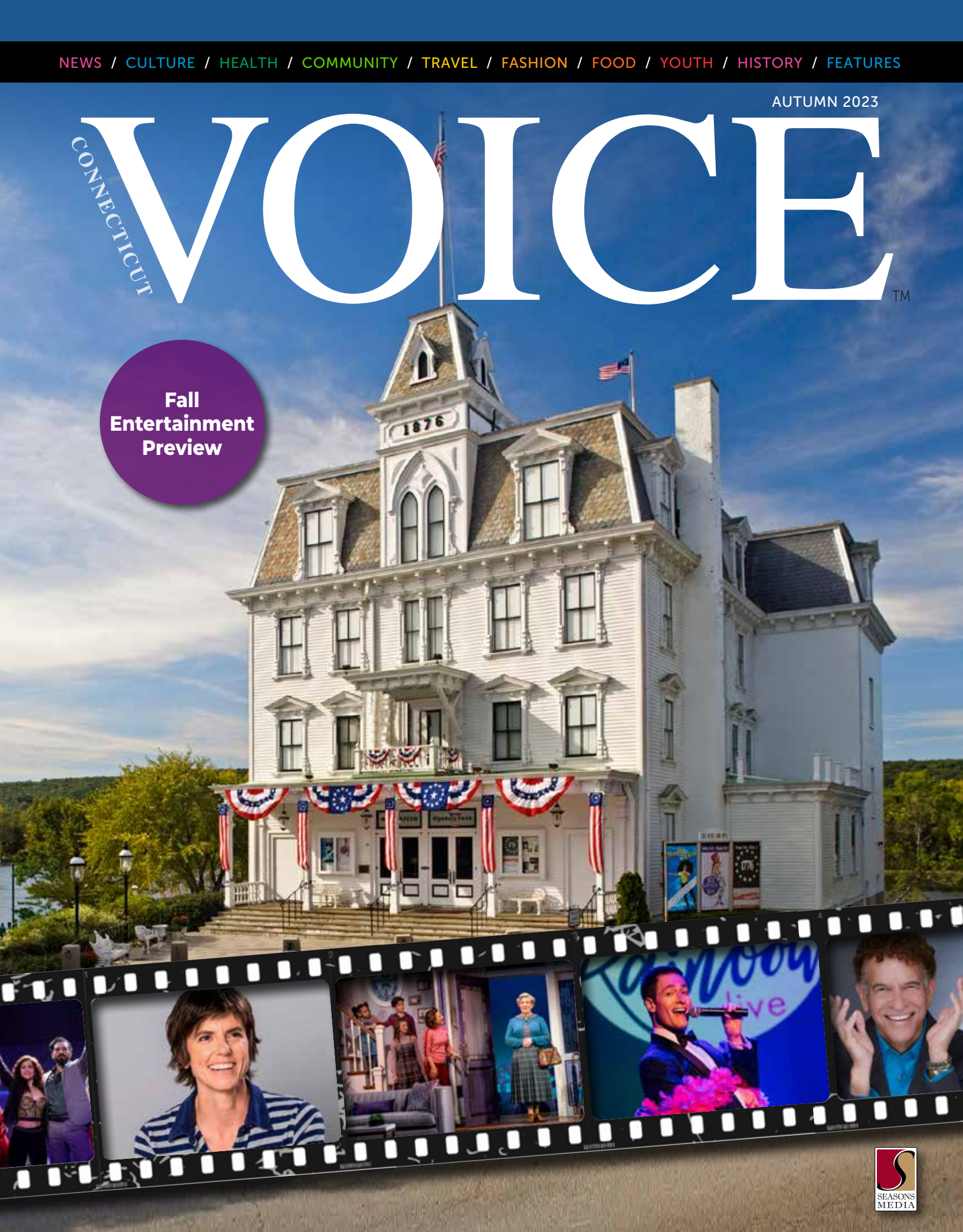


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Fall
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Preview





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CONNECTICUT VOICE™

EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome, Autumn!

The fall is my favorite season in Connecticut. It's not merely the beauty of the state, the cooler days and the vistas tailor-made for postcards and jigsaw puzzles. As I write this, I'm watching the first changes of light as the season begins to change. I've always loved that.

Autumn is also a time to renew and reflect—and be grateful for the many ways love is supported in our state, though as we all know there is still work to do. For example, as we are going to press, the governor of Nebraska has signed a cynical order severely limiting freedom of gender expression. The inherent cruelty and blatant ignorance of gender this reveals is part of the threat to all LGBTQ+ people that we must resist.

For an example of what we are up against, read the excerpts from Amber Green's blog. Green had to flee Texas with her adoptive trans daughter, staying one step ahead of those who would destroy her family until she found safe having here.

Sobering as that is, we can be proud that here in the Nutmeg State, we have advocates. Dawn Ennis profiles the new organization, Equality Connecticut. Jane Latus also celebrates the new directions taken by the New Haven Pride Center and covers the passionate and positive work Middlesex Health does in providing support groups for so many of our LGBTQ+ friends. John Scully and Anne Stanback talk about how Hartford's Immanuel Church is an Open and Affirming congregation, joyfully providing a home for those who seek to express their faith in an embracing community.

On the positive side, fall is also a time for family, food, and entertainment. Frank Rizzo provides a comprehensive roundup of events around the state with a distinctly LGBTQ+ twist. After all, who wouldn't want to snatch up tickets to see Tig Notaro or Randy Rainbow. Plus, there are theaters and concerts of all kinds to make your fall more festive. Frank also has a great interview with Filipino heartthrob Jose Llana, who is currently starring in *Here Lies Love* on Broadway.

If you're thinking of traveling overseas, you'll want to check out the first of Ashley Rogers' travel features. In this issue, you'll find out what you should do to stay safe as an LGBTQ+ traveler.

We've also got our regular columnists with insights and advice. Kim Adamski continues her frank columns about sex. Meghan Crutchley has tips for handling stress, and Michelle Cutrali helps you plan for retirement.

And that's just what's in these pages. Remember, Connecticut Voice is also the producer of the Voice Out Loud podcast, and CTVoice.com has timely articles and news. Be sure to follow all our social media as well.

Finally, it's not too early to mark your calendar for our second Connecticut Voice Honors. This major performance will be at the Bushnell in Hartford, April 27, 2024.

As always, I'd love to hear from you with story ideas, what you'd like to see us cover, or just to connect. Have a great fall!

Chris

Christopher Byrne, Editor
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“DO NOT FOLLOW WHERE THE PATH MAY LEAD. GO, INSTEAD, WHERE THERE IS NO PATH AND LEAVE A TRAIL.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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CONTRIBUTORS //



FRANK RIZZO

Frank Rizzo compiled our Fall Entertainment Preview (page 32) and sat down with Broadway star Jose Llana (page 45). 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 looked at fashions for differently-sized people (page 48). 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 profiles the new advocacy group Equality Connecticut (page 20) and dropped in on Chion Wolf's poetry event (page 19). 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.



ASHLEY ROGERS

Ashley Rogers, a long-time traveler has tips for LGBTQ+ people with wanderlust (page 60). Ashley is a former marketing director and an award-winning network television producer and documentary filmmaker from NYC and LA. In 2010, she moved to Cuenca, Ecuador for "a new adventure" and found her next career passion as a real estate agent, founding the company, Ecuador At Your Service (ecuadoratyourerivce.com). She also continues with freelance writing and production.



JANE LATUS

Jane Latus covers health and politics. She writes about Middlesex Health's support groups (page 74), visits the newly revitalized New Haven Pride Center (page 54), and compiled entries from Amber Green's blog (78). 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.



TOM CIUBA

Tom covered an exciting event with Chasten Buttigieg, Harvery Fierstein, and Richie Jackson. He serves as vice president of communications for a global transportation provider, has previously worked in consumer public relations and nonprofit, and dabbles in podcasting and filmmaking. Tom has called Connecticut home for 15 years.



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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for April 27, 2024 at
The Bushnell!



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See you at The Bushnell in April! And get ready to party!

[CTVoice.com](https://www.ctvoice.com)

The Audacious Voice

Our contributor Chion Wolf continues her wide-ranging columns on, well, all kinds of topics. Chion puts the human in human interest and manages to find great stories that are sure to amuse—and touch—you.

You can see the full columns on [CTVoice.com](https://www.ctvoice.com), but here are the topics, she's been talking about since our last issue:

Four Agreements—Chion readily admits she loves self-help books, and one of her favorites is *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* by Don Miguel Ruiz. The book has been a guide for many, and the agreements are: (1) Be impeccable with your word, (2) Don't make assumptions, (3) Always do your best, and (4) Don't take anything personally.

Chion writes about how these have played out in her life, and the challenges that trying to adopt and

live by these principles have created. It's not always easy, but in true Chion style, she manages to make the challenge sound fun.

Bolt from the Blue—About 270 people are struck by lightning in the U.S. every year, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and your chances of getting struck are about 1 in 15,300—that is if you're outside during a lightning storm, which is never advised.


Leave it to Chion to find two people who had been through the experience and were willing to tell their

stories. (About 90 percent of people who are struck by lightning survive the strike.) For both of them, it was life-changing, and the stories of how the experience transformed them are fascinating. One found a deeper connection with her fellow human beings, and one became a piano virtuoso. Of course, there's more to both stories.

Chion uses these stories as a powerful metaphor for how life sometimes throws us curveballs, and what do to respond to those can be rewarding in ways we hadn't imagined. And you don't need to be literally hit by a thunderbolt to make those realizations.

The Happy Place—Chion tells a story about shoplifting at Disney World and the dire consequences for her as boundary-pushing 15-year-

old. Needless to say, she learned her lesson...mostly. That story is the springboard to talk about adults for whom Disney, the parks, and, naturally, the souvenirs, are the basis of an entire lifestyle, which in some cases pays off for TikTok stars (\$50K in with the merch) and the woman who travels to the parks reporting on the food. That's just two of the fascinating people Chion discovers, and she is quick to acknowledge that it's highly unlikely that these people are—or ever were—petty thieves.

Read all of these complete stories online, and tune in to hear much more on Connecticut Public Radio, Saturdays at 10 AM and Wednesdays at 11 PM, or stream the podcast any time. 



Host of the *Audacious* radio show and podcast on Connecticut Public Radio, Chion Wolf. Photo by **Ryan Caron King**



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Chasten Buttigieg Brings Harvey Fierstein, Richie Jackson and Bittersweet Reflections on His Queer Experience to Ridgefield Playhouse



Harvey Fierstein, Chasten Buttigieg and Richie Jackson at Ridgefield Playhouse.

There was nothing but love and admiration from the audience for trailblazers

Chasten Buttigieg, Harvey Fierstein and Richie Jackson, who spoke with grace, humor, and a tremendous sense of pride at Ridgefield Playhouse on Friday evening, June 16. The event was a stop on Chasten's tour across 20 U.S. cities promoting his memoir, *I Have Something to Tell You*.

Despite generational differences among the three guests, there were marked similarities in their individual experiences growing up gay, coming out, building careers and families, and living authentically.

"Growing up in rural Michigan, everything I knew about being gay was that it was bad," said Chasten, who is married to Pete Buttigieg, current secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation under the

Biden administration and the first openly gay man to run for the office of U.S. president. "And just when I was coming into my own sexuality, Matthew Shepard's murder happened."

Richie Jackson, who served as executive producer of the hit show *WW* and recently published his own memoir, *Gay Like Me*, had a similar experience. "I had first heard that being gay was wrong from a fourth grade teacher," he explained. "And

I personally knew I liked boys as young as third grade. So, it became this incredible secret."

Harvey, a renowned theater and film actor as well as producer and author who calls Ridgefield and Connecticut home, recalled a priest teaching him that being gay was a bad thing.

"I never could work up the courage to hand my mom a letter telling her that I was gay," Chasten recounted.

"And at that point in my life, I saw only two options: end it or run away. So, at 18 years old, I left."

For this very reason, Chasten repurposed his original memoir to connect with a young-adult audience as well. "I wrote the book that I wish I had access to in eighth grade, or when I was 18 and hated myself, needing to know that there were others out there just like me," he said.

Richie believes Chasten's book comes at a critical time when more than 529 anti-LGBTBQ+ bills have been introduced this legislative session.

"I hope my book is irrelevant one day," Chasten responded.

Despite the current challenges facing the LGBTQ+ community, all three acknowledge progress in the fight for equality since coming to terms with their own sexuality years ago.

"I remember growing up thinking I would never see a ring on this finger," Chasten began. "Now, Pete and I have a loving marriage where we support each other in our careers," he beamed, "and we are loving parents."

For Richie, living openly in a same-sex marriage and as a gay parent is a daily form of activism. "There are some in the gay community who say that a lot of us are trying to be heteronormative," he said. "But being a gay parent—attending a parent-teacher meeting, dropping your kids off at school, being in these places that were constructed with heterosexual families in mind—is truly a radical act."

Harvey noted younger generations' views on and



"Seeing so many kids at Ridgefield's Pride in the Park celebration this year—gay kids, transgender kids, straight kids—felt like the war is over. Trust me, I know it's not!"

—Harvey Fierstein

approaches to LGBTQ+ issues. "Seeing so many kids at Ridgefield's Pride in the Park celebration this year—gay kids, transgender kids, straight kids—felt like the war is over," he said. "Trust me, I know it's not! But it was nice to see that we've come a long way.

When I wrote *Torch Song Trilogy*, none of this seemed possible."

Richie has witnessed the same optimism in his son, who is also gay. "When my son first came out, he told me, 'dad, it's not a big deal

anymore,'" he said. Richie, who wrote *Gay Like Me* as a response to that statement, later came to read between the lines of that statement to recognize a sense of hope and optimism.

Both Chasten and Richie believe society would not be at this point without the contributions of activists such as Harvey.

"Harvey didn't wait until he was famous to come out," Richie said. "He started his career already out. Nobody had done that before, and that's Herculean."

"It was and still is so brave," Chasten added, before noting that "straight people have to step up and join the fight now" as a new form of bravery and to ensure we keep moving forward.

As far as what activism might look like for Pete and him in the future, Chasten is focused on the present. "Pete and I participated in something historic and remarkable when we ran the race for president," he said. "Then, we became parents. And that changes everything."

That joyous moment was followed by their son's hospitalization for respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and a cancer scare for Chasten that required surgery and a three-month healing period.

"Both of those circumstances — and what's going on right now within our community — taught me what's important and what can be taken so quickly," he said. "Right now, I just want to be the best dad I can be." 🍷

—Tom Ciuba

Love is in the Air... And On The Wall

This summer, Mental Health Connecticut (MHC) partnered with muralist Lisa Marie to bring "The Love Mural" to Connecticut. The mural at Parkville Market was unveiled during a Pride Month event.

members of the LGBTQ community to be their authentic selves."

The mural, and its message of love and healing, was the result of a life-threatening accident. Lisa Marie told *CT Voice*, "In 2104, I had a pretty



Caption here

The project was made possible by funding from Macy's. "Through our social purpose platform, "Mission Every One," Macy's is committed to creating a brighter future with bold representation for our customers, colleagues, and communities we serve," said Sam Di Scipio, Macy's, Inc. senior director, social impact. "We are thrilled to provide Mental Health CT with funding to create dynamic artwork that promotes inclusion and empowers



Caption here



Caption here

bad fall off a ladder and had a bad concussion. I was going through a lot of struggles with my mental health and a traumatic brain injury.

"At the time, I also had a long-term partner, and I ended up becoming a survivor of intimate abuse."

As a result of this, Lisa Marie began a healing journey that involved a trip to Mexico, Yoga practice, and a quest to understand self-worth and self-love. "I started learning about how colors relate to our energy. I took all the seven chakra colors [identified with energy centers in the body] and the thirteen colors in the color spectrum and focused on what's bringing us joy.

"When I was feeling better in 2017, I put the healing color energy into personal practice in the studio, and then I wanted to take it to the street and paint it."

The first mural in Washington, D.C. was an instant hit. Lady GaGa visited. There were pop-up weddings, and the mural went viral on social media with messages celebrating all kinds of

love, peace and friendship. It was more than anyone anticipated.

Lisa Marie wanted to take the feelings national, and she began her mission to paint Love Murals in all 50 states. The one in Connecticut is the fourth. Lisa Marie is particularly happy to partner with MHC, the original idea "stemmed from my journey to mental health."

As Lisa Marie says, the mural is for everyone. "Everyone is on their own journey, and I want it to feel inclusive. The mural is a big hug of color, and there's something that happens where everyone feels better when they are surrounded by this color. My hope is that experience helps to heal people."

And after 50 states? Lisa Marie hopes to take it to the world. "What do we need," she asks? "We all need to be loved, and together we can paint this world a rainbow." You can learn more about Lisa Marie and the mural at lisamariestudio.com.

—Christopher Byrne

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On With the Show! Guilford GreenStage Celebrated Festival Return

The town of Guilford was bursting with arts and entertainment from September 17 to 22nd as the Guilford GreenStage festival returned in a big way to the Guilford Green and locations around the town. According to Peter Hawes, executive director of programming, the goal has been to “create a diverse festival of the performing arts that primarily celebrated the depth and breadth of American culture.”



The festival made its debut in 2017, and it was the vision of William Boughton, former music director of the New Haven Symphony with the goal of bringing diverse entertainment to Guilford and the Shoreline region. In 2019, there were 73 different events, and then COVID hit. Still, they were able to mount a significantly downsized event to keep going. This year, Hawes says, they were “building back,” and for 2023, approximately 25 different events encompassing dance, theater, and music took over the town.

As noted, COVID had a severe impact on the festival, but Hawes says that the interest and passion of the all-volunteer organization helped keep the vision alive, and that this year, the extensive program showcased everything from traditional ballet to expressive movement to African and Puerto Rican genres. Theater included spoken word, poetry, stand-up comedy, and traditional drama. All of this was complemented by workshops and master

classes to engage and entertain the community.

The festival also continued a program it launched in conjunction with Guilford High School, which involved students in more formalized educational programs to expose and engage students in the arts.

One of the other key features of the festival is that it provides grants to Connecticut-based artists, particularly in the shoreline region. This year, they commissioned three works, which premiered during




the festival. While everyone was shut down during the pandemic, Hawes said they were able to provide six grants, which created an essential lifeline to artists who, like so many, were trying to get by in an uncertain and stressful time.

The joy and excitement was back in a big way this year, and Hawes says the focus was on celebrating and promoting diversity in all areas of the arts. “I think it’s created buzz and a kind of ‘wow’ we’ve never seen in Guilford,” he says. “We’ve brought a lot of people from different communities together to celebrate the diversity of arts and artists.” Hawes and his team have sought to involve all communities in helping develop content for the festival to achieve that diversity and include as broad a representation of cultures, genres, and sub-genres as possible. That, of course, includes the LGBTQ+ communities, and Hawes notes Guildford-

based Schuyler Beeman (previously profiled in *CT Voice*) performed his cabaret and lesbian playwright Emily Breeze presented a staged reading of her play about coming out.

Hawes added that with the current fractious nature of American culture today, in many respects, the ability to bring together a wide variety of cultures representing age, gender, gender expression, and culture has been one of the many great achievements of the festival.

“The festival has had tremendous energy, brought people out, and shown how much people value diversity in their hearts and in humanity,” he says.

The festival has had a major financial impact on the community as well. Hawes says that it’s estimated that the festival has contributed about \$1.3 million to the community over the previous three events. 

To find out more about GreenStage Guilford and to learn about past programs and grant opportunities, visit greenstageguilford.org.

Chion Wolf Celebrates One Year of Reciting Other People's Poems



Roses are red, violets are blue; Our Chion Wolf is the emcee of something fun and new.

It's called "Other People's Poems," and this past July, the CT Public Radio host marked a full year of the once-a-month free event in Hartford. How this event started is very personal for Wolf.

"After my wife moved out, after my divorce, I wanted to have different energy in my house and in the land that I'm caretaking. I needed more poetry in my life. I missed that feeling of expressing and reading and feeling the human experience in a way that everybody can understand and share," she said. "And so, I started this in my backyard and invited some people I knew and was powerful from the start."

Of course, after a few months, summer turned to autumn, and Wolf accepted an invitation from Lelaneia Dubay to relocate the event to Dubay's woman-owned

organic distillery across from Real Art Ways, the Hartford Flavor Company. There's no charge for admission, but the bar offers a wide variety of locally made libations. While it's fine to just sit and enjoy the event, participants are encouraged to sign up for one of 25 slots, and read a poem.

Any poem? Yes, so long as it's not your own. This is called "Other People's Poems" for a reason. Regular attendees have recited classics from Shakespeare to Langston Hughes to Robert Frost, as well as some truly awful poems whose rhymes beg to be mocked. A participant once read the lyrics to "Dancing Queen" by ABBA, while another recited the words to "The Rainbow Connection," famously sung by Kermit the Frog.

The gatherings occur on the first Friday of every month, and while it's not meant to be an LGBTQ+-centric event, it's always been queer-friendly.

"The struggles that we've gone through and the way we've moved throughout


the world informs the kind of poetry that heals us and we can access. And so, I can say with all my heart, that everybody brings to OPP that sort of desire to connect," said Wolf.

And those who recite a poem from memory win a very unusual prize, Wolf told *CT Voice*.

"I am turned on when somebody has memorized a poem," she said. "I think it's just incredibly sexy and wonderful and exhilarating, frankly, and feels nostalgic

to me. So, I wanted to reward people who have a poem memorized and were devoted to the poem so deeply, that they would take the time to memorize it. And so, the loofahs are for anybody who has it committed to memory. Why a loofah? Because it's a cheap prize, because it's a ridiculous word, and because you should change your loofahs once a month."

Sometimes a theme emerges, related to the season, a holiday, to grief, love, or heartbreak.

"Something special happens every single time, and not just like eerie coincidences. Themes evolve that touch so many people in the room," Wolf said. "Every single time, something extraordinary happens. And that, I think, is a combination of the people who are drawn to an event like this and the spirit of the idea that, in the first place, poetry can speak for all the ways that we share this wild human experience." 

—Dawn Ennis



To learn more about "Other People's Poems," check out the Facebook page [otherpeoplespoemshartford](https://www.facebook.com/otherpeoplespoemshartford).



The New Group Working to Advance Our Rights: EQCT

EQUALITY CONNECTICUT LAUNCHED EARLY IN 2023 AND GOT RIGHT TO WORK AT THE CAPITOL

Connecticut has a myriad of local Pride organizations, from big cities to small towns, as well as advocacy nonprofits such as the Triangle Community Center, OutCT and Q Plus. Now there's a new group in the Constitution State, dedicated to securing the LGBTQ+ community's constitutionally protected rights through political activism: Equality Connecticut (EQCT).

"Our mission is to bring people together to celebrate our LGBTQ identities and advocate for the laws and policies, and the resources that we need to protect our community," said Matt Blinstrubas, executive director of EQCT, at its January launch at the State Capitol.

"We come to this work with a fierce commitment to LGBTQ justice and liberation. We recognize that queer people in Connecticut

face multiple various forms of oppression, and therefore we fight against them. We see the fights against systemic racism, gender discrimination, criminalization, violence, poverty, health disparities, as well as reproductive justice, as all inherently queer issues that we want to show up for. We also know that legal rights are not enough. Our visibility, our culture, our history, our sense of belonging, and our shared joy are equally essential to

LGBTQ people's well-being," he said.

The group takes inspiration from the Equality Federation, a national organization comprised of 43 state Pride groups, and similarly named non-profits in states across the nation.

Blinstrubas said EQCT's first mission is to create a larger presence at the State Capitol, making connections with lawmakers toward passing legislation that's important to

the LGBTQ+ community. He told *CT Voice* at a fundraiser in Norwalk this past June that in its first six months, the organization already has taken its first steps toward accomplishing that mission.

“We have actually influenced and made a meaningful difference on some legislation this session. One thing in particular was that, with Representatives Jeff Currey and Cristin McCarthy Vahey, adding very modernized language around suicide prevention education to be more LGBT inclusive; Education for educators, and things like that,” said Blinstrubas.

“We were able to get language in there when they defined ‘youth at-risk for suicide,’” said Beverley Brakeman, who does pro-bono legislative advocacy for EQCT. “There were four categories, and we were able to get a fifth category that said ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.’ And so that is in the statute now, as the definition of youth at-risk for suicide.”

Blinstrubas said their work has just begun.


“I think that we have come light years in terms of being a presence at the Capitol,

from that time in January to now. It has completely changed for the better.”

Joining Blinstrubas on staff is award-winning writer, community educator, public speaker, and social media strategist Leah Juliatt of Waterbury, who organized a concert fundraiser this past summer that raised thousands of dollars for EQCT. “I couldn’t be more proud to be a part of this incredible group of activists and organizers,” they said. Juliatt was invited to the White House in June to provide testimony at its Gender Policy Council and the Task Force to Address

Online Harassment and Abuse.

EQCT also has an advisory board with more than a dozen volunteers dedicating their time, including OutCT president Kia Baird, TCC Board President Colin Hosten and Tony Ferraiolo, director of Health Care Advocates International’s Youth and Family Program, among others.

Find out more about Equality Connecticut at eqct.org. 

—Dawn Ennis

“We have actually influenced and made a meaningful difference on some legislation this session.”

Matt Blinstrubas,
Executive Director
EQCT



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WHY LGBTBE CERTIFICATION MATTERS

Talking to John Pica-Sneedeen, executive director of the Connecticut Gay & Lesbian Chamber (CTGLC), you'll be instantly convinced as to why your business should be a member—and why as consumers you'll want to do business with a registered enterprise. This last point is, perhaps, obvious. Supporting the LGBTQ+ community is important for many who live in it, and member designation can help people know where to direct their dollars.

The CTGLC is affiliated with the NGLCC, and Pica-Sneedeen says that membership in the CTGLC automatically establishes membership in the national group. One of Pica-Sneedeen's proudest accomplishments in his nine years at the helm of the Connecticut chamber has been establishing the requirement that businesses belong to their local chambers, which helps the states overall, and means their NGLCC fees are waived. Currently there are more than 30 members of the CTGLC. As executive director, Pica-Sneedeen's role is to certify Connecticut companies for national LGBTQ Business Enterprise (LGBTBE) Certification.

While Pica-Sneedeen says the process can be a bit involved (though he does his best to streamline it for in-state companies), certification helps LGBTQ+ companies gain a competitive

advantage in things like procurement and other areas where representation of minority-owned companies is required by law. As a certified LGBTBE, companies get official recognition of their status as well as access to a wide variety of programs that include participation in



scholarships and training, accelerator opportunities, use of the LGBTBE logo, and much more. In Connecticut, there are also special events, networking opportunities, dedicated benefits and discounts, and marketing support.

Currently, certification is especially important in Connecticut because for all the advantages for

LGBTQ+ communities in the state, the state itself does not recognize an LGBTQ+ designation as a valid minority group. Pica-Sneedeen says that he has been working with the state legislature for more than three years to try to get this on the books. Ironically, he

but it would mean that an LGBTQ+ business cannot be ignored on the basis of its ownership and structure. As Pica-Sneedeen says, the goal is to have the opportunity to have a seat at the table.

Companies interested in getting LGBTBE certification should contact CTGLC (www.ctglc.org). They will be required to submit all supporting documents establishing ownership and LGBTQ+ qualifications. There will be a site visit, though Pica-Sneedeen says that since the pandemic, these interviews have largely been handled by Zoom. Once that is all complete, Pica-Sneedeen sends the recommendation to the national committee. It typically takes 30-90 days to be approved.

Finally, Pica-Sneedeen says, that the LGBTQ+ community is the largest minority group in the world. "We encompass every other minority group. We're part of every one, and we're everywhere. The amount of people who are out is so much greater than before." He adds that despite setbacks and political challenges, there is more acceptance of LGBTQ+ people.

"If we join together as a minority, we can take over the world. We have the intelligence and the style to do it."

It's a good place to start. 

—Christopher Byrne

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Securing Retirement

Future financial planning is important for everyone and especially for LGBTQ+ communities where there may be non-traditional families and unique financial arrangements. If you're a business owner, you may be wondering, "Do I get a retirement plan? Should I create one for my employees? How do I even go about this?" If you are an employee, you may want to know what provisions are being made for you through your work.

Good news! The State of Connecticut has heard your concerns and made it easy to offer employers and employees ways to save for retirement. In fact, it is now mandatory for certain businesses to offer a qualified retirement plan.

Nearly 600,000 working people in Connecticut have no access to workplace-based retirement savings, and that number is growing, according to the office of the State Comptroller. The elimination of pensions more than twenty years ago forced workers into claiming responsibility for their own retirement income. Hardworking, middle class families are financially unequipped with the resources needed for a robust retirement. This will require many to delay retirement for as long as possible to maximize social security benefits and/or double dip with social security and job wages.

Connecticut stepped in to attempt to ease this burden on employees and the economy.



The state mandates that employers in the state who have five or more employees who earn more than \$5,000 in a calendar year must participate in an employer-sponsored qualified retirement plan, or they may be penalized. An employer-sponsored retirement plan includes a plan qualified under Internal Revenue Code a 401(k), qualified annuity plan under section 403(a), tax-sheltered annuity plan under section 403(b), Simplified Employee Pension plan under section 408(k), a Simple IRA plan under section 408(p), or governmental deferred compensation plan under section 457(b).

As a business owner, choosing the right qualified retirement plan may be a daunting task, and we recommend speaking to a financial professional for guidance. Here are a few options to consider when seeking advice that will meet your business and employee needs:

MYCTSAVINGS: The Connecticut Legislature passed a law that created MyCTSAV-

INGS to make it easier for more workers to save for their retirements. The program uses automatic enrollment and savings through payroll deductions to help employees save. Eligible employees can opt out if they don't want to participate or prefer to save another way. This is the "Do-It-Yourself" option. For more information visit: www.myctsavings.com

401(k): This is a subsection of the IRS code that defines an employer-sponsored, defined-contribution, personal pension (savings) account. This means that an employee may contribute periodically to the plan directly out of their paycheck, and the contribution may be matched by the employer. Some businesses may have tax benefits, fees and/or administrative costs associated with these plans. The benefit of these retirement plans is that they offer financial guidance and administration support.

SIMPLE IRA or Savings Incentive March Plan for Employees: This retirement plan is ideal for small busi-

nesses and can be seen as the "gateway" plan to get into retirement planning. It allows employers and employees to contribute to a Traditional IRA. These plans usually come with low fees and financial guidance.

Simplified Employee Plan or SEP: This retirement plan is for business owners only. It can be a great way for business owners to save for their retirement and have favorable tax consequences. These plans may come with financial guidance and should be discussed with a financial professional and/or an accountant.

Whatever business you're in, now is the time to get that retirement plan started. Let's not forget the many helpful LGBTQ+ businesses associated with the CT Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce that provide assistance finding the best plan for you. For a list of those businesses please visit: <https://ctglc.org/>



—Michelle Cutrali

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 who will understand your individual situation.

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Safe Spaces for Consent

If you ask me, people don't talk about consent enough with respect to sex. Sure, those of us who attend college get a one-hour seminar at orientation to talk about the definition of consent and the consequences of violating it, but consent is far too nuanced to cover in such a short period of time.

"No means no," is the primary message we get about consent, and it's important. If someone says no to sex, do not have sex with them. If someone says no to something you may consider totally benign like a hug, do not hug them. Consent can be revoked at any time. A person cannot consent when incapacitated by drugs or alcohol. Most of us have heard these basics, and it's important to know them as a baseline.

These are not the only things to keep in mind, though. We must also create an environment in which our partners feel safe saying no to us. Let me explain.

Think about this situation. You are in a relationship in which you're financially supported by another person. You are worried that if the person isn't satisfied with the relationship, they'll leave you with nothing. So, to keep them happy, you have sex with them when they ask, whether you want to or not. This is an example of a situation where a person might feel they can't say no.

Aaron, age 32, talks about a time he had a friend over for drinks and let them crash on the couch so they wouldn't have to drive home. This friend proceeded to crawl into his bed and initiate sex. When he expressed that he wasn't interested, they continued to ask and initiate. He decided it was easier to just go with it and have sex with the person than to say no and create conflict.

So, how do we ensure that a partner feels okay, safe, or comfortable saying

no to sex, or any activity? Obviously, it's impossible to control for every factor affecting consent, but there are a few things you can do.

First, be specific. "Can I go down on you?" or "Want to bottom?" are better than issuing commands or simply moving the person into position. Communicate these questions with each sex act. Just because they want to give you a blowjob doesn't mean they want you to reciprocate, so ask first.

Lead by example. Tell the person what you like, then ask what they're into. Say no to anything you're not comfortable with. Continually communicate during the entire encounter. Showing that you're comfortable talking about consent helps put your partner at ease that they, too, can tell you what they do and don't want.


If they seem ambivalent, emphasize that they don't have to do anything they don't want to. If you ask them, "Can you use this cock ring?" and they say something indecisive like "I guess so," say "It's totally okay if you don't want to!" or "no worries. What if I wore it instead?" Take the pressure off and give them an out.

Let's revisit the above example with Aaron. His guest was badgering, which felt coercive to him. They also continued attempting to initiate sex after Aaron had already expressed disinterest. What should they have done instead? The best way to approach it would have been to simply ask, and to stop right away when Aaron said no, rather than asking repeatedly, trying to wear him down.

SEX TALK

With Kim Adamski

Being safe to say yes to is also important! Your partner should feel safe telling you what they want without fear of judgment. You don't have to say "yes" to everything they ask, but try not to make them feel bad for asking respectfully. You may think their desire is weird, but as long as it isn't putting anyone in danger, there's no reason to make them feel bad for it. This is also a behavior you can encourage by modeling. Tell your partner your fantasy to open the door to hearing theirs, and respect their "no" if they aren't interested in trying it.

These tips are not comprehensive. It's important to add that seeking and giving consent isn't going to undermine the passion of the moment, however you define that. Consent is about communication and creating a safe, comfortable environment. The more openly you talk with your partner, the better you will both be able to give informed and enthusiastic consent. Chances are you'll end up feeling freer, more connected—and having a great experience. 

—Kim Adamski

Stress Happens.

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS ON HOW TO DEAL

As queer people, we already deal with greater levels of existential stress, as do other minority groups in the US, and it's well documented how stress related to discrimination is bad for our health. According to the American Heart Association, this stress raises blood pressure, increases our likelihood of cardiac events, is linked with higher rates of substance abuse, and difficulty finding medical providers that understand our specific needs can be challenging. Not to mention the everyday stresses of

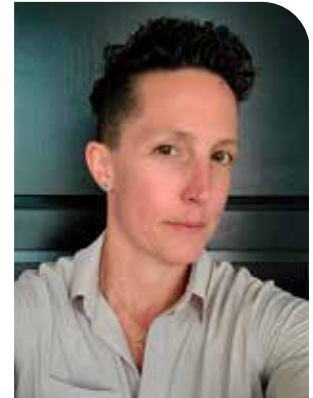
being a human being experiencing break ups, job stress, and sick family members. That's a lot, and yet we're still out here making art, making change, and caring for each other!

So, what happens when our stress levels hit the fan? What happens when they're continually approaching the fan? How about when we experience stress on a regular basis relating to our queerness, and our intersectionality concerning other public identities like race, gender, and physical ability?

Now more than ever,

investing in our own health and well-being as queer people is a revolutionary act! As Audre Lorde wrote in *A Burst of Light*, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence; it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Although Lorde is credited with coining the phrase "self-care," she's sick of hearing it, too! Instead, I invite you to visit your Self. Sense into that part of your Self that helped you awaken to your queerness. That source energy is like a skeleton key that you can use to unlock the rest



Meghan Crutchley

of your life. It can help you explore what behaviors align to your unique needs and wants, which have a positive/negative impact on you during times of stress, and what you need to experience on a regular basis to feel nourished, rejuvenated, and relaxed while you unplug from life's demands.





A good place to start understanding our own unique stress responses is to identify what actually happens when you experience stress. Research shows that we fall back on our habits during stressful times. So, while our conscious mind is distracted by dealing with the source of our stress, our unconscious is keeping us on task with our most consistent habits. As Wendy Wood points out in her book, *Good Habits/Bad Habits*, “That’s good news for us...that your habits and those parts of you that you’ve set toward your long-term goals will continue.”

This might instill more stress in some of you! No need; all we have to do is find ourselves in the present moment with compassion—compassion for the fact that being human is hard. It’s messy, and it’s also ruthlessly beautiful. When we can check in with what we need and understand and view our

“Once we can slow down the process of our automatic habits, we can see the connections to things like our thoughts and resulting behaviors.”

behaviors as trying to solve a problem (Ugh, stress!), then we can be more flexible from a nervous system standpoint and allow for small changes. That’s the first step, exploring and moving towards what feels good and what behaviors are aligned with our deeper Selves and which ones are not. Here are a few strategies to noodle on. See what works for you:

Practice presence with what’s happening now.

Sense into emotions, feelings, and thoughts that are prompting you to act. Once we can slow down the process of our automatic habits, we can see the connections to things like our thoughts and resulting behaviors. Knowing that being in your body might not feel safe for everyone, focus on what feels good. For many people breathing is an accessible and profound resource for practicing presence.


Set/hold boundaries.

Put time limits on media, technology, and even people that add to your stress/ anxiety.

Recover as hard as you stress.

Schedule your recovery practices as you would work appointments and obligations. Stress is accumulative, and so is recovery. Daily practice even five minutes a day will help you build momentum for any habits you’re trying to develop like movement, breathing, meditation, baths, reading, etc.

Compassion is freeing.

Bringing compassion to anything we find in our current lives helps free us from identifying with it as inherent or inevitable. Want to make a change? Start first with allowing yourself to be right where you are, muck and all! And watch how much easier it is to let go. 

—Meghan Crutchley

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT //

FALL ARTS PREVIEW:

Some Rouge, Some Rainbow, Some Razzmatazz

By FRANK RIZZO

Courtney Reed in the North American
Tour of Moulin Rouge! The Musical.
Photo by Matthew Murphy

Now that summer is over, it's time to store the shorts until next year and get out the glitter for a night on the town this fall. Here are just a few of the many shows around the state—and a bit beyond—that are getting us excited.

Moulin Rouge
The Bushnell in Hartford
Nov. 21 to Dec 3

Attention party-goers, this fall's big Parisian blast takes place at The Bushnell when the Broadway tour of *Moulin Rouge* plays Hartford. The Tony Award-winning musical, based on the 2001 Baz Luhrmann film, has production values that are stunningly over-the-top with spectacular costumes, a dazzling night club setting and a score chock full of contemporary pop songs, but with a French twist. (Just keep the 'ooh-la-las' to yourself.) BTW: **Candace Bushnell** will be at The Bushnell Nov. 4 talking about *Sex and the City*, and no doubt, *And Just Like That...*

Chicago
Shubert Theatre in New Haven
Dec. 7 to 10

Yes, we've seen this evergreen show before. It's still running on Broadway after 27 years, and yet we can't get quite enough of those hot guys in leather, slinky gals in satin, the razzle-dazzle and, of course, all that jazz. Cue the vamp.

Dreamgirls
Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam
Nov. 10 to 30

And we're telling you we are going. Of course we are because the songs are fab, the wigs are high, and the drama mamas are off the charts. It's a more contempo show than Goodspeed usually presents, and we can't wait for the glam and glitz. (Oh, and we're Team Effie.)

Randy Rainbow
Ridgefield Playhouse Oct. 19 and
Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts
on the UConn campus in Storrs
Oct. 28.

All hail our fave queen of sass and satire: Randy Rainbow (and for the umpteenth time, yes that's his real name). His YouTube parodies got us through the Trump administration, not to mention the pandemic, and his barbed musical pieces still skewer the crazy right wing. (Check out his latest Trump parody, "Don't Arraign on My Parade, inspired by "Don't Rain on my Parade.") Yaz, queen.

On Your Feet: The Story of
Emilio & Gloria Estefan
Palace Theatre in Waterbury
Dec. 15 and 16

We all know the Estefans are Miami-bred Cuban-Americans who, first with the Miami Sound Machine and then with Gloria's solo career, personified the Latin sound for American pop music. Here's their story on stage, and the title sort of tells you where you'll be during this tour stop because, well, "Rhythm is Gonna Get You." Wear sensible shoes. Or maybe a pair of hot stilettos. Your call.



On Your Feet





Chicago brings it razzle dazzle to New Haven. Photo by Jeremy Daniel





Tig Notaro
Warner Theater in Torrington
Sept. 15.

We love Tig’s off-beat, deadpan comedy and her very personal storytelling. (Just listen to “Boyish Girl Interrupted” and her tale of when she introduced her wife to some overzealous Mississippi relatives.) The American stand-up comedian, writer, radio contributor, and actor will make a stop in Connecticut with her “Hello, Again” tour and we can’t wait to say hello, too.

CT Gay Men’s Chorus Holiday Show
The Katharine Hepburn Cultural
Center in Old Saybrook

What better way to celebrate the holidays than with a gaggle of gay guys singing their out their hearts in harmony? The Kate is the perfect intimate setting for a musical event that speaks to community, pride, the Christmas spirit, and Daddy kissing Santa Claus. So sing out, Louis.



David Sedaris
The Palace in Stamford
Oct. 10

Our favorite literary elf from his famous *The Santaland Diaries* returns to Connecticut no doubt bringing us up-to-date with post-pandemic tales—often hysterically funny but sometimes dark and poignant, too —about his colorful family, marathon walks, and his decades-long boyfriend Hugh. This *sui generis* humorist — and Amy’s brother—never fails to delight and even disturb—whenever he presents his latest “carnival of snackery.” (which is also the title of his latest book). Plus, you get to say hi to him after the show for a book signing.

Lizzie
TheatreWorks Hartford

Our favorite Fall River daughter is back with a rock musical of her own—and don’t you get just a teensy gay vibe in the story? Think *Six*, with a Yankee twist. It’s a 19th Century mystery that still haunts us more than a century later with its tale of murder, money, and mutton—and now you can dance to it.





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Wish You Were Here
Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven

Oct. 5 to Oct. 28

Hot off her Pulitzer Prize win in drama last year for *English*, San Toss will present a world premiere play about Iranian women in revolutionary times in 1978 grappling with the question of whether to stay or emigrate. Sounds dramatic.

Pride and Prejudice
Hartford Stage

Oct. 12 to Nov. 11

Complete Works of Jane Austen (Abridged)
West Hartford's Playhouse on Park

Sept. 27 to Oct. 22

For all those Austen-philes (or “Jane-ites,” according to a Playhouse promotion) it’s a bonanza this fall with one show that celebrates her most famous novel, in the Kate Hamill adaptation that’s been a hit around the country. The other tackles all the novels and gives you a crash course in the world of landed gentry, English social mores, and sharp-witted women. (We always thought Mr. Darcy was pretty dreamy, too.)

Patti Labelle at Foxwoods
Nov. 24 and

Kesha at Foxwoods
Oct. 28.

We couldn’t choose between diva and the divine, so we suggest both performers for their own distinct style of empowerment that celebrates—thanks Kesha—“We R Who We R.” Patti turns 80 next year, and what a great way to celebrate her prideful career. (“I’m the original drag queen,” she boasted to the *New York Post*. “I was wearing crazy hair, crazy makeup, crazy clothes [from the beginning]...I think my gay following realizes that I’m one of those girls that they can come to say whatever they have to say, and I say, ‘It’s OK.’”) Awww, we love you, Patti.

Derek Hough – Symphony of Dance
Mohegan Sun Arena

Nov. 25

If we can’t dance with a star, we can at least watch one of our favorite dancer-choreographers Derek Hough show off his fancy footwork with precision, style and smoldering sexiness. (We think his sultry dance floor moves could qualify as foreplay.) He brings a cast of dancers that also features Haley Erbert performing an array of dance styles to a live band.

Eric Nam
College Street Music Hall, New Haven
Oct. 10 with his “House on a Hill Tour.

We’ve been a fan ever since we heard the Korean-American singer-songwriter refuse to dress up as famous gay celebrity on “SNL Korea” because he didn’t want to stereotype and poke fun at the LGBTQ+ community. Oh

yes, his pop-dance songs are also irresistible. When he sings “You’re-Sexy-I’m-Sexy,” we all feel sexy. (Also featured is choir-boy-turned-popster heartthrob Alexander Stewart.)



Brian Stokes Mitchell

Brian Stokes Mitchell
Ridgefield Playhouse

Oct. 29

Who says the era of swooning over a leading man is over? “Stokes” (as his friends call him) has wooed audience in Broadway musicals for decades including *Ragtime*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Kiss Me Kate*, and the man can still make us melt. His solo show at the cozy theater just makes it more personal.

The Year of Magical Thinking
Various New Haven spaces in November.

(Dates and places to be announced. Check out longwharf.org.) Kathleen Chalfant (Tony Award-nominee for the original “Angels in America”) performs this stage adaptation of Joan Didion’s deeply personal memoir. But the stage will be especially intimate as Chalfant performs the piece in some people’s living rooms, as well as small spaces in libraries, art organizations, and local retail businesses around the New Haven area. Long Wharf Theatre and the NYC-based Keen Company are partnering in this unique experience.

Sunset Boulevard
A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) in Ridgefield
Oct. 26 to Nov. 19

This (relatively) new theater in Fairfield County is getting good buzz. So, we’re eager to return the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical and, of course, our favorite queen of delusion (sorry, MTG), Norma Desmond, forever ready for her close-up.



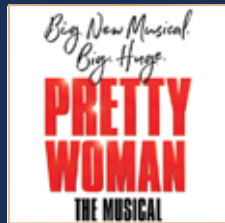
Palace Theater in Waterbury

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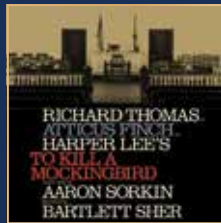
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SEPTEMBER 29



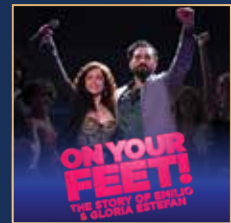
PRETTY WOMAN
OCTOBER 10-12



**HARPER LEE'S
TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**
NOVEMBER 3-5



**A MAGICAL CIRQUE
CHRISTMAS**
NOVEMBER 28



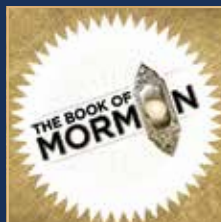
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And in New York City:

Merrily New Roll Along at the Hudson Theatre, began its limited 18-week run Sept. 19. The problematic Stephen Sondheim musical stars Jonathan Groff (TV's *Looking* and *Mindhunter*), Daniel Radcliffe, and Tony Award-winner Lindsay Mendez as three friends, exploring how relationships change as people get older in this backward-telling tale. We've swooned over Groff since *Spring Awakening* and loved Radcliffe for his post-Harry Potter career choices. It was a hot ticket last fall when it was off-Broadway and no doubt will be once again.

And at the Met there's the opera **Dead Man Walking** (music by Jake Heggie, book by Terrence McNally, staged by Ivo van Hove) in repertory (Sept. 26 to Oct. 21). It is the most-produced opera worldwide, and after a Covid-related delay is finally making its Met debut.

And taking Amtrak to Penn Station, we go straight to Madison Square Garden to see **Eddie Izzard** (Sept. 21 and 22, Oct. 2); followed by some of our faves: **Ringo Starr** (Oct. 6); **Pink** (Nov. 5 and 14); **Enrique Iglesias, Pitbull** and **Ricky Martin** (Oct. 26 and 27) and the final MSG shows of **Billy Joel** (Oct. 20, Nov. 11).

Of course, we're always excited about the annual autumn returns of **New York Film Festival** at Lincoln Center (Sept. 29 to Oct. 15); **New York Comedy Festival** (Nov. 3 to 12); and **New York Comic Con** (Oct. 12 to 15).



Sydney Shepherd, stars as Lizzie Borden in an all-female cast in *Lizzie* running Sept 29–Oct 22. Alongside performances of *Lizzie*, TheaterWorks Hartford will present a special one-night-only concert with *Bandits on the Run* on October 22. Photo by **Dan Holodak**

Broken Chord by Gregory Maqoma **Quick Center at Fairfield University** **Nov. 1**

One of South Africa's leading choreographers, Maqoma conceives works that combine beauty with political awareness. As a visionary who merges movement, theater, dance, visuals, and music, his latest work was created with composer Thuthuka Sibisi, it features four soloists and an onstage cappella chorus as the piece tells a compelling story of a group of Cape Town singers on tour in England in 1891. *The Guardian* called the show "a potent performance."

The Color Purple **Ivoryton Playhouse** **Sept. 28 to Oct. 22**

We're eager to see the film version of the Broadway musical at Christmastime—but there's nothing like live theatre, and one of the best little theaters around is presenting the powerful coming-of-age tale of *Celie* this fall. (And who can forget those scenes with the seductive Shug?)



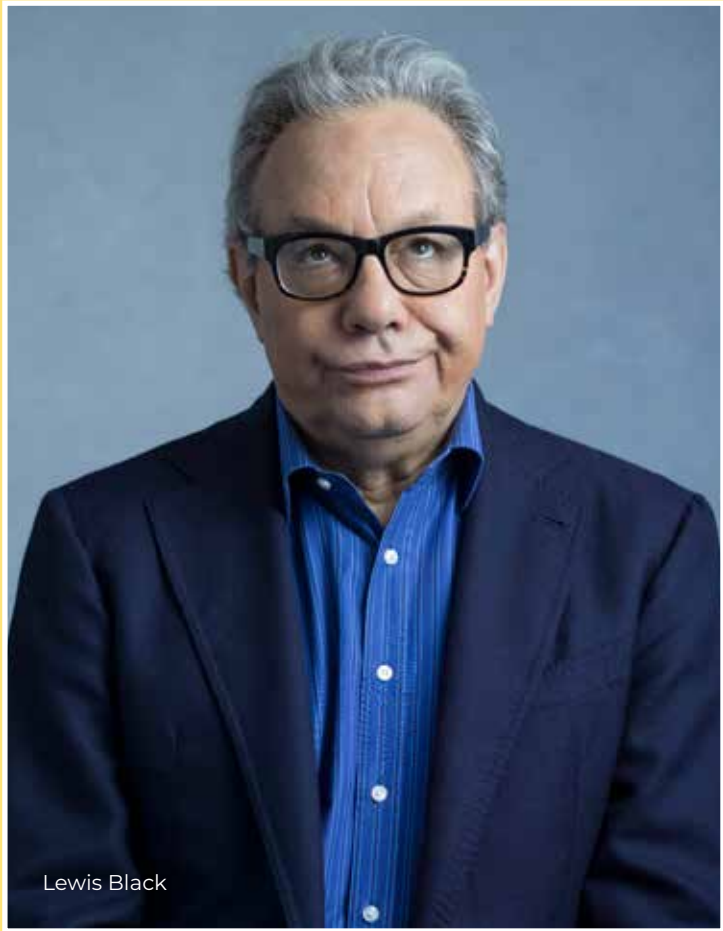
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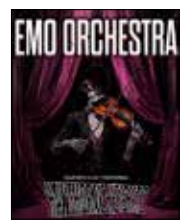
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Amy Bruni
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Emo Orchestra feat.
Hawthorne Heights
OCTOBER 6



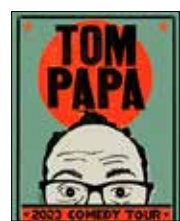
Carbonaro:
Lies on Stage
OCTOBER 7



Whose Live
Anyway?
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In Concert
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Lewis Black
Garde Arts Center in New London
Nov. 19

Comedian Lewis Black rants for all of us, and we're sure he has a lot of finger-poking in store when he returns to Connecticut. (BTW: He's a Yale School of Drama grad, '77.) We also liked what he said about the new LGBTQ+ generation: "There's a sense of 'we're not going to take it anymore; we're not going to be threatened anymore.'" And coming from the king of rage, that's high praise indeed.

Andrea Bocelli
XL Center in Hartford
Dec. 9

Feeling classy and classic? The great Italian tenor returns to Hartford for the first time in 25 years with classics (and a few holiday tunes, too, no doubt.) It will be a family affair in Connecticut when his handsome 25-year-old son Matteo—a tenor as well—performs at Foxwoods' Great Cedar Showroom on Dec. 15 as part of a separate world tour promoting his solo album "Matteo."

The Jinx & DeLa Holiday Show
College Street Music Hall, New Haven
Nov. 29


This is our kind of holiday show. Drag superstars

BenDaLaCreme and Jinx Monsoon — favorites from the world of *RuPaul's Drag Race*—will bring their fifth international tour in its only Connecticut gig with a mix of songs, sass and drag glam.

Maidens, Witches and Femmes Fatales:
The Women of Opera
Madison Lyric Opera
(Oct. 14 and 15)

Want a bit more opera this fall? This all-female evening sounds grand (and puckish) as it features some of the greatest arias and scenes from the world of opera, featuring works by Bizet, Barber, Britten, Mozart, Puccini, Verdi Strauss and Wagner.

Fairview
Collective Consciousness Theatre New Haven
Nov. 2 to 19.

This is another hot, new theater company in then state whose work we loved. It will be presenting Jackie Sibbles Drury's Pulitzer Prize-winning play about a middle class African-American family preparing for a grandmother's birthday dinner only to be watched by four white people. It's exploration of black life and the white gaze promises to be a stunner. 

Jose Llana: Here Lies Pride

By FRANK RIZZO

It was an awkward moment for Jose Llana when he told his family that he would be starring in the new stage musical *Here Lies Love*.

But Llana would not be playing heroic Philippine politician Benigno Aquino Jr., the role he had originally sought.

Instead, Llana would play Ferdinand Marcos, the country's president who ruled for two decades and imposed martial law from 1972 to 1981. Marcos' dictatorial reign was the reason Llana's student-activist parents emigrated in the late '70s as their friends began getting arrested and disappearing. Llana was a three-year-old when they arrived in the U.S.

Aquino was a forceful opposition leader until he was assassinated in 1983, a murder which further propelled the People Power Revolution, which led to the removal of Ferdinand and wife Imelda Marcos from power. *Here Lies Love* tells the story of Imelda Marcos' rise and subsequent fall amid the heady swirl of politics, money, corruption and America's involvement in bolstering Marcos' dark reign.

The musical, which opened on Broadway in July, was conceived by David Byrne with music by Byrne and Fat Boy Slim, and staged by Tony award-winning director Alex Timbers (*Moulin Rouge*).

"I first told my sister, and said, 'Hey I'm doing a new musical with a great young director and the guy who was in Talking Heads,'" said Llana. "And, oh yeah, I'm playing Ferdinand."





Llana as Marcos and the cast in the multimedia production on Broadway.

When he shared the news with his parents, however, “They weren’t so thrilled,” he said.

But, he added, as long as the storytelling didn’t glamorize the political strongman and his wife—the latter infamous for her extravagant shopping habits—and knowing that it would bring attention to that country’s history and people, they were supportive.

The production itself is a massive and theatrically radical undertaking. The sung-through *Here Lies Love* is an audience-immersive experience, something the likes of which Broadway has never seen. With the orchestra seats removed, the floor of the Broadway Theatre has been physically transformed into a giant dance club environment, where under a giant disco ball surrounded by projections, 300 audience members stand, dance and move about—guided by “audience wranglers”—as the actors perform at various moving stages. (There are seating options for around 800 on the sides and balcony.)

Annie-B Parson, who staged the cool dance movement in David Byrne’s *American Utopia* on Broadway is choreographing *Here Lies Love*. Re-imagining the physical performing space and creating its nightclub design is David Korins (*Hamilton*).

Here Lies Love began as a multimedia song cycle in Australia and at NYC’s Carnegie Hall in 2007; then as a 2010 concept album; then as a theatrical show at Mass MoCA in the Berkshires in 2012. It was produced off-Broadway at the Public Theater in 2013; followed by a hit run at London’s National Theater. In 2014, it returned to The Public and in 2017 it played Seattle Repertory Theater, demonstrating that the show could also play in a revamped proscenium house.

The pandemic put a pause on plans for a Broadway engagement, which would require the expense of physically transferring a traditional theater into a vast and fabulous nightclub.

Llana said during the pandemic he had finally emotionally moved on from years of anticipation for a Broadway production—until last year when he received word that, yes, it was finally going to happen.

Different World

But the show would not return as it had been. Other forces which emerged during the pandemic—notably the Black Lives Matter and the We See You, White American Theatre movements—also altered the dynamics of the show.



Jose Llana. Photo by Billy Bustamante

Llana arrived at our interview at Soho House, a private club in the Meatpacking District. Dressed in casual chic, he was a handsome, sophisticated figure with piercing dark eyes and a disarming smile suggesting he could be all business or charm—or both. This would be the first time he would be talking about the new production and his excitement was evident as he spoke passionately, not just with a sense of promotion but of purpose, for a subject that meant the world to him.

“The world is changing, and we wanted to make sure that the show that we still loved would also change,” said Llana, repeating what he told Timbers. “I wanted them to know that this subject matter is very important to me, and I wanted to be clear that I wouldn’t be part of a project that would present [the Marcos] in any falsely positive way.”

“My parents raised me and my sister with an extreme awareness of why we left,” he said. “There’s a hot-headed activist in me, too. Speaking out is part of my DNA because the reason I’m an American is because my parents came here to escape a regime they felt needed to be changed. So I cannot stay silent, and my director and producers know that. From day one there was always an

open dialogue, and they always made me feel that they were grateful for my presence.”

Llana said the creative and producing teams have made a committed decision to make sure that this production would feature many Filipinos, Philippine-Americans and people of color involved in the production. Llana, who has been with the show since workshops prior to the Mass MoCA production, says the musical has deepened dramatically and become more politically powerful.

The show features the first all-Filipino cast to perform on Broadway, led by Llana and, as Aquino, Conrad Ricamora (Off-Broadway’s *Soft Power*, TV’s *How to Get Away with Murder*). Lea Salonga stars as Aurora Aquino, the slain leader’s mother, for a limited time. (Guest stars from the Philippines will follow.) Arielle Jacobs plays Imelda Marcos, the former First Lady of the Philippines.

The Tony Award-winning Salonga (*Miss Saigon*) is also one of the Filipino producers, along with writer and immigrant rights advocate Jose Antonio Vargas and costume and set designer Clint Ramos, who created the costumes for the production. There is Filipino representation on the producing and creative teams as well.

Gay Pride

Llana, 47, grew up in a Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C. before going to New York City to study classical voice at the Manhattan School of Music. His life changed dramatically when, as a 19-year-old freshman in college, he landed the featured role of Lun Tha in the 1996 Broadway production of *The King & I*, which starred Lou Diamond Phillips. (He repeated the role when the tour came to The Bushnell in Hartford.) In 2015, he became King when he succeeded Ken Watanabe in the Lincoln Center revival of the show, which also starred Kelli O’Hara.

His early career highlights included roles in Broadway productions of *Rent*, *Street Corner Symphony*, and as the romantic lead in a revised revival of *Flower Drum Song* in 2002 (which starred Salonga).

With his reputation as a dreamy Broadway singer growing, Llana returned to the Philippines in 2003 to



Llana (second from left) and the cast including Lea Salonga, Arielle Jacobs, and Conrad Ricamora (l to r from Llana)

become a recording artist there.

“But I realized that—after being an out gay man—I had to be pushed back into the closet to promote myself as ‘pop star heart throb’ and ‘Lea’s former Broadway leading man.’ It was tough, and I was embarrassed that I did it that way and that I didn’t stand up for myself. I was there for six months or so, but to achieve what I wanted to achieve there I would have to basically move there. I had a theater career here, so I came back to the U.S. with full vengeance, thinking I am not spending one more day in the closet—and I didn’t even have a boyfriend at the time,” he says laughing.

He soon landed the role of Chip in the hit 2005 musical *The 25th Annual Putnam, County Spelling Bee*, playing a student in the competition and memorably singing “My Unfortunate Erection.”

He and Erik Rose, a real estate executive, have been together since 2008 and married in 2018. “Mentioning my husband in conversation and in interviews, and also that I’ve been out for 30 years, is important to me. The more normal you make it by saying these things out loud, the more powerful it becomes.”

“When I came out of the closet in ‘94, for the first six years the words ‘boyfriend’ was never uttered. It was always, ‘That’s Jose’s friend.’ People now have the same issues with the whole non-binary conversations. Just because it’s hard for you to say ‘them’ doesn’t mean you shouldn’t stop trying if it helps make them feel better and that’s how they want to be addressed. I’m reminded of how much we had to deal with the rolling of the eyes when we said, ‘This is my boyfriend’ or ‘This is my husband.’ My parents now just say it, and it isn’t anything extra special for them. It’s just ‘Jose’s husband.’

Sometimes the most powerful and effective activism is to live your life proudly.

A Changing Relevance

With its bold theatricality, its boundary-busting talent, and its portrayal of an historic narrative, *Here Lies Love* could be seen as *Hamilton* for the Philippines.

“What I hope for *Here Lies Love*, not just my Philippine friends but for others too, is that they’ll say, ‘Thank you and I’m going to go home and really dig deep about that history.’ (Llana

recommends the 2019 documentary about Imelda Marcos, *The Kingmaker*.)

“Our job is to put on a great show,” he says. “But I also see it as a bit of a Trojan Horse, where on the surface it’s this big shiny bauble, and there’s a lot of fun and great music and beautiful people dancing all around you.”

But then hopefully, he said, “by the time the house lights come up at the end of the show, and you see the dirty floor that you’ve been dancing on and take in the hangover from the Marcos ‘party,’ you understand what can happen when we let leaders run wild without accountability.”

Presenting *Here Lies Love* now has a new relevancy for the United States and its people, he said. “When the show was created during the Obama administrations, the world and the U.S. were riding a high. Look at what happened since.”

Marcos was a master of re-inventing history and the truth and questioning and attacking journalists, said Llana. “That was his strategy. The similarities now are scary. That’s why it’s so important we’re telling this story now.”

Sizing Things Up

By **BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON**

As people begin to, once again, to spend more and more time outside their homes, whether it's at the office, in a restaurant or club, at the gym, or a theater or cinema, there will remain an inner pressure—especially prevalent in the thoughts of LGBTQ+ folks – to appear stylish wherever one goes.

For many of us, that's not a huge dilemma (especially if money is not an object), with a wide variety of good-looking and well-fitting clothing at our fingertips. But for women and men whose weight or height require that

their wardrobes are beyond “standard” sizing (size 12 for women, XL or more, for men), it hasn't always been easy to find clothing that is comfortable yet eye-catching. Luckily, that situation is changing, thanks to a wide variety of savvy retailers and designers.

“We are always able to cater to every woman in any size who is looking to update her fall wardrobe,” notes Lyndsey Riviere, a stylist at the Dressing Room, which has stores in Wallingford and Madison. The popular boutiques carry several brands, including Skies Are Blue and Isle Apparel, that offer figure-flattering clothes in larger-than-usual sizes, as well as a varied denim selection with options for plus-size women. “We want to make sure that you're never struggling to find a pair of jeans that fit you just right,” she adds.



A patterned dress from Hurley LA (inset) and a patterned top and jeans from Maurices are figure-flattering outfits.

That trend is definitely growing. “Every day, we see new designers expanding their current size offerings or launching their plus-size clothing line into the open space of a now \$1 billion industry,” says Jen Wilder, co-owner of the Plus Bus. “Plus-size fashion has often been treated as a monolith of style, but over the past three years, we have seen the plus-size customer diversify in as far as what they are looking for or what they expect from a brand. These women are not playing by the same rules their mothers and grandmothers were. It’s why we encourage people to dress the body they have today and for the life they want today and not wait for ‘five pounds from now’ to invest in their own expression through style!”

A similar sentiment is echoed by designer Renee Cafaro, who specifically creates clothing for larger-sized women.

Top: PlusBus is offering more diverse styles to their plus-size customers in response to increasing sales. **Bottom left:** Vitality is a premium athletic apparel and loungewear brand with a mission of inclusivity, commitment to customers of all sizes, and a focus on confidence-inducing apparel. **Bottom right:** Ruth Nathan's Port of Spain Jumbo bow ties a redesigned to complement taller men due to the broader height of the bow.




“Design-focused retailers have been catching on like wildfire as plus-size shoppers are finally getting more access to fashion which they can use to express themselves. Everyone wants and deserves unique and trendy pieces.”

Adds Jamie King, professional fashion designer and SVP of Design and Trend with national retailer Maurices, “Under-represented groups of Americans continue to demand (as they should) more representation in every area of life, and having fashion choices is a huge part of that. We are so inspired by our Plus-identified customers, and we truly believe that all women should have access to fashion that makes them feel comfortable, put together, but most of all, confident. This is why we are proud to offer inclusive sizes 0-24: a feel-good fit for everyone!

Bigger men have long had it easier, as many brand-named sportswear designers and retailers, including Ralph Lauren, LL Bean, DXL and Casual Male, have offered items in sizes up to 3XL. But now, more and more fashion companies are thinking outside the box in catering to the larger-sized male customer.

For example, Nicole R. Brown, Chief Creator of accessory brand Ruth Nathan’s, offers two lines, The Port of Spain Jumbo and Port of Los Angeles Jumbo bow ties, each of which are designed to complement taller men due to the broader height of the bow. “These lines ensure the tie frames his face nicely,” she notes.

And perhaps the entire industry will soon follow the example of popular shirt brand UNTUCKit. “Inclusivity is a huge part of UNTUCKit and always has been,” says founder Chris Riccobono. “Everyone is welcome in our stores where you’ll find our “lineup,” which is a visual map of all the different body shapes and sizes we fit with our shirts, pants, and more. And starting in October, we’ll have even more UNTUCKit size and fit offerings through a new partnership with DXL, which will extend our size range significantly. It’s an important next step in allowing everyone to enjoy The Original Untucked Shirt.”

So yes, you can go big—and go home—with clothing that you love! 



Maurices specializes in stylish looks for plus-size women.

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Le Consort



Jessica Vosk

& ENTERTAINMENT

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Anoushka Shankar

Tue, Oct 3, 7:30 pm (\$36-46)

Isidore Quartet

Thu, Oct 5, 7:30 pm (\$36-39)

Sergio Bernal Dance Company

Thu, Oct 12, 7:30 pm (\$36-41)

Justin Willman

Sat, Oct 14, 8 pm (\$31-51)

Samara Joy

Fri, Oct 20, 8 pm (\$36-56)

Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood Live!

Sun, Oct 22, 2 pm (\$26-31)

Randy Rainbow For President

Sat, Oct 28, 8 pm (\$46-51)

Le Consort

Thu, Nov 2, 7:30 pm (\$36-39)

Jessica Vosk

Sat, Nov 4, 8 pm (\$46-56)

Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway

Sat, Nov 11, 8 pm (\$36-56)

American Ballet Theatre Studio Company

Fri, Nov 17, 8 pm (\$36-39)

Messiah Sing

Thu, Nov 30, 8 pm (Free)

MacMaster & Leahy

Sun, Dec 3, 3 pm (\$36-46)

Holiday Pops

Fri, Dec 8, 8 pm (\$76-91)

Note: All artists, events, dates, programs and policies are subject to change.



In the Center's Food Pantry: staff members Ta'LannaMonique ("TMO") Lawson-Dickerson, Laura Boccadoro and Bennie Saldana

The New Haven Pride Center is Back

By JANE LATUS

Community: that's what it was all about 27 years ago when activists formed the New Haven Pride Center. Founding Director John D. Allen, Ed.D. conducted a community needs assessment as part of his graduate work that validated his premise: there was a pressing need for a location in the city to meet, organize, and just be. From this, the New Haven Pride Center was born.

Since its first years on a shoestring budget with one staff member, the Pride Center steadily grew. In 2022, nearly 15,000 people participated in its programs, implemented by 12 paid staff, board members, and around 200 volunteers. Hundreds



Juancarlos Soto

depend on the center for essentials. When its food pantry was unavailable during quarantine for 17 weeks, dozens of volunteers delivered food to 125 families. And then, something happened, which threatened the center's existence—a financial crisis related to its essential tax-exempt status.

Last year, the board discovered an unopened second notice from the IRS, warning that the center's 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status was in jeopardy due to failure to file tax returns for three consecutive years. The news came as a surprise to (all but one) of the staff and board members, who were unaware the IRS had sent an initial warning letter. "It came out of left field," says board Co-President Nicholas Bussett.

The board immediately hired compliance

consultant BryteBridge Nonprofit Solutions to work with the then-director to file the overdue returns and prevent loss of tax-exempt status. When a board member later contacted BryteBridge for a progress check, they learned that nothing had been done and that the firm had not received the required paperwork. The board removed the director and appointed Juancarlos Soto interim director. (Soto had joined the center as a case manager three years previously and was deputy director at the time.) The board subsequently received a letter from the IRS saying its 501(c)(3) status had been revoked.

The immediate result of loss of IRS status was loss of funding, and for one month, all staff but Soto were furloughed.

The Community Steps Up

Soto says that during the month he was the lone staff member, he wasn't really alone. Volunteers rallied to support the center. Although programs were suspended, services were uninterrupted.

The next few weeks were "the roughest imaginable," board member Dolores Dégagé Hopkins told community members at a February 2023 online Town Hall immediately after the tax-exempt status had been retroactively reinstated. Yet that wouldn't have happened without the efforts of politicians and other organizations.

State Rep. Jeff Currey sped up the process of securing \$200,000 in state aid (previously designated to the center from the American Recovery Act). Sen. Richard Blumenthal worked with the IRS to accelerate the turnaround time for the process of reinstatement.

Other LGBTQ+ organizations came to the center's aid as well. The Triangle Community Center helped keep the food pantry going. New Haven businesses, nonprofits, professionals, and individuals donated money, held food drives, and volunteered. Accounting firm Marcum, LLP donated its financial services.

Co-President Hope Chávez told attendees of the Town Hall meeting

that the board was determined to fully resume operations and implement checks and balances as part of the rebuilding plan. "We recognize rebuilding trust with the community, staff, and folks in general will be a journey," she said. "We are aware there were some blinders on. There was an extent to which we possibly took trust too far."

Coming Back Stronger

No question, this was a traumatic experience for the organization, and it prompted extensive self-examination and subsequent administrative and policy overhauls. "The transition has been painful on a personal level and a professional level,"

says Soto. He felt burdened with "the fear of closing if I don't turn this ship around."

However, the crisis was also a good time to correct course, he says. He says that over the years, the center



drifted away from its original focus on community service and became more of an arts center.

“We’re now moving in the direction we want to be moving, returning to our roots, which is being a community center. New Haven has a plethora of arts organizations, but has only one LGBTQ+ community center,” he says.

Months later, Soto is clearly relieved to have programming back because the community badly needs a home. “The number-one thing I hear from people is, ‘I feel lonely,’ and ‘I feel afraid,’” he says.

Being a community center means providing a safe space for hanging out, support groups, educational programming, organizing, etc. The main priority, however, is meeting the basic needs of the people it serves.

“Our priorities are that the food pantry is always full, the Community Closet always has clean clothes, and hygiene products are always stocked,” says Soto. The center serves approximately 50 people a week with basic needs like

these.

Anyone is welcome to drop in to warm up or cool down, use a computer for fun or to apply for a job or benefits, microwave a lunch from the food pantry, use the library, or watch Netflix.

For camaraderie and support, the center offers several “affinity spaces,” support and social groups for those sharing interests or identities. It is a safe place for teens, who have been ousted from their families, and young adults struggling financially.

They are among the many who rely on the New Haven Pride Center for everything from survival to companionship. “I didn’t realize how many members of the LGBTQ+ community were in need in Greater New Haven until I joined the board,” says Bussett.

Reemergence and Moving Forward

“We’re living through really fucked up times. We’re living in Connecticut and we’re experiencing homophobia and

transphobia here,” says Soto. And more trans and gender nonconforming people are coming here, fleeing the legislative equivalent of hate crimes in red states. Connecticut needs to step up for them, too, he adds.

If you want to keep up with the ever-changing action at the center, don’t blink. Or at least check their social media regularly. There is a monthly clothes swap where you can bring some and/or take some. There are one-time craft events, and testimony-writing nights. Needs dictate programs like this summer’s sock and underwear drive.

The center conducts teach-ins on such topics as making your business welcoming, how to be an ally, the use and administration of Narcan in drug overdoses, and more.

Whoever you are, you’ll likely find the center has an affinity space that suits you, or you can suggest a new one. All are hybrid—online and in-person. They include support groups for gender, orientation, and culture, plus there’s an intergenerational Rainbow Friends and



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Elders, for example. Other groups, like Narcotics Anonymous, meet at the center, providing a safe place for queer people to attend.

Then there are youth services, with intensive programs for artists and writers, game nights, Black and Brown Queer Camp, and the “Real Talk” series on such serious issues as mental health.

The center also organizes some big annual events. It hosts PRIDE New Haven every September. After the youth-focused nonprofit True Colors closed in 2021, the center took over organizing the annual Connecticut LGBTQ+ Youth Conference. It’s the largest such teen conference in the country.

The center had to forego its major fundraiser, the Dorothy Award. The loss “was definitely felt by the community,” says Bussett, who says it will return.

But the daily, ordinary gatherings at the center give Soto the reward that for nonprofit workers doesn’t come in the form of a big paycheck. One day a woman came in to pick up her son, who was attending a youth program. She saw Soto,



and they recognized each other as former co-workers at another organization.

“She started to cry. I asked her, ‘What’s going on?’” She explained hers were tears of relief. Seeing Soto, she foresaw a successful future for her son. She told him, “I’m so happy now because I have a different idea of what my son can grow up to be.”

Bussett has a similar story, about someone who came in looking for help finding a job and is now thriving. “That’s why I

stick around,” he says. So is the Pride Center; “we’re not going anywhere.”

Looking back, life for queer people in 1996 Connecticut when all this started seems eons ago and dimensions away. Life did get better for LGBTQ+ people in the state since then. There is still work to do, however. In many respects, today is for many a scary time to be queer, and support for marginalized communities is as important as ever. 🍇

A black and white dog with a white blaze on its face, wearing a colorful patterned collar, is the central focus of the advertisement. The background is a snowy outdoor scene. To the left of the dog is a QR code with a paw print in the center, and below it, the text "SCAN TO GIVE!". To the right of the dog, the text reads: "Pets like Rufus need lifesaving care every single day. Make a gift to change a life!". At the bottom of the advertisement is a red banner with white text: "Your gift will be matched for local pets in need!" followed by "Accepting gifts of cash, stock, crypto and from donor-advised funds. Your gift will go twice as far for pets, today through December 31." The Connecticut Humane Society logo, a blue circle with a white paw print and the text "CONNECTICUT HUMANE SOCIETY", is in the bottom right corner. At the very bottom, a dark red banner contains the text: "Newington · Waterford · Westport · CThumane.org".

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NEWS 8

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TRAVEL //

“Oh, the Places You'll Go!”

**TIPS,
TREASURES AND
SAFETY MEASURES
FOR LGBTQ+
TRAVELERS**

By **ASHLEY ROGERS**



In his beloved children's book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go*, Dr. Seuss delighted in presenting the joy of exploration, of seizing new opportunities, and living with pride, despite life's hurdles. For the LGBTQ+ community, traveling is a bit like Seuss's message ... it isn't always easy, but the rewards are well worth the effort, and stumbling blocks can be turned into building blocks, with understanding, respect, compassion and preparation.

According to the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) world maps, there are still more than 70 countries that criminalize same-sex relations, with punishments ranging from discrimination, humiliation, stoning and imprisonment, to the death penalty.

In the United States, in June 2023, the Human Rights Campaign officially declared a "State of Emer-

gency" for the first time in its 40 year history for LGBTQ+ people traveling to the US, after more than 525 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in 41 states, with 75 already having passed in 2023.

Despite these grim statistics, the LGBTQ+ travel industry has grown enormously in recent years, becoming one of the most lucrative segments in this category, according to Skift, a leading news outlet for the travel industry. The key to safe travel, inclusive experiences, and once-in-a-lifetime adventures, is extensive research and preparation, say the experts.

"As an LGBTQ+ traveler, it's incredibly important to research the area you're planning to travel to ahead of time so you can be aware of any safety concerns or cultural nuances ..."

It's not always easy to prioritize safety, while advocating for equality and respect. "LGBTQ+ individuals certainly have unique considerations while traveling, with 82 percent of the LGBTQ+ traveling community having faced unnecessary barriers including discrimination while traveling," says Matthieu Jost, founder and CEO of Misterb&b, the world's largest travel and social network. Misterb&b offers vacation and business travelers over 1 million LGBTQ+ owned rooms, apartments, or LGBTQ+-friendly hotels in 200 countries. (<https://www.misterbandb.com>)

"As an LGBTQ+ traveler, it's incredibly important to research the area you're planning to travel to ahead of time so you can be aware of any safety concerns or cultural nuances," says Jost. "While it's extremely unfair, there are certain sets of rules that must be abided by when traveling to places that are not historically welcoming to LGBTQ+ individuals."

The Misterb&b blog features tips for traveling safely as part of the LGBTQ+ community, including

In The Event of Trouble

Even if you're the most law-abiding citizen at home, social, legal and cultural missteps in a foreign country can result in discrimination, violence and even arrest. Writer Anuga Argewal and travel blogger Lucy Taylor have these tips for LGBTQ+ travelers who find themselves in dangerous situations.

Seek Safety: The immediate goal should be to prioritize safety. If you are in imminent danger, contact local authorities, emergency services, or your embassy or consulate.

Contact LGBTQ+ Support Organizations: LGBTQ+ travelers can reach out to local LGBTQ+ support organizations for guidance, resources, and assistance.

Contact Human Rights groups, or legal professionals who specialize in LGBTQ+ rights for support and advice.

Document the Incident: Document any incident of discrimination, harassment, or violence, including taking photos, writing down details, and collecting any evidence. Documentation can be crucial for reporting the incident and for seeking legal assistance.

Don't Always Trust the Police: Police can be insensitive to or hostile toward LGBTQ+ individuals. In some parts of the Middle East and Africa, police use a fake Grindr, Facebook or other social media apps to lure, rape, abuse

or arrest LGBTQ+ individuals. Never unlock a smartphone or provide passwords to anyone.

Don't Give Too Much Information: If you can't imagine what crime you've committed, you may try to talk yourself out of an arrest. Until you know why you're being detained, you should keep quiet.

If Arrested, Ask About Your Rights: Always ask that you be told your rights in a language you understand. Your rights will vary from country to country. Also clarify the reason for an arrest.

Don't Sign Anything: Sometimes, due to corrupt police practices, people have been arrested and then encouraged to sign a document in a language they don't understand. Don't sign anything until you have a translator or translated copy of the document in front of you. Only sign a translated copy.

Call Your Family or Friends: If you've been arrested you need to notify someone in your family or family of friends. Tell them where you are being detained and on what charges. You should also give them contact details for your lawyer so they can stay informed.

Access Counseling and Support: After dealing with traumatic experiences, consider counseling or therapy to address any psychological or emotional challenges you may face following such anti-LGBTQ+ incidents.



Matthieu Jost

gay travel guides and roundups of the safest travel destinations for LGBTQ+ individuals, aids in choosing the right

destinations and accommodations and educating travelers on the cultural implications and norms for the queer community in that area. The portal also helps to connect travelers with other LGBTQ+ visitors and locals from the countries they are traveling to.

In June 2023 Misterb&b also launched a new travel app, Weere. "The Weere app was developed with the aim of empowering LGBTQ+ travelers and addressing the specific needs of solo travelers within our community. We recognized that 70 percent of our users are solo travelers, and we wanted to provide them with a platform where they could not only plan trips but also meet and connect with other travelers," says Jost. "In a time of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, travel advisories in places like Florida, and increased discrimination it's more important than ever to create safe and welcoming experiences for LGBTQ+ travelers. Weere means finding community and fighting loneliness during hard times through travel," he adds.

The IGLTA (The International LGBTQ+ Travel Association—<https://www.iglta.org>) offers free comprehensive travel and safety guides, along with country destination information, according to its President and CEO, John Tanzella. "Our website features resources that cover LGBTQ+ travel tips, local customs and laws, safety advice and recommendations for LGBTQ+ welcoming businesses and accommodations. We aim to equip travelers with the necessary tools to make informed decisions and ensure their safety and well-being while exploring the world."

Members of IGLTA, founded in 1983, include LGBTQ+-friendly accommodations, transport, destinations, and service providers, travel advisors, tour operators, event



coordinators and travel media located in more than 80 countries.

Anuja Agrawal is the co-author of *Check-Up, Check-In: Why Business Travel Strategies Should Prioritize Employee Health and Wellness*. Agrawal is also the founder/CEO of Health Flights Solutions. She agrees that it is crucial to research the legal landscape and social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals before traveling.

“LGBTQ+ travelers should be aware of cultural norms and sensitivities in their destination country, including local customs, traditions, social expectations, or any specific cultural considerations or practices that might impact their experience, such as dress codes, public displays of affection, or gender expectations,” says Agrawal.

“LGBTQ+ travelers should also research LGBTQ+-friendly accommodations and establishments, and familiarize themselves with emergency contacts, including local LGBTQ+ organizations or support groups, as well as embassy

or consulate information. In the event of an emergency or safety concern, knowing where to turn for assistance can be invaluable.”

Safety and logistical concerns are particularly difficult for transgender people traveling abroad, as their legal documents may not match their outward appearance, and discrimination and public humiliation have been reported across international borders. To confront these challenges, transgender travelers should consider updating their passports with current information including their names, photos, and gender identities. Obtaining a letter from a therapist or medical doctor translated into the local language is also a good precaution.

An additional problem for trans travelers, as explained by The National Center for Transgender Equality, is TSA inspectors who do not recognize the X gender designations and conduct intrusive body searches. Using full body scanner, the inspectors can also see—and often ridicule—binders, packers, wigs, and breast

forms. Any of these things, while completely legal, may attract unwelcomed attention, harassment, and can lead to increased scrutiny and embarrassment, say trans travelers.

Transgender individuals taking gender-affirming, PrEP or HIV medications may also not be able to access these meds in their destination countries, so it’s critical to take enough to ensure health safety. For more information on traveling with medications see Harvard’s Global Support Service (<https://www.globalsupport.harvard.edu/travel/advice/tips-traveling-medication>).

Anyone with medical conditions or concerns about health, accidents, or medical emergencies while traveling should also research local hospitals and clinics to make sure they are LGBTQ+-friendly and to see what is available in case an unexpected incident occurs.

While tourists, historically, are easy marks, LGBTQ+ travelers are an even more vulnerable target. Entrapment campaigns using social media and apps,



Assure LGBTQ+ travelers they are welcome.

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catfishing, meeting new “friends” in isolated areas, openly using dating apps or showing your phone to a stranger, may all turn your vacation into a nightmare if precautions are not taken.

Resources that can help assess the legal, cultural and social climate of travel destinations for LGBTQ+ travelers include the ILGTA’s “State-Sponsored Homophobia” annual report that provides detailed informa-

tion on the legal status of same-sex sexual activity, protection against discrimination, recognition of same-sex relationships, and other LGBTQ+-related issues.

The ILGTA’s annual world report and map highlighting legislation that criminalizes or protects people based on their sexual orientation or recognizing their relationships is a great resource, as are the *Spartacus Gay Travel Index*, and *Ecuadorian LGBTQ Travel Guide*, a crowd-sourced knowledge base for LGBTQ+ travelers.

Other resources include the US State Department travel advisories and annual human rights reports, which include details on LGBTQ+ rights in countries around the world. International SOS provides, country guides, available in their Assistance App, and security professionals are available to speak to travelers 24/7 through their Global Emergency Response Program. LGBTQ+ travelers may also want to check the *CIA Factbook*, *ILGa.org*, the Overseas Security Advisory Council, and limitless apps and country specific websites devoted to LG-

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BTQ+ travelers.

Before leaving home, experts agree that registering with the US State Department is another way to protect your security. The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) is a free service that allows U.S. citizens and nationals traveling abroad to enroll their trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

Acquiring travel insurance is also recommended. IGTLA's CAP and Seven Corners specifically cater to the LGBTQ+ community.

ManAboutWorld, a digital magazine for LGBTQ travelers has produced an – a free 44-page manual – which is also an important read. (<https://www.manaboutworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/LGBTQ-Guide-to-Travel-Safety.pdf>).


This comprehensive report reminds travelers “The issue of safety always goes beyond LGBTQ rights to the much broader topic of human rights. You will



–Dr. Seuss

enter these countries with a responsibility to be mindful of their citizens, as well as the circumstances of their lives, and to respect the local culture and be Ambassadors for your own LGBTQ+ community.” Also, remember when tourists leave, local LGBTQ individuals may feel the repercussions of any inappropriate actions initiated by queer travelers.

While LGBTQ+ traveling is not without its concerns, if you prepare well and respect your chosen destination, the trip of a lifetime awaits. And, as Dr. Seuss says, “Congratulations! Today is your day. You’re off to Great Places! You’re off and away!”

And now, that you’re prepared to travel safely, in our next issue, we’ll look at some of the great, welcoming, and exciting destinations that will be ideal for the LGBTQ+ traveler. 

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DELICIOUS //

Get a Taste of East Rock, New Haven





By **CHRISTOPHER BYRNE**

For Chef Emily Mingrone, cooking was a calling. She grew up in Hamden with a chef for a father, and she started young. She opened and operated her first business, a deli with catering, while she was still in high school.

She always knew, however, that she wanted to open her own restaurant, and after attending culinary school, worked in many famous Connecticut establishments, and even learned to become a butcher at Fleishers.

Finally, in 2019, she teamed up with Shane McGowan and opened Tavern on State in the East Rock section of New Haven in the summer of 2019—earning the “Newcomer of the Year” award from the Connecticut Restaurant Association.

An auspicious beginning, but then a pandemic hit. Undeterred, Mingrone pivoted, providing takeout meals and creating with Zach Pierce, Provisions on State, a boutique grocer and butchers.

As if that wasn’t ambitions enough, Mingrone also opened the Fair Haven Oyster Company on Front Street in New Haven in 2022. All three are thriving now that the pandemic has receded.

Mingrone credits her success to being a “pivoter” and “adapter extraordinaire.” “My whole career is a trauma response and always being on my toes. We do what we need to do, and provide service to the community.”

Community matters very much to Mingrone, especially New Haven, which she loves because it’s diverse with people from all walks for life, “gritty and artistic.” As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Mingrone values inclusivity and creating a


space where everyone is welcome. When people visit one of her establishments, Mingrone wants them to feel like they're part of a community as a whole, while having a safe space. She adds that most of her staff identifies as belonging to some part of the LGBTQ+ community. "I've had trans employees approach me saying they never had a safe space to work before, and I'm very proud of that."

And then there's the food.

Mingrone says that Tavern on State is closest to New American, which, she adds, "undersells it quite a bit. I say it's responsibly sourced seasonal cuisine with a tavern twist...whatever that may mean.

"There's a lot of New England influence. It's eclectic, and it's led by flavor. I'm very talented with flavors. I'll start with an ingredient I want to use, and I can think about it for days on end before I work it all in."

Mingrone says it's hard to explain. Well, that may be true for the process, but the results are something special. The restaurants are full at almost every seating, and they provide a sexy, warm, welcoming space where people can just enjoy and feel at ease.

While nothing will beat going to one of these amazing spots for a great meal, Emily shared two of her favorite recipes with *CT Voice*. 

"There's a lot of New England influence. It's eclectic, and it's led by flavor...."





Pork Milanese

Recipe Courtesy of Emily Mingrone

Adjust quantities based on number of servings, assume about 8 ounces of pork loin per serving.

Ingredients: (Pork)

- **Pork loin**
- **Egg**
- **AP flour**
- **Panko**
- **Garlic powder**
- **Cayenne**
- **Salt**
- **Pepper**
- **Olive oil (if pan frying)**

To Prepare

1. Slice pork
2. Pound thin with mallet
3. Season flour with garlic powder/cayenne/s&p
4. Bread using standard procedure: flour/egg/panko
5. Fry in olive oil on stovetop or in fryer depending on availability/preference

Ingredients: (Salad)

- **Red watercress**
- **Pickled shallots**
- **Semi dried tomatoes**
- **Shaved fennel**
- **Pecorino pepato**
- **Shallot vinegar**
- **Evoo**
- **Salt and pepper**

Method:

1. Place all ingredients in bowl and dress with shallot vinegar, evoo, s+p
2. Place on top of pork cutlet
3. Generously grate pecorino over salad with a microplane

Ingredients: (Sauce Ravigote)

- **Eggs**
- **Blended oil**
- **Dijon**
- **Capers**
- **Shallot**
- **Garlic**
- **Tarragon**
- **Carrot**
- **Lemon juice**
- **Salt and pepper**

Method:

1. Brunoise carrots (dice into small cubes 1/8-inch or smaller) & set aside.
2. Place egg yolks in food processor with a tablespoon of Dijon Mustard.
3. Drizzle in blended oil
4. Add capers/shallot/tarragon/lemon/salt/pepper/diced carrot
5. Check for seasoning to taste.

Special Appliances/Tools:

- **Meat tenderizer/mallet**
- **Fryer (fryer oil)**
- **Microplane**
- **Food processor/robot coupe**

RECIPES //

Cold lobster roll with creme fraiche, smoked trout roe & dill

Recipe Courtesy of Emily Mingrone

Ingredients: (Lobster)

- **2 each 1 1/2 # lobsters**
- **Lemon**
- **Bay leaf**
- **Salt**

Method:

1. Bring a pot of salted water to a boil with 2 lemons halved and 3 bay leaves
 2. Drop lobsters in water for 9-12 minutes until done
 3. Cool in ice bath
 4. Remove claws and tail and pick meat
- Ingredients: (Creme Fraiche Dressing)

All quantities to taste.

- **Creme fraiche**
- **Buttermilk**
- **Dill**
- **Lemon juice**
- **Lemon zest**
- **Salt**

Method:

1. Place creme fraiche in a bowl
2. Thin out with lemon juice/buttermilk
3. Add chopped dill & lemon zest
4. Season

Ingredients: (Split Top Brioche Bun)

- **Bun**
- **Butter**

Method:

1. Melt butter in a pan
2. Add bun and toast until crispy & golden on both sides

Ingredients: (Smoked Trout Roe)

- **Purchased product**

Special Appliances/Tools:

- **Stock pot large enough for 2 lobsters**
- **Fryer if potato wedges are desired**



An Autumn Treat


**WHEN THE GRAPES COME IN, IT'S
TIME TO GET CREATIVE.**

We all know the concept of lemonade from lemons, but what do you do with grapes gone wrong? If you're the Heritage Southbury Hotel, you take a setback and make a sensation.

Back in 2018, the gorgeous hotel, spa and golf spa located pretty much in the center of the state, created a vineyard. They thought it would be a picturesque backdrop for the many weddings and other events the location hosts.

The idea was that they would harvest the grapes, send them to a blending house, and have their own Central Connecticut wine. When that didn't work out, they tried to go the organic route with Hawk Ridge, but that entailed spraying and bagging and other practices that didn't make the vineyard backdrop appealing.

So, they got creative. Chef Wojciech Węglarz used the grapes in a unique way that's become a signature of the venue: he grilled them. They were an instant hit, and now the Heritage Southbury has become a favorite local destination where folks can come, sit on the terrace, enjoy the beautiful surroundings, and sample this tasty snack that's usually served with perfectly aged brie. This treat is often enjoyed with the hotel's signature hot mulled wine, or sparkling wine.

While the exact seasonings are Chef Węglarz's closely guarded secret, and they use their own homegrown Cayuga grapes, Chef shared the process so if you can't make it to Southbury, you can add a bit of festive fall flavor to your entertaining. 





Grilled Grapes

Inspired by Chef Wojciech Weglarz
& Heritage Southbury

What you need:

- **Grapes on the vine**
seedless grapes
recommended.
- **Honey to coat**
- **Brie**
- **Rustic Bread, Baguette**
or Crackers

To prepare:

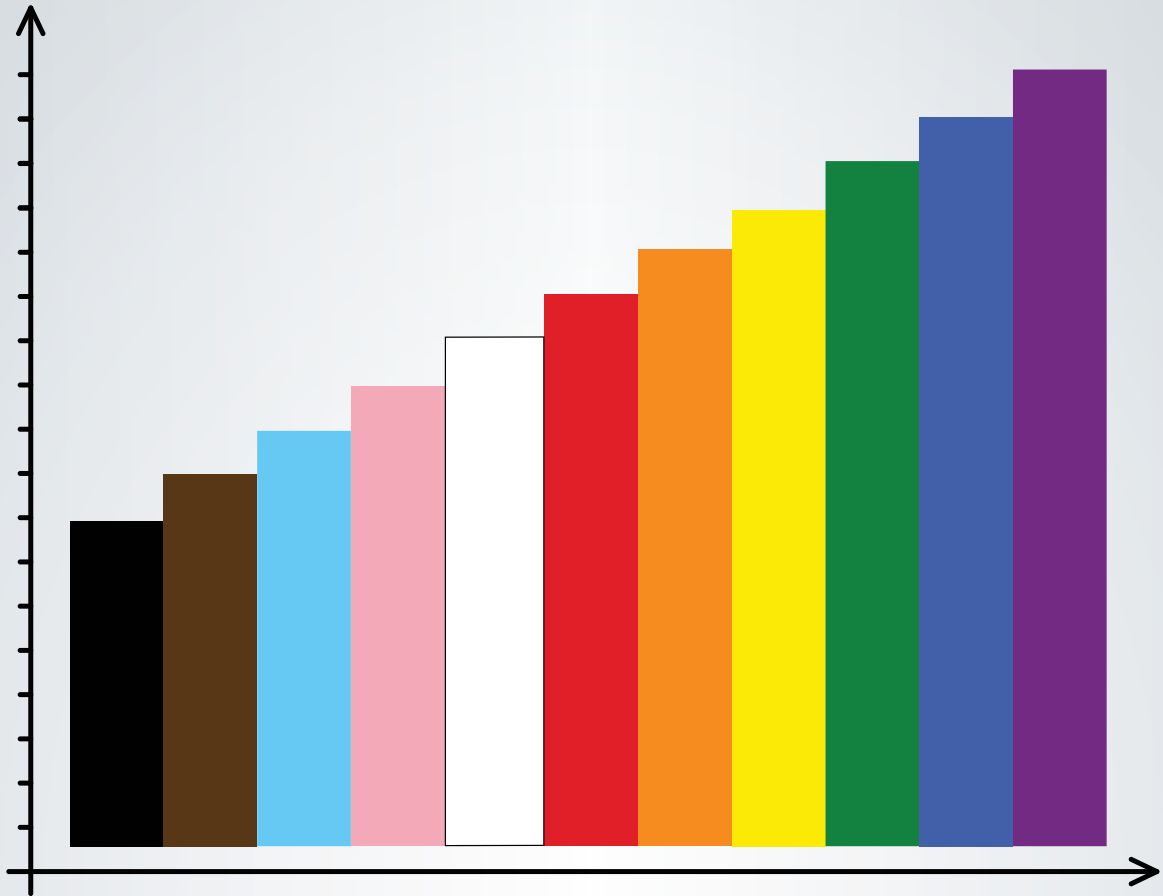
- Wash the grapes and allow them to dry, leaving them on the stem.
- Coat the grapes with honey, being sure to hit surfaces inside the bunch.
- Place the grapes on a heated grill.
- Using tongs, turn the bunches of grapes every few minutes until you see the honey begin to caramelize and the grapes will split.
- Remove grapes from grill.
- Place on a plate with Brie, other cheeses, breads, and other charcuterie items as you wish.
- Serve while the grapes are still warm.

Notes:

The longer you grill the grapes, the softer they will get. This is a matter of personal preference. Well-grilled grapes will spread like a jam on bread and can then be topped with Brie or whatever else. Lesser-grilled grapes will hold their shape and are like individual candies.

Heritage Southbury uses locally produced honey.

Choose a honey that tastes best to you and that will easily allow you to coat the grapes.



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SUPPORT GROUPS OFFER HELP, HOPE AND HOME

By JANE LATUS

“Home.” That’s what Acie Wolfson of West Haven says they found. “A sense of belonging, family, people similar to myself” are what Damien Allen of Newington gained, he says.

Wolfson attends a support group for nonbinary and gender nonconforming people offered by Middlesex Health. Allen attends a group for trans men. Middlesex also offers groups for trans women and family members.

These gatherings have changed their lives enormously, both say. “When I measure how much I’ve grown from the group, it’s incredible. Incredible!” says Wolfson. “This one hour gives you the energy to go on. We talk about pain and struggle, but for some reason I still leave feeling lighter. Because I know I’m not alone.”

“Before joining, I didn’t know another trans person,” says Allen. Thanks to the group, he now has good friends who are trans and talks to—and hangs out with them—outside of meetings. The group was especially helpful at his age (57 when he started attending a few years ago) because, he says, “The younger set is more accepting. People my age just don’t get it.”

Anyone 18 and up is welcome to attend these sessions, and you don’t need to be a Middlesex Health patient. Meetings are monthly, free, and online. Newcomers might appreciate knowing they won’t be required to talk; they can just listen, the facilitators say.

In a time when some want to erase trans



Acie Wolfson



Damien Allen

and gender nonconforming people from existence, queer people in Connecticut worry about whether it could happen here, says Michael Miarecki, LCSW, the primary mental health clinician for trans patients at Middlesex. He works closely with Teo Grimaldi, the gender medicine program navigator who facilitates Middlesex’s male, female, and nonbinary support groups.

Times like this make it more vital that our identities are acknowledged and, beyond that, celebrated, says Grimaldi. “We’re all validating each other’s sense of anxiety,” and sharing ways to manage it, he says. But they also make room for light-heartedness. It’s not all struggle, Grimaldi says. “There’s joy within the experience.”

The many rewards of community

People attend for a variety of reasons, say Grimaldi and Miarecki, including:

Relatability, meeting people who have had the same experiences and feelings.

Advice from people who’ve been there on everything from how to navigate coming out at work to issues with family members.

Information and resources.

A sense of camaraderie.

A place to celebrate each other’s wins, like going shirtless outdoors for the first time, or the elation at being correctly gendered by a barista.

Reassurance that you too will be ok.

A family.

Friends.



Terry Kang, Teo Grimaldi and Michael Miarecki. Photo by Stan Godlewski.

It's a place to talk about what's going on in your life, not just about your identity, says Grimaldi.

Allen says he found the family and sense of belonging he craved, plus more. "I enjoy listening to people. I'm always learning new stuff." He also has met trans people in successful romantic partnerships, making him realize "There's hope for me." And although his biological family is "mostly" supportive, he says it's a relief to spend time with people who share what he's experiencing.

"As much as the news would like us to put our constant energy into existing, it's nice to have a space to talk about our favorite ice cream flavor. You can talk about normal stuff without being queer being all-consuming," says Wolfson. Elsewhere, in a world where they're either "sir'd" or "ma'am'd" (and therefore always misgendered), they are constantly forced to explain themselves.

Wolfson appreciates that Middlesex offers a group for a full range of gender nonconforming folks. "Lots of support groups are more on the binary edges, and you don't quite fit in either one." They are emphatically grateful for the opportunity: "We get to be thankful for the space we have, while acknowledging the struggle. Some days it's hard to function."

Especially for those who aren't fully out in the world, the support group is a place where members are seen as they really are, says Wolfson. "We deserve the visibility, to be heard, and to feel like we fit."

Families transition, too

There is also a families/allies or friends support group. It's mostly attended by parents, but other relatives and friends of trans and gender nonconforming people participate as well. It is led by Terry Kang, LMFT, who runs Middlesex Health's adult intensive outpatient program, and Miarecki.

Kang says she's amazed by the progress she's seen in the five years she's been leading the group. Participants arrive more aware of the language and process surrounding being trans or nonconforming, and there is less judgment and criticism.

Still, she notes, parents come with fears. Some of those might be expected as they confront these issues, but some

are exacerbated by negative political rhetoric amplified in mainstream and social media.

They come with questions, lots of questions, and it's a safe place to ask them, says Kang, as well as the place to get answers. How do puberty blockers work? Where do I find a doctor? How do we handle a bully at school? How do we approach school administration?

Many parents are grieving the loss of the person they knew as their son or daughter. "They worry they'll lose the person they've known for so long," says Grimaldi. "Yeah, they'll lose the depressed part of that person. They'll meet the happy person." He tells parents it's okay to feel sad and that they're supporting their child by showing up.


One reassuring message parents learn from each other and Kang is that their child won't change too quickly, too slowly or with regrets, because there is a team of medical professionals working with them and their child to determine the course and pace of care.

Pronouns frequently come up: how to adjust to them, what to do about family members who resist them, and what to do when kids come up with their own, unique ones. "Just use the pronouns!" says Grimaldi.

Most importantly, Kang tells parents, "Talk to, listen to, and love your child."

Middlesex Health's Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness serves more than 1,200 transgender and gender nonconforming patients. It provides hormonal therapy, behavioral health services, continence and public health, gender transition surgery, physical therapy, infectious disease testing and treatment, and voice therapy.

The Human Rights Campaign has awarded Middlesex Health several consecutive "LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader" designations.

Meeting dates and times are on the Middlesex Health Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness website, MiddlesexHealth.org/gendermedicine. To sign up for the family/friends group, email Michael.Miarecki@midhosp.org and for all other groups, email Teo.Grimaldi@midhosp.org. 

One reassuring message parents learn from each other and Kang is that their child won't change too quickly, too slowly or with regrets, because there is a team of medical professionals working with them and their child to determine the course and pace of care.



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Flight From Texas

By AMBER GREEN

Amber Green and her children are political refugees. They are among the tide of families forced from their homes in states that have criminalized gender-affirming care. In fall 2022, they left Fort Worth with all they could fit in their van and drove to Connecticut. Although this is a safe haven state, financially it's a hard place for a single mother of three to survive. The family and their pets lived in their van for three cold months until a group of residents banded together to get them settled into an apartment in Bristol just in time for Christmas. Amber blogged about the traumatic experience. Here are excerpts.

THE LIGHT CAME ON

“Max, are you a boy or a girl?” It was the question that would change our lives forever.

Paige, then Max, was always so unhappy and angry. Constantly breaking down and crying, “I just don’t know what’s wrong with me.” But Christmas 2021, that all changed. Paige asked Santa for girl toys, lip gloss and such.

Christmas morning, she was ecstatic to see everything she had asked for—especially a dress and heels. Her smile stretched ear to ear.

After almost of a week of wearing only that dress and insisting we call her this or that girl name, a light went on. I turned to my child and asked, “Max, are you a boy or a girl?”

“I’m a girl!” she replied.

At that point I realized why my child had been so angry with life. She was being forced to live as a boy when she was a girl. We talked it over. She picked a new name. We went shopping for dresses, nightgowns, etc. I began to notice she was now happy and carefree.

She stood looking in the mirror in her new dress. I told her, “Not everyone will be happy with who you are. But you need to always be true to yourself. And I will always love you for you.”

She pushed a piece of hair behind her ear and said, “I don’t care what people think. I like myself.”

I smiled at my beautiful daughter,

who had become her true self. But I had no idea how hateful the world would be, and everything I was going to have to protect her from.

Telling the family and school

The following week I informed my family that Paige was a girl and would from now on be going by Paige. Almost all of them said the same thing, that “he” was too young to make that decision, and it was just a phase. I knew it was not a phase. But at least I got them to call her Paige.

I was worried about my sister, mainly because she and her husband were Trump-loving Republicans. I was surprised when she said she was ok with Paige being her true self. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I let Paige’s school know. Her teacher said she would start referring to her as Paige. The principal said the school would support her in whatever way she needed.

Smooth sailing, I thought.

I had no idea what was to come.

A GLIMPSE AT THE PAST

I’d always wanted kids, but never met anyone to have a life with. I looked into fostering-to-adopt. When the foster worker came to do a home study, she asked, “How many kids are you looking to take in?”

I replied, “One or two.” She said, “Well, the reason I am asking is I’m looking for a home for a sibling set of

three.” I swear I had to look like a deer in headlights.

After my second weekend visit with the kids, they were placed with me in 2017, and the adoption was finalized January of 2018.

Around then, my mom moved in with us because of health issues. She passed away in 2021 from a heart attack. I’m grateful for the time she had with her grandkids. I wish she’d had the chance to know Paige as her true self. I know she would have accepted her and loved her just as much.

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

June 7, 2022 was the day the knock at the door came. I was sick with Covid. I figured it was my aunt, coming by with soup. Piper (my oldest) opened the door and said, “Mom there’s a man at the door.”

He said, “I’m with the Department of Child Protective Services. We received a call in regard to Maxwell.”

“You mean Paige,” I said.

“Yes, Maxwell,” he replied.

“It’s Paige!” I told him. “And I know why you are here.”

Because I was sick, he said he’d return on the 15th. I was freaked out. I called my aunt, who told me everything would be ok, that I was a good mother, and they would see that.

I was so anxious. But the 15th came, and he never showed. I thought that was it, maybe they dropped it. I was

wrong. He called on the 28th and said he would be by later that day.

He said there were allegations that Paige was being abused. He asked who in the family could vouch for me. When I offered to give him my sister's number, he said he didn't need it. I later learned why not.

REACHING OUT FOR LEGAL SUPPORT

That night after the visit from CPS, my mind was all over the place. I tweeted that I was at a loss and got a message from the mom of a trans son, also in Texas. CPS was investigating them for the same reason. She said there was a temporary restraining order that covered all PFLAG members. That if I wasn't a member to join right away.

I joined the next day. Then I called Lambda Legal, which gave me a list of lawyers working on this issue. I chose one, who said from that point forward to direct CPS to him. He asked if I had a mental illness. I told him I'd been dealing with grief since my mom passed away, but that was all. He said the person who filed the report had said I was mentally ill and "making" Paige be a girl. "Do you know anyone in Crowley?" he asked.

I said, "Yes, my sister. Why?"

He replied, "It looks like your sister is the one who made the report."

My heart sank. How could she do this? I started thinking through everything since I'd told her Paige is transgender. How she was always too busy to spend time with us. How she didn't want to help Piper with her Girl Scout cookie sales this year. How she was not shocked or upset when I texted her that CPS had been out.

My lawyer sent CPS a letter from my primary care doctor, stating I am not mentally ill. But that would not be the last of CPS.



Piper (l) and Paige

DECIDING TO LEAVE

I had already started thinking about leaving Texas for somewhere safer, when things started heating up in Texas. Now CPS was increasingly harassing families of trans kids. I called the kids to the living room to talk.

"How would y'all feel about moving to another state?" I asked. "Somewhere that is more accepting of transgender individuals. Somewhere safe for Paige?"

"Yes!" Paige exclaimed.

"Like where?" Piper asked.

"What about our animals?" Michael asked.

The kids were most excited about the possibility of moving somewhere with snow.

I started a GoFundMe. I was surprised when donations started coming in little by little. I started to see how much support I had.

WE NEED TO LEAVE ... NOW!

It was August 29, 2022 when the horrible text message came from my sister. "I will take those kids away from you, one way or another."

I tried to choke back the tears. I was angry. I was hurt, and I was fearful for

our safety, because my sister's husband has several guns. I called my aunt, who said, "Well I am sorry to tell you, but I agree with her, Amber." I couldn't breathe. Any support I thought we had was gone.

So that was that. We would take a bag of clothes each, and our animals. The kids would have a bag each of activities for the ride.

It was so hard trying to load the animals in the van. By the time we drove away from our home in Texas on the fourth of September, there were 4 cats, 3 lizards, and us in the van.

ROAD TRIP NORTH

When we hit the road, only my best friend knew where we were going. My lawyer had told me that was best. As we reached the Texas border, I breathed a sigh of relief.

When we were just outside of New York, my lawyer called. He asked how far I was from Connecticut. I said about four hours. He said, "Get your ass to Connecticut now. Don't make any more stops for anything. Just drive." He didn't like the way the new CPS worker was acting.

I drove straight through the rest of the way to Connecticut. As we passed the Welcome to Connecticut sign, I pointed it out to my kids. I started to cry as they cheered. We had made it. We were finally somewhere safe.

JANE LATUS COMMENTS

"Safe" is a relative term. When Amber's oldest daughter twisted her leg at a playground, Amber took her to the ER. Because the family was living in a van, the hospital called DCF. The social worker accusingly (and rhetorically) asked, "Why did you come here without a plan?" Eventually DCF dropped the case. Although Connecticut is a safe haven state for both gender care and abortions, at least for the former it has fallen short on providing support.

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IMMANUEL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH: An Open & Affirming Congregation

By JOHN SCULLY & ANNE STANBACK

John's Story:

When Matthew Shepard, the gay college student, was murdered in Laramie Wyoming in 1998, there was outrage in cities all over this country. Hartford was no different. More than 800 people with candles silently marched down Farmington Avenue to Immanuel Congregational Church, where a memorial service was held. I remember that time in our history well. And two years later, when I felt something missing in my life, I remembered the church that warmly opened its doors to a hurting and angry community.

My husband, David Osella, and I are both from families of six children and were raised Catholic. We went to church with our families each Sunday and received the sacraments up to confirmation. We met in 1986 at Dignity Hartford, a now



defunct chapter of Dignity USA, which was a progressive and inclusive Catholic community not sanctioned by the official Catholic church. Dignity held a Catholic Mass on Sunday evenings for the gay and lesbian community. When they disbanded, knowing how strongly the Catholic church lobbied against the Gay Rights Bill in the late 80's, we figured all churches felt that way. And so, we did nothing. But we'd been "churched." It was part of who we were, and I missed being moved and inspired by a good sermon, church music, and that sense of community. We attended our first service at Immanuel in October of 2000.

Anne's Story:

Like most everyone else in my North Carolina hometown, I grew up attending church every week. Once I went off to

college, I stopped going but got engaged with the campus ministry's social justice work. That work was meaningful enough to me that two years later I entered Yale Divinity School. It was there I realized I was a lesbian, and there I learned more fully how religion—and Christianity in particular—bore a huge responsibility for society's disdain for LGBTQ+ people. I loved my time at YDS, and it set me on my career path working for justice organizations. But after I graduated, I didn't step back into a church for another 16 years. As someone whose core identity in was "lesbian feminist," church was not just irrelevant; it was a place where I felt invisible at best and hostility at worst.

Then in the fall of 2001, I was invited to speak about marriage equality at Immanuel Congregational Church in honor of the church's first anniversary of becoming Open & Affirming (O&A). I went back the following week as a visitor, and 21 years later I continue to find it a place that fully affirms me for who I am; that engages me in work around racism, environmental justice and other issues; and that challenges me to be a better person.

Immanuel's Story:

Although Immanuel historically welcomed all people, the congregation began a two-year study process in 1998, and in 2000 voted unanimously to become Open & Affirming. In 2012, Immanuel furthered our study and added gender identity and expression to our O&A statement. In the United Church of Christ (UCC)—Immanuel's



Messages of love and acceptance for all as part of "Drag You to Church" services.

denomination—the designation of Open & Affirming is a public covenant of welcome of LGBTQ+ people into the full life and ministry of a church. Today, Immanuel has a very active group of people who identify as LGBTQ+, including several of us in church leadership. The majority of the

congregation, however, are allies, many of whom found their way to us because of our early O&A declaration.

Immanuel has served as a home for PFLAG Hartford for more than 20 years. In 2004, when the Knights of Columbus and other anti-LGBTQ+ churches held a rally against marriage equality, Immanuel opened its doors to more than 900 people who attended a Speak Out organized by Love Makes a Family. For decades, we were one of the few faith-based groups that had a presence at Hartford Pride, the Transgender Health and Law Conference, and the True Colors Youth Conference. For those of us who sat at the Immanuel table, we will never forget what it felt like when queer youth or trans adults shared their shock—and also their joy—at seeing a church show up at an LGBTQ+ event.

Happily, there are many more congregations today—of all faiths—that welcome and affirm the queer community. If you are searching for a faith community, we invite you to join us for Sunday worship. And if we aren't the right fit for you, we will help you find another congregation that affirms LGBTQ+ people. 🍆

Ann Stanback is Moderator of the Church Council. John Scully is Church Council Clerk for Immanuel Congregational Church. To find out more information, visit Immanuel at <https://www.iccucc.org/>

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