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SPRING 2023

# VOICE<sup>TM</sup>

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## PETE BUTTIGIEG

U.S. Secretary of  
Transportation  
& Gay Dad

*One-on-One with Dawn Ennis*





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# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome spring!

There are so many ways to welcome the season, steeped in myth and celebration, across millennia and cultures. Whether it was Persephone returning from the Underworld in Greek mythology, or modern celebrations of the vernal equinox, they all have one thing in common: It is the season of rebirth, celebration, and hope.

In challenging times, those can sometimes seem in short supply, yet we are fortunate that in Connecticut we are surrounded by so many people who have devoted their talents, energies, and careers to improving the lives of everyone in our vibrant LGBTQ+ communities.

That's the focus of this issue—the people and organizations from our state and beyond whose dedication and leadership improves the lives of everyone around them. These are people whose commitment to service touches and stands as an example to all of us. It is an impressive lineup.

Dawn Ennis spoke with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg about his work, balancing family life and his trailblazing role as the first openly gay Cabinet member. Brian Scott Lipton interviewed Brian Sims of Out Leadership about his work ensuring equality in corporations and improving professional lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Jane Latus spoke with Dr. Jeffrey Shelton and Michael Mlarecki of Middlesex Health about their groundbreaking Transgender Medicine Program as well as their psychiatry and counseling work for LGBTQ+ people of all ages. Frank Rizzo interviewed Broadway star J. Harrison Ghee, currently in *Some Like It Hot* about finding and expressing his authenticity as a nonbinary person. I talk with Dr. David Shapiro about how he is transforming the practice of surgery to be more inclusive. Finally, Dawn spent time at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, a half-day high school program where a new generation of young people are experiencing the arts and social justice in an affirming environment.

In a world that can sometimes be dark and threatening, these people represent the best of us—and the spirit of hope the season brings.

We continue to be committed to finding the stories that give us hope and that make Connecticut one of the best places in the nation to live for LGBTQ+ people. I would be remiss if I didn't offer heartfelt thanks to the writers, designer Stacy Murray, and the whole team that's dedicated to telling these stories.

We are also in the process of expanding our website—[ctvoice.com](http://ctvoice.com). Visit us there, and you'll find expanded content and much more. Oh, and if you're looking for something to do this spring (after you finish reading this magazine, of course), check out everything that the Connecticut Office of Tourism is doing for our communities.

Wishing you a joy-filled season, and thanks for celebrating part of it with us!

*Chris*

Christopher Byrne, Editor  
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Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg,  
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—Lao Tzu

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# CONTRIBUTORS //



**FRANK RIZZO**  
Frank Rizzo interviewed nonbinary Broadway star J. Harrison Chee (page 38). He 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.



**BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON**  
Brian Scott Lipton talked with Out Leadership's Brian Sims (page 12). He has been a nationally renowned journalist for over 30 years. He has been Editor in Chief of TheaterMania.com and Resident Publications, Managing Editor of men's fashion magazines DNR and MR, and his byline has appeared in Forbes and The Wall Street Journal.



**DAWN ENNIS**  
Dawn Ennis did our cover interview with Secretary Pete (page 62). She is an award-winning journalist, a professor at University of Hartford, and writes for several news outlets. Ennis was America's first transgender journalist in a TV network newsroom when she came out nine years ago. Follow her @lifeafterdawn on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Ennis and her family reside in West Hartford, Connecticut.



**KIM ADAMSKI**  
Kim Adamski contributes our frank column on sexual health. She is a sex educator in Hartford, Connecticut. She currently works at the Hartford Gay and Lesbian Health Collective. Kim loves answering the questions people are afraid to ask, and that's what motivated her to go into sex education. If you have questions about sex, contact her at adamski.kimberly@gmail.com.



**CHION WOLF**  
Chion is the host of *Audacious* on Connecticut Public Radio. A two-time recipient of the Gracie Award, from the Alliance for Women in Media Foundation, she received The Advocate's Champions of Pride 2021 as an "unsung" LGBTQ+ hero. She has produced storytelling events in Connecticut and is on the board of Night Fall, Inc, an annual performance event. Chion is also a certified judge with the International Chili Society.



**AMY S. WHITE**  
Amy S. White lives, teaches, cooks, eats, and writes in Eastern Connecticut. Amy gives us some healthy snack ideas and recipes (page 44) for guilt-free noshing between meals. You can find out more about her at her website: amyswhite.com



**JANE LATUS**  
Jane Latus covers health and politics. She covers Middlesex Health (page 58) and caught up with CT nonprofits (page 34). She is a writer and personal trainer living in Canton. She and her wife live in Canton with an escalating number of cats. They have three grown children: two sons (one trans and one gay) and a foster daughter.



**MICHELLE CUTRALI**  
Michelle Cutrali has been a Financial Advisor for more than 20 years and has earned a Certification in Long-Term Care Planning. Her business, Cutrali Insurance and Financial Services, is geared towards helping LGBTQ+ folks with investments, insurance and retirement planning. Her specialty in long-term care & life insurance helps to shed more color on subjects that our community needs to start planning for.



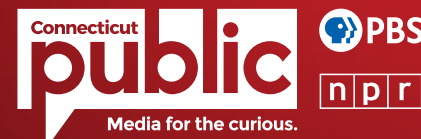
**RENEE DININO**  
Renee Dinino is our resident pet maven and wrote the piece on Ukrainian rescues (page 72). She is the director of community affairs for iHeartMedia in Connecticut, the midday host on The River 105.9 and host of a syndicated talk show on all CT iHeart Radio stations. An avid animal lover and advocate, she and her husband Sal have a German Shepherd, Luke, a rescue. Instagram @reneedinino.



**MEGHAN CRUTCHLEY**  
Meghan is the founder of the consulting company Habitqueer, and is committed to helping LGBTQ+ individuals lead rich, authentic, and fulfilling lives. In her column, she outlines healthy life changes (page 30) that you can really stick to.

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## The Audacious Voice

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This issue, we welcome Chion Wolf, host of the Audacious radio show and podcast on Connecticut Public Radio. A friend and supporter of this publication since its founding, Chion will be sharing her very human stories in our pages and on the web site. She was the co-host of the Connecticut Voice Honors last September as well. We look forward to being even more involved with her as we move forward.*

*Chion is a two-time recipient of the Gracie Award, honoring programming created by women, for women and about women in all facets of media and entertainment. She is a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community, and her warmth, wit, and insights are both informative, and inspiring. Full columns will be available monthly on CTVoice.com, and we'll excerpt the columns in these pages. We're printing her first column in its entirety as Chion gives us some insights into what she's up to with the show and much more. We'll let Chion take it from here:*

When people ask me what conversation sticks in my mind, the most from *Audacious*, my public radio show, out of the 100-plus we've done, I always think of the same one.

Here's the mission of the show: To humanize the stereotyped, to understand the misunderstood; To get to a deeper level where all of humanity shares the same space, no matter how difficult, seemingly absurd, or uncommon the stories. Not all our episodes are about painful experiences, conditions, or professions, but many of them are. You may have a story yourself! Have you ever felt like your life blew up? Like you're the only one in the world who's gone through it?

The conversation I always think of was with Gabby Myers of Elwood, Indiana. In 2017, her nose was bitten off by a dog named Clyde. Clyde belonged to an old friend of Gabby's. In fact, to Gabby, Clyde WAS a friend. That friend had just gotten a second dog named Cain. When Gabby was visiting



them one night, Cain jumped up and licked her face. She thinks Clyde must've been trying to protect her. He jumped up and bit. It happened so fast. As she starts telling me about the blood, her nose on the floor, the 911 call, she begins to cry. She remembers needing to make sure that nothing bad happened to Clyde. He didn't mean it, she says. He had a bad day. We all have bad days.

She tells me about the first time she saw her face in the hospital, with a hole in the middle of it. She talks about the cruel comments and fearful looks she gets from people when she's in public.

I sob with her. There's a part in the interview where she says she wishes we could hug. I wish it, too. We cry some more. And, amazingly, we laugh a lot, too. Gabby (pictured below) is very funny.

But the part of the interview that sticks in my head most is when I asked her: "If you could wave a magic wand and get your old face back, would you do it?" I could barely finish asking the question when she said, "No. No."


And honestly? In a flash, I thought, "Bullshit, Gabby. You're just saying that

because it's the 'right answer'. Look at all the pain you've experienced! Of course you'd want your nose back, are you kidding me?!" But after a thoughtful pause, she said with a low, resolute voice, "Because it's not me anymore."

This is the part where you may be reminded of a saying you've heard a thousand times: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." She preferred this Gabby—the Gabby who suffered, who is still finding ways to rebuild. To love herself exactly as she is now—not in spite of what happened, but because of it. To not defer her grief, but to

find beauty in it—especially in what feels like experiences that are not at all beautiful. Have you ever noticed how, when you hear about people's hardships, something happens to you? For a moment, you stop caring so much about your own sorrow, uncertainty, and challenges... And you really care about theirs.

In an instant, you're transported to the soft turf of their sidelines. Your arms are up; you root; you rally for them! Your cheers propel your feet onto their field! Like a grandparent, you love them for everything they've ever felt and will ever feel. As you put your arms around their anguish, their pain is exchanged for empowerment. And you both cash out. You lift each other to the goal. As Ram Dass said, "We are all just walking each other home", and home is—of many things—these profound arenas of expansion.

Whether you're the listener or the speaker; subject or the facilitator; the injured or the advocate; this intent listening makes all listening sacred. In this series for Connecticut Voice, I'll be sharing reflections on my *Audacious* conversations. They're all love stories, really: Love of exploration, love of pushing the limit. Love for self, and love for what the struggle has to offer us all. Love for the absurd illusion of separateness which is a function in—not a bug of—this human experience. Love for how we all overlap. I hope you see yourself in these stories, and tell yours one day. Then, we will be reminded of what it feels like to root each other on. And on, and on... 

—Chion Wolf



“Love for how we all overlap.”

—Chion Wolf

Host of the *Audacious* radio show and podcast on Connecticut Public Radio, Chion Wolf. Photo by **Keith Claytor**

## Brian Sims Speaks For Equality

**F**ew people have devoted as much of their lives to doing good as Brian Sims. After

many years as an attorney, Sims became the first openly LGBTQ+ person elected to the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 2012. During his decade as a legislator, he worked to remove homosexuality from the state criminal code, voted to expand protections for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, defended access to reproductive healthcare, fought for criminal justice reform, and sought solutions to environmental issues disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities.

In 2012, Sims chose to attempt to climb the political ladder by running for Lieutenant Governor, but ultimately lost the state's Democratic primary to Austin Davis. After that defeat, Sims chose a new direction for his life and joined Out Leadership as its Managing Director of Public Policy & Government Affairs.

*Connecticut Voice* recently spoke to Sims, who turned 44 last year, about his career, past and present, and what can be done to preserve LGBTQ+ rights:

**CV: Why have you always been attracted to public service?**

BS: My parents are both retired Army Lieutenant Colonels—they met during Vietnam and stayed active—and through them, I saw the importance of public service. I also saw the true meaning of equality early on in my

life because what they did was not defined by gender. In fact, my parents' entire approach to life was shaped by the notion of equality.

**CV: Were you prepared for what it meant to be an openly gay elected official?**

BS: I had to learn how to handle the depth and breadth of vitriol within the Assembly that I would receive, not just for my personal life but for standing up for LGBTQ men and women. I was the first out assemblyperson—although I know there are dozens of closeted officials in government, and I understand many of them chose to stay in the closet to either advance their careers or out of fear. I understand that. I wore a bullet-proof vest to and from my car every day. I had to move every two years, because by law, my address became public every 24 months, so I would get death threats. It was very hard on my friends and family because I also put them at risk. I am so grateful nothing happened.

**CV: So, how did you become involved with Out Leadership?**

BS: I have known about the work of Out Leadership for my whole career. The organization works directly with some of the most powerful businesses in world, from Walmart to Coca-Cola, which are among the most powerful players and influential entities in their states. We discuss issues such as taxes and supply chains, and, more importantly, what they can do to advocate equality.

**CV: What does that mean in practical terms?**

BS: I will be working with these companies advising them on how to become advocates for LGBTQ rights. There are states and countries where having HIV is a crime; some states still don't have anti-discrimination laws. We want to pressure these places to change their policies. When Brunei came out against LGBTQ people, by making homosexuality punishable by death, the organization worked with banks around the world to make this unacceptable. It's my job—our job—to help give businesses a voice.

**CV: Is this job just a respite from politics?**

BS: My approach to equality work is long-term, and it always has been. I don't see myself running for office in the near-term, but I didn't see doing it the first time. Right now, my passion will be helping other LGBTQ people run for office. There should be dozens of us in elected positions.


**CV: Do we need more LGBTQ politicians to protect things like gay marriage?**

BS: We know all LGBTQ rights are in the crosshairs of this activist Supreme Court. Luckily, the reality is that our officials at the federal level recently enshrined a law—the Respect for Marriage act—that reaffirms the public belief in marriage equality. Plus, the precedent of decisions like Obergefell makes it less likely the Supreme Court could overturn this one right. But

we have to be out there to tell our stories. I always say that our personal storytelling has gained us more rights than any politician ever has!

**CV: Connecticut is fairly progressive in LGBTQ+ policies. Any thoughts for our state?**

Connecticut stands out as one of the states in America where the legal and social environments best support LGBTQ+ people living openly. The Constitution State currently ranks second in the nation on the Out Leadership Business Climate Index but there continues to be a stronger than expected religious exemption for discrimination enshrined in the State's Religious Freedom Restoration Act. No person in Connecticut should be discriminated against and we urge Connecticut's leaders to remove these exceptions and fully support equality and non-discrimination.

According to the organization, among nearly 100 member companies, Out Leadership is proud to have many with a valued presence in Connecticut, including BlackRock, iHeartMedia, PwC, Coca-Cola, First Republic Bank, and more! If you're interested in learning more about how your company can be a part of Out Leadership and using the power of business to advance LGBTQ+ equality, please visit [outleadership.com](http://outleadership.com) and click the "join" button. 

—Brian Lipton

**...our officials at the federal level recently enshrined a law—the Respect for Marriage act—that reaffirms the public belief in marriage equality.**





## Dressing the Part

**M**anchester native, Keith Nielsen didn't start out to design costumes for movies, but he's excited that's where he landed. The graduate of East Catholic High School headed to Florida and the Ringling College of Art and Design for his college years.

He ended up back in the state working with Rocky Hill-based Synthetic Cinema on several of their projects. Synthetic has been very active in Connecticut, and the company is passionate about bringing more filmmaking here, according to Nielsen.

Nielsen came by his love of fashion quite naturally. His grandmother taught him to sew, and even helped him develop his senior thesis in college—his first fashion line. He also credits his mother and growing up in a very crafty family for instilling in him the joy of fashion. Nielsen anticipated that he would be making contemporary garments, but when the movie opportunity came knocking, he picked up the thread.

"I'm doing everything I said I'd never do," he said laughing on a Zoom interview. "I never wanted to do costumes; my mind was so fashion focused. There was a block in my mind about dressing people for a characters and not for themselves [as individuals]."

That's all changed, however. He continues, "Now I'm obsessed with character development. I love all the psychology." Nielsen says that what he discovered was the ability to create one-of-a-kind looks, and he loves it. He readily admits that's not

something he would have the chance to do if he were designing a line of clothing for retail.

Most recently, Nielsen designed the clothes for *The 12 Days of Christmas Eve*, a

kind of *Groundhog Day* story starring Kelsey Grammer. The film was produced by Synthetic Cinema and shot in Connecticut. For Synthetic, Nielsen also designed *A Holiday Spectacular*, a

Hallmark Movie featuring the Rockettes. That film is set in 1958, and Nielsen was able to indulge and express his love for period clothes in that.

In looking back, Nielsen says he was inspired by famous



Keith Nielsen

designers like Edith Head, who during the golden era of Hollywood designed clothes for more than 400 movies and won eight Academy Awards. However, Nielsen says he also loves the work of the lesser-known William Travilla, who designed many costumes for Marilyn Monroe, including her iconic pink gown from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Nielsen says Travilla doesn't get the respect he deserves for his contributions to movies. Nielsen also says he was inspired by contemporary designs as well. "When I went to see Madonna's Confession tour, it changed my life", he says.

Currently, Nielsen is working on a film set in the 1940s, which excites him. He says he listens to The Andrews Sisters as he works, and adds that this is a great time for costume designers. "We're in a Hollywood moment," he says. Certainly with the number and diversity of productions currently in development and shooting, there's lots of room for great clothes—and high-concept creations.

Still, working on shooting timelines isn't always easy. Budgets are tight, too, so there isn't always the ability to build things from scratch. However, most costume designers will tell you that the ability to adapt, rebuild and "Frankenstein" existing pieces to create a new and original look is a skill—and an artform—all its own.

Now that his career is up and running, I asked him what advice he would have for young people who are interested in pursuing this type of career. Over and above learning the fundamentals of his craft—drawing, conceptualizing and managing teams—he says, "Be curious and ask




Keith's design on the set for *A Holiday Spectacular*.

**Be curious and ask questions. Explore the different facets of an industry, and pursue it if you're drawn to that.**

questions. Explore the different facets of an industry, and pursue it if you're drawn to that. I love what I do, and thank God I was curious, and I explored it.

"I see my twenties as my foundation decade. There's a

lot happening. You're getting into the real world, and it's shocking. So, I said yes to everything." That allowed him to create that foundation so that when he felt he had a clear direction he was able to pursue it.

And, finally, he says. "Work hard. When you think you are working hard, work harder." Great advice for anyone—but particularly for those in the challenging and competitive world of the arts. 

—Christopher Byrne

## Linda Estabrook Retires From HGLHC

Linda Estabrook who has led the Hartford Gay and Lesbian Health Collective (HGLHC) as executive director for 34 years has announced her retirement. Joining the organization in 1983, six years after its founding, Estabrook led the organization through some of the darkest days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, up through the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and continued to deal with health challenges facing the collective's patients.

Under her guidance, the HGLHC has become a leading health organization in the state, serving people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, always emphasizing, health, wellness, care, and community.

Over nearly three-and-a-half decades, Estabrook says she watched the evolution of HIV/AIDS from a widely misunderstood death sentence to a manageable chronic disease. In a conversation with *Connecticut Voice*, she spoke feelingly of the early days when testing could take weeks and was a potentially traumatic experience—whether the results were positive or negative. She recalls asking patients if they wanted to be tested, if they wanted the results of the tests, and what they would do when the found out.

She added that while today there are an assortment of treatments, and much more is known about HIV/AIDS, the caregivers are still asking the same questions. Care for the patients and their well-being continues to be the primary concern.

Looking back at the changes she's seen over the years, Estabrook also said that she has seen people coming out at younger and younger ages. She says, "it's pretty amazing to witness the positive changes that are impacting youth." At the same time, she says, "sometimes it feels like the more progress that's been made, the more dangerous the world can become." As a result, Linda and her team have constantly looked at how best to support their clients in a dynamic world.

Speaking of a changing world, the organization was challenged with COVID-19, and Linda once again led the organization through a crisis. She notes that for many of the gay men HGLHC serves, there was certainly generational trauma as COVID spread, so much was familiar to the early days of HIV/AIDS as unknowns and fear gripped the country. Even as recently as last year, the emergence of Mpox created another challenge for the collective.

Estabrook is rightfully proud of how HGLHC responded. "We had to develop programs and services on the fly," she says. "We were working with various partners, and we needed to flip the switch and make that happen." She and her team were successful, which resulted in a huge bump in clients. In July of 2022, they served 26-to-28 clients, and by August that had grown to 178. Along with that, there are all the staffing, funding, and advocacy issues that go along with that expansion and being able to serve those who need them.




Linda Estabrook

The work never stops, and asked if she's going to take some time off when she steps down on June 30, Estabrook laughs. "Certainly, that has crossed my mind," she says. However, she wants to ensure that the work of the collective continues. "After 34 years, there are all kinds of documentation, institutional experience, and memory." Making sure those are preserved are the tasks of her last few months in the job...as well as overseeing ongoing care.

Over the years, Linda has received many awards and accolades, including

the Susan S. Addis Award in Public Health Practice and the Dorothy Award of Leadership in Health for the LGBTQ+ community, and the Spirit of Community Award Lifetime of Service, promoting health, wellbeing, and justice.

As she moves on—and hopefully ultimately gets a little downtime—Linda's legacy of caring advocacy and providing compassion and consideration for the diverse communities HGLHC serves, will endure for many years to come. 



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## RuPaul's Drag Race Finally Has a Connecticut Queen or Three

For 14 seasons we've watched the Emmy Award-winning *RuPaul's Drag Race* showcase queens from such states as New York, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, North Carolina—even Arkansas.

But after 14 years and more than 200 contestants, there wasn't a Connecticut-based drag performer among them.

Until now.

For the 15th season, which began in January, the popular drag competition series—now on MTV — features not one, not two, but three artists who live in and

perform around the state: Amethyst, Loosey LaDuca, and Robin Fierce.

(One could say there are four Connecticut dragsters if you count Jax, who grew up in the state but lives and performs in New York.)

I talked with the main Nutmeg Trio in January during the early stages of the new season's broadcast, which features 16 queens from around the country vying for the series' biggest cash prize yet: \$200,000.

"It became Connecticut versus the world," laughs Robin Fierce. "But it was nice seeing familiar faces and

faces that I get along with."

Loosey, says she was walking her dog Rocko, a Yorkshire chihuahua, late last spring near his home in Ansonia, when his cell rang, indicating the call was from Los Angeles. "At first I thought, 'OK, this is a telemarketer, but I picked up anyway and when I heard, 'Hi, Loosey?', my heart stopped. When they told me I was selected, my first reaction was, 'No way! I think you're wrong. I think there's more to the process.' And they said, 'Nope. You have been cast!' I was standing right in front of my elementary school, so it was really a full-circle moment.

There were similar states of shock and awe with others.

"I'm so new to the game having performed for less than three years," says Amethyst. "So, did I think I was going to get selected on my first try? Absolutely not. I was just hoping they'd remember me for next time I auditioned."

"The show was the reason I started drag in the first place," says Amethyst who is from Bristol and though relatively new to the catwalk has become a Tik-Tok-grown comedy queen.

For Robin Fierce, it was her fifth audition tape that was

the charm. "I almost didn't send it in," says the Hartford-based performer.

The last time she sent her tape in, she received a crank call saying she was on the show and got "super excited and then super disappointed when I learned it was a crank call. So, I was definitely a little more guarded, but when I learned it was real it was an amazing moment."

Because the three were all sworn to secrecy, none of the three knew the others were selected, which was especially difficult because they often worked at the same venues, including the Chez Est club in Hartford, "our home bar," says Loosey.

Because of the trio's prolonged absence for the filming the series, others surmised the reason.

"I had them all booked for



Southington Pride Balls in the Air Bingo at Witch Doctor Brewing with Loosey

my shows, and they all called me on the same day, saying they had to cancel saying

whatever the reasons they gave," says event producer and entertainment agent Sky Casper. "I was like, 'Hmmmmm, OK.' Let's just say I put the puzzle pieces together."

Each thought they were the first Connecticut queen on the show—until the first episode when they all met in the iconic pink "workroom" and screamed with excitement when they saw the others.

Loosey, who auditioned "two or three times" over her 13 years in drag, said she "didn't try to present what I thought they wanted. I tried to present exactly who I was. The most important part of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is authenticity."

Loosey says her non-drag life as a construction worker gave her the strength to hang in there and keep auditioning.

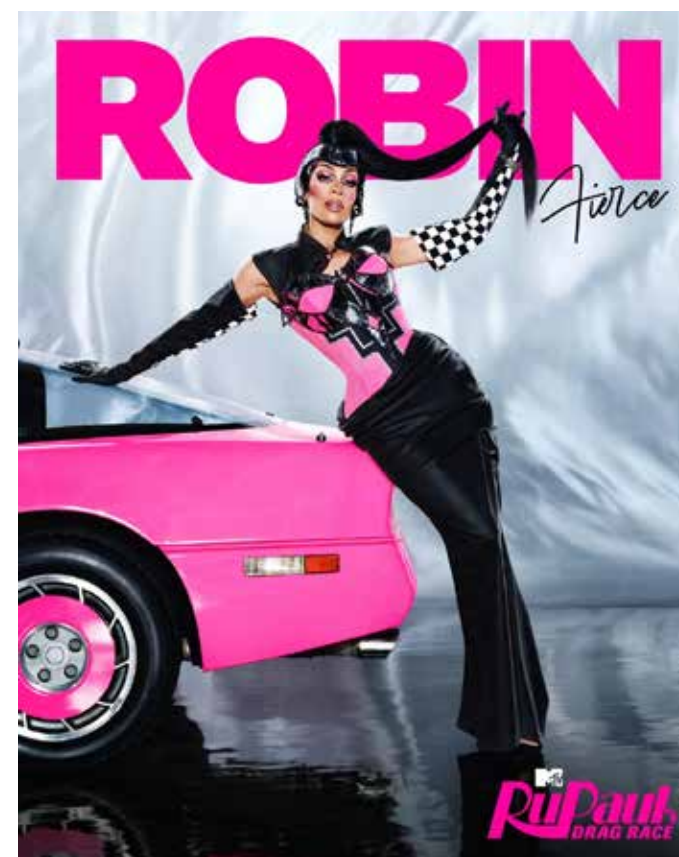
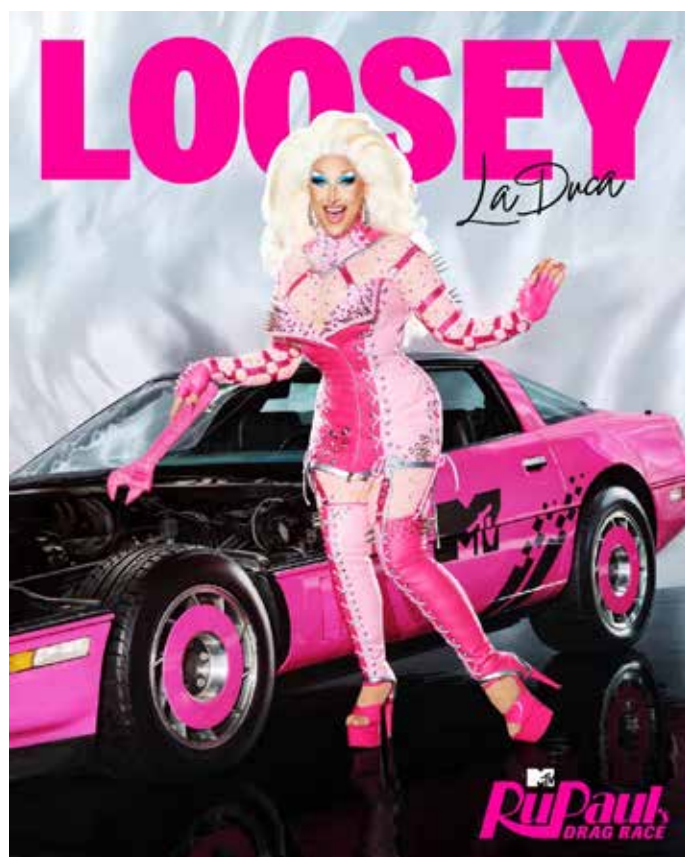
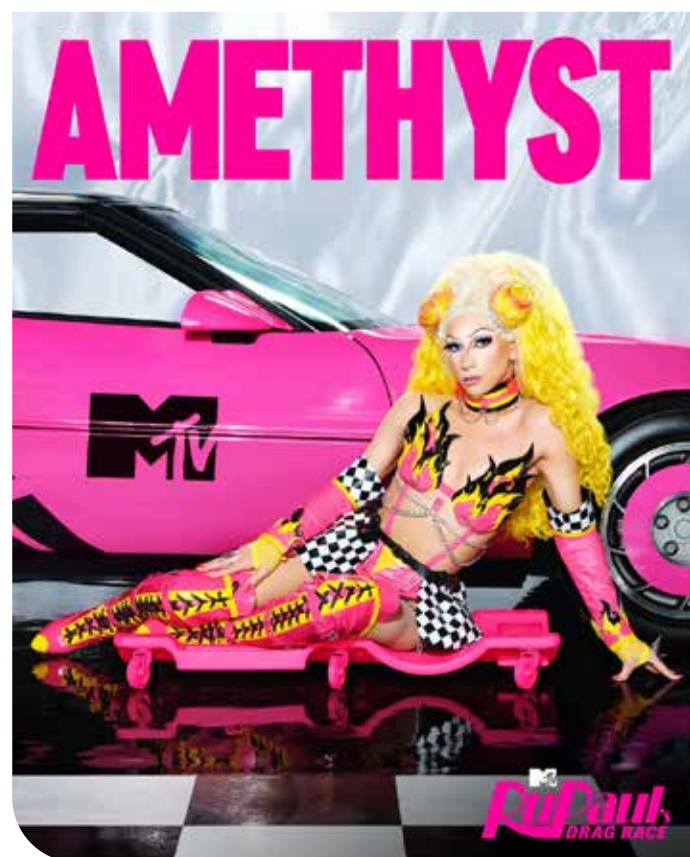
"Construction work and drag are not that different,"

she says. "Both are very hard work and take a lot of creativity, tenacity and guts."

Among the other Connecticut drag venues and special events that are growing in popularity around the state are Troop 429 club in Norwalk, Chez Est in Hartford, Trevi Lounge in Fairfield, the "Lipstick Lashes & Lies" series at Mohegan Sun Resort Casino, and the "Green Eggs and Glam" drag brunches around the state. Chez Est, Troupe429 and 168 York St in New Haven are among those hosting weekly watch parties of the show on Friday evenings.

The winner of the season is expected to be crowned in April and *CT Voice* will return for June's Pride issue to chat with the queens for an inside look at the show.

—Frank Rizzo



## Hartford's Version of "Fame"



**O**n any given day at the intersection of Vernon and Washington Streets in Hartford, high school students from all over Connecticut are singing, dancing, acting, performing, playing instruments, creating art, and stagecraft. They're also learning about something many public schools shy away from teaching: Equity, equality and the history of marginalized people.

"We have open conversations about social justice issues, whereas, at some of the schools, it's like, 'No, no, no,

we don't talk about that!'" said college-bound senior Cecil Pond of East Granby. "Teachers don't want to get in trouble."

Pond, 18, is a trans man, studying visual arts at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Half Day Program, colloquially known as GHAA. It's part of the Capitol Region Education Council and located in Hartford's Learning Corridor. Like their classmates, Pond attends public high school in their hometown in the morning. On Monday through Thursday, they ride a bus to Hartford four afternoons a week for classes that don't

end until 4:15. Then they board another bus for the long ride home.

"It's a busy schedule, but it is super fun here," they said. And aside from exploring different media, Pond said what they like best is the diversity at GHAA.

Same goes for the faculty and administration, echoed Pond's teacher, Wesley Santiago. "One of the reasons I teach here is because of the diversity. And I think I've learned a lot since I've come here to open-up my view of what diversity is," Santiago said.

"I think it's also an education that's missing in a lot of schools," he said. "We talk about how the struggles between different people, whether it's the LGBTQIA+ community, whether it's the African-American community, the struggles are very similar, and the struggles inspired each other.

"The environment makes you feel very welcome, be seen without needing to restate your pronouns every single day. The faculty here remembers and takes note of that, and on the attendance sheets, they'll write a note of your chosen name and people will refer to you by

that, and remember that."

"Remember my name! Remember! Remember!" The iconic Irene Cara theme song from the 1980s television show, *Fame*, immediately springs to mind. Or perhaps for these young people, *Glee*.

"I am gay, Black and Puerto Rican," said theater department senior Andrew Rivera of Bristol, who is also making plans for college.

"We're reading a lot of stories that have to do with identity, racial and sexual and that kind of stuff. A lot of things that we talk about in the class relate to me," said Rivera, 17. "Very, very much so."

When he writes for his future audience, he chooses to avoid negativity, he said, "Because they deserve to know that being gay, being trans, being whatever, isn't all doom and gloom. If you're not cis and you're not white and you're not straight, your life is terrible! Yes, it can be, but it does not necessarily mean that is the only reason it is that way."



Vivian Speaks, also 17, is majoring in theater design and production and described herself as mixed race: Portuguese, Black, Puerto Rican, white. Her dream is to leave New Britain for Georgia to make film and television. What GHAA has taught her reflects its motto, "Make art... Change the world."

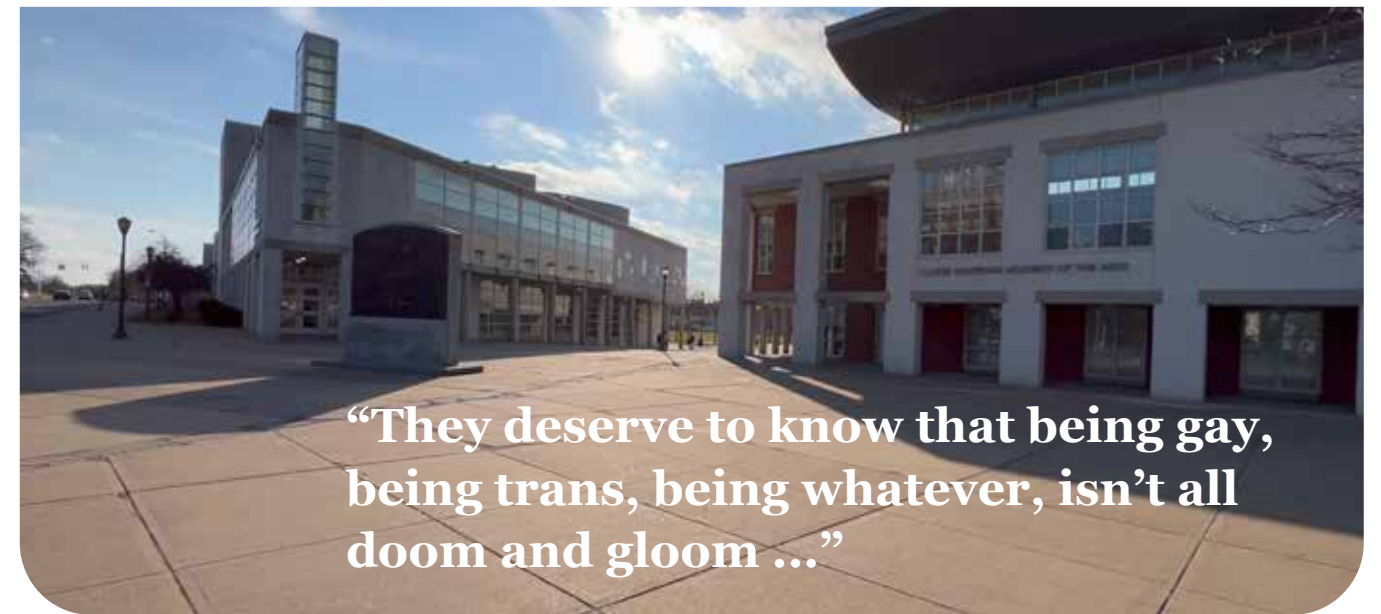
"Be yourself, love yourself, because that's all you have," she said. "Just express yourself. There's nothing to lose! You only have one life in this world. Express it to the most that you can."

According to Director Kim

Stroud, about 400 students attend GHAA's Half-Day Program, and another 400 are enrolled full-time. There's no tuition; it's free. Free transportation is also provided by CREC. But there is one thing every student has to do: audition. "I think the word 'audition' scares people in a way that it shouldn't," said theater teacher Hannah Simms, who identifies as queer. "It's really a 'getting to know you' process, and no one is told they can't come to the school based on the audition," she said. "It's to figure out which department is the best fit for you."

Stroud has been with the academy almost 30 years. "Some time ago, we decided that we would be a social justice institution, and we have embraced that wholeheartedly," she said. "We have made conscious efforts to include it in the curriculum." She says students encounter social justice on many levels, and she adds, "We're really excited about it. It empowers the students. It gives them opportunity to be decision makers and have voices that are heard. And I think it makes them better artists."

—Dawn Ennis



**"They deserve to know that being gay, being trans, being whatever, isn't all doom and gloom ..."**

## When the Unexpected Happens



Anyone following the news today has seen the growing number of layoffs of professionals, particularly in the tech sector. For younger people for whom this is the first time to go through this, it can be a disconcerting and dispiriting experience, but layoffs can happen to anyone at any age. The pandemic has certainly exacerbated this as companies seek to reset themselves in a post-Covid economy.

However job loss happens, it's never fun because for many of us, our jobs are a part of our identity. In a dynamic economy, however, layoffs are a fact of life, and emotional issues aside, there are things you can do to minimize the fallout of losing your job. Here are some tips that we recommend:

### 1. Stay positive.

It's important to remember that the decision was probably based on the economy or other external factors.

### 2. Be professional.

If you handle yourself with decorum, your employer may be willing to serve as a reference, recommend you to vendors, and even provide assistance with interviewing and résumé building. Plus, if their economic situation continues to improve, who's to say they won't hire you back?

### 3. Account for every penny.

Review your terms of employment and claim any money owed to you from bonuses, commissions—even unused vacation. Also, find out if you are entitled to a severance package. If not, file for unemployment benefits right away

since that claim may take weeks to process.

### 4. Replace lost benefits.

If your spouse works, see if you can add yourself to their healthcare plan. If not, or if you are single, you can apply for COBRA coverage within 60 days of termination and extend your health care benefits for 18 months. Similarly, you may want to purchase an affordable term life insurance policy to help replace any workplace coverage you may have had.

### 5. Evaluate your retirement plans.

While some employers allow you to leave your 401(k) in place, it may not always be the right move. Have a financial professional look the plan over to see if you are better off rolling over the funds into a traditional IRA or Roth IRA.


### 6. Network-Network-Network.

You never know where your next job will come from, so take advantage of every networking opportunity. Also, be sure to use social media platforms like LinkedIn to help connect with people online, and let them know you're looking.

### 7. Stay in touch.

For many people, a lot of social interaction comes from being with coworkers. Suddenly having that automatic interaction shut off can be demoralizing. Yes, it takes more work versus showing up every day, but keeping connected is good for your spirits—and who knows where it might lead professionally.

### 8. Take time to consider your next step.

There's no challenge that comes without some positive. After you get over your initial response, particularly if it came as a surprise, give yourself some time to think about what you want your next chapter to be. We often get so focused on our day-to-day functions we don't give ourselves time to think about what would be an exciting next step in our lives and careers. Even if you're stressed out at the unforeseen change—which is perfectly normal—if you can find the opportunity in it, you'll likely be glad you did. 


— Michelle Cutrali  
contributed to this article.

**DISCLAIMER:** This article is for informational purposes only, and it does not replace professional investment advice, for legal, tax, financial, or any other. It is recommended that you seek such advice from a Financial Advisor or Certified Long Term Care Planner who will understand your individual situation.

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**WHAT'S THE BUZZ?**

**Playing Safe, Staying Healthy**

**W**hen we think of STI and HIV prevention, our minds immediately go to condoms. That's great. Condoms are easy-to-use, accessible, and an effective way to reduce your risk of STI's and HIV! It's important to have condoms and know how to use them to stay safe during sex. But did you know there are other ways to prevent STI's and HIV as well? They vary in accessibility, ease of use, and efficacy. Knowing about as many risk reduction methods as possible allows you to protect yourself and to educate others.

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a daily pill that greatly reduces your likelihood of getting HIV during sex, as well as through sharing needles during intravenous drug use. About a year ago, it also became available in the US in the form of a bimonthly injection administered by a doctor. When taken as directed, PrEP is more than 99 percent effective in preventing HIV transmission during sex.

There are a few disadvantages to PrEP, however. First, it doesn't prevent other STI's. It only works for HIV, so using condoms is still strongly recommended to prevent infections like chlamydia, syphilis, and gonorrhea. It's also only available by prescription, which requires access to a doctor or other prescriber. You also have to get regular HIV tests to continue your PrEP regimen, because if you do get HIV, continuing PrEP can make HIV treatment more complicated. Overall, however, it's a safe medication that does a great job in preventing HIV.

One concern that's often cited about PrEP is that it increases risky sexual behavior that can lead to other STI's. While the research on this is mixed, prescribers of PrEP largely feel that the protective benefits of PrEP outweigh the potential increase in risky behavior.

On a similar note, HIV positive individuals can prevent transmission of HIV by taking their medications correctly and consistently. For most people, this will make your viral load low enough that

transmission is very unlikely. This is commonly known as "treatment as prevention," or "Undetectable = Untransmittable." Again, this method only prevents HIV, not other STI's, so condom use is still recommended for the best protection.

Another option is to engage in lower-risk sex. Anal, vaginal, and oral sex are higher risk sexual activities when it comes to STI transmission, but they are not the only kinds of sex! Manual stimulation (for example, hand jobs and fingering) are lower risk, as is using sex toys like dildos and vibrators. Masturbating together and dirty talk are two activities that carry no risk of STI transmission.

Recommending withdrawal (pulling out) can be controversial, because it is a much less effective way to prevent STI transmission, but if no other options are available to you, and you are still planning to have sex, it does reduce your risk of infection. It's not the best option, but this is about risk reduction, not elimination. If you are having condomless sex, it's better than nothing.

Abstinence is an unpopular option, but I'd be remiss not to mention it. Not having sex is 100 percent effective in STI prevention, and it is right for some people. If you choose to remain abstinent, this is a totally valid choice, and no one should shame you for it.

Getting tested is an important part of being a sexually active person. Getting regular STI/HIV testing can bring you peace of mind, and if it does turn out you have an STI or HIV, can get you the treatment you need as quickly as possible. This way, you can stay healthy and avoid transmitting an STI or HIV to others.

Since we are on the topic of sexual

**SEX TALK**

With Kim Adamski

risk reduction, it's worth mentioning pregnancy prevention as well. Often overlooked when it comes to LGBTQ+ folks, it is applicable to many. For example, a cis woman in a relationship with a trans woman might choose to use birth control. Many bisexual folks also use it. If you are a person at risk of pregnancy and do not want to become pregnant, talk to a healthcare provider or sexual health educator to find out what options are available and decide which method you'd like to use.

Rather than being a drag on spontaneity, appropriate care makes sex more enjoyable! Knowing you're being safe can reduce your inhibitions and allow you to enjoy sex fully, without worrying as much about risk. Talking honestly with your partner about STI/HIV status, prevention, and safety shows your partner you care about them and want to help them stay healthy.

When it comes down to it, it's up to you to keep yourself safe and to select the prevention method that works best for you. Some folks use more than one method at the same time, and some try a variety of methods before they land on the one that works for them. Don't be afraid to try something new if what you're doing isn't working for you. That's part of the magic of sex!

—Kim Adamski

## Changing the Face of Surgery

**D**r. David Shapiro is on a mission to make healthcare more representative and inclusive and to ensure that when people come to him or his colleagues, they receive the care that respects—and honors—their chosen identities.

Shapiro grew up in Middletown, attended medical school at UCONN, and is currently Chief Medical Officer for Saint Francis Hospital in Hartford, a member of Trinity Health of New England. As a young man, he became aware that

he identified as gay, and he says, "I told people I was part of the LGBTQ community and pursued my career, but says, "every time I went somewhere else, I had to re-out myself. It becomes not onerous, but tiresome."

Shapiro had to keep doing this because he had chosen to go into surgery as his specialty—not a very diverse group. "It was difficult because it was a macho culture, the so-called 'manly' experience of surgery." He says the field wasn't, in general, welcoming to women or people of color. Gay people could pass, he adds, because sexual

orientation often isn't obvious to a casual observer.

In addition to his own life story, Shapiro was also shaped by one other event: the torture and murder of Matthew Shephard in October 1998, shortly after Shapiro had entered medical school. After a residency interview where he was told "there's no place for new mothers or fags," Shapiro found a more welcoming (or at least neutral) place and emerged from his training committed to supporting inclusion and diversity in the surgical field.

When he got to Saint Francis,

he says that although he is not religious, he wanted to make sure that the "mission-based institution was serving everyone." He's proud to say that, "Saint Francis recognizes your self-identified family. They don't lock people out because of who they are." He adds that this practice is faith-based in its best form—welcoming to everyone.

In recent years, in large part because of what he has observed in the culture, his practice has become more focused. After an acquaintance of his was caught in crossfire in a bar shooting, he has



**“We want our providers to represent our patients. Shared experience makes everyone more comfortable.”**

concentrated on injury prevention, gun and violence protection, and has become increasingly aware of the ways in which more people are being targeted with violence for their gender expression.

Though he's not an activist in a traditional way—little marching or community organizing—Shapiro nonetheless puts his beliefs in practice every day. "It was important for me to have people know that I could be an advocate for them. I wanted to be sure that other gay men knew I was there for them." In addition, he wanted to be able to support people with gender dysphoria, though Saint Francis doesn't provide gender affirming surgery.


Shapiro wants people to know that he and his colleagues are creating a welcoming environment. Trinity Health has been working under the Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Initiative of 2018, which means that all forms and documents throughout the organization have been revised to respect gender identities. Internally they have trainings for advancing inclusion caring for the LGBTQ+ population, and a colleague resource group called Pride at Trinity Health (PATH) helps ensure that everyone who interacts with patients assures those patients' needs and identities are fully recognized.

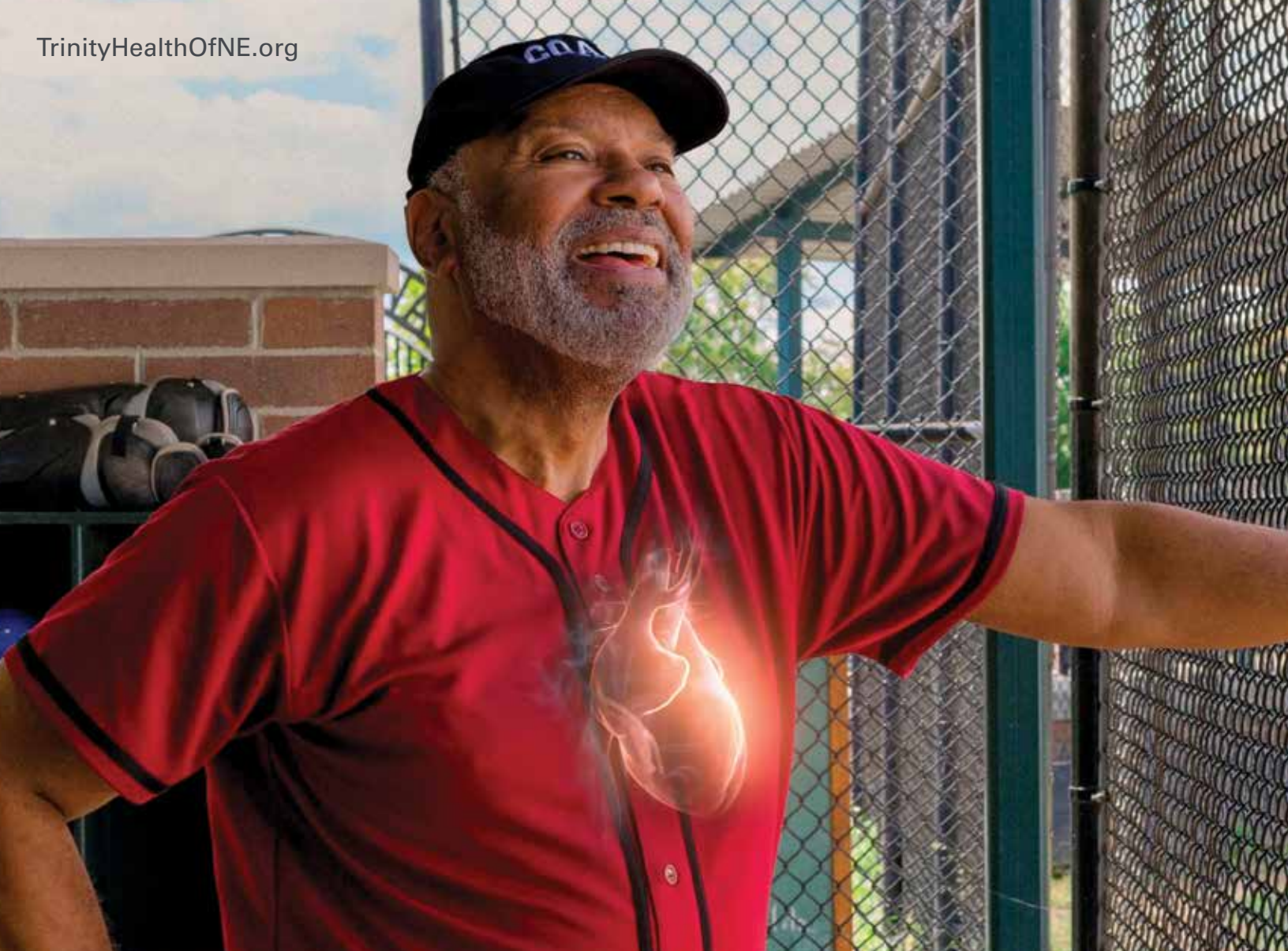
For the world of surgery,

Shapiro is determined that the field be more welcome. As one of the founders of the Association of Out Surgeons and Allies (AOSA), he says, "We wanted to make sure that the specialty of surgery didn't exclude people because they're LGBTQ+, but that they are invited in."

"We want our providers to represent our patients. Shared experience makes everyone more comfortable." Shapiro, who identifies as a bear, is an enthusiastic and charming presence who cares deeply about his patients and their outcomes. On meeting him one might notice his progressive pride pin on one lapel and a Black Lives Matter on the other. Shapiro isn't doing this to promote his views, however.

Rather, he wants patients he consults to see those and feel comfortable raising any issues they might have. For Shapiro, it's all about people feeling comfortable and cared for.

He has one other project that's near-and-dear to him: "Stop the Bleed." It's a global empowerment and training program that helps bystanders in a violent event or accident know how to intervene to treat bleeding victims. Shapiro points out that bleeding is the number one cause of preventable death in such situations. You can find out more about this program online at [CTVoice.com](http://CTVoice.com). 



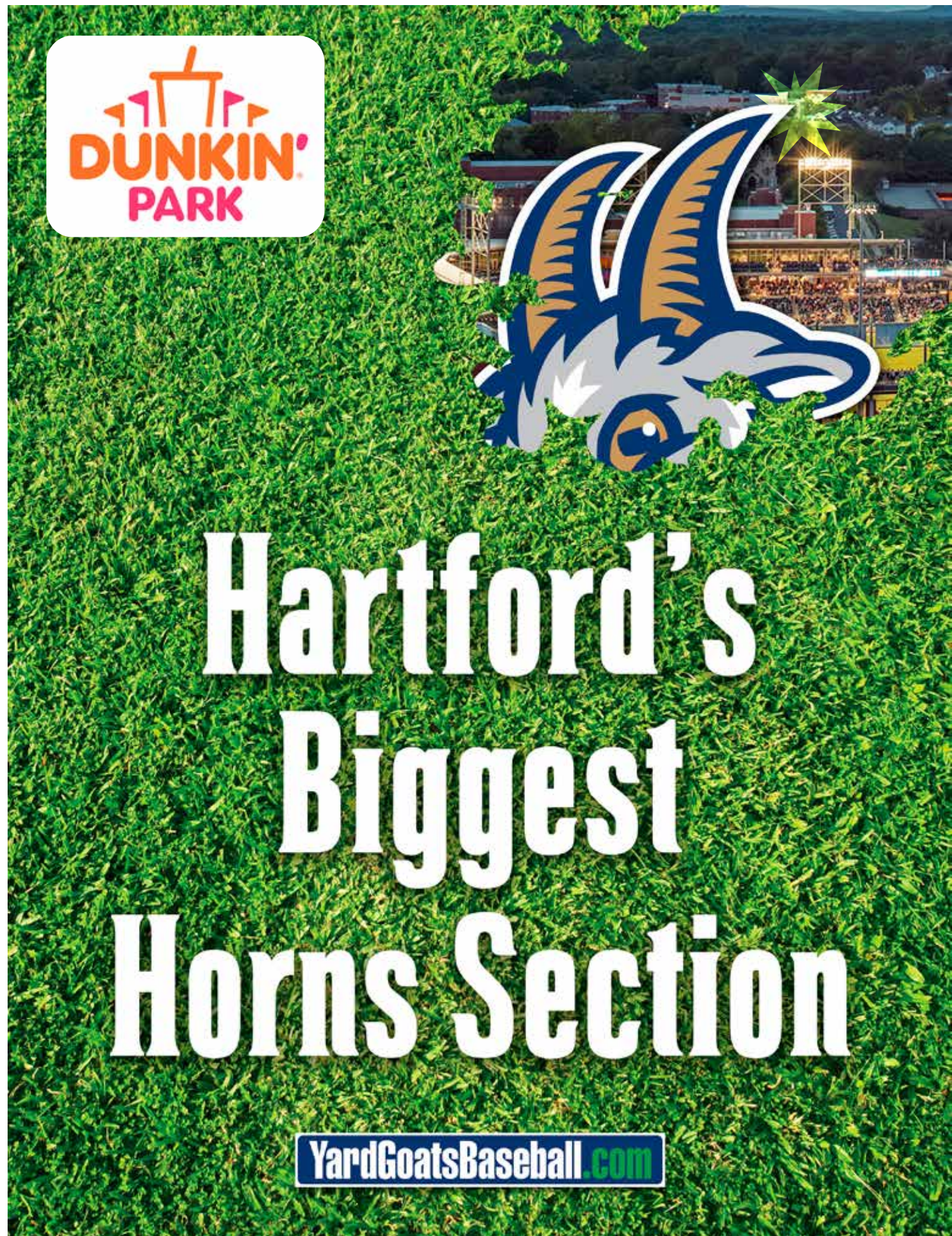
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## The Healthy Way to Make Life Changes

**W**e all do it. With a new year, we make resolutions that we think will change/improve our lives in the months ahead. That notion of fast results, of overnight success, of “overhauling” our bodies and health is a huge part of our cultural conditioning—often exploited through marketing. However, that’s not how it works for humans. Sustainable change is not an upheaval, and the belief that it is why many fail to make

those changes stick for long. By this time in the year, many of your best intentions may have fallen by the wayside. You wouldn’t be alone.

Believing we have to create radical change as the calendar flips sets off alarms in our nervous system. It triggers our fight/flight/freeze responses. You can “white knuckle” sticking to a restrictive diet or take more exercise classes only to find yourself a week later eating a pizza on the couch and giving up. It takes a lot of conscious attention and

energy to practice something new. Biologically, the brain sees this as a waste of precious calories.

You might have read that and thought, but burning calories is good, right? Not for our survival, that’s why the brain tries to automate our behaviors as much as possible, to save time and energy. Our brains are predictive, meaning once a habit is formed, our brain retrieves the answer to- how should I act in this situation and environment- from what we’ve done in the past? It



Meghan Crutchley

takes time to make change sustainable.

This is where mindset matters. We know our environment, neural pathways, and our past



experiences all influence how we respond once we are triggered, or cued, to act out of habit. Therefore, the first step to changing habits is to become conscious of them.

Bringing awareness to your behaviors means meeting yourself in the moment. In the same ways that we as queer people have had to return to ourselves again and again in our lives to identify who we are and what works for us at different points in our lives.

Self-awareness is the most powerful skill to possess when we’re talking about creating the life and experiences we want for ourselves.

Here are a few tips on how to use what I regard as a

superpower, our queerness (or whatever word you’d use here) to enact significant sustainable change in your health and life:

**1.** Get clear on why you want to achieve a certain goal, whatever that may be. It’s usually a lot deeper than, “I want to lose weight”, and more like “I want to feel more confident in my body.” How does this fit in with your values, identity, and what you want to experience in life?

**2.** Identify the smallest action you could start taking each day that would help you consistently move closer to your goal. The smaller the better, this way we don’t set off the alarm bells in our bodies. For example, start a movement

practice with walking around the block 1 time per day for 2 weeks. Once it feels super easy to practice, then you increase slowly.

**3.** Make your environment work for you, Ask yourself: “What things do I need to help me get out the door on my walk, putting sneakers near the door, downloading a few podcasts, recruiting a walking buddy?”

**4.** This works the other way too: “What obstacles do I think might come up around this habit, how can I remove things in my environment that won’t be helpful?”

The goal is to start shifting our thinking away from having to feel motivated and focus on the small

behaviors that are going to help us build Momentum. Motivation acts more like emotion; comes and goes. Whereas building momentum using small daily actions practiced over time taps into how our brain naturally works, and so it’ll observe that this action is being taken repeatedly and it’ll automate it for us! Then, by the time that walk around the block slowly turns into a 5k walk/run at the end of 6 months, you’ll be astounded at how easy it was to do. Then, take the pressure off by considering everything just practice! Need some help figuring out your next steps? Let me know what you’re working on! Meghan. habitqueer@gmail.com

# Get Out, Connecticut



Yeah, it's been a wacky winter, but as spring comes, it's time to get out in the state. And "out" is the operative word at the Connecticut Office of Tourism. The organization has been significantly increasing its efforts to attract LGBTQ+ travelers—and to communicate to everyone in state how welcoming it is.

"Positioning LGBTQ people at the forefront of our efforts welcomes visitors from all walks of life," says Noelle P. Stevenson, state tourism director. "It's part of our DNA that everyone should feel

welcome." She adds that inclusion is a year-round effort, too, noting, "We're not just about raising flags in June, we celebrate the community and diversity all year long."



Coming out of the pandemic, Stevenson says people are eager to travel, and they're eager to find places that are welcoming. And there sure are a lot of them.

From Pride celebrations around the state to drag shows to music and arts festivals, to what Stevenson calls "adrenaline" activities such as skiing, hiking, rock climbing and so forth, her job is to ensure that everyone everywhere knows that whomever they love and whatever their family looks like, they will feel at home in the state.

Stevenson adds that in recent months, she's been attending travel and trade shows and has been impressed to hear how people in the travel industry are seeing Connecticut as a destination, as well.

Stevenson and her team have been hard at work, and they anticipate that people and businesses throughout the state will see positive results. For example, Connecticut became the first state to join the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association at the global partner level, an organization designed to support LGBTQ+ travel and tourism—and at the same time underscoring the social and economic impact of these communities.

In addition, the Office of Tourism is blowing their own horn with a new multi-million-dollar campaign called "Find Your Vibe," which highlights the state's culture and focuses on LGBTQ+ events and locations. And, of course, they are going all out to promote the many Pride events around the state.

You can find all of this and much more at the Office's newly updated website, [CTVisit.com](http://CTVisit.com). They've devoted an entire section to venues, events, and more targeted to the LGBTQ+ community.

While Stevenson says that their work is "aggressively local," trying to inform state residents about the many outstanding options available, Connecticut is becoming an international destination as well. She points to the resumption of Aer Lingus flights to Bradley direct from Dublin, which began last November, and will facilitate people coming from all over Europe.

All of this is good news as we are emerging, at least somewhat, from the pandemic, and people are eager to travel more. Stevenson is encouraged, saying "Whether or not to travel is not even part of the conversation any more. People are going." They are indeed. Late in 2022, the state saw a 15 percent rise in tourism, the largest of any state coming out of the pandemic, and all indications are that the numbers will keep growing, adding billions (With a "B") to the economy, to say nothing of creating great experiences and memories.

In our next issue, we'll highlight Pride and many more summer events. In the meantime, check out [CTVisit.com](http://CTVisit.com), and then, get out.



IN THE SPIRIT //

# THRIVING,

Not just surviving: Connecticut's LGBTQ+ nonprofits after Covid

By JANE LATUS



Pride block party. Photo by Linda-Cristal Young

**I**f what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and you aren't dead ... you must be one of Connecticut's leading LGBTQ+ nonprofits in the non-quiet-yet-aftermath of Covid.

Except for resuming most services in-person, directors of three of the state's major nonprofits say they are still in the midst of managing Covid.

They've made many changes, weathered drops in donations, worked overtime, and exhausted themselves. But they also managed to create joy, discovered ways to better serve their clients, and strengthened alliances.

Nonprofits are always challenged to raise funds and provide services, and particularly during Covid, the need was greater than ever, and people were strapped when it



New Haven Pride



came to being able to donate. Still, thanks to perseverance, vision, and commitment, LGBTQ+ organizations were able to weather the storms (even the unexpected ones) and continue to provide much-needed services and support.

### New Haven Pride Center

It wasn't just COVID that upset this organization. In November 2022, the Pride Center lost its nonprofit status after failing to file some financial reports. They are in the process of reorganizing under the new interim director, Juancarlos Santos. Previously, however, the Center had supported the community through the pandemic.

Food insecurity was the center's initial top priority, with 65 percent of clients reporting it as a problem. Many in the community lost their jobs, and with it their income. The organization

had to pivot to operate as a food pantry.

For 17 weeks, 30-40 volunteers delivered food to up to 125 families. Deliveries including pasta, rice, canned tuna, beans, fresh fruits and vegetables, and fresh-baked bread provided at cost by G Café Bakery on Orange Street. A grant funded the program.

The center remained open for three weeks after quarantine began, and was able to meet their clients' needs. Within three weeks they ramped up virtual programming: drag performances, panels, social groups, book clubs, tours of the center's art gallery, and Netflix movie nights where people could stream together and chat. Programs were designed to keep the community connected.

They began a weekly email. It was designed to provide encourage and resources, and the community responded positively, looking forward to each edition.



Some pandemic-produced worries were unique to the community. HIV-positive people were worried about supply chain issues for their medications. Young people were going back in the closet because they were back home.

Funds were even tighter than usual, but they were able to secure some PPP (Paycheck Protection Program) grants, which allowed them to add caseworkers and increase staff.

One other issue emerged during the pandemic: an acceleration of hate. The Center was attacked in social media as they tried to advertise Pride celebrations during Covid. For example: a parent asked for help after their nonbinary middle school student was kicked out of a private school over their identity. Worried parents and teachers were calling over rumors that area schools may prohibit GSAs (gay-straight alliances.) The Greenwich school board this year removed sexual orientation and gender identity from its Title IX policy.

All that worked virtually stopped when the Center



Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective

U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro, a longtime ally and supporter.



Estabrook celebrates Supreme Court's extension of workplace discrimination laws to LGBTQ+ people.

lost its nonprofit status. However, in February of this year, Interim Director Santos and the Center's board were able to reestablish the Center's nonprofit status and got \$200,000 in relief funding from the state. It is in the process of returning to its focus as a community center and with the support of many New Haven organizations and political backing is on the road to re-establishing its important role in the community.

### Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective

"Busier than ever" is how director Estabrook describes the health collective. Last August the clinic saw 178 people, up from 26 in July.

Anyone who thinks Covid is over obviously doesn't answer the phones at HGLHC, where Covid is getting in the way of vaccinations for yet another disease, Monkeypox. (The disease is now being referred to as "Mpox.") "We're scheduling clinic appointments for [Mpox] vaccines, and every single week people are calling and saying, 'I have Covid and need to reschedule my appointment,'" says Estabrook.

Add to that skyrocketing cases of sexually transmitted diseases. The Centers for Disease Control last fall announced a steady rise in STDs over five years, including a 65 percent increase in syphilis. "Those continue to go up," according to Estabrook.

Managing these illnesses is in addition to the daily services the collective provides, among them: HIV and STD testing, sexual health exams, providing PrEP, and services like dental care and daily meals for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Changing guidance from the CDC keeps staff heads spinning as well. The CDC keeps reversing its opinion on whether you can administer Covid and Mpox vaccines together, says Estabrook.

Some things are certain about the Mpox vaccine, though, and they're important for those for whom it's recommended to know: HGLHC has plenty of it, it's free, and—most importantly—it doesn't become fully effective until two weeks after receiving the second shot.

Estabrook stresses that behavior change



is crucial. "It isn't just the vaccine slowing the numbers of Mpox: it's behavioral change, having fewer sex partners."

Meanwhile, she adds, "Covid continues to exist, and it continues to impact the Health Collective and the people we serve." Covid necessitated many adaptations, including physical changes to their buildings. To prevent Covid from spreading, they converted a room into a negative pressure room. This room is now being used for administering Mpox vaccines. "What we learned about PPE from Covid we apply to the Mpox situation," Estabrook says.

The changes cost "tens of thousands of dollars," she adds. "In the initial six-month-to-a-year period, various entities stepped forward with funding, so we were able to buy air filters, and special equipment for the dental clinic." That equipment prevents particulates from getting from the mouth into the air.

The collective's biggest fundraising event, One Big Event, had to move online for two years. It was back in person in November.

The dental clinic is back open, and social and support groups are back in full swing in various combinations of indoor/outdoor/online.

The meal program, which serves 350-400 people, switched from buffet style to take-out containers. A social component was added to make up for not meeting in-person.

For health care workers, ebbs and flows and tsunamis come with the territory. "It does take a toll when you respond to a public health emergency, but everyone steps up to the plate," says Estabrook. "And we make changes and continue to move forward in a productive way."

### Triangle Community Center

"Great timing" might sound sarcastic, but when Rivas took over as executive director at the start of the pandemic, it was fortunate that he was already a board member, so well familiar with the organization.

A surging demand for mental health services (especially among the young and old) was the center's biggest Covid-related challenge, he says. Staff members were working double-duty to try to keep up.

The center was able to expand services at no cost by implementing a new intern program. Eight interns, working toward their professional licenses, provided 2,300 hours of free counseling in 2021. The monthly caseload shot up from 20 people to 70. "It helped us get rid of the waiting line for mental health services," says Rivas.

The center trains interns to be LGBTQ-competent, so wherever they end up working, that effort will support their future proficiencies. The center has even hired two of its interns.

They added two more clinicians,



Triangle Community Center's inaugural Pride Parade of Sail

including a grant-funded counselor who counsels LGBTQ+ students at Norwalk public schools. “The schools introduced LGBTQ questions to a student survey and, not shocking to us, the highest rates of suicidal ideology, depression and anxiety are in the LGBTQ community,” says Rivas.

Another Covid change was an expansion of the center’s food pantry. Previously it was only for clients’ emergency needs, but the center learned that local food banks were working at capacity. “We decided we’d help alleviate that stress,” says Rivas. “During the pandemic we spend about \$18,000 just to keep the food pantry stocked.” Pre-Covid, that was \$4,000 a year.

Also due to Covid, “All our programming had to switch completely around.” The result, though, was an

increase in offerings. They added programs for kids under 13, and more programs for seniors, including a popular pen pal program with an LGBTQ center in Washington, DC. A bonus of moving activities online was that it eliminated lack of transportation as a barrier to participation.


Creative thinking was successful—but tiring. When easing back into in-person events in 2021, the center broke down its annual Pride in the Park to 15 separate events to keep them small, outdoors, and safe. Events included the inaugural Pride Parade of Sail, concerts, a movie night, drag brunch and...well, many more. “That was a lot of work on our part. We were all exhausted by the end of June,” says Rivas. “We were very happy to have four events this year in June!”

As with other groups, fundraising took a

hit. PPP grants helped, but they had to cut expenses.

The center is looking to fill three full time positions: grant writer, development manager, and community engagement manager. Rivas says, “Looking for the right person is like finding a unicorn.”

The center’s biggest fundraiser was back in person in October—a boost for both the budget and the spirit. The Gala’s theme was Queer Prom, an opportunity missed by many the first time around, to attend as their true selves.

Encouraging as all this is, there’s always more need. To find out what’s needed, where to donate, and how to volunteer, go to [CTVoice.com](http://CTVoice.com) and click on this article. We’ll post links to each of the organizations. 

# NEWS 8

# 75 YEARS



The Essential  
J. HARRISON GHEE



By FRANK RIZZO

**T**here's a show-stopping moment in the Broadway musical *Some Like It Hot*, based on the classic 1959 film comedy.

In the new show, Jerry and Joe are two musicians in Depression-era Chicago who disguise themselves as women and join

a touring all-female band in order to flee gangsters after accidentally witnessing a mob hit.

Late in the second act, Jerry—who has gradually been coming to terms with the unexpected joy he feels in his feminine ruse—finally embraces his inner "Daphne" in a song called "You Could Have Knocked Me Over with a Feather."

In the case of J. Harrison Ghee who plays Jerry/Daphne, the song is both profound—and personal.

The out-and-proud, non-binary, six-foot-four (without heels) actor—and looking divine in a blazing red gown—transforms the song into a triumphant anthem, celebrating their combined essences and singing:

*You coulda knocked me over with a feather/  
You coulda knocked this train off its track/  
For weeks I had a funny feeling/  
That something was revealing/  
Now this genie's out the bottle/  
And she ain't goin' back...*

*Well, I have tried to love many ladies/  
Back when I sang in a much lower key  
Now you could knock me over with a feather  
cause, Joe./  
The lady that I'm lovin' is me.*

In a Zoom interview from the living room of his New York apartment, Ghee reflected on his own personal journey as someone who is gay, who does drag, and is gender fluid.

"I can't say there was a definitive moment for myself," when asked if he had a similar 'aha' moment, "so no, no 'feather.' It's something I've always felt and it's something I'm reconnecting with [with the show], freeing myself to let it out more."

But his change manifests itself in other ways, too.

"Prior to the pandemic I used to say I wasn't a political person, but since that time you could say I had a 'feather' moment realizing that as a black queer human in this world, I *am* a political statement. So, I started living even more out loud with the understanding that when I leave my home I'm making a statement, so I might as well give the world something to look at, something to think or feel differently about, and to walk in my joy."

**Getting Past Baptist Roots**

Ghee wears his personhood elegantly, whether it's glamorously walking the red carpet in top hat and satin gown, or more humbly meditating at his little shrine in his living room. But with the spotlight on him now, he has stepped up to a new calling, as a kind of "minister of intention, purpose and love," putting the human back in humanity.

It runs in the family. The child of a Missionary Baptist pastor, Ghee was raised in Fayetteville, N.C. Within a strict upbringing, Ghee found joy in singing in the family's church choir, performing in plays, playing in the marching band and in cheerleading for his school.

"My dad would say how I'd be killing this grass pretending to be an entire marching band in the backyard all by myself, dancing to the beat of literally of my own drums," says Ghee laughing.

That's sense of freedom is something Ghee wants to reclaim.

"What has helped me now in my identity journey is my ability to tap into the purest version of myself, which is 'the little me.' I feel that as a child, we know who we are, but society, our family, and the world get in the way of that, and all we're doing now as adults is fighting to get back to that innocence and purity of who we are."

Ghee was bullied in school for effete mannerisms, and there were moments when the confidence was shaken, and fear took over. But eventually his teen self became resilient, not only disallowing the slurs but also reaching out for understanding.

"At first, I fought back and yelled at anyone who had anything to say to me. But then I got to the point in high school of being more confident, and I took the time to sit down with them and ask, 'Why are you so bothered by what I'm doing?' I couldn't allow these things to keep me down because if I did, I wouldn't be able to be effective in the ministry and the purpose in life I was created to do."

**Acting Gigs and Drag**

After graduating from high school in 2007, the 18-year-old quickly split to New York, attending the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, followed by his first



“I don’t like labels and limits at all. I just want to be human, existing in this world, and to be an artist doing what I do.”

Christian Borle, Adrianna Hicks, and J. Harrison Ghee in *Some Like It Hot*. Photo by Matthew Murphy



Christian Borle and J. Harrison Ghee in *Some Like It Hot*. Photo by Matthew Murphy

professional jobs at Disney in Japan and later as lead vocalist on the Norwegian Cruise Line.

Far from home, Ghee came out as gay and then began exploring drag in the persona of Crystal Demure.

"Drag used to be my excuse to play with my feminine side and where I got to live in that place where it exists in me. But now I find the fun in letting it all play together."

Though Crystal is still around, Ghee says he feels comfortable expressing gender ambiguity on his own.

"That's one of the things I was excited about doing [*Some Like It Hot*], because it allows me to take this journey with audiences and show that yes, there is a little bit of Daphne in everybody—and you have to trust that and listen to your inner queen. She will always tell you how she wants to feel and how she wants to be. That energy is guiding you to be free."

### Coming Out in Many Ways

Coming out professionally as a gay and non-binary person was not a challenge. Ghee says there was no big sit-down with his agent and manager and others in his professional sphere. "They saw my growth and honored that, and that's one of the things I like about the team I have."

Coming out to the folks was another matter—and several times as well: as a gay person, as a drag artist and as non-binary.

Ghee came out as gay when he was 21 when he was performing in Japan, sending both parents an email with the declaration of his sexuality. The actor was prepared for his father to disown him—but he didn't. Ghee's father struggled with the news but ended by saying, "You're my son. You're a part of me. You represent me, and I love you," and that was all Ghee needed to hear.

The first line of Ghee's mother's email showed there was less of an issue: "LOL, I've known as long as you've known."

But still there was the drag aspect of Ghee's life and that wasn't shared with the family...for a few more years.

In 2015, Ghee starred as Lola in the national tour of the Tony Award-winning musical *Kinky Boots*, a role originated on Broadway by Billy Porter. Ghee became the first established drag artist to play Lola, who saves a small shoe company from ruin by devising thigh-high, spike-heeled boots made exclusively for drag queens.

Ghee's mother knew for some time about his drag persona, as did his brother, "but for my dad it wasn't until the night before he saw the show that he found out that the role of Lola wasn't that much of a stretch for his offspring. "He said, 'Oh, you get to imitate drag queens. That sounds like





Ghee on the opening night of *Some Like it Hot*.



Christian Borle, Adrianna Hicks, and J. Harrison Ghee on the first day of rehearsal for *Some Like It Hot*.

fun, just don't bring any wigs home.' And I thought, 'Oh, the time has come. We must sit down, sir.' But that was also empowering because I got to show him a portfolio of my drag. I had done photo shoots, and I was able to show him that drag was an art, and that yes, I created that. I styled that. I had the wherewithal to put these things together artistically. This is what I do. I can't run from that. This is *my* ministry."

#### Some Like it Fluid

The conversations about gender, sexuality and identity are still continuing.

"Last week I was FaceTime-ing with my mom and I said 'nonbinary,' and she stopped the conversation and said, 'Hey, when did you start using this word? I've seen it in interviews.' We hadn't had *that* conversation yet. With all that was going on [with the show] and because I wasn't trying to force [the issue] on anyone, we had never talked about it. Oftentimes I would shy away from having those conversations out of fear of how it would be received. I was at work at the time, and she said, 'OK, we'll talk about it later, but just know that I clocked it.'"

Ghee has learned over the years that he has to give others "the space and

grace" to have those conversations and "reframing and refocusing how I approach this for my own place and joy. It's not about 'coming out.' As a lot of people say, it's about 'letting in.' It's about, 'I'm letting you in to know more of me. I'm letting you understand me more as a human. I'm trusting you more with parts of me.' My mom and I have always been a little better at having these conversations. I haven't even ventured to start that conversation with my father."

#### A Different Velma

Ghee also showed their range in 2018 by starring opposite Harry Connick, Jr. in a new musical version of the 1973 Oscar-winning film, *The Sting*, playing the Robert Redford role to Connick, who took on the Paul Newman role.

"It was such a beautiful experience and to share it with Harry Connick—and the humanity and heart that man has. The conversations we would have just about life and being artists and how we approach the work that we do. I learned so much from that experience."

Ghee's TV credits include HBO's *High Maintenance* and the Netflix series, *Raising Dion*.

In early 2020, Ghee was in rehearsals for the new Broadway musical *Mrs.*

*Doubtfire*, but the pandemic closed down theater for 18 months. The show eventually opened in late 2021, but ended its run several months later.

*Kinky Boots* and *Some Like it Hot* aren't the only boundaries Ghee has broken through.

In 2021 at the Muni in St. Louis, Ghee gave new meaning to the phrase "and all that jazz" when they starred as Velma Kelly in the musical *Chicago*. Ghee did not play the character as a drag artist but rather as a nonbinary human, a first for a production of that show.

"I'm not going to pretend she's a cis gender woman," they said. "This is a nonbinary female. Everyone was aware and understood it, and it adds another layer of interest even though it's not written [explicitly in the script.]"

*Some Like It Hot*—where he stars opposite Broadway veteran Christian Borle—has redefined the guys-in-dresses comedy as something much more, showing that embracing Jerry's feminine side is what makes him perfect, taking a twist on the film's famous last line. The performance is likely to earn Ghee at least a Tony Award nomination.

Amid all the praise, attention and buzz, Ghee, who is single, is "just focusing on myself and my life. I haven't met someone who has moved me in that way. But I long for that. I hope for that."

In the meantime, Ghee says he is grateful for the humans around him during this Broadway experience. "And we talk about real things. Not just surface stuff, like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. how was your day?'" They're to the heart of the matter, conversation where you're unpacking, unearthing and asking hard-hitting questions.

"I don't like labels and limits at all. I just want to be human, existing in this world and to be an artist doing what I do. You know, if you allow life and circumstances to stretch you, you'll be amazed at what you'll find, if you just free yourself to just be." 🍷

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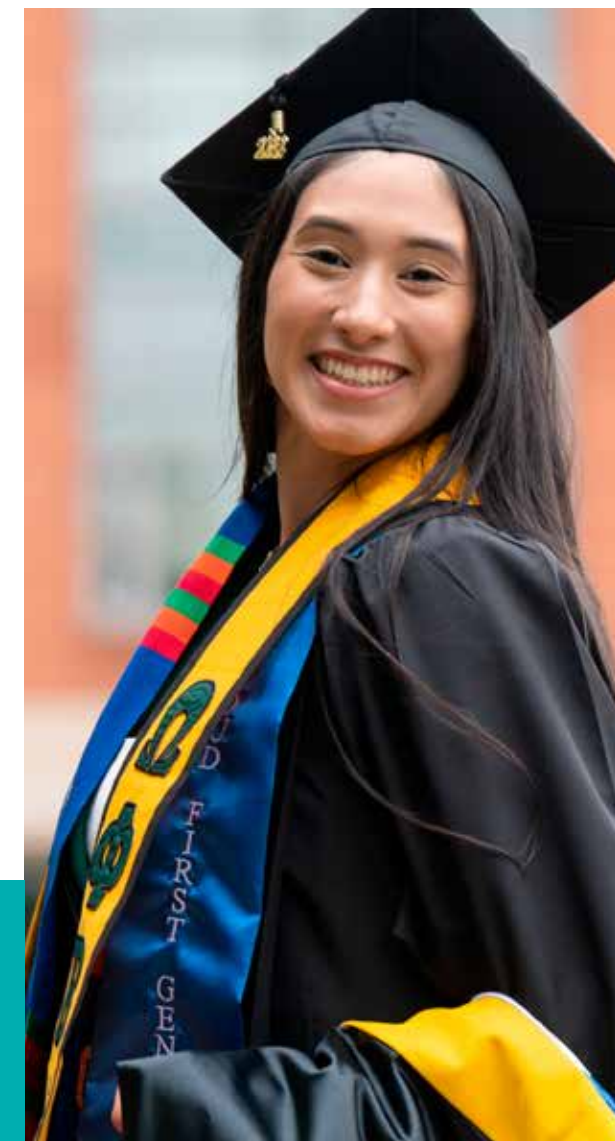
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DELICIOUS //



# Snacking Our Way to Better Health This Spring


By AMY S. WHITE

**M**any of us eat heavier foods in winter. We might carry on with the holidays' excess, reaching for carbs, cakes, and cookies to comfort us on chilly, dark days. Spring arrives, and we are a few pounds heavier and want to break the cycle. The trick may be in the snacks. It's nearly impossible to get through the day without something between meals. Good news: as long as it's the right kind of snack, indulging once or twice a day can improve metabolism and mental health. They offer fuel for our bodies and a treat for our senses.

What is the "right" kind of snack? What does "healthy" mean? Good snacks energize and provide a nutritional boost. They should also be satisfying, delicious and joy-inducing. Mixing protein with carbohydrates or fats will keep us full longer. Combining flavors (think salty and sweet) and textures (crunchy and creamy) will keep our tastebuds content.

Finally, it has to be convenient. Skip the vending machines because we all know processed foods aren't good for us. With a few easy-to-make, easy-to-take healthy snacks, we can avoid the temptations of chips and candy bars.

Here are three basic recipes—perhaps "formulas" is a better description—that both meet the "healthy snack" criteria and offer infinite opportunities for variety. There are seven "inspirations" for each recipe to get started. The one-bite wonder protein ball is nicely portable for on-the-go snacking. Then, transform the traditional smoothie into a smoothie bowl with delicious and nutritious toppings. Finally, grab some veggies, crackers or toasted pita bites and dip them in homemade hummus with flavors beyond plain chickpeas.

Our body needs to feel good, and our taste buds need to feel happy. When we control what goes into our snacks, we can feel better about grazing when the mood strikes. 

## RECIPES //

### Smoothie Bowls

(Serves 1-2)

#### Ingredients:

**2 cups frozen fruit**  
**½ cup liquid (milk or juice of choice, or use yogurt)**  
**1 banana or avocado (to thicken)**  
**Additions or toppings, such as protein powder, spices, nuts and seeds, additional fruit, granola, cereal, shredded coconut, etc., to taste**

#### Directions:

Blend together the frozen fruit and liquid. Add the banana and continue to blend until smooth. Pour into a bowl and top with favorite toppings. Make ahead of time and freeze in an airtight container; microwave for 30 seconds or so to thaw.

#### Flavor Inspirations:

**Very Very Berry:** strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and mixed berry yogurt, and top with added berries

**Banana Split:** bananas and plain yogurt, and top with strawberries, chocolate chips or cocoa nibs

**Tropical Beach:** pineapple, mango and vanilla yogurt, and top with shredded coconut and sliced kiwi

**Peaches and Cream:** peaches and vanilla yogurt, and top with granola and a swirl of heavy cream

**Fall Flavors:** pumpkin puree and plain yogurt, top with dried cranberries and pumpkin seeds, and add a sprinkle of cinnamon

**Chocolate, Banana and Peanut Butter:** banana and peanut butter (instead of yogurt), and top with chocolate chips, cocoa nibs, sliced bananas and/or peanuts

**"Ban-avocad-oat":** banana, avocado, and plain or vanilla yogurt, and top with granola or rolled oats

### Homemade Hummus

#### Ingredients:

**1 15-ounce can of beans (black beans, cannellini beans, chickpeas, etc.)**  
**½ cup optional roasted vegetable (beets, sweet potato, red pepper, etc.)**  
**2 tablespoons olive oil**  
**1 tablespoon nut butter, tahini (sesame paste), or Greek-style yogurt**  
**1-2 teaspoons citrus juice or vinegar, to taste**  
**Seasoning(s), such as freshly chopped herbs, cumin, paprika, grated garlic or ginger, toasted seeds, salt and pepper, etc., to taste**  
**Optional drizzle of sweetener of choice (honey, maple syrup, etc.)**  
**Optional garnishes, such as chopped fresh herbs, sprinkle of spice, nuts, seeds, etc.**  
**Something to dip into it!**

#### Directions:

Drain and rinse the beans and place in a food processor with roasted vegetable mash if using. Add olive oil, nut butter or tahini or yogurt, and seasonings. Puree until smooth. Add citrus juice or vinegar, seasonings, and sweetener to taste and continue to puree until smooth. Place in a bowl, garnish and dip away!

#### Inspirations:

**Roasted Beet:** add roasted beet mash, and season with cinnamon and cloves

**Black Bean:** black beans, plain yogurt, chopped chiles and lime juice


**Spicy Curry:** season with curry powder, ground turmeric, grated ginger and cayenne

**Herbed Pesto:** use pesto instead of the nut butter or yogurt

**Avocado:** add ½ avocado, and season with cumin and cilantro

**Lemon Dill:** season with garlic, dill and lemon zest

**Roasted Red Pepper:** add roasted red pepper, and season with a dash of sriracha



“A good snack is satisfying, healthy, and joy-inducing. Indulge!”

### No Bake Protein Balls

Makes a dozen

**Basic formula:**

**¾ cup old-fashioned rolled oats (a good option is Bob's Red Mill)**

**½ cup nut butter of choice**

**2 tablespoons sweetener, such as honey, agave or maple syrup**

**1½ tablespoons protein powder in flavor of choice**

**1-2 tablespoons additional ingredients for flavor and variety (e.g., coconut, chocolate chips, raisins, etc.), to taste**

**Directions:**

Stir together ingredients in a large bowl until thoroughly combined. If the mixture is too crumbly, add a teaspoon or two of water or milk of choice until it is moist enough to stick together. Roll into balls and store in the refrigerator in a covered container.

**Inspirations:**

**Chocolate Peanut Butter:** use peanut butter and chocolate protein powder, and add mini chocolate chips

**Oatmeal Cookie:** use cashew butter and vanilla protein powder, and add raisins and a dash of cinnamon

**PB&J:** use peanut butter and vanilla protein powder, and dried cranberries or chopped dates

**Almond Joy:** use almond butter and vanilla protein powder, and add chocolate chips and shredded coconut

**Carrot Cake:** use cashew butter and vanilla protein powder, and add shredded carrot and a dash of ground ginger

**Lemon Poppyseed:** use almond butter and vanilla protein powder, and add poppyseeds and the zest of one lemon

**Nut and Honey:** use peanut butter and vanilla protein powder, and add chopped nuts



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## LGBTQ+ MENTAL HEALTH CARE AT MIDDLESEX HEALTH

By JANE LATUS

It isn't easy being yourself when you're deemed different, especially if you are directly targeted simply because of who you are.

Mental health services are vital to LGBTQ+ health care at Middlesex Health, which has a multidisciplinary Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness and an intentional, system-wide focus on being affirming, supportive and expert providers to LGBTQ+ people. In January, Middlesex opened a new building that consolidates its mental health services for all individuals regardless of how they identify. The Crescent Center houses 108 staff members who were formerly spread among nine buildings.

"There's nothing inherently pathological about being queer," says Jeffrey Shelton, MD, chair of psychiatry at Middlesex and a proud gay man. "But what is distinct is what people experience. There is an inherent violence to transphobia or homophobia, and it is an incredibly scary thing to be a victim of, and that has an impact on people."

And what an impact: the authors of the National Center for Transgender Equality's 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey concluded, "The findings paint a troubling picture of the impact of stigma and discrimination on the health of many transgender people. A staggering 39 percent of respondents experienced serious psychological distress in the month prior to completing the survey, compared with only five percent of the U.S. population. Among the starkest findings is that 40 percent of respondents have attempted suicide in their lifetime—nearly nine times the attempted suicide rate in the U.S. population (4.6 percent)."

That survey took place before attacks on queer people dramatically ramped up in public schools, legislatures, and the



media. Results of the latest survey, completed in December 2022, hadn't been released at press time.

Discrimination at work or school, in public accommodations, by law enforcement, in housing, and by professional service providers causes stress. So does hateful rhetoric on social media. Add to that the nearly daily news of another state proposing to criminalize being queer.

Even in Connecticut, which last year enacted a safe-haven law for refugees from other states' anti-LGBTQ+ policies, trans residents are targeted. In January, Representative Joe Hoxha (R) introduced a bill "to require public school educators to recognize each student by the biological gender of such student."

Michael Miarecki, LCSW, is the primary mental health clinician for transgender patients at Middlesex. "The negative rhetoric in politics and society in general definitely impacts the mental health of people who identify as LGBT," he says. He spends a lot of his time helping patients, especially trans people, handle the daily news.

"There's a lot of difficult language on a regular basis," says Miarecki. "What I want people to hear is that there are a lot of people to support them through their transition or through their LGBT experience. There are therapists out there; there are support networks; there are community-based groups there to help them, whether it's through Middlesex Health or grassroots organizations."

Middlesex provides mental health services to nearly 10,000 people of all ages annually. The team includes psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse

Michael Miarecki, LCSW, oversees mental health care for trans patients at Middlesex Health.



Jeffrey Shelton, MD, chair of psychiatry at Middlesex Health.  
Photo by Stan Godlewski



practitioners, licensed clinical social workers, marriage and family therapists, clinicians who do home visits, and support staff. In every department and every position, Middlesex employees are trained to be informed and respectful to patients of all gender identities and orientations. Staff badges include Pride colors and employee pronouns. Flags welcoming all identities are displayed throughout all buildings.

“These things matter,” says Miarecki. They let patients know they are welcome.

“It is an honor to be the person who supports them,” says Miarecki, wiping away a tear. “When you hear a patient say, ‘You’re the first person to believe in me,’ it’s magical.”

Shelton agrees. “It’s been such an incredible privilege to work with older trans adults,” he says. He admires how they handle the complexities of coming out at an older age.

Middlesex offers a wide range of services, including individual therapy, support groups open to the public, therapy groups delineated by age, a navigator to support patients, and a mobile crisis team for young people. Support and therapy for LGBTQ+ individuals, virtually so distance and lack of transportation aren’t obstacles to attending. Telehealth appointments are also available for individual therapy.

It’s scary to be marginalized—or to ask for help. It’s hard to open

up to a stranger, says Miarecki, but people who have already been dismissed are even more hesitant. Many are reluctant because they’ve had negative experiences with the medical system. They may have been treated as curiosities, or had their problem overlooked while the therapist fixates on their identity. “Just because someone’s trans doesn’t mean that’s what they need to talk about,” says Shelton.

Adds Miarecki, “We look at the whole person.”

The symptoms that stress causes occur at a much higher rate for LGBTQ+ people. Patients commonly have PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Much of the anxiety and depression is situational, says Miarecki. Individuals may lack family or school support and feel isolated. “I can’t tell you the number of trans people I’ve seen who’ve never met another trans person,” says Shelton. “Not having a connection with others is really hard.”

Discrimination also leads to joblessness and poverty. Young LGBTQ+ adults make up the majority of unhoused persons nationwide. It’s easy for them to end up in a self-perpetuating cycle. It’s also easier to acquire an addiction, which is Shelton’s practice specialty. He says that methamphetamine is the most-abused substance by gay men and trans women. A psychiatrist needs to understand these circumstances in order to help patients, he says.

The encouraging news is that studies show that suicidal ideation is reduced by at least half if even one person is supportive. A study reported in the Journal of the American Medicine Association last year reported that suicidal ideation dropped 73 percent for gender nonconforming youths who received affirming care.

Support is so powerful a force that a Yale study found it can even counteract a genetic predisposition to depression. “The importance of support in someone’s life, no matter their gender or identity, is so incredibly important,” says Shelton.


Providing that support, and helping patients obtain it in all areas of their life, while providing a safe space, is what Middlesex’s clinicians do. Miarecki says people tell him things like, “You’re the first person to hear me and not judge me for being the person I am.”

Through therapy, support groups and casework, clinicians help patients build a network of support. Shelton urges patients to avoid isolation. It’s counterintuitive, but when we are lonely, we tend to further isolate because we feel vulnerable, he says.

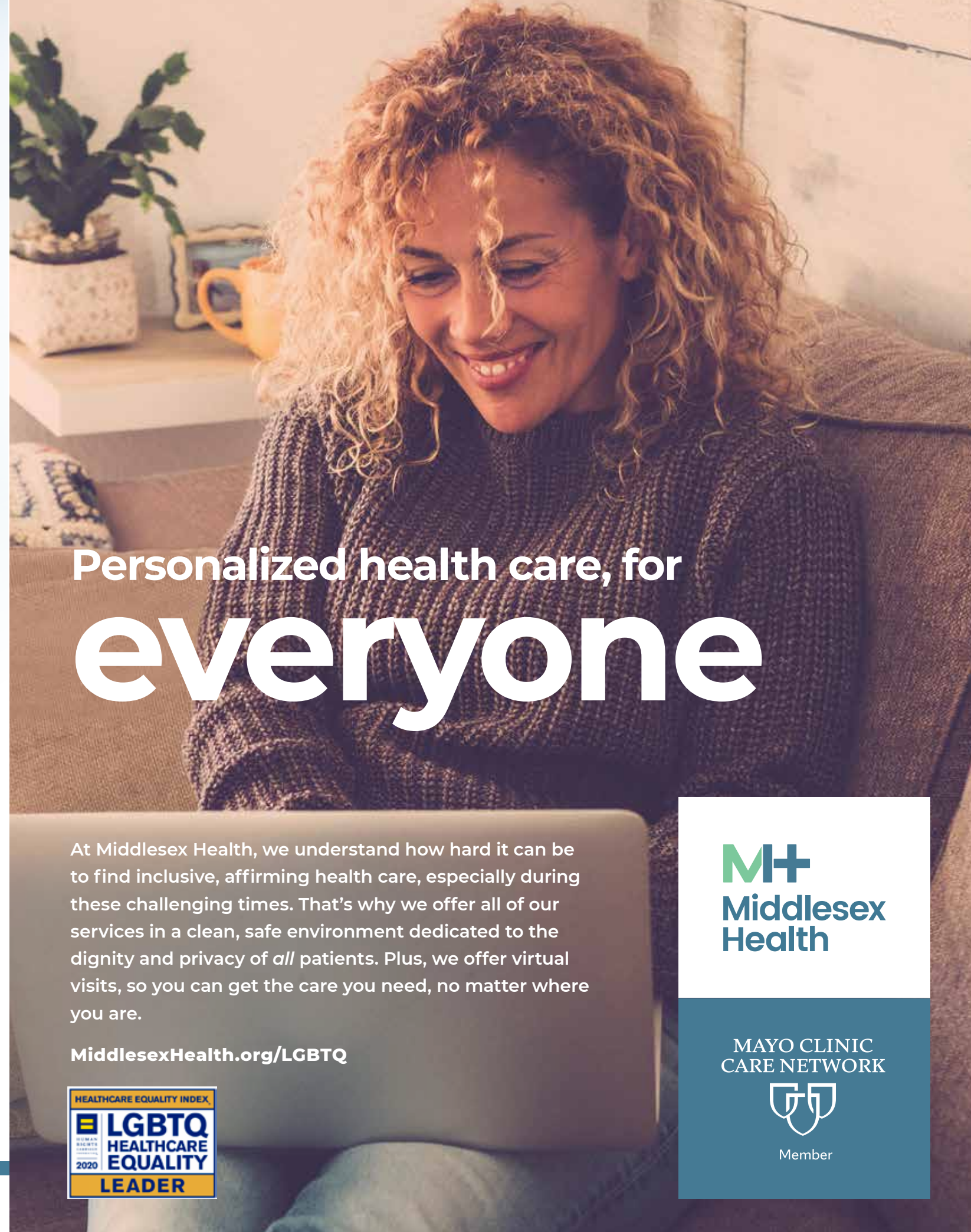
Different age groups typically face unique issues. For kids, it’s often confronting disbelief from adults who think it’s a phase or experimentation. Kids also face the stress of coming out at school.

Young adults struggle with defining their identities, and face issues in work, housing and socializing.

30- and 40-somethings may be coming to terms with difficulties they experienced while younger, since they grew up at a time that lacked societal acceptance and the terminology to define themselves.

Older people coming out can feel incredibly liberated but may also feel trauma or regret from having lived unauthentically for most of their lives. 

To receive mental health care at Middlesex, call 860-358-8825.  
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COVER STORY //

# Building Bridges:

ONE  
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WITH **Pete  
Buttigieg**

Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg spoke with CTVoice on Jan. 4 in New London under the Gold Star Memorial Bridge, one of only four crossings in the U.S. to have won a big grant under the new bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Photo by Dan LeRoy

# The out, gay, Cabinet member spills the tea about running again, transportation troubles, family life and fighting for LGBTQ+ rights

By DAWN ENNIS

**T**he afternoon of January 4 in New London was unusually warm, a 56-degree day, perfect for a politician who presses the flesh without a winter coat, wearing just a dark suit jacket over his trademark starched white shirt and traditional blue tie that perfectly matched his piercing blue eyes. Pete Buttigieg was there for a news conference that day and, like the weather, the welcome was mostly warm.

That is, until Gov. Ned Lamont invited him to step up to the phalanx of video cameras and various microphones and he began his remarks. That's when a car alarm sounded. Then another, and a few more. Each alarm blared so loudly behind the assembled crowd that heads turned away from the politicians and toward the distraction.

One police officer later said he suspected a handful of members of the four construction unions invited to the event staged a demonstration using their "panic alarm" buttons on their vehicle key fobs. This was to express their opinion about Buttigieg's sexual orientation, he speculated, and an attempt to disrupt the event when it was his turn to speak. But Buttigieg didn't miss a beat, not once in the 30 seconds it went on.

## "Secretary Pete"

The last time Buttigieg made news here was in 2019, when he was known as "Mayor Pete." He stumped for votes and campaign cash in New Canaan—sans jacket—as a Democratic candidate for president best known as the mayor of South Bend, Ind., a Navy veteran who served in the Iraq War, and husband to another man.

Now, Buttigieg is "Secretary Pete," the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, the first out gay American ever confirmed by the U.S. Senate to a position in a president's Cabinet, and a dad to two toddlers. On this day, Buttigieg returned to the Shoreline not asking for money, but bringing with him millions in federal funding to fix Connecticut's longest bridge.



Following his news conference on the selection of Connecticut as the recipient of federal infrastructure funding, Secretary Pete spoke with local reporters, including those from Channel 3 and *CT Voice*. Photo by Dan LeRoy



Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, Gov. Ned Lamont, Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy and other officials, private business leaders and members of labor unions held a news conference on Jan. 4 under the Gold Star Memorial Bridge in New London to announce \$158 million in federal Infrastructure Law funding. Photos by **Dawn Ennis**

“Secretary Pete, thank you very much for the birthday present,” deadpanned Gov. Lamont as he saluted the Biden administration’s decision to select the 80-year-old Gold Star Memorial Bridge, connecting New London and Groton, as one of only four major bridge projects in the country to receive a grant of \$158 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

### Securing the Supply Chain Between New York and Boston

“We’re really excited about this project,” the secretary told *CT Voice* in a one-on-one interview, following the news conference with Lamont, Sens. Blumenthal and Murphy, New London Mayor Michael Passero and others. “What you have is one specific region, one specific place that has implications for the entire region and really for the entire country. You think about the national security significance. We think about the economic significance of the freight, as well as the passenger travel that happens on this bridge. I think it’s a great example of why we’re doing this in the first place, when you see a need and see trucks having to go way out of their way to get to where they’re going.”

That 17-mile detour is one reason, given the current weight limit of 40 tons is all the troubled roadway can bear;

the safety of the 60,000 dialy drivers and passengers crisscrossing the span across five lanes is another. Plus, that \$158 million will not only shore-up the northbound side; it’s estimated to cut a full year off the repair timetable that started in 2022. There are also plans to create a multi-use path for bicyclists and pedestrians to access mass transit.

“If you allow a bridge to go too long without that rehabilitation, it’s like a leaky roof, it only gets more expensive to take care of which is part of why this project succeeded in a very competitive mix,” said Buttigieg.

### Will He Run Again?

Speaking of competitive mixes, reporters have been asking the Secretary of Transportation if he’ll hit the campaign trail again for another run for president in 2024, or if he will seek election to an open U.S. Senate seat in Michigan where he lives with his husband, Chasten, and their twins, in Traverse City.

“I love this job, and I feel like we’re right in the middle of the action,” said Buttigieg. “I don’t have any plans to do any job besides the one I’ve got.”

Buttigieg’s job leading D.O.T. is “taking 110 percent of my attention and energy,” he said. He calls it “the best job in the federal government, even if it’s pretty demanding some days.”

### The Twins

Another demand on his time: Raising twins Joseph “Gus” August and Penelope Rose, who will turn two in August. So how does he manage family time given the pressures of his job?

“Every working parent has to figure out a way to make it happen,” said Buttigieg. “I try to be there for Chasten, whether it’s breakfast time today—I was slicing bananas while he was getting their little sweaters on—or when it’s in the evening, I try to be there for bath time every day that I can. Unfortunately, it won’t be possible today, but, you know, we help each other out, as so many parents do. We’re so proud to see our kids grow and thrive and be healthy.”

How are the kiddos? “They’re doing great,” he said. “We got them in day care. They’re pretty much running our world. So, they’re coming up on a year and a half. They’re walking. It’s a very physical thing, trying to keep up with two toddlers. It keeps Chasten, my husband, and me on our toes. But it’s the most beautiful thing that’s ever happened to us. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

### Under Fire

When not chasing toddlers, Buttigieg is being chased by Fox News, The New York Post and other conservative media,



who have been heavily criticizing him nearly every day; From last year's supply chain snafus to airline meltdowns at Southwest and the first nationwide ground-stop since 9/11 earlier this year. They also harp on his use of military aircraft to travel, which he's defended as less expensive than last-minute commercial flights. In one widely seen interview on Fox, he argued it's customary for Cabinet members leading presidential delegations to take such flights and bring their spouses along, just as it was during the Trump administration.

Even *The Daily Beast* called him out, accusing Buttigieg of not doing enough to address ongoing airline industry issues.

A spokesperson for the Department of Transportation responded to that report in an email to *CT Voice*, crediting Buttigieg with creating an online airline customer service dashboard last summer: "D.O.T. is taking action like never before, strengthening consumer protections and both raising the floor of passenger rights and enforcing the current rules. To that end, D.O.T. has issued the largest fines in the history of the consumer protection office this year—helping to get hundreds of thousands of people hundreds of millions of dollars back.

**"I love this job, and I feel like we're right in the middle of the action. I don't have any plans to do any job besides the one I've got."**

—Pete Buttigieg

As for Southwest, the D.O.T.'s investigation was in its initial phase as of press time, as was an investigation into an Ohio train derailment and chemical spill.

"The Department will hold Southwest Airlines accountable, including pursuing fines against the carrier. While airlines are private companies and responsible for running their operations, the Department will hold them accountable if they fail to comply with the law and promises made."

And as for Buttigieg himself, when asked about the detractors who staged

a noisy car horn demonstration at the start of his remarks in New London, he was asked if that bothered him.

"Nope. But you know, this can be a noisy business sometimes," he laughed. "I'm not that worried."

#### Fighting For LGBTQ+ Rights

Across the country, hundreds of anti-LGBTQ+ bills are being introduced in Republican-controlled states, largely aimed at healthcare and school sports for transgender youth. And because families who affirm their children's identities and fear being labeled as "groomers" and "child abusers" are hitting the federal highways for sanctuary states like Connecticut, California and Massachusetts, *CT Voice* asked Buttigieg for his reaction as a secretary, a member of the LGBTQ+ community and as a father.

"We want to make sure the transportation system is here for parents, families and kids who need to feel safe," he said. "But the most important thing is for them not to be in that situation in the first place. So, I'm not just speaking for myself, but this administration is going to continue to push back on this kind of anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ legislation that really is endangering our kids, endangering families."



Chasten and Pete Buttigieg shared this photo of themselves with Instagram followers on Valentine's Day 2022. Used with permission.



Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told *CTVoice* correspondent Dawn Ennis he stopped for some chowder on his way to the news conference in New London on Jan. 4. Photos by **Dan LeRoy**

"It sends the exact wrong message," said Buttigieg. "If you're pro-family, you have to be for every child. And if you believe in supporting parents, you have to believe in supporting parents who are trying to do right by their kids. Unfortunately, what we are seeing is, for nakedly political reasons, like in certain states like Texas, like Florida, we're seeing the exact opposite of those family values, which I think most of us in America believe in, which is to take care of people and support parents who are trying to support their trans kids."

#### Buttigieg Is Back

This particular trip afforded the secretary a brief chance to reconnect


with Connecticut.

"First of all, for somebody like me with a connection to the Navy, it means a great deal. It's always exciting," he said, referring to the submarine base in Groton, a short drive over the bridge above us. "I arrived a few minutes early, so I could get a cup of chowder; That just kind of hit the spot for me. And just personally, I have so many great friends connected to Connecticut, it's really exciting to be back here."

#### Historic Impact

*CT Voice* asked Buttigieg about the historic and cultural significance of being an out gay man, serving in such a prominent position in the

administration, and whether he realizes the impact he's had.

"Sometimes I do," he said, and paused. "But I would put it the other way around, which is to say that somebody like me would not have a chance to serve, to live openly, to be raising my kids, to talk about my involvement in infrastructure policy as a member of the president's Cabinet, and what my husband and I have to do to feed our kids and raise them and support them. That conversation would not even be possible if not for the work and the advocacy of so many in the community who were there even before I was born. And I recognize I am standing on their shoulders, even being able to serve." 

THE GIRL WITH THE DOG:

# Connecticut Rescuer Travels to Help Ukrainian Pets

By RENEE DININO / photography by TODD FAIRCHILD

**M**arissa Squires didn't start off as a business owner, entrepreneur, animal advocate or founder of a puppy rescue.

"I was a young girl that developed a passion for dogs after seeing at a young age how they selflessly gave back to us," Squires said.

This led her on a path to animal advocacy and, in return, selflessly giving of herself to those in need. She found a way to combine her passion of animals and leadership skills by turning them into a thriving business and rescue. This, of course, did not come easy.

Squires grew up in Terryville, Conn., with her parents Wayne and Elena, and younger brother Austin. It was apparent from the beginning that Squires would most likely fill her life with animals. Her love for animals grew stronger as she grew up and her friends would always associate her with a dog, whether it was bringing a dog to a party, being constantly with a dog or helping an animal in need.

Squires attended Central Connecticut State University and fell into the world of sports through soccer, a sport she played all through middle school and adulthood. She was quite a player, which led her to follow a path of sports medicine.

"I've always loved science; it just always interested me. Medicine in general always interested me and how

the body works," explained Squires. This lasted for two years. She found herself in the world of finance as an accountant at a mortgage company and discovered the art of making money. However, in 2007, many mortgage companies closed; she found herself without a career.

"I truly did some soul searching and found myself pulled towards a lifelong passion about animals, and dogs to be specific," said Squires.

Following a new direction, a huge income cut and adjustment, she applied and got a receptionist position at a veterinarian clinic. Over the next three years, she advanced to veterinary technician, became a certified veterinary massage therapist and founded New England Puppy Rescue ([saveallthepuppies.com](http://saveallthepuppies.com)). Through continued work as a vet tech, she continued to learn, take classes and expand her knowledge on the holistic-minded approach to helping dogs. This transferred over to her rescue.

She started New England Puppy Rescue in 2010 and has helped over 1,500 dogs find loving, safe homes. Many of them had to be nursed back to health before adopting out. In fact, it is not uncommon for her to have many pups in her care at one time, whether it be at her home or in one of the 30 foster homes within her network. She keeps her rescue relatively small in order to handle the flow of pets. Squires can help ensure all the puppies that come

into her care get the best care possible, and all adoptions or foster families are vetted out.

"Many, not all, but many people only think of puppy rescue as the adorable videos they see on social media," Squires added. "I truly wish it were that easy! Don't get me wrong, puppies are the most magical creatures, in my opinion, but unfortunately they don't always come to us in the condition you see. Between illness from the shelters, lack of socialization, neglect, abuse and who knows, it's not always the cute head tilt photos or videos. It takes a lot of work, between puppy poop and paperwork, tears of joy and heartbreak, puppy kisses, and tail wags. This is not for the weak of heart."

Eventually Squires found yet another path that would combine all of her skills and let her interact with prospective and current pet owners who wanted to take the best care of their pets.

Dogology ([dogologyct.com](http://dogologyct.com)) was founded in 2013 with a vision of feeding the whole dog: mind, body and soul.

"All the things the pet parent could find outside of their veterinary office," Squires said in an excited tone. "I wanted this to be a place where people could find pet nutrition, training, expert advice, no judgement, reputable rescue adoptions and holistic resources. I want dogs to thrive, and all it takes is knowledge and mindfulness; we owe it to them."



"I found myself pulled towards a passion about animals and dogs."



“I was thankful I had my experience in rescue so I could jump into action and treat the immediate needs of the incoming animals. This, of course, was the same for the Ukrainians; it was just a horrific time and to be a part of helping in any way has changed my life forever.”

—Marissa Squires

While maintaining her business and rescue, she also found time for love with the kind of person who could keep up with her work ethic, driven personality and round-the-clock rescue routine. Jamie McDonald—a familiar name in Connecticut known affectionately as Bear—is Jamie of Bears BBQ fame. The two met through a business acquaintance. They are quite a pair with their need to give back to their communities, help those in need and fight for those who can't speak for themselves.


At the start of the war in Ukraine, McDonald headed to the Ukraine border and volunteered for almost a month with the World Central Kitchen; his son Collyn would also join him. This meant Squires was at home taking care of her business, her rescue and their five “dog children”—he came with three and she had two.

While McDonald was in the Ukraine, he was bombarded with images of humans in their most vulnerable condition, families torn apart, and children sent to the border of Poland in hopes they would survive the attacks. He was doing the best he could to capture the moments through his photography. He was also witnessing a need to help all the displaced animals that, like their human counterparts, once had safe homes. This was a conversation he shared with Squires. They worked together to arrange for her to arrive in Ukraine. Squires worked as a vet tech in Poland for one week on the border rescuing and helping aid in the care of many animals.

“I was the triage when the incoming animals came across the Ukrainian border. I examined them, tested them for contagious diseases, medicated them, addressed emergent needs and helped to

facilitate their rescue,” Squires said about her experience. Her strength is what got her through the days of seeing animals come with injuries due to bombings, starvation or wandering on the streets.

“I was thankful I had my experience in rescue so I could jump into action and treat the immediate needs of the incoming animals,” Squires continued. This, of course, was the same for the Ukrainians; it was just a horrific time and to be a part of helping in any way has changed my life forever.”

When we're kinder to animals, we're kinder to people. Squires lives her life like that. She is one person making a big difference one pet at a time with an army of volunteers and fosters for her rescue and the support of her anchor at home, Jamie McDonald, and the pups Bernie, Duke, Callie, River and Remi. 



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# The Joy of Giving

By ELLIOT LEONARD and ROGER LITZ

It's not a very easy time to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community today. But then again, has it ever been?

From the moment the first brick was thrown at Stonewall, this has been a fight for our lives. Although, lately, it does seem like the fight has become more urgent, especially for the most vulnerable members of our movement, such as people of color, and the transgender community.

We are often seen as easy targets in a culture war intent on erasing us by any means necessary. But out of the darkest storms can be born the most vibrant rainbows that defy erasure.

When my husband Roger and I started the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation, we had the goal of supporting nonprofit organizations that serve the needs of our diverse community. We knew that, no matter at what level, every single gesture of support can make a tremendous difference.

That is truer than ever today.

With recent efforts to dismantle pivotal progress in LGBTQ+ equality in state legislatures and local communities throughout the country, much of our movement has had to rely on legal challenges through the judicial system as a backstop against the hate. Our Foundation has been privileged to



Elliot Leonard and Roger Litz

Past. Present. Future. Every new triumph springboards from prior challenges along the same continuum.

support efforts by organizations like Lambda Legal and the ACLU to fight for equitable medical care for incarcerated transgender people, for example, and to defend transgender children and their families from unjust prosecution in places like Texas and Florida.

If it's a fight they want, we're here to win.

For every Marjorie Taylor Greene and Ron DeSantis, we have advocates like Brian Sims, and Jared Polis, and Pete Buttigieg, who are no strangers to fighting for their very right to exist. These young, intelligent, tenacious leaders represent not just historic examples of the progress we've made over the past few decades into the present, but also shining beacons of hope for the future growth and success of this movement.

Past. Present. Future. Every new triumph springboards from prior challenges along the same continuum. So many of our friends and chosen families never got the chance to celebrate the first openly gay U.S. Secretary of Transportation, because they were felled not just by the pandemic of the 80s, but by the slow and callous public healthy response to it. As a burgeoning generation of LGBTQ+ seniors now navigates what it means to age in this strange twilight of COVID,



Elliot Leonard and Roger Litz

"Critical advancements come from learning all people are created equal."

Foundation has also supported the City University of New York's efforts to expand its LGBTQ+ Student Center and the Mixner LGBTQ+ Equality Fellowship, both based at City College. We keep ascending the ladder only by helping people up behind us.

That's precisely why our

opponents have spent so much time and resources attacking our systems of education. Some of the most critical advancements in our movement come not from marching in the streets or winning at the polls, but by learning in school that all people are created equal, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Kids sure know the darndest things.

That's the real grassroots of our movement. While there's no doubt we need the folks at Lambda Legal and ACLU fighting the good fight at the national level, we also know that charity begins at home. The organizers, advocates, and volunteers working in community-based LGBTQ+ Centers in cities, towns,

and rural areas throughout the country have long been described as "the heart and soul of the LGBTQ+ community." In just over two years, our Foundation has been honored to support dozens of organizations helmed by amazing leaders all working to protect the safety, equality, and well-being of our community. We are grateful for their activism and proud to count them as partners in this work.

We urge you to take some time to research the LGBTQ+ Centers in your own communities. The joy of giving takes on new meaning when you realize the tremendous impact that seemingly small gestures can have on the lives of so many.

And, speaking of joy, let's not forget what the crux of this fight is anchored by in the first place: Love, Hope, and, of course, Pride. See you in June! 🏳️‍🌈

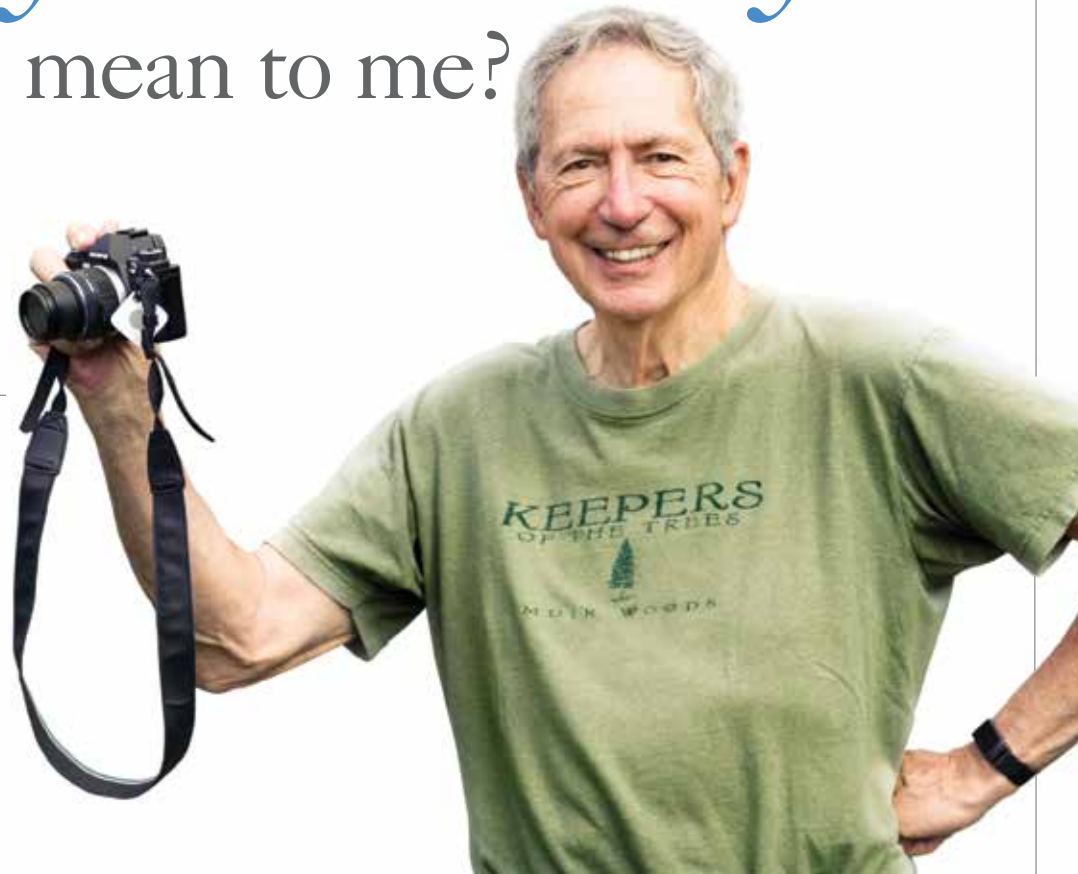
let's not forget their place in our community, and our movement. Over at New York's Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, for example, they've created a program called Aging Together, which provides assistance, referrals, education, and peer support to LGBTQ+ elders—a program which our Foundation has also been very proud to support.

We're all in this fight together, regardless of race, immigration status, gender, or age. The progress we make today will need to be defended—and relitigated—tomorrow, and there's no surer way to ensure progress than by preparing a new generation of leaders to take the baton. To that end, our



Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation logo

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Restrictions apply. Not available in all areas. Limited to Internet Essentials ("IE") and Internet Essentials Plus residential customers 18 years of age or older meeting certain eligibility criteria. Comcast's current rate is \$29.95/month (subj. to change). If a customer is determined to be no longer eligible for the IE program, regular rates will apply to the selected internet service. Subject to Internet Essentials program terms and conditions. Professional install extra. Advertised price applies to a single outlet. Actual speeds vary and are not guaranteed. For factors affecting speed visit [xfinity.com/networkmanagement](https://xfinity.com/networkmanagement). Affordable Connectivity Program: Only eligible households may enroll. Benefit is up to \$30/month (\$75/month in Tribal lands). After the conclusion of the Affordable Connectivity Program, you'll be billed at Comcast's standard monthly prices, including any applicable taxes, fees, and equipment charges. Once you have successfully enrolled, you will see the Affordable Connectivity Program credit toward your internet service. For complete details visit [xfinity.com/acp](https://xfinity.com/acp). © 2023 Comcast. All rights reserved. NPA244404-0002 NED-DearAmerica-V1