where it won four Olivier Awards, including best new play, director and actor (Kyle Soller, who plays the moral center of the work, Eric).

It was only a matter of time before Lopez would have his first Broadway production. (Burnap and two other recent grads from the Yale School of Drama, Arturo Luis Soria and Dylan Frederick, are featured in New York.)

ALWAYS THE OUTSIDER

Lopez, 42, the son of a Puerto Rican father and a Polish-Russian mother, both teachers, and grew up Episcopalian and gay in Panama City, Fla. on the Florida Panhandle, the older of two brothers.

He was hooked on theater as a kid, inspired by his aunt, actress Priscilla Lopez, who originated the role of Diana Morales (singing “Nothing”) in the 1975 production of “A Chorus Line” and who won a Tony Award for starring in “A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine.” As a nearly four-year-old boy, Lopez visited his aunt backstage and a photograph of that day shows a wide-eyed kid, clearly smitten.

In an interview several years ago for *The Hartford*

Courant, Lopez told me that the course of his life was set then and there: “From that day forward, there was nothing else I wanted to do but work in the theater. Look at that picture. I’m like the junkie with his first fix.”

But when he told his aunt he wanted to be an actor, she gave some prophetic advice: “Be a writer instead.”

Still, Lopez pursued acting when he went to the University of South Florida. After college, Lopez arrived in New York in 2000, uncertain about his acting fate and where he could find a place in the theater.

Or in the world, for that matter.

Lopez had always felt like the outsider. As a teenager he resisted being gay, having been frequently bullied. It was hard enough being the only Puerto Rican family in town, he said. When he did finally come out when he was 21 in the late ‘90s, it was bundled with the fear of AIDS that was drummed into his head throughout his teens.

But in the first decade of the 21st century, with new treatments being discovered, the epidemic

receded from the news.

Arriving in Manhattan at the start of the millennium, Lopez struggled as an actor to get any traction in the theater in which he so desperately wanted to play a part. He was at a loss.

In 2002, he sent scores of letters to leading figures whose names and addresses he found in the Theatrical Index, an industry listing periodical. His letter read: “I am Matthew Lopez and I want to work in the theater. I don’t know at what capacity but if you have a job that needs doing, I will do it.”



The cast of “The Inheritance.” Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for **MurphyMade**, 2020.



The cast of "The Inheritance." Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for MurphyMade, 2020



Andrew Burnap and Kyle Soller. Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for MurphyMade, 2020



The cast of "The Inheritance." Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for MurphyMade, 2020



The cast of "The Inheritance." Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for MurphyMade, 2020

He only received one response – from Harold Prince, the most award-winning producer and director in Broadway history.

In 2002, Prince invited Lopez to his Rockefeller Plaza office. Lopez had already begun writing short plays in college and continued to do so after graduation, and he asked Prince if he should go to grad school to study the craft, feeling intimidated by young writers with loftier pedigrees. “He said the best way to do anything in this business is to just do it,” Lopez recalls.

Prince put Lopez in contact with playwright Terrence McNally, who took Lopez on as an assistant for a new musical. In return for the help – “which he really didn’t need” – McNally agreed to read Lopez’s work. “I gave him something that was dreadful, but he was encouraging and pointed out where there were strengths and weaknesses. He recognized things that even I didn’t see at the time.

“Writing was something I always did for myself, but I wasn’t sure to what end. Writing was something that other people did, special people, anointed people. I just didn’t feel I had permission. But all I needed at that time was encouragement. What Hal Prince and Terrence McNally did was not so little – something like that can literally change a person’s life.”

He wrote the Civil War drama “The Whipping Man,” which premiered in 2006 but didn’t have an off-Broadway run until 2011. “Somewhere” followed and was the only produced play of his that tapped into his Latinx heritage. “Reverberation” premiered at Hartford Stage but has not yet received another major production. But Lopez made a mark with the 2015 off-Broadway hit “The Legend of Georgia McBride,” a comedy about a straight man performing drag in a Florida Panhandle nightclub (which TheaterWorks Hartford produced in 2018).

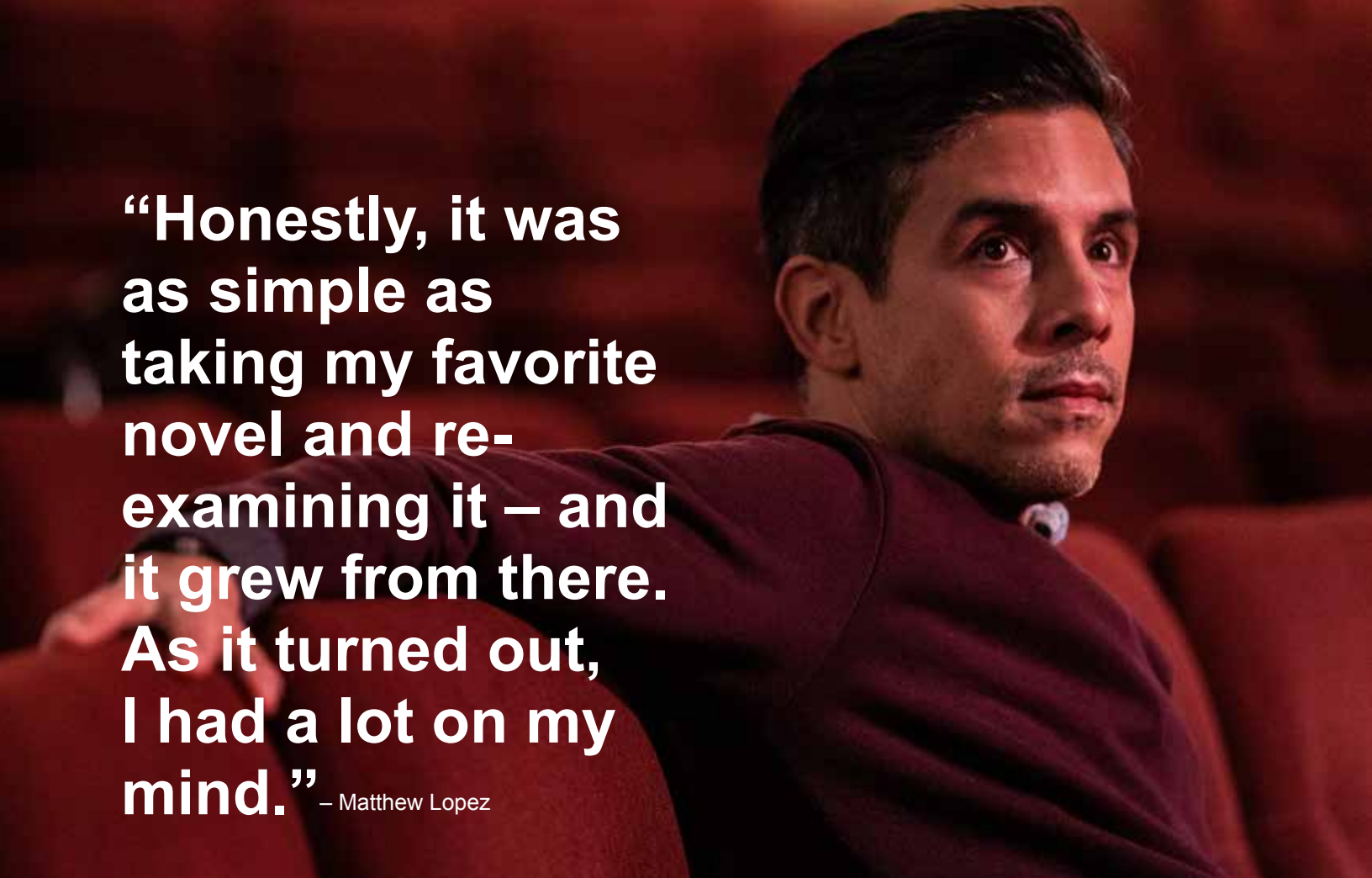
HIS AUTHENTIC SELF

For “The Inheritance,” Lopez wrote a play that was more deep and personal than any he had ever written. In dealing with Toby, a vainglorious and aspiring writer, Lopez was revealing a lot about himself, including issues of alcoholism, sex, and narcissism.

As a gay out man in his 20s in Manhattan, Lopez indulged in clubbing, heavy drinking, and careless sex which masked his personal struggle of loneliness, not feeling worthy, not fitting in.

“I was very aware that I was putting a lot of my own history into Toby, but it was also me trying to put myself into ‘Howards End,’” says Lopez, “and nine years sober.” He told a cast member that “Toby was who he was, and Eric is who he aspires to be.”

Years ago, Lopez told me that he wrote his share of semi-autobiographical works when he started out and didn’t have any interest in doing that any longer. “Oh, I have a drawer full of plays about breakups, lonely gay boys, and love affairs,” says Lopez. “There’s a lot of me in my early plays but no one wants to see my life depicted on stage. I’m bored by my life.”



“Honestly, it was as simple as taking my favorite novel and re-examining it – and it grew from there. As it turned out, I had a lot on my mind.” – Matthew Lopez

Playwright Matthew Lopez wrote “The Inheritance” during his time at Hartford Stage, which commissioned and developed the epic work. The theater also produced his plays “The Whipping Man,” “Somewhere” and the world premiere of “Reverberation.” Photo by **Matthew Murphy**

But that all changed when he started writing “The Inheritance,” and – like Toby and E.M. Forster, too – he is reaching for his authentic self.

“If there’s anything I learned from sobriety – and I’ve learned a lot – it’s impossible to recognize the patterns of your life while you’re in the midst of it and it’s only when you come to the end of a cycle can you look back and see how long the cycle was and how it was constituted. It’s very clear to me now that this is the culmination of a 20-year cycle that started Jan. 5, 2000 when I first moved to New York, to Nov. 17, 2019 when we opened on Broadway.”

I asked him if he felt things had come full circle since his arrival in Manhattan and that meeting with Prince, who died last summer at 91 and knowing of Lopez’ success. Forster’s words from “Howards End” echoed: “Only connect.”

Terrence McNally’s husband, Tom Kirdahy, became lead producer for “The Inheritance.” Connections continue. Lopez’s play could also be seen as a younger generation talking to “Love! Valour! Compassion!” –

McNally’s Tony Award-winning play, staged a quarter-century earlier.

In Rebecca Mead’s story on Lopez in *The New Yorker*, McNally said of “The Inheritance:” “As an 80-year-old survivor, observer, and participant of the many years covered in the play, it was as if someone were telling the story for the first time – so hot are its passions – and for the last time, with the compassion and wisdom we seek from our artists.”

I asked Lopez if he could have written “The Inheritance” when he was younger.

“It all seems that everything led up to it, that everything that preceded it was informing it. But at 23, you don’t think that way. You want everything right now. You’re impatient and I certainly was, and I got in a lot of trouble because of impatience,” he says. “I honestly think that if you told me at 23 that in 20 years I would have a show on Broadway, I would have probably said, ‘Why do I have to wait so long?’ But I couldn’t have written it at 23. I didn’t know enough about myself. For me, it took 20 years to get there. I wouldn’t do anything differently.”



The cast of "The Inheritance." Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for MurphyMade, 2020


And since the Broadway opening?

Crazy busy, he says, with not that much time spent at the Fort Greene loft he shares with his husband, Brandon Clarke, a private-school administrator. (They met in 2004 and married in 2015.)

Lopez is now tackling a multitude of projects, including a new script for a musical based on the film "Some Like It Hot." (Not to be confused with an earlier musical version in the '70s.) He also says there's interest in taking his play "Somewhere" and turning it into a television series. Work on the film version of his popular off-Broadway comedy "The Ballad of Georgia McBride" continues. There are several other film projects, too.

No, he hasn't heard from television producer Ryan Murphy about turning "The Inheritance" into a Netflix project but if he does, Lopez jokes – kind of – there are a few scenes that he cut from the stage version that he'd be interested in putting back.

Finally, when I ask him to reflect on what impact "The Inheritance" has had on him as well as others, his tone shifts to a voice that is not unlike that of the play's Eric, Lopez's aspirational self.

"After asking an audience to sit there and listen to my play for seven hours, I realized very early on at the Young Vic that my role after the play is over is to then listen to other people, and they are so willing to tell their stories. 'The Inheritance' is just one story. It's just my story. It isn't meant to be definitive. It would be very depressing to think this was the only story. What's been so gratifying is that others have wanted to tell their stories as a result, and I think that's about as close to a mark of success as you could ever hope to find." 



Tony Goldwyn and Paul Hilton. Photo by **Matthew Murphy** for MurphyMade, 2020

THE YALE MEN OF “THE INHERITANCE”

Three stars share strong Connecticut ties

By FRANK RIZZO

Dressed in black and barefoot, the three handsome young men in the photo shoot for Connecticut VOICE – Andrew Burnap, Arturo Luis Soria, and Dylan Frederick – playfully pose, tease and laugh as if they share a special secret boy bond, beyond their roles in the celebrated two-part Broadway play “The Inheritance.”

And they do. All are relatively recent graduates of the Yale School of Drama. (Bradley James Tejeda, who graduated in 2016, and Mark H. Dold, who graduated in 1996, understudy several of the major roles.)

“We definitely have a shared vocabulary for sure,” says Burnap, who graduated in 2016 and plays a leading role of the charismatic, dangerously charming Toby Darling in the play. “I wouldn’t say there’s a Yale way to figure things out. There’s a Ron Van Lieu way, an Evan Yionoulis way, a Peter Francis James way, a Steven Skybell way.” Burnap was referring to his acting teachers who “give you all these tools you can use when you need them. We definitely have a shorthand that we can communicate to each other in order to investigate our parts more fully.”

Playwright Matthew Lopez says Burnap’s good looks, sexy aura, and fab hair can distract from his talent. “He is a tremendously gifted, compassionate, sensitive, and inventive actor – one of the best of his generation. With Andrew Burnap [in the play], I feel like someone who bought Apple stock in 1983.”

During a break in the photo shoot, the gregarious and lithe Frederick asks me, “Have you seen this play yet? It’s awesome, right?” It is, and it’s destined to change these actors’ lives.

For the Minnesota-raised Frederick, who played Lee Harvey Oswald in Yale Repertory Theatre’s “Assassins” just before he graduated in 2017, “The Inheritance” is a major boost to his career. He says he auditioned for two years after graduation with little results – until he booked the play. Now he is one of the ensemble’s standouts, especially in the role of a Gen Z artist named Tucker, who blithely asks a stunned group of older gay men, “What are T cells?”

Says Burnap of his friend: “Dylan is one of the more adventurous and eccentric people that I met at Yale. In scene classes I would often ask myself, ‘What would Dylan do?’”

Soria, who also is a playwright, graduated from Yale last May and joined the cast as another memorable member of the ensemble, part of a Guppie couple with both men named Jason, but now one is of Latino descent. Lopez rewrote the role suited to Soria’s personality and heritage, even adding some lines in Spanish.




Andrew Burnap, Dylan Frederick, and Arturo Luis Soria.
Photo by Frank Rizzo.

“I wrote the play,” says Lopez, “knowing that the actors would inform the characters and I left the characters broadly open to their own interpretations. Arturo took that character, which I gave a brief outline to – the character was meant to be delightful and lighten the mood when things got too dark – and filled in all of the details. He forever changed the role.”

Says the dashing, goateed Soria: “I’m happy that I can be there and be unapologetically myself and unapologetically Latino, too.”

Of the three actors, Burnap is the only one who worked on the play from early workshops in 2016 to its London premiere.

“We had no idea what this thing was going to be during that first preview audience at the Young Vic in London,” says the Rhode Island native.

“I remember the first laugh in the opening scene. I thought, ‘Oh my god, they might like this!’ And then before the first intermission, I remember feeling so intoxicated because the audience was giving us this amazing instant feedback,” he says. “Then fast-forward to the end of Part One and it was as if the entire theater lifted up in suspension. It was one of the most remarkable nights of my life that I’ll never forget. I get chills now talking about it. It became a communion with the audience – and so wildly unexpected.” 



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The Agony of Youth

UConn researchers hope a groundbreaking study will lead to progress

By CARA MCDONOUGH / Photography By ALLEGRA ANDERSON

When it comes to the challenges and disparities faced by today's LGBTQ youth, University of Connecticut Professor Ryan J. Watson has done his homework – he has studied the numbers, produced hard data and drawn conclusions.

And the enterprising researcher, who is an assistant professor in the Human Development and Family Sciences Department, notes that the reality is ... alarming.

Yes, same-sex marriage is now the law of the land, and life is theoretically “better” for queer and transgender teens. Yet there are still major hurdles faced by the population.

But Dr. Watson hopes that by studying our most vulnerable populations, we'll be much better equipped to address the problems they face.

In a landmark 2017 survey of more than 12,000 LGBTQ youth aged 13 to 17, produced by Dr. Watson in partnership with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), participants reported experiencing various challenges at jarringly high numbers – 95 percent reported that they have trouble getting to sleep at night; 77 percent reported receiving unwanted sexual comments, jokes, and gestures in the year prior; and only 26 percent said that they always felt safe in the classroom. Seventy percent said they have been bullied at school because of their sexual orientation.

LGBTQ teens of color faced additional issues. The report found that some encounter racism on a daily basis, making expressing their LGBTQ identity that much more difficult. Only 11 percent of LGBTQ youth of color believed their racial/ethnic group is regarded positively in the United States.

Transgender youth also faced complicated challenges, the study found, with 51 percent saying they couldn't use the bathrooms or locker rooms that match their gender identity. Some said they didn't feel safe doing so, others said they aren't sure if it's allowed, and 17 percent said teachers or other administrators told them not to.

The study, undertaken in 2017, was conducted with co-investigator Dr. Rebecca Puhl, professor of human development and family studies and deputy director of UConn's Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity. The report – importantly – came out after President Donald Trump's administration announced that the government would not collect data on the LGBTQ community as part of the 2020 Census. Through a series of questions, the study examined the lives of more than 12,000 LGBTQ youth ages 13 to 17, living all over the country.

According to a report on the study issued by the HRC, these various stressors mean that LGBTQ youth report high rates of depression, anxiety, and alcohol and drug use.

“I'm still surprised by the statistics and super alarmed by these high rates of disparities,” says Dr. Watson. “Yes, we've had a lot of progress. We've quickly legalized same-sex marriage, and trans folks have non-discrimination laws, and we expect that those things will impact the broader climate. But despite this, we still see 50 percent of trans kids who feel unsafe – they don't feel that they can be who they are.”

Dr. Watson hopes, however, that the more we know about these issues, the better equipped we'll be to solve them.

That drive has inspired his research, which largely focuses on studying at-risk populations, and particularly youth. His



Ryan Watson

graduate work at the University of Arizona began in a lab that studied bullying among ethno-racial lines. And in addition to the LGBTQ youth study, his work at UConn yielded another major study published in the Journal of Research on Adolescence in February 2019, which found that a large proportion of sexual and gender minority youth do not identify with traditional sexual identity labels, but instead use emerging labels including “nonbinary” or “asexual.” His current research focuses on preventing health disparities – such as HIV transmission – through prevention and intervention strategies in various populations.

“We are at an interesting time where kids are more empowered and able to use complex terms and feel comfortable with that,” he says of the sexual identity study.

And yes, those terms might be difficult for older people to grasp at first. But Dr. Watson advises that being honest can be the best path forward in a time when culture and norms are so rapidly changing.

“I think that [it’s beneficial] if people can be up-front and say, ‘I just want to celebrate who you are, work with me while I work through this,’ and just be open-minded,” he says.

As for the 2018 youth study, Dr. Watson believes the numbers probably would have been even higher had the study been done several years earlier. But there is no question that many difficult issues persist within this population.

“We still have the pervasive negativity and discrimination towards LGBTQ people in general and can see it impacting youth in really negative ways,” he says, adding that some of the negative messages come from politicians in positions of power and increased visibility.

His partners at HRC agree, both about the severity of the findings and the hope that these statistics will yield something better.

“The harrowing statistics show the devastating toll that rejection by family and peers, bullying and harassment, and apathy on the part of too many adults is having on America’s young people,” says Ellen Kahn, senior director of programs and partnerships at the Human Rights Campaign Foundation. “Ryan Watson has been an invaluable partner, and through our work, these findings are helping to inform policy and practice change to improve the lives of these young people.”

Dr. Watson’s research is critically important to understanding an understudied population, says Dr. Eva S. Lefkowitz, professor and department head of the UConn Human Development and Family Sciences department. She believes his work is essential in helping to develop prevention programs and policies to support the well-being of these young people.

“Scholars – and the general public – are just catching up to this new generation of young people, who tend to have much more flexible beliefs about gender and sexuality, and

BY THE NUMBERS

The landmark survey spearheaded by Ryan Watson found:

Only **24%** of LGBTQ youth can “definitely” be themselves at home.

Only **25%** of LGBTQ youth have families who show support for them by getting involved in the larger LGBTQ and ally community.

67% of LGBTQ youth hear their families make negative comments about LGBTQ people.

78% of youth not out to their parents as LGBTQ hear their families make negative comments about LGBTQ people.

48% of LGBTQ youth out to their parents say that their families make them feel bad for being LGBTQ.

Trans youth are more than twice as likely to be taunted or mocked by family for their LGBTQ identity than cisgender LGBTQ youth.

LGBTQ youth of color report hearing family express negativity about LGBTQ people more frequently than their white peers.

77% of LGBTQ youth report receiving unwanted sexual comments, jokes, and gestures in the past year.

ing of fundamental questions such as what labels youth use to describe themselves,” she says.

And Dr. Puhl, Dr. Watson’s research collaborator, says it has been particularly important for her to study the experiences of weight-based victimization in sexual and gender minority youth, another understudied issue that has concerning implications for victims’ emotional and physical health.

“Our national study found that SGM [sexual gender minority] youth face substantial weight-based teasing from both peers and family members, regardless of their body size. Moreover, this weight-based teasing is linked with their poorer mental health, higher likelihood of substance use, and unhealthy eating behaviors,” Dr. Puhl says.

“So, this tells us that efforts to support LGBTQ youth need to be more comprehensive; many LGBTQ youth are

victimized for having multiple stigmatized identities (e.g., both sexual orientation and body weight), and so programs or initiatives aiming to support LGBTQ youth need to address these vulnerabilities and health consequences stemming from different types of stigma. This important work wouldn't have been possible without our collaboration, and it's been a productive and successful research project for us both to work on together."

The data, researchers agree, indicate a heavy truth about today's LGBTQ youth: things may be getting better, but there are still unruly, complicated challenges that young people face.

Dr. Watson doesn't sugarcoat the numbers. But he does plan to continue doing the research that keeps these struggling populations in the public eye. He's seen former mentors conduct research that has yielded change in the form of new laws and regulations.

Plus, he notes what seems a small, but important detail in the LGBTQ youth survey: participants took an average of 45 minutes to complete the questions. That's a long time, and may indicate that simply asking the questions, and giving these individuals the chance to share, is a meaningful experience in itself.

"Things like that make it exciting to do the work because you know that it's helping people," Dr. Watson says. "When you can see that impact, it makes me want to keep doing the work." 🍇



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



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FEATURE //



What's in a Name?

When it's official, everything.

By JANE LATUS

“As a black trans woman, every time I walk out the door, my head is on swivel.”

– Karleigh Webb



Karleigh Webb

Shakespeare only asked the question because he already knew the answer: a rose by any other name can stink.

“It might as well have been a Willy Wonka golden ticket!” Karleigh Webb says of the new driver’s license she (literally) skipped out of the DMV with last July. From then on, she had no more explaining to do. She is Karleigh Emmelene Chardonnay Webb, and she is a woman.

Most cisgender people think of ID documents only as a practical necessity. But for trans, intersex and gender non-conforming people they’re even more so, to the point of existential importance.

“As a black trans woman, every time I walk out the door, my head is on swivel,” says Webb, 48, of New Britain. “To show a license with a name that doesn’t match your name, gender that doesn’t match your gender, and photo that doesn’t match your face – you have to continually out yourself. It can be demoralizing and very draining.”

Beyond making life easier to navigate, ID that backs up your name and gender is a safeguard against judgment, discrimination, and physical harm. Internal harm, too, adds Webb. “When the dead name comes up, it can eat away at your spirit.”

Layne Gianakos, senior manager of Community Services at Anchor Health Initiative, an LGBTQ primary care clinic in Hamden, helps three to six people a week with document changes. “I’ve assisted countless trans folks with name changes and some are so elated they cry tears

of happiness, while others don't see it as a big deal since they felt that's always been their name anyway," he says.

HOOPS AND HURDLES

Connecticut is one of 13 states requiring "appropriate treatment" (but not surgery), attested to by one of a range of professionals from licensed clinical social worker to MD, before changing the gender marker on a birth certificate.

Of particular importance to intersex and gender non-conforming individuals, since January 2019, a non-binary option is available on Connecticut birth certificates. Without fanfare, former Commissioner of Public Health Raul Pino made Connecticut the 12th state to offer the option.

Connecticut's Department of Motor Vehicles instituted another big change on Jan. 27, 2020, offering a non-binary gender option of "X" on driver's licenses.

According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, as of November 2019, nine states allowed people to self-identify their gender. Sixteen required surgery. Tennessee and Ohio did not allow gender marker changes, period. Remaining states had no policies, putting trans people's gender markers in the hands of individual judges or agency officials.

There's good news for Connecticut residents born in other states or countries: since 2017, probate courts will process gender marker changes on their birth certificates. "This is a huge advancement," says Gianakos.

Connecticut advocates are pushing for more reforms, including gender self-identification. Last legislative session, a bill to require a non-binary option on all state forms and applications made it out of committee but never to a floor vote.

Cost is a major obstacle. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, 29 percent of trans Americans live in poverty and only 21 percent of those who have transitioned have updated documents. No wonder, when it can cost \$800 (in Pennsylvania) for a name change alone.

In Connecticut, a name change costs \$225, although low-income applicants can request a waiver. License and birth certificate changes are free, but copies cost \$30, about three hours of minimum-wage labor. A passport costs up to \$110.

Without proper documents, it's harder for trans people to get the jobs, housing, education and services they need to earn more. They can't even pick up a package at the post office.

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new documents, including immigration and tribal IDs. Volunteers there also help guide anyone – grant applicants or not – through the process. In 2019 Trans Lifeline awarded 579 microgrants, averaging approximately \$400. They hope to expand that number soon because demand is high, says Director of Development Bri Barnett.

“Our applications often close within 30 minutes of opening,” says Barnett. “While we are not able to meet the full need of our community, we are dedicated to helping as many trans people as we can with the resources we have.”

HAPPY TEARS AT THE DMV

Karleigh Webb remembers her trip to the DMV in vivid detail. “I walked in and had all my paperwork. I was fidgety. Your heart is in your mouth and you’re wondering, ‘What if there’s something I forgot?’

“And then I get up there and I showed them the paperwork. There’s a black woman there with a welcoming smile. Things were going fine, then she said, ‘I need to check on this.’ Your heart starts beating faster and your brain is spinning out of control. Outside you’re trying to keep cool. But you’re panicking. She walks into an office with a piece of paper, and you think, ‘No. I’m too close.’”

But the clerk returned with a smile, saying all was set. “She took my hand and held it for five seconds and said, ‘I know what this is about, and you’re very brave, and I’m very happy for you. Now go and get your life.’”

After skipping to her car with the temporary license, Webb started crying. When the permanent card came later by mail, she says, “I was bawling all the way from my mailbox to my apartment.”

TWELVE FEET TALL

Pamela Lynne Bain, 59, says “I knew at age 14. I wanted to be a girl.”

She suppressed it big-time, the East Hartford resident says. “I was a prisoner in my own life.” She was so deeply

undercover that her construction co-workers called her Mad Dog, unaware that this macho jackhammer-wielder was wearing women’s underwear. Miserable, she dove into substance abuse.

At 50, things clicked for Bain, now sober and tired of being afraid. She realized, “They might kill me and they might beat me up, but I’ve gotta live my life.” She came out as bi, and shortly after also as trans.

“I called City Hall and made an appointment with the probate judge. The judge turned out to be someone who went to Cub Scouts in my mother’s basement.” He was “very professional,” says Bain.

After all those years and apprehension, says Bain, “It was easy.” The clerk offered to mail the proclamation. “But no, this was the biggest day of my life!” says Bain. She waited until she held it in her hand. “I was like 12 feet tall when I walked out of there!”

Bain named herself after actress Pamela Anderson. “She was this bubbly, smiley beach girl. I won’t look like her, but I’m an old, hippie beach girl!”

“I walked around for 55 years with the name my parents assigned me. It’s not who I am. It never was,”

says Bain. “To change my name is my owning it before the world. This is who I am. I’m not hiding anymore.”

REVISIONIST HISTORY, OF THE GOOD KIND

“Getting my birth certificate felt like a major thing, like going back – not to be overly dramatic – to where it went wrong, and fixing it,” says Quinn Leona Nintean, 29, of Colchester.

Nintean came out to her warmly receptive family in January 2019 as a non-binary trans fem, and immediately got to work. “Thinking about trans stuff was the biggest thing on my mind for a good two to three months – IDs, forms, gender markers – it was just stressful,” she says.

“It was a big deal. It felt like I was making a step forward



Pamela Lynne Bain



Quinn Nintean

with every document.”

Nintean says she’s unprepared to choose a non-binary gender marker because “it makes it easier to find us by the administration. I keep that ‘F’ for equal reasons because I identify socially as a female, and for safety.”

Her only difficulties in obtaining new documents were human-error related, and the officials she interacted with were friendly and professional. “I’m thankful to be in Connecticut. No one looks at you sideways for it,” she says.

While the process was relatively seamless for her, Nintean, who is white, points out that trans people of color face more discrimination across the board, even in Connecticut.

Nintean’s wife suggested the name Quinn after a character in the video game League of Legends. “That was the turning point that she was getting on board with it,” says Nintean, smiling.

THE WORLD RECOGNIZES ME

Maeve Martinez was 16 the day she went with her mom to probate court. “I left there that day Maeve,” she says.

“I’m happy to have documents that match my ID, because the world recognizes me as who I am,” says Martinez, now 21, of Manchester. “I get clocked a lot more than I wish I did. Even if I am clocked, I am Maeve, a mixed-race trans woman, and if you don’t like it, tough.”



HELP IS AVAILABLE

Here are a few resources:

Trans Lifeline offers guidance and financial help

translifeline.org/microgrants

National Center for Transgender Equality

transequality.org/documents

Connecticut TransAdvocacy Coalition

transadvocacy.org


It's a relief, she says, to "not have to be reminded of being trans at every corner. It just feels normal."

Before, Martinez felt anything but. High school was tough, as friends drifted away because they didn't understand her. "I was a very effeminate child. I loved dolls and idolized Bette Midler. From a very young age people would say, 'Oh yeah, that one's different,'" she says, laughing. "I always used to say I wanted to be a girl. In high school, I realized I was a girl."

While in the midst of ID changes, Martinez had to take the SAT test "with the wrong name and wrong gender marker. It made the test more stressful and I was worried it wouldn't be valid. It was like hell trying to get them to change it."

Applying for freshman housing at UConn was another headache. The housing office repeatedly promised and failed to correct her gender, repeatedly assigning her with male roommates. It was resolved only a few days before move-in day.

FYI, Maeve is the name Martinez's mother had chosen if she had a daughter. Which, as it turns out, she did.

VOICE is not publishing a photo of Martinez because, as a trans woman of color, she has experienced reasons to fear for her safety. 



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Written by Michel Marc Bouchard
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Friday, March 20, 2020 | 8 pm

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VOICE OF REASON

This transgender advocate has always spoken up for herself; now, she's advocating for others

By **DAWN ENNIS** / *Photography courtesy of Alisa Gold*

ABOVE: In August 2019, Eva Gold joined demonstrators at the capitol building in Hartford to protest. ON FOLLOWING PAGE: Alisa Gold (left) and her daughter, Eva, share a hug in their southern Connecticut home. Photo by **John Mongeau**

To see Eva Gold window-shopping in the mall with her mom, you'd never think she's anything other than your average teen, trying to drag her mother inside the stores, hoping to try on, buy, and bring home some of the stylish goods on display: shoes, slacks, blouses, and so much more.

Not that she needs more clothes. Like any 14-year-old girl, her bedroom closet in their southern Connecticut home is busting at the seams. But the truth is, Gold is unlike most 14-year-old girls. She's transgender.

"I think I was six," Gold says of how old she was when she insisted on making a change and live as the girl she knew she was. "I just didn't feel comfortable in my body," she says. This was not a shock, recalls her mother, Alisa Gold.

"At 18 months, she would wear baby towels that have the hood attached to it, and so she would wear that on her head as her long hair," Alisa says. The very first drawing that her child made of herself showed her with long, green hair.

She always identified with female characters, especially liking the Queen of the Night from "The Magic Flute" and Maleficent from "Sleeping Beauty." She loved operas and would stand on a small cookie tin dressed in a long, red flowy dress, and sing opera. Eva always had a flair for the dramatic.

By the time of her second birthday, Eva was already correcting strangers, who dared to remark, "What a cute little boy!"

"I'm not a boy! I'm a girl!" Eva would exclaim.

"At age two, she would cut out paper dolls, and make beds for them," says her mom. "She always wanted to wear a dress. She would wear an Ariel costume," a hand-me-down from the neighbors, "nonstop, all the time. And at daycare she would play with all the girls all the time. I remember at 3, she was devastated, because some of the girls were doing a tea party and she wanted to go."

"My whole life," chimes in Eva, "I've just always felt like a girl. I don't think I ever felt like a boy at all."

Eva's mother says it was at age 3 that they decided it

was time to see a doctor, because temper tantrums that had begun at 18 months had only grown worse. "The levels of aggression and anger were so high," Alisa says. "We were desperate to help her." But the doctor had no experience with the condition that she now recognizes was gender dysphoria.

Nothing seemed to help, and by the tender age of 4 going on 5, Eva was displaying worrisome signs she wanted to end her life. "She was talking about not wanting to live anymore," says her mom. She would draw herself with a giant "X" through her name and talk about how she wished she could fly away to heaven so no one would ever find her. At one point, she talked about running away, hiding in the woods and living in a tree house so no one would ever see her.

Eva's mother, not yet recognizing this was an issue of gender identity, not sexual orientation, tried to console her child. "I said, 'Well, you know, there's a lot of girls who like girls and a lot of boys who like boys. And, you know, we love you no matter what.'"

"I thought of it as, 'I have one son, and he's clearly going to be gay. And that's good, because as an only child, he'll be more inclined to stay in touch with his mom more!'"

What finally opened Alisa's eyes was Eva's

response to her mother's comforting message, that love is love. "And she said, 'There are lots of people like that but there's nobody in the world like me.'"

"It was heartbreaking," Alisa recalls. "It was tough, and the kids were not kind. She got teased literally every single day for being a boy who liked girly things."

Eva's parents bought her girls' underwear to wear under her boys' clothes, enrolled her in ballet, bought her a Barbie doll, and did not discourage her from wearing those towels with hoods that gave her the feeling of having long hair.

Alisa says that unlike many parents whose children are transgender, she had very little trouble coming to terms with their child's authentic gender identity and did not feel a need to mourn the loss of her son.

"It's the same person," she says. "Yeah, there's the name change, but I always looked at Eva as Eva. But early on,



Eva’s display of consistent, insistent, and persistent identification as a girl warranted a social gender transition; that means no medications, no interventional treatments. She would simply start to live as a girl, to see if her behavior remained consistent, insistent, and persistent.



Eva Gold, 14, enjoys playing on her school’s girls’ soccer team, as well as drawing, cooking and volunteering in her community.

the whole family, it was me against everybody else.” Even though several members of her extended family are members of the LGBTQ community, they, too, had trouble accepting Eva at first, Alisa says. “We actually have the gayest family!” So imagine her frustration when some relatives blamed Eva’s gender dysphoria on her having a Playskool toy kitchen.

Her parents, who live about an hour away, also took a while to adjust. “I tried to explain to my dad,” she says, reminding him that when he was growing up, he shared a bedroom with four girls, and it didn’t make him a girl. Eventually, all of Eva’s relatives embraced her as a girl.

Except for Eva’s dad, Scott. Not right away.

“My husband really struggled with it,” Alisa says. “It was really tough for him, and it took a long time.” Help from support groups was instrumental. Ultimately, though, it was having to fight opposition from the school district and its leaders, she says, that turned him around.

“When people started turning against us, when the school was really not helping Eva, he really stepped up,” she says.

Eva’s parents sought advice from medical and legal pro-



Eva Gold attends middle school as a typical 8th grade girl with a backpack and a lunch box.

professionals about what to do next. They helped the Golds determine that Eva's display of consistent, insistent, and persistent identification as a girl warranted a social gender transition; that means no medications, no interventional treatments. She would simply start to live as a girl, to see if her behavior remained consistent, insistent, and persistent.

Alisa says at the time, there were not networks like there are now – “no groups on Facebook or anything like that” – to offer them guidance. She adds while there were a few sup-

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port groups in existence, there wasn't much awareness about them, and it was very difficult to access the networks that were available unless you knew someone involved in them, which the Golds did not. So Alisa and Scott made their own plan. Since they had long enjoyed spending summers in France, it was decided that during a trip in the summer of 2012, between kindergarten and first grade, Eva would take her first steps toward a gender transition.

Her mom took her dress shopping and they packed both boy clothes and girl clothes, so Eva could experience life as a girl while on vacation, if she wanted to. As they tell it, the experiment was a complete success, with a stranger on the Paris Metro complimenting Eva on her natural beauty, even inquiring if she was a child model. And the boy clothes stayed in her suitcase.

Upon returning home, Eva got a whole new wardrobe, but the local administrator barred her from using the girl's bathroom. She was also bullied every single day regarding her gender identity. Although the Golds found another school in their district that was prepared to welcome her and even allow her to use the girls' bathroom, administrators blocked them at every turn, refusing to let Eva switch to a new school.

Constant teasing by bullies and the lack of support from the school was too much for Eva to bear. "It was right around Thanksgiving," Alisa recalls. "She said she did not want to live anymore. She ran upstairs, slammed her door," and locked it, with the intent to climb out the second story window and jump. Alisa dialed 9-1-1 while Scott tried to get into their daughter's bedroom.

Fortunately, they had been pro-active following a previous incident; the Golds had installed burglar-proof – and six-year-old-proof – windows, that Eva could not open by herself. But even this attempt to end her life failed to move administrators. The school district tried to force Eva's parents to homeschool her, refusing to allow her to return to her school after she came out of the hospital.

Eva, meanwhile, received professional help to deal with the extreme depression and suicidal thoughts that were directly related to the rejection she was experiencing.

Eva's parents enlisted the help of Boston-based GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders (GLAD) as well as a lawyer/educational advocate who pointed out that what school administrators were doing was against the law.

With this assistance, the Golds finally won Eva the right to attend an accepting, neighboring public school and, eventually, use the girls' bathroom, too. The commitment runs all the way through high school, which Eva begins this fall.

At the age of 7, Eva came out to her first-grade classmates at her new school, in an end-of-year classroom exercise about what makes everyone special. "I used to be a boy," she said. Someone asked, "How did you do that?" And her matter of fact answer was, "I let my hair grow. And I started



Eva Gold enjoys traveling the world with her family, from France to the Connecticut shoreline.

wearing dresses and changed my name." That was that, and the next student told their story.

Telling her own story has become Eva's thing. Starting at age 10, Eva appeared along with her parents in a stage production in New York City called "Transformations," in which families dealing with gender identity issues share their stories.

Lately, she's decided to become an outspoken advocate for transgender rights. In August 2019, Ted Doolittle from Connecticut's Office of the Healthcare Advocate (OHA), invited her and other activists, along with state lawmakers, to speak at a Hartford news conference. They denounced efforts by the Trump administration to eliminate healthcare

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protections for the trans community. It was her first time before TV cameras, and the first time she publicly shared the struggle she had endured as a first grader.

“I felt out of place. I was made fun of daily and discriminated against, so I tried to take my life because my body did not match who I am,” Eva told reporters. “How would you feel if your loved one took their own life because they couldn’t get the emotional or medical support they needed to live their best life as their authentic self?”

Back at home, Eva’s bedroom reflects her passions: her pink-painted walls are festooned with fashion designs, drawn on the backs of cardboard trays from her stay in a hospital. A circus of stuffed animals competes for space in her queen-sized bed. She spends her free time drawing and reading, and cooking in their kitchen. She’s also active in their temple and volunteers her time with local seniors and an in-school program that helps students with intensive special needs.

Eva is now an eighth grader preparing for high school, and boys have caught her eye. She’s been on puberty blockers for some time now, and also has patches that provide hormones to give her body feminine curves in all the right places.

“Looking back, I had a lot of problems with teasing and stuff,” Eva says. “And now, even if there is a little teasing, I’m fine. That’s it. I just go through it and know that some people are going to be hateful through your whole life. So, you might as well not worry about it.” 



Eva Gold is already seeing results from patches prescribed by her doctor that help her body align with who she is.



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At 14, Eva Gold is your typical Connecticut teenager: she loves to shop and is eager to start dating. But Eva has made one thing clear, ever since she was 2: she’s a girl. Eva is transgender, and an activist for trans rights.

A Vue of Farmer’s Best

Jackie Post got a taste of a new menu at Foxwoods’ top restaurant, Vue 24, that is featuring some local farmers.

Holistic Healing

One physical therapy team takes a more holistic approach to treating the transgender community. Hilary Russo has the story from Middlesex Health.

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Girl Talk

In her latest tour, Kristin Chenoweth pays homage to the ladies

By CARA ROSNER / Photography courtesy of MARK OWENS

Emma and Tony Award winner Kristin Chenoweth has traveled the world performing but holds a special place in her heart for UConn's Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts, where she'll soon return. "I just loved the last time I was in Storrs, Connecticut," she recalls. "All the college kids came and that really jazzed me up and inspired me. It was actually one of the better shows I've ever done."

The powerhouse vocalist will return to Jorgenson with her "For the Girls" tour at 8 p.m. March 27. Her latest album, which also is called "For the Girls," was released in September and is Chenoweth's tribute to female singers throughout history – particularly some of those she admires most. Ariana Grande, Dolly Parton, Jennifer Hudson and Reba McEntire are some of the friends and collaborators who join her on the album.

"I just wanted to pay tribute to the music I grew up with and the music my mom loved," says Chenoweth. "And, you know, it gives me permission to go all over the map with singers, from Dolly Parton to Dinah [Washington] to Edyie Gormé. I think music is becoming, especially album making...there are no more rules. It used to be you had to stay in one lane, but this gives me permission to be in all lanes."

Chenoweth's career has encompassed film, television, voice-over and stage roles. She won a Tony Award in 1999 for her role in "You're a Good Man,


Charlie Brown" and was nominated for two more – in 2004 for her turn as Glinda the Good Witch in "Wicked," and in 2015 for her role in "On the Twentieth Century." She also won a Theatre World Award in 1997 for Outstanding Broadway Debut, as well as two Drama Desk Awards and two Outer Critics Circle Awards (1999 and 2015).

She also appeared on the television show "Glee," for which she was nominated for two Primetime Emmy Awards and a People's Choice Award. In 2009, she won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in "Pushing Daisies." She became a New York Times bestselling author with her 2009 memoir called "A Little Bit Wicked" and received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2015.

Most recently, the busy actress appeared in the Hallmark Channel film "A Christmas Love Story" in December, and she is set to star in the Netflix film "Holidate" later this year.

To celebrate the release of her "For the Girls" album, she returned to Broadway in November for eight performances at the Nederlander Theatre.

Those who come to see her perform at the Jorgensen can expect a mix of new material and old favorites, Chenoweth says.

"We're definitely going to do a tribute from the music of 'For the Girls' and I'm so excited to bring in my singers and put on a real show," she says. "It's going to be a lot of music from the record, and a lot of what I did on Broadway." 

Tickets for the March 27 performance are on sale now, at jorgensen.uconn.edu or by calling the box office at 860-486-4226. Tickets range from \$35-55.



MUSIC //



Good For What Ails Ya

Melissa Etheridge's "The Medicine Show" plans an April stop in Connecticut

By RENEE DININO

Photography by LAUREN DUKOFF

Singer, songwriter and rocker Melissa Etheridge will bring her latest tour, "The Medicine Show," to Connecticut with a stop at the Warner Theatre in Torrington on April 15. I've had the opportunity to interview this amazing woman many times over the years. Whenever she is on tour, she always visits us in Connecticut.

Her latest tour complements her 15th studio album, and I spoke with her last year when she released the album and kicked off the tour. Talking to her is one of the highlights of my job – getting to speak with a powerful, successful female who happens to make great music.

The cover "The Medicine Show" album is totally retro, and even has a Janis Joplin classic rock feel. Etheridge can rock a cowboy hat like nobody's business!

"You know it's in the same vein of rock 'n' roll as a medicine woman, you know rock 'n' roll is music that's derived from old indigenous cultures," Etheridge says. "That sort of shamanism aspect of it, absolutely, when Janis took on her Pearl persona, you know it was that feeling. I have a stylist who's been with me for 10 years now, Paul Castro, and I said I wanna feel medicine womany, and just from head to toe, I felt it."

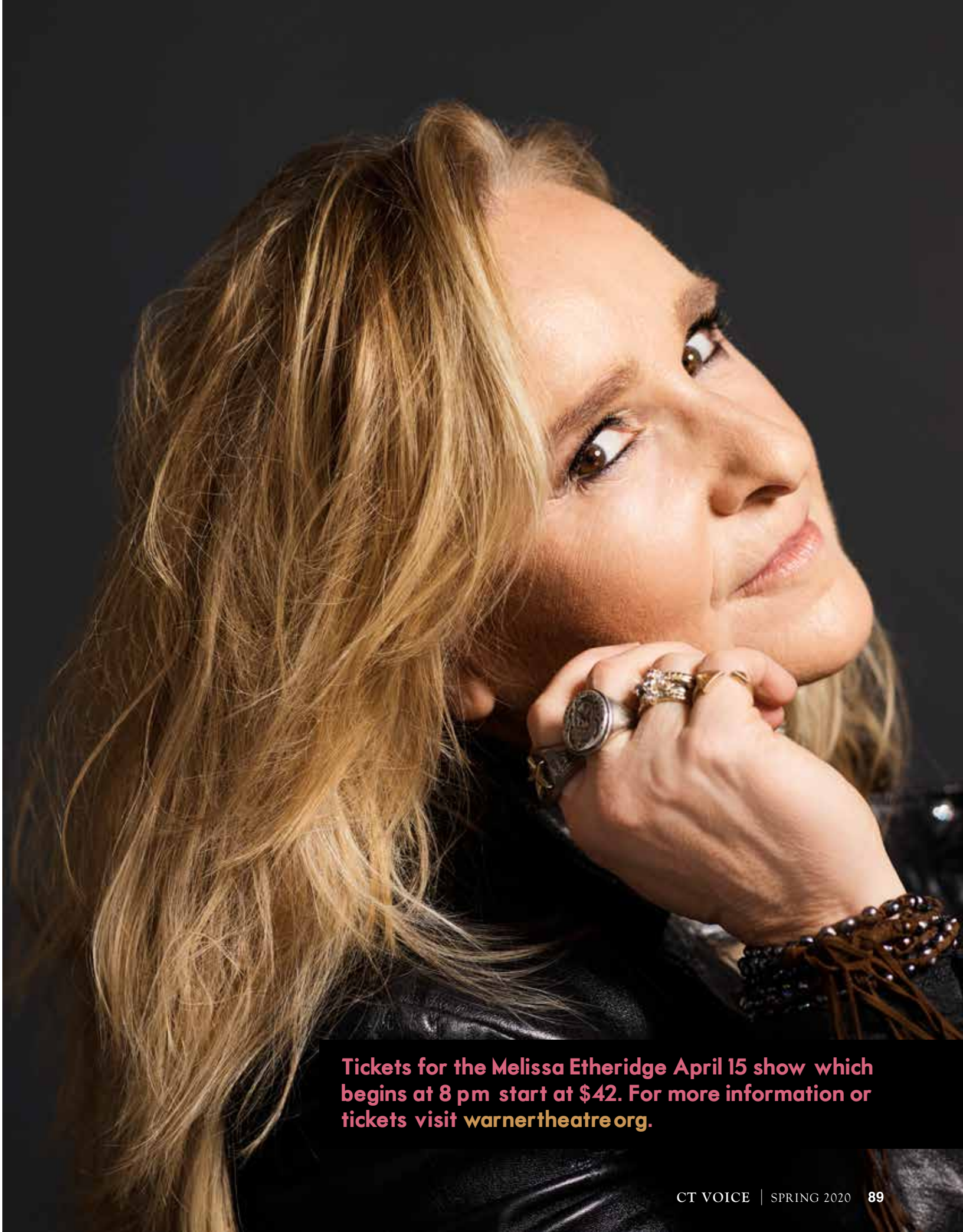
Let me also interject, Etheridge loves to laugh, and her laugh is good for the soul!

Flashback to 2010: I was hosting an event at Bushnell Park in Hartford for Susan G. Komen, and of course Etheridge is a breast cancer survivor. I was hosting and I was interviewing her and asked if she would record a message for all. So, in front of 10,000 people, I was able to wish everyone participating in the race good luck, and I was also able to deliver a message from the one and only Etheridge, wishing everyone well. "Hey, it's Melissa Etheridge, I wanna say hey to everybody out there getting ready to run your Race for the Cure in Connecticut. You all have a good race and run for hope and all that is real."

These days, she's feeling stronger and healthier than ever and has some rituals she likes to do before her performances.

"Well, my whole day sort of becomes routine when I have a show, from the time I wake up to the time I put my stuff together, and my day becomes the ritual," she says. "I do sound check, I do dinner, I do hair and makeup, I have meet and greet, I have half an hour before the show [when] I do stretching. Then, right before I go on, we do something we call 'We Vibe':





Tickets for the Melissa Etheridge April 15 show which begins at 8 pm start at \$42. For more information or tickets visit warnertheatre.org.

I get in a circle with my musicians and I just connect and I say, 'Okay, we're about to do this.... Then the energy comes, man, the minute the lights go down. The audience is just right there with me. I never have to get pumped up; it's always right there for me.'

After all these years of writing, recording and touring, there's no place Etheridge would rather be than on stage.

"It's my favorite place, I gotta tell ya. It's why I do everything I do, it's why I make music, it's why I make albums, because I love standing in front of people and exchanging energy through music and transforming ourselves and feeling better," she says. "My favorite compliment is when people say, 'God, I feel so much better than when I started, than when I came here.' That's what it's all about. So, in doing that, I feel better, so I now chase it. I totally understand why Mick Jagger has been doing this all into his 70s."

Those who see her on the tour will get more than merely music: they'll get stories and hear real issues through Etheridge's music that will somehow get transformed into a therapeutic outlet, where audience members actually come away feeling empowered.

"2017 and 2018 were really the years I was writing and conceptualizing this album, 'The Medicine Show,' and just month after month, there would be deeper and deeper issues coming up from the #MeToo movement, the women's

marches, to school shootings, our whole government, the opioid crisis and everything," says Etheridge. "I felt the last couple of years, these things kept floating to the top. We need to find a new way of thinking about them and solving these issues."

She adds, "I view myself as an artist. My job is to mirror society, to write stories that make us think and feel and maybe help us understand these things more. So that's what I put into 'The Medicine Show,' and that's what this album is."

Her thoughts on being a role model, whether intended or not, for the LGBTQ community?

"The role model thing is an interesting thing," she says. "You know, I entered this industry and I would think, 'What would the people I looked up to do?' And before you know it, someone says to me, 'You're my role model,' and I'm like 'Me?' You're like, what? Me? How did that happen? I found that just being myself, just saying, 'This is who I am,' and being able to stand in my truth has gotten me so far. If I can influence, if I can inspire someone to be who they are, to find their courage, their strength, in exactly who they are, then maybe we're making the world a better place and that makes me very happy."

Later this year, *Connecticut VOICE* will speak with Etheridge about another of her loves: pets. 🐾



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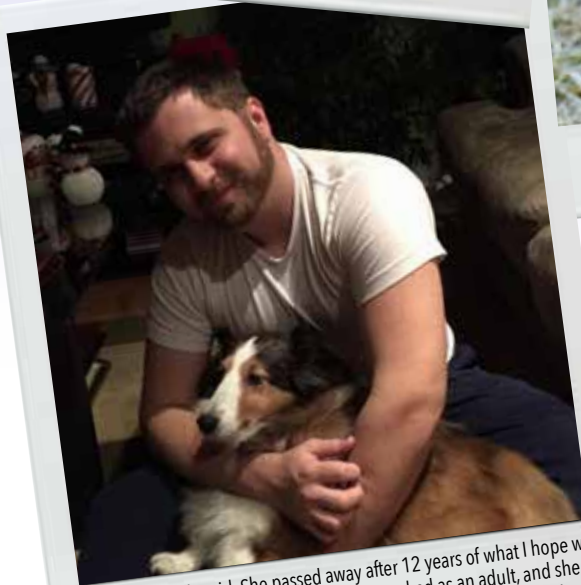
PETS //

They're our buddies, our babies, our companions and – let's face it – our best friends. Our pets are such important parts of our lives, bringing joy, unconditional love and comfort. We recently asked our readers to share photos of your pets, and did you ever! We loved scrolling through the photos that readers posted on our social media channels. Here, we share a small sampling of them. Check out the rest on our Facebook page.

We love seeing you, your friends, and snapshots of your lives. We want to share your experiences and your voice! We hope you will connect with us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to join the conversation, and you may end up seeing yourself on the pages of a future *Connecticut VOICE* issue.

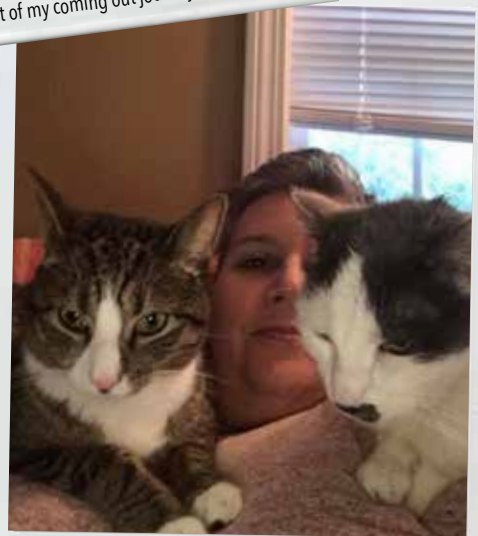


Emily is my confidante and best friend. Her love is unconditional. – Carol Wadding Lemieux



This was my Allie girl. She passed away after 12 years of what I hope was a wonderful life. Allie was the first dog I ever had as an adult, and she got me through a major part of my coming out journey. – James Sheppo

► This is Dutch on the right. My oldest asked to get a cat when she came home from college swearing when she moved out, her cat would go with her. She met her now husband who had two dogs and Dutch had to stay and became my furbaby. On the left is Theo, my youngest's 1 year old. He's their cat but he loves to snuggle with me. These two bring me comfort and peace when things are tough and my chronic pain is bad. I love these two! – Carlee Welsh



Theo and Dutch



This is Manny. He's 12 years old and we've had him since he was 6 weeks old. He's hyper and kind of a hot mess, but I love him.
- Paxton Wedward Moynihan



Katie Middleton



Emberlace melts my heart. Sweetest dog, so gentle. Love her. I am blessed. She loves her friend Gray who is feral.
- Susan Wheeler Laverty

▲ This is Katie Middleton. She will be 8 on Thanksgiving. Growing up, our pets' birthdays were always on Thanksgiving; you should give thanks for your pet. She's 7lbs and lives with her daddies, myself and Ed Flemke in Southington. This little rescue couldn't have come at a better time into my life. She added value to a life that was in a desperate place. We rescued each other.
- Christopher Barone



My best friend in the whole world! - James Sheppo



Lessons for Life

By **JOE BERTOLINO** / *Photography by* **STAN GODLEWSKI**

In 2012, when I was a candidate for the presidency of small college in northern New England, a professor asked me how I would deal with homophobia in that relatively conservative area. I replied that it would be a great conversation to have as a college community, and I would welcome the discussion. I wasn't about to hide my identity as a gay man. After all, I wasn't being recruited to be the "gay college president," but the "president of the college." I got that job.

Soon after, I received letters of welcome and support. On occasion, I would receive a letter from an anonymous community member quoting scripture from the Bible and saying that they were praying for me. When this occurred, I joked to my colleagues that the job was challenging enough, and I would welcome all the prayers I could get!

At that time, LGBTQ individuals had just begun to make inroads into presidential positions in higher education.

Indeed, when I was a young professional beginning my career in higher education in the early '90s, it was almost unheard of for a gay man to be a dean or vice president, let alone to hold a chief executive position. The gay glass ceiling, we called it.

We're fortunate now to be in a time when increasingly more colleges and universities are willing to set aside historical bias and truly recruit and hire the best person for their institutions, including leaders who are LGBTQ.

A major breakthrough came in 2010, when 10 "out" presidents formed LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education. A vice president at the time, I met with the group and

was encouraged to confirm that career advancement to the highest level was indeed possible for LGBTQ individuals in academe.

Five years later, I was attending a meeting of this organization in Chicago when the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision to legalize gay marriage. Spontaneously, we participated in the Chicago Gay Pride parade – each of us holding an individual sign that highlighted our institutions. Mine read: "I am president of Lyndon State and I'm out!" The response was overwhelmingly positive. It was a powerful moment.

Now, in my fourth year leading Southern Connecticut State University, and my eighth year as a college president, I don't identify as a gay president. I don't feel the need to. Rather, I just want people to know me as a president who happens to be gay. Because while my orientation may inform my perspective, it's only one piece of a complex puzzle that forms my identity.

I came to acknowledge and understand my identity as a gay man during the years of the AIDS crisis. Like many in the LGBTQ community, I faced discrimination on both a personal and professional level. While painful, these experiences helped shape who I am and informed my world view. Moreover, these challenges and obstacles fueled my desire to focus on social justice and equity issues, first as a social worker and then as a university administrator in student affairs. I have no doubt that these life experiences have made me more empathetic, more present, more aware, more intentional and more thoughtful – in short, a better leader.

The culture change that we've seen in the last 10 years

“... these life experiences have made me more empathetic, more present, more aware, more intentional and more thoughtful – in short, a better leader.” – Joe Bertolino



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has had a profound effect on campuses. I am one of more than 100 LGBTQ chief executives nationwide. My time and attention as president expands beyond sexual and gender identity into multiple areas of social justice, including issues around race, ethnicity, religion and immigration status.

We have an open, welcoming community at Southern and I've found that this generation of students has a broader set of experiences which leads to their being more open and accepting of others. LGBTQ students are becoming more comfortable with their identities much earlier now – in high school, even middle school – and their peers have been exposed to this and understand it.


That is not to say that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism have gone away, and we must not be lulled into believing that discrimination will not occur on college campuses. But the main challenges for higher education administrators now revolve around questions of gender identity, and how to ensure that we have the right policies and supports in place to meet the needs of trans and non-binary students.

At Southern, students can now choose the name they wish to identify by when they register for classes. We have gender-inclusive bathrooms and have enhanced our services in areas such as residence life, counseling, and health services. We have taken important steps to promote gender studies in our curriculum, and introduced inclusive training and practices in our student support areas. And we have applied to be listed on the Campus Pride Index, a national compilation of LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities. But there is still more to do.

At the end of the day, all students – regardless of identity – want to know that someone cares, and that they are safe and supported. They want to know that there are resources available to them and know how they can access them. They want to know that there are opportunities for them to succeed.

Ensuring social justice for LGBTQ students, therefore, is not simply a matter of improving conditions for the immensely diverse group of individuals who identify as members of this community.

Rather, it's a matter of instilling an ethic of care: building an inclusive community in which every member feels valued and is treated with dignity, respect, kindness, compassion, and civility.

And in doing so, we can set an example for society to follow. 

Joe Bertolino, Ed.D., is president of Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven.

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