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Celebrating the bold and visionary leaders within the Connecticut LGBTQ+ community.

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Make plans to attend our second Connecticut Voice Honors gala. On April 27 next year, we'll be celebrating the people making a difference for our LGBTO+ communities in Connecticut.

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For sponsorship opportunities contact Jim Tully at (860)729-2938. See you at The Bushnell in April! And get ready to party!

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From political figures, to sports and entertainment stars, medical professionals, and the people who work behind the scenes, this is a special night to applaud them—and to celebrate the rich diversity of LGBTQ+ life in





CTVoice.com

EDITOR'S NOTE //



Time for a Celebration

In this issue, we've got a lot to celebrate. It seems like only yesterday, but this is the fifth anniversary of *Connecticut Voice*. We're proud of all we've achieved in that time in showcasing the best of LGBTQ+ life in our state, as well as taking on issues that matter to the lives of our communities. From the arts to education to public service, advocacy and healthcare, our goal has been to shine a light on the individuals, companies, and programs that contribute to our readers' lives and to acknowledge the passion and commitment they bring to their work.

We are also proud to announce our second Connecticut Voice Honors program, which will take place April 27 at the Bushnell in Hartford. (Get your tickets; it's going to be a great

night.) We're pleased to profile the honorees in this issue, and in these pages you'll meet these incredibly dedicated people and organizations who are committed to supporting our LGBTQ+ communities. They are the reason that our state has been—and continues to be—a beacon of diversity and acceptance that stands out in the nation. They believe and demonstrate every day that we all deserve to live and love authentically and freely.

There's much more here, too. You'll be delighted by Brian Scott Lipton's interview with Varla Jean Merman, our celebrity host for Connecticut Honors, Jane Latus looks at the community known as furries, and they're much more, and more fun, than they're often made out to be in other media. Jane also has an important article on activist Liat Feller, a piece that can help everyone understand the realities and challenges of being intersex. Frank Rizzo sat down with out TV star Jeladi Alladin who stars in the series *Fellow Travelers*, and is upping the ante on representing black, gay characters more authentically on mainstream shows.

In our regular columns, Kim Adamski gives clear-eyed advice for anyone who uses a hookup app and how to stay safe. Meghan Crutchley shows us how to be more peaceful and present through practicing self-compassion. Michelle Cutrali provides important insight on estate planning and why it matters, and more.

For all there is to celebrate, however, we are also mindful that there is more to do. Recent moves in Enfield and Suffield have been designed to officially limit free expression among LGBTQ+ communities. (You can follow these stories as they unfold at ctvoice.com.) What this tells us is that even with all the advances that have been made and all the advantages of our state, we must continue to be vigilant and refuse to be made invisible. If we are banned from public spaces, we can flood our private spaces with rainbows. Having found our voices, we will not be silenced, no matter what challenges may be put in our way. Every time you speak up for yourself or for any LGBTQ+ person, you are doing work as important as anyone profiled here. And that, too, deserves—even demands—a celebration.

Christopher Byrne, Editor chris@ctvoice.com

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Celebrating Five Years of Connecticut Voice

2024 marks the fifth anniversary of *Connecticut Voice.* We're proud to have been able to celebrate our state's LGBTQ+ communities and to feature so many people who have entertained, inspired, and worked hard to ensure a positive quality of life for us in the state.

As we move into our sixth year, we remain as committed as ever to amplifying the voices of our communities, celebrating our achievements, and honoring those who work tirelessly on our behalf.

From the arts to politics to education, we are committed to uniting communities and



YEARS

covering it all with honesty, passion, and
consideration for the many individuals and
organizations we serve.

- And we like to have a little fun along the way.
- Thanks to all our readers, listeners, and viewers, who have been our supporters for the past five years. We look forward to continuing to serve you in the years ahead, and we welcome your participation—and your voices—at any time.
 - Together, we are striving to make life in Connecticut for the LGBTQ+ communities the best it can be.

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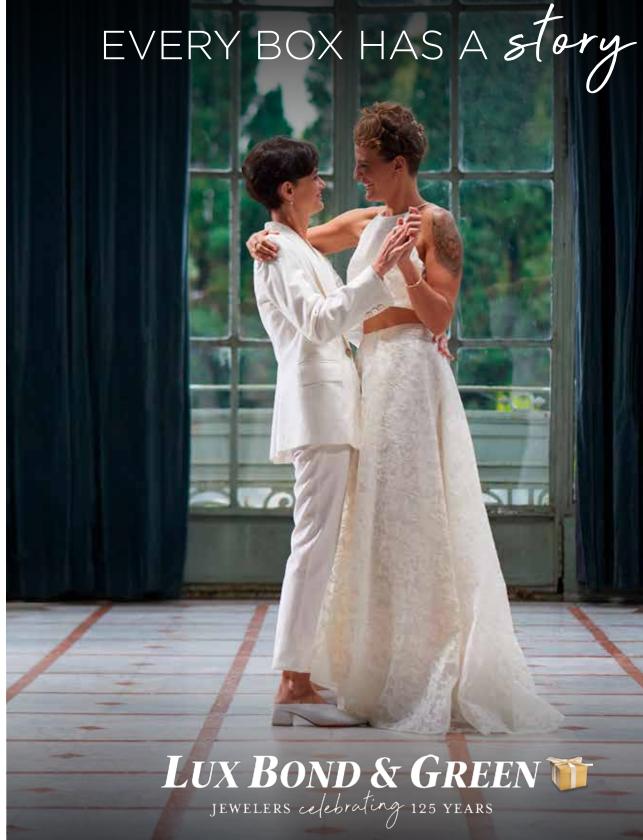
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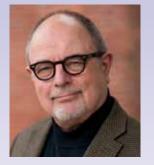
Mario Lino, principal of The Latino Way on the power of her community.



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CONTRIBUTORS //



FRANK RIZZO

Frank Rizzo sat down with actor Jelani Alladin to talk about his career and life (page 28.) 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

our cover story on the amazing Varla Jean Merman (page 52), and looked at same sex weddinas in Connecticut (page 36). 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.



KIM ADAMSKI Kim Adamski

Brian Scott Lipton wrote contributes our frank column on sexual health. She is a Hartford-based sexual educator. 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.



JANE LATUS

Jane Latus covers health and politics. She gives us an inside look at the furry trend (page 56) and profiled intersex activist Liat Feller (page 44). 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 AMY S. WHITE

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.



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

Meghan Crutchley is a National Board Certified Health and Wellness coach, educator, speaker, writer, and the CEO of Habitqueer, a company founded to improve the health and well being of queer professionals one habit at a time. With content and solutions developed for the individual, leadership or large group audiences they are uniquely positioned to focus on health issues including stress reduction, sleep, nutrition, behavior change geared toward

MEGHAN CRUTCHLEY

queer professional and queer affinity groups.



"WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR OWN IGNORANCE OR, WITH TIME AND OPENHEARTED ENLIGHTENMENT, OUR OWN WISDOM.

-Isabel Wilkerson from Caste: The Origins of Our D

The Audacious Voice

-**Our contributor Chion Wolf** touch—you. You can see her full columns

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

on CTVoice.com, and here's a preview of the topics she's been talking about since our last issue. The online columns have links to these amazing interviews.

he Accent

Mystery—We've all heard about being "struck dumb" by something, but what would happen if you were suddenly struck British...well, at least in your speaking voice? Chion talks with a man who suffered from the real but rare Foreign Accent Syndrome. While there are fewer than 100 actual reported cases in all time, it happened to Kenly Byrd who one day, after suffering from a migraine, suddenly sounded like he'd just landed from Old Blighty. It certainly shocked this

lifelong Alabamian—and his family and friends—when his familiar twang became "pear shaped tones." Chion talks to him over time, and the end of the tale is as surprising as its beginning.

Keep On Truckin', Women—

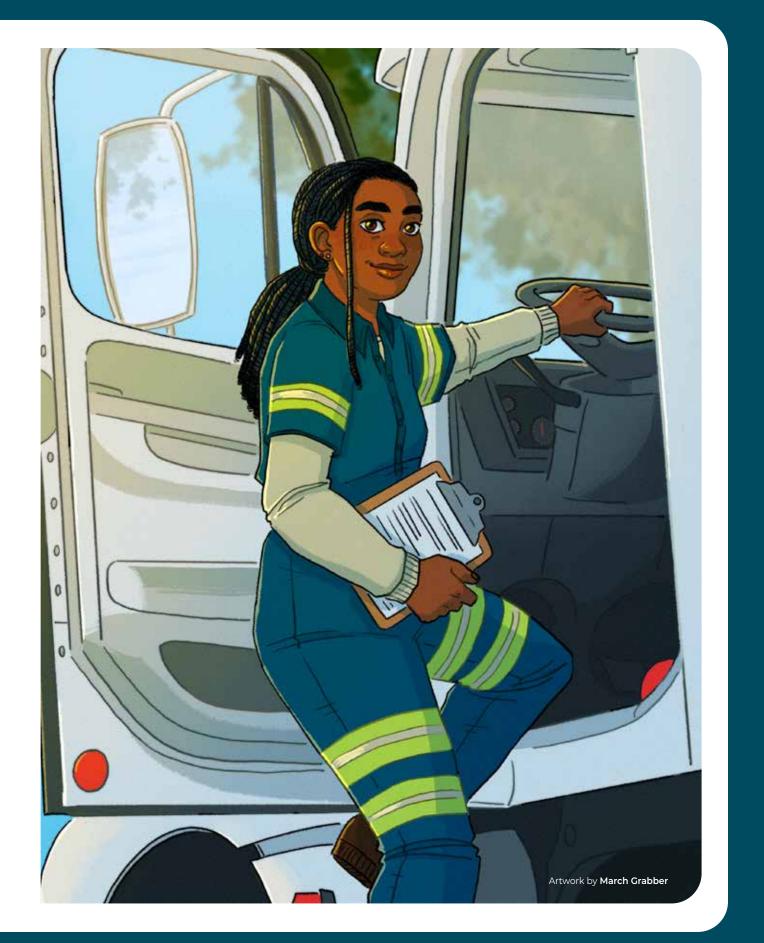
After seeing a tow truck operator on I-84, Chion became fascinated with the lives and jobs of these mobile rescuers. When the only people who responded to her producer's interview requests were female tow truck drivers, the adventure and the episode—took on a new, and much broader,

dimension. Chion talked to and rode along with women who loved what they did, got an inside view of what life on the road is like, particularly when people are in distress, and saw that helping might be a calling. Plus, a surprise revelation from one of her interviewees, opened Chion's eyes to the ways in which acceptance and support can be life-affirming—even when the come from what might be unexpected places.

Peppered...With

Questions—This one is pure Chion. It starts two decades ago in the parking lot of the

Westfarms Mall. Fast forward to a show about spies and one spy in particular, the famous Valerie Plame whose identity as a CIA operative was leaked in 2003. This led to a conversation between Plame and Chion, a trip to New Mexico, a new encounter with a childhood memory, and a string of peppers—a ristra—a symbol of welcome. Chion pulls it all together as only she can in an intriguing journey and yet another wonderful story of fascinating people. 🕔





For more Chion, 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.

The Divine Charles

e's a man of many talents with a long career that's included playwright, actor, director, novelist, cabaret performer, and drag icon. The legendary Charles Busch has written and started in more than twentyfive plays including The Divine Sister, The Lady in Question, Red Scare on Sunset, The Tribute Artist, The Confession of Lily Dare, and his latest, Ibsen's Ghost.

His play Vampire Lesbians of Sodom became one of the longest running plays in the history of Off-Broadway, and over his long career, and Busch (now 69) defined the downtown theater scene throughout the 80s and 90s with his laser sharp wit, love of the classic leading ladies, and a camp sensibility.

He also made it to Broadway with play The Tale of the Allergist's Wife, which ran for 777 performances on Broadway and racked up an impressive list of awards and nominations, not to mentioned becoming one of the longest running comedies on the Great White Way.

His life story, too, is quite a tale, and Busch tells it in a wonderful new memoir: Leading Lady: A Memoir of a Most Unusual Bov. Last fall. Busch talked with Connecticut Voice about his life and his memoir— the story of an artist and his quest to find and express his authentic self through his art. The book is delightful, and often laugh-out-loud

funny—read. Given Busch's work, that's not even remotely surprising.

The book is full of stories of Busch's childhood, which was upended when his mother died unexpectedly. Busch came under the influence of his aunt Lilian with whom he lived and who encouraged his creativity while trying, with mixed success—to make him a better student.

store to support his family, went on endless dates. Busch recalls that his nowsingle father would come home late from "catting around with Parents without Partners," and father and son would watch movies together, which introduced young Chares to movies and movie stars that would inspire many of his most outrageous—and deliciously campy—characters. He loved those times watching with his father, and called

"If I wanted to be on stage, I had to first somehow be this fake construct of sort of somewhat masculine guy. And then I had to lay the character on top of that, and so it did seem rather fake."

Busch's father also had a profound, if perhaps unintended, influence on the young playwright/ actor's development. After his mother died, his father, who had wanted to be an opera singer but ran a music him a "straight man with a "stereotypical gay aesthetic."

But Charles was always headed for the stage. "I always wanted to be on stage from early earliest memory, and I wasn't

terribly good. And, and all the way through college at Northwestern, there wasn't any dramatic literature for, an androgynous, young gay guy. Plays like Angels in America came later.

"If I wanted to be on stage. I had to first somehow be this fake construct of sort of somewhat masculine quy. And then I had to lay the character on top of that, and so it did seem rather fake." He adds that when he started doing drag, he found more honesty in "tipping over into the feminine."

The book also traces Busch's development as an artist from solo shows, to the opportunity to produce plays on a shoestring at the Limbo Lounge and the creation of his company Theatre-in-Limbo, many of whom like actress Julie Halston became muses and collaborators over many years.

The tale also includes a rich look at Off-Off Broadway during the 1980s. It was a time of diverse and often unbridled creativity where troupes performed in bars and lofts prior to finding themselves—if they were lucky enough—in the big time of an Off-Broadway house. Busch was a central part of this movement. and as he found and developed his voice, audiences flocked to see whatever he would do next.

The book is full of stories and reflections, and as Busch said, "when you work on a book, you know, you kind of give this new view of your whole life. And, and one

of the things that really amused me and. and fascinated me about my own life, was, was just that somehow I turned myself into a leading lady, right, and, and people seemed to have bought it.

"And often I end up sharing dressing rooms. I put on my makeup side by side with Carol Channing, and I've shared dressing rooms with Lucy Arnaz and, and Lorna Luft and Michele Lee.

"There's, a little story in my book when I did a onenight performance of, The Women by Clare Booth Luce in Palm Springs, and it was a benefit for a theater out there. I was in drag, and I was in the rather form fitting black dress. Michele Lee suddenly said, 'I don't think it's fair that you're miked, and we're not.'

I said, 'what are you talking about? I'm not miked.'

"She goes, 'you're body miked.'

"I said, 'I'm, I'm not, I swear'

"And she points this area below my waist. She says, 'I can see the mic pack."

"I said, 'Michele, that's my dick.'"

You can hear the full conversation with Charles Busch on the Voice Out Loud podcast available at CT Voice.com. 🕔

-Christopher Byrne



CHARLES BUS

"A magical tale of how Charles brought drag into the present by celebrating the glamour of the past." -SARAH JESSICA PARKER

CT's Best-Kept Healthcare Secret Could Be Your Best Friend

o you own a body? If so, congratulations: you are among the 100 percent of readers who can use this news. If you're also a member of the LGBTQ+ community, you're more likely, actually, to need this news.

LGBTQ+ people already face unique and added obstacles to accessing healthcare. Fortunately, in Connecticut, there's help available (free!) for one of the most stressful of them: insurance.

The state Office of the Healthcare Advocate offers free assistance with health care issues-most commonly with appeals of insurance denials.

Their success rate is high, says OHA General Counsel Sean King. In 2002, the office handled about 4,000 cases and recovered \$6.7 million for





consumers. And that is despite being, as King puts it, "the best-kept secret in state government."

"We do have frequent LGBTQ+ issues come into our office, in particular around gender-affirming procedures that are denied, or delayed or untimely," says King. Frequently, insurers claim that care isn't medically necessary. The office also often handles appeals of reproductive care denials for same-sex couples, and mental health coverage claims. King says that requests for help are "substantially" higher now in part due to increased awareness of the office's existence. A new state law requires that insurers display the OHA's contact information on the first page of denial letters.

The office was created by law in 1999 and opened in 2000 under the unclear and potentially misleading name "Office of the Managed Care Ombudsman." The General Assembly improved the name in 2005. Five years later, the Affordable Care Act required that all states establish a healthcare consumer assistance program. Not all did.

Connecticut is "probably the most robust in the nation," says King, who adds that most states' programs are poorly funded and staffed; that some designate one person in the attorney general or consumer affairs office as "the program," and that some assign the job to a nonprofit. Connecticut's office has 18 staff members.

To request help, fill out a form online and attach pertinent documents. Mv personal experience with the OHA was easy, quick, and successful. I filled out the form, and the next day received an email confirmation saying it had been received and that someone would contact me soon, and in less than a week had a phone appointment with a staff attorney. A few days later, the insurer reversed its denial of my wife's electrolysis, which is medically necessary for trans women.]

The number-one thing the office helps people with is insurance denials, but it also offers one-on-one assistance in selecting, understanding, and using plans.

Education is the office's secondary focus. They



"The number-one thing the office helps people with is insurance denials, but it also offers one-on-one assistance in selecting, understanding, and using plans."

use social media, conduct webinars, offer "lunchand-learns" to employers and organizations, and attend public health events. "We try to make sure people understand health insurance in general, their own health insurance plans specifically, how laws apply to their plans, and how to deal with in- and outof-network providers and denied claims," says King.

The OHA is available to present to LGBTQ+ organizations and at events. Requests can be made on the website.

Advocacy is another one of OHA's critical missions. The organization lobbies for or against rule changes proposed at the state level and by the federal Department of Health & Human Services and Department of Labor.

The 2020 U.S. Supreme Court Bostock v. Clayton County ruling (that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination against employees because of gender identity or sexual orientation) is interpreted as also prohibiting discrimination by private health insurers. In practice. though, it obviously doesn't. The matter isn't legally settled, says King. "Whether an employer's health plan can impose certain restrictions on gender affirming care seems to be an open question that will likely require further litigation to resolve definitively."

Plans funded by the Affordable Care Act can't limit LGBTQ+ people's care, but 26 states currently have no law prohibiting private insurers from discriminating. That leaves behind about half the privately insured people in the country.

For state employees it's a similar story. According to the Movement Advancement Project (MAP), 13 states explicitly exclude gender affirming care, and another 12 states have no or an unclear policy.

According to MAP, 44 percent of the LGBTQ+ population lives in states without LGBTQ+-inclusive protections for private insurance.

Find out what you need to know at the OHA website: https://portal.ct.gov/OHA.

—Jane Latus



No "LGB" Without the "T"

t is frustrating, alarming, sad, and more than a little scary that this still needs to be said in 2024, but here we ao. once again. for the record:

Trans. Rights. Are. Human. **Rights.**

Some so-called "leaders" throughout the country have decided that the trans community-including gender non-conforming, non-binary and intersex folks—make an easy target as political pawns in their hatefilled culture wars. Which is why it is more important than ever for the entire LGBTQ+ community and our allies to stand up boldly on behalf of the entire trans family.

Simply stated, there is no LGB without the T. We are one family.

Do not for a second delude yourself into thinking that this latest attack on the trans community is "not your fight." Ignoring transphobia does not make cisgender queer people any safer. Already your favorite drag queens are being targeted in places like Tennessee and



Robyn Schlesinger

Arizona. Legislators in Iowa this vear proposed a ban on same-sex marriage. And Florida's now infamous "Don't the rest of the LGBTQIA+ Say Gay" law has spawned copycat legislation in more than a dozen other states.

They are coming for all of us. Look at the ominous historical precedents. The Weimar Republic was one of the most accepting political climates in recorded history. It took but a few, short years for the Nazis to take power. And where did they begin? The offices of Magnus Hirschfeld, renowned sexologist whose Institute for Sexual Science supported the rights of sexual

and gender minorities, most notably the trans community. The historic parallels to today are dark indeed. Rev. Martin Niemoller famously stated of the progressive inaction during the Holocaust, "Then they came for me-and there was no one left to speak for me"

We cannot allow passivity and apathy to define our future. It is incumbent and imperative for all of us to stand up for the trans community because it is the right thing to do. While those who seek to marginalize the TGNCNBI community attempt to position it as a recent phenomenon, trans folks have existed since the beginning of time, just like rainbow. The time for us to act as a community is now.

Intersectionality is more than just an intellectual buzzword when it comes to our civil rights movement. It means that an attack on reproductive autonomy is an attack on trans men and bisexual women, for example. It means that Black LGBTQ+ Lives Matter. too.

For us at the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation, it means whether you identify

as transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, intersex or anywhere on the rainbow spectrum, we stand with you-today, tomorrow, and always.

Last year, we were pleased to announce the launch of the Leonard Litz TransPLUS initiative. In response to the unprecedented challenges facing transgender, gender non-conforming, non-binary, and intersex ("TGNCNBI") members of the LGBTQ+ community, the program is providing support for organizations and individuals whose work focuses on those most impacted in this current environment.

As we all continue to embrace the nuanced, socialized, and evolving experiences of gender identity and expression, the Leonard Litz TransPLUS Initiative seeks to center and lift up those voices in our community that have historically been relegated to the far margins of the movement.

The name is very deliberate. We seek to "emPower" the TGNCNBI community, and we believe that every trans life matters. We know that we are strongest when we

are unified, and—now more than ever—we must prioritize the safety of our community by responding to hate with resolute love.

In addition to grant funding. the TransPLUS Initiative amplifies voices of TGNCNBI leaders and builds greater awareness of the community's socioeconomic and political challenges. For example, at the Creating Change Conference held in New Orleans this January, we were thrilled to present the Transgender Leadership Award to the verv deserving Mariah Moore, who has fought tirelessly on behalf of the trans community, especially Black transgender women. At a



Robyn Schlesinger is a Trustee of the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation who spearheads the TransPLUS initiative. Colin Hosten is the Executive Director and a Trustee of the Leonard-Litz Foundation.



We cannot allow passivity and apathy to define our future. It is incumbent and imperative for all of us to stand up for the trans community because it is the right thing to do.

time when more and more of our trans friends and family are being singled out for discrimination and abuse, Mariah has chosen to step up and lead the fight for human rights.

It is time for all of us to step up. We are grateful for the opportunity to lead this effort at Leonard Litz. and look forward to helping to recognize. support, and celebrate the most impactful programs, services, and advocacy efforts for the TGNCNBI community.

When we fight together, we win. Please join us! 🚺

> -Colin Hosten and Robyn Schlesinger

Estate planning is for Everyone

Myth: An estate plan is just for high-networth individuals.

Fact: An estate plan is for everyone who is single, has a spouse, has a partner, has dependents, owns a business, has investments, has retirement funds. owns property, or has material possessions of value such as a car.

An estate plan may reduce estate taxes and shield your beneficiaries from having to go through probate. It means your last wishes will be heard loud and clear. You can name a guardian for any young children and can even direct how your four-legged children will be cared for after you are gone. Also, a very important reason for having an estate plan is that it can prevent a mess by bringing clarity to your beneficiaries, and it can protect assets from unforeseen creditors.

The estate plan may contain a will or living trust, the names of your beneficiaries, the appointment of an executor, a letter of intent that tells a beneficiary or executor what you wish to be done with specific assets, funeral details, and special requests. It should contain a healthcare directive with a power of attorney appointing a trusted person to make medical decisions for you when you can no longer



voice your opinion, and a durable power of attorney appointing a trusted friend or relative to make financial and legal decisions for you, if you become incapacitated. It may also contain a trust or trusts for passing on assets to your beneficiaries.

You should update your estate plan whenever a major change occurs in your life, such as purchasing a home, moving in with a significant other, getting married, having or adopting a baby, selling your business, getting a divorce, retiring, or having a beneficiary die before you do. Review your plan when federal and state laws on estate taxes change. It's a good idea to review every year or two, too

If you should die without a will, which is called "intestate," the state and federal governments will have standard procedures for distributing your assets, and they may not be in line with your wishes. Your beneficiaries may have to pay more in estate taxes, and probate may take considerably longer than it would if you had a will in place.

These are guidelines that apply to virtually everyone, but for LGBTQ+ people, there are some issues that are particularly important. For instance,

your partner (or spouse) should be named in all estate documents, such as Power of Attorney, Advance Directives, Medical Power of Attorney and HIPAA authorization. This ensures that the person closest to you can make decisions if you cannot.

If you have young children, clearly delineating who gets the guardianship is essential as well. This is important both for identifying children... and grandchildren.

And then, there's the will. This is particularly important for the LGBGTQ+ community. It is your opportunity to specifically-and legally-determine how your assets will be distributed.

As we've discussed before in these pages, many people aren't comfortable thinking about estate planning because it conjures up thoughts of mortality. That, however, is inevitable, and in our experience people who take the time to do this work feel a sense of relief—and go back to enjoying their lives knowing that they've taken care of something so important for them and their families.

Consult a professional financial advisor on tax and estate planning. Trusts and wills can be complicated to set up, so consult a professional trusts and estates attorney or certified public account before you begin. 🚺

> -Michelle Cutrali contributed to this article.

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

Helping the LGBTQ+ Community Plan Today to Be **Prepared for Tomorrow**



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WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

Grindr and Tinder and Scruff, Oh My!

ookup apps—everyone's on 'em! Well, maybe not everyone, but they are more popular than ever. They are an easy and convenient way to meet people, and swiping sure can be addictive. However, if you're doing more than browsing (or cruising), it's important to note that there is a level of risk involved with using hookup apps. The best way to protect yourself is to know what the risks are and take measures to reduce them. After all, sex is more fun when you aren't worried about safety, right?

Now, I must include the usual disclaimer: there is no way to eliminate risk completely when it comes to sex. Sex—especially with people you don't know well (or at all)—is an inherently risky activity, but there are ways to reduce those risks.

When you meet someone from a hookup app, you are meeting a stranger. Try to meet in a public place, like a coffee shop or bar. You may have talked for a while online before meeting, but there's no way to be sure that they are telling the truth about who they are. Meeting them in person helps you get a better read on them. If you feel your danger senses going off, listen to your instincts and don't go anywhere alone with them. It's better to be safe than sorry.

When you do go meet someone, let a trusted friend or family member know where you are and when you'll be back. In this situation, having someone know where you were is incredibly important, should something go wrong. Some people even go as far as to ask their date for a photo of their driver's license before meeting up! I'll leave that one up to you, but I have to admit, it's a good way to verify that the person is who they say they are.

Whether you're going on a date or

casually cruising, sexual protection is paramount. Bring condoms, lube, and whatever other protective gear With Kim Adamski you'll need to stay safe from STI's and HIV. Don't assume the other person will have them. And remember, condoms only work if you use them! Think about how you'll bring up condom use ahead of time, so that if your partner declines, you're ready with a response. It's your body, and you are not obligated to forego condoms just because your partner might not want to use them.

If you are having sex with people you don't know well, are with multiple partners, or otherwise could be at risk of STI's and HIV, remember to get tested regularly. Syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea are all currently very common, and rates of infection are rising. Getting tested can give you peace of mind, and if your test comes back positive for an STI, you can get treatment right away. Not only does this protect your health, but it also protects your partners.

PrEP is another method for reducing your risks. PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) is a daily medication that prevents HIV transmission. It is 99 percent effective in preventing HIV transmission via sex. In situations where you don't know your partner very well, you may not know what their HIV status is, and while many people are forthcoming, others may not be honest. Using PrEP will only protect you from HIV. PrEP does NOT prevent other STI's like chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. Therefore, it's recommended that you use a condom along with PrEP to prevent other infections.

of protecting your emotional safety. No matter what, sex involves feelings. whether it's love, friendship, or just plain old horniness. Yep, horny is a feeling. For many people, hookups are a positive experience. However, for lots of others, they can be more complex. Sometimes you may have a bad sexual experience. Other times, you may have unexpected or surprising feelings. It's important to be honest with yourself about what your feelings are, communicate about them to your partner, and proceed in a way that is best for both of you. This can mean anything from entering a relationship to not seeing each other again. If you are feeling emotional distress that you feel you can't handle alone, talk to a trusted friend or family member, or seek help from a mental health professional.

When it comes to your sexual health, it's important to put YOU first. Your health and wellness should be a priority, and, as they say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. There are so many ways to enjoy your experiences. Find the ones that work for you—and above all, stay safe. 💔

I'd also like to stress the importance

—Kim Adamski

Improve Your Wellbeing through Self-Compassion

ight now, things feel particularly dark in the world. We are facing political instability, extreme loss of human rights and of human life on a global level, and increased attacks on queer rights.

Many of us want to be informed and at the same time feel overwhelmed. It seems to have come to the point that zoning out—or numbing out completely are the only options. However, that often leaves us all disengaging more and more from our own feelings and our lives. The thing is: as human beings we need to feel our feelings. We need to be able to express our fears, just as it's important to express our joy and feel like we belong. The problem is that all our emotions come from the same spout so to speak. That means if we turn off the spout to stop the fear and sadness, then we also turn off the joy too.

This is where compassionate engagement comes in. It's the willingness to turn towards and recognize our own suffering and that of others as part of what we experience as human beings. However, that in itself might

be scary—to say, "I'm having a hard time right now." We also might have a hard time with this depending on our attachment style, if we experience depression, anxiety, and are highly selfcritical, according to a 2022 study. These conditions lessen our stress tolerance, and we're more likely to have compassion fatigue, meaning we can't show up or witness the suffering of others, including our loved ones.

Several studies have shown that we can actually expand our capacity for tolerating difficult emotions if we meet ourselves with increased



Meghan Crutchley

self-compassion and take steps to explore what might alleviate our suffering (known as compassionate action).

Studies also show that self-compassion positively affects our health: when we're more kind to ourselves, we experience more positive emotions. The feelings of



Self-compassion is literally the opposite of internalized shame language and is linked to strengthening of our vagal tone...which is an overall marker of "good health."

warmth expressed as a result releases oxytocin which reduces inflammation in the cardiovascular system.

Self-compassion is literally the opposite of internalized shame language and is linked to strengthening of our vagal tone, as identified in a 2015 study, which is an overall marker of "good health."

Our vagus nerve innervates with almost every organ in our body, and it's responsible for taking in all the data from our outside environment (Am I safe? Do I need to take action?) and adjusts our body's internal responses. Strengthening vagal tone has shown to lower blood pressure, lessen symptoms of anxiety and depression and increase prosocial feelings and behaviors that promote feelings of belonging. It's a direct link between how we experience our inner world and how we respond and interact in our outer environment—Including how well we're able to show up for

What I often see with my health coaching clients, and with others around me in

others in our lives.

my personal communities, is a willingness to be more helpful and compassionate towards others than we are towards ourselves... especially us queer folk! Many of us already deal with varying degrees of internalized shame, which has a negative impact on our health behaviors and overall wellbeing.

The good news is that we can use small daily habits to practice taking compassionate action. There are four that I've seen make a massive impact on the experiences and health of my clients.

1) Start the day with a breathing practice. It can be more structured like boxed breathing (Breathe in. Hold. Release), or you can just focus on your inbreath/ outbreath for 3-5 minutes, that's it.

2) Finding flow. Create space each week for things that bring you joy like hobbies, time in nature, play.

3) Listening to what you want. Take time each week to journal, create a vision for yourself in your life, decide

Editor's Note: Citations of the specific studies mentioned here can be found in the online version of this article.

what things are going to be just for you.

4) Focusing on bright spots/

wins. This is what I call the evidence that's already in your life of what's going well. So often we only focus on what we think we need to "fix," where we messed up, or what's wrong with the world, when there are so many positive things happening every day right alongside the negative. So, practice widening the focus to include, and pay specific attention to, what you're doing well!

The only real power we have in the world starts with understanding how to grow our own power and light, and then we can more readily share that with others without feeling like we're getting burnt out or overwhelmed. As the adage of one flame lighting a thousand lights suggests, we can fully step into our own lives with self-compassion, because we deserve that too. It's not just for other people, and we can actually hold both the darkness and the light.

If you feel like you need some support around your health and wellbeing, check out www.habitqueer.com. I'm here to help.

-Meghan Crutchley



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT //



JELANI ALLADIN: A Fellow Traveler On the Rise

Bv FRANK RIZZO

nen Jelani Alladin read the description of his character in the Showtime/

Paramount+ series *Fellow Travelers*, the romantic leading man of the stage musicals *Frozen* and *Hercules* knew it was a role like no other he has played.

The six-part series centers on the clandestine romance between Hawkins Fuller (Matt Bomer), a savvy State Department staffer and Tim Laughlin (Jonathan Bailey), a recent college graduate. The series follows their complex relationshipand highly charged sexual dynamic—from the "Lavender Scare" in 1950s, to the gay rights movement of the '70s, to the AIDS epidemic of the '80s.

Aladdin plays Fuller's journalist friend Marcus Gaines whose own attraction to men and ideas of

gender roles become challenged when he falls for Frankie, a drag queen played by Noah J. Ricketts who just happened to be Alladin's understudy (and pal) when they were both in Frozen on Broadway. I first interviewed Alladin six years ago when he was about to star on Broadway—and the first time Disney had romantic leads of different races in roles that weren't race-specific in a Broadway, opening-night cast.

"I want to share something with

you I hadn't really talked about in the press," Aladdin, now 31, tells in our interview. "When I decided to make the move from stage to screen, I had a fear of playing a queer character on TV—and not because I was ashamed of who I am, but because the lack of depth and the sophistication of the characters that I was being offered, where 'gay' was the only character trait."

However, when Alladin read the detailed description of his character, he saw a complex role: a young Black man confronting racism in his profession on a daily basis, and also one with a sense of humor, who has a cynical view of relationships, and who views himself not as a homosexual but rather a man who likes to sleep with men. All of that, plus a man who is not afraid to be affectionate with the man he is dating. "Now when I read that, I went, 'Yes, yes, sign me up. Those are qualities that I can play."

Alladin says the role also shone a light on the difficulties of being a proud, out, Black, queer person. "That is not something that is often normalized. The stakes are so much higher [for Black men], and sometimes we want to ignore that and simply say, 'It's 2024. Just be vourself.' But no, that is a privilege of being white where every door is

open. There are so many hurdles that [Black queer men] have to overcome before they can even be open to love who they want to love. So, I was really honored to be the vessel for this story."

INTIMATE SEX SCENES

When asked about how Alladin approached the plentiful and revealing sex scenes in *Fellow Travelers*, he said the scenes were not just rooted in sweaty naked bodies.

"When we approached the sex scenes, it was never about just the carnal but the spiritual desire. Sex for Marcus and Frankie began with poetry and the exchange of ideas; then it led to the physical, but it all comes from a spiritual place. Like, 'How do I connect to this person that is new to me?' It's the journey of discovery.

"Lindsay Somers, our intimacy coordinator, was awesome in that before every scene that hinted with intimacy, we had a clear conversation about what we are learning from this moment, what are we trying to reveal or hide, like, 'Can I touch you here? There?' It all felt natural because Noah and I are such great friends, so there was a trust with our bodies which made it easy because we didn't have to get into the nitty gritty. It was so comfortable to look into his eyes and to know that it is somebody I trust and who has supported me and who has been there for me. That carried the tether of our relationship through the series."

Alladin was especially drawn to his character's expansive sexual journey.

"Sure, Marcus is a man who sees himself as 'just a man who likes to fuck other men'—and honestly there's nothing wrong with that.

Sure, Marcus is a man who sees himself as 'just a man who likes to fuck other men'—and honestly there's nothing wrong with that. But the problem was that he was not able to make space for more than that. Sure, you can have whatever preferences you have, but are you able to look at the larger rainbow of all possibilities rather than one small sliver? I was so proud to show a character who was going through that evolution."

Aladdin says one of his favorite scenes was at the dinner table when Marcus' father asks about his love life as his son grows increasingly uncomfortable.

"When that scene was first presented to me, I thought,







'Oh my gosh, that is an extremely relatable moment of what it feels like for someone going through that moment. I feel there are so many men who watch that scene and see themselves in it with their parents."

Another revealing scene is when Frankie and Marcus are leaving the nightclub and are taunted with expletives by homophobes.

"Marcus' toxic masculinity is on display when he says to Frankie, 'Are you mad because they called you the F-word?' and Frankie says to him, 'They called you one, too.' When I read that I thought, yes let's go there. Let's talk about hierarchy we have in the queer community where 'my gay is better than your gay because I'm more masculine.' Let's pull that out of Marcus and be honest and truthful about it; let him reckon with that and show how damaging that inner segregation we have can be."

MASCULINE MASKS

For Alladin, playing hyper-masculine men is familiar turf and one that has helped give him insights into the character of Marcus.

"When I think about my roles as Kristoff (in *Frozen*) and Hercules (in the stage musical) and Will Campbell (in the series *The Walking Dead: World Beyond*), these are men who have a kind of armor. The way they present themselves physically and vocally, whatever it is, there's this armor that exists around them. But inside is this beautiful, warm, luscious heart in each of the characters. I've been really lucky to be able to play such versatile humans in that they can be the strongest man on earth, but they can also have the most human heart and who is able to connect to other persons around them and share empathy. Their armor is their form of drag. I think about that all the time."

And what was his drag growing up? "It was simply to be a fellow

student," he says of his experience of being a Black high school student wanting to fit into a white environment.

Alladin, who is of Guyanan and West Indian heritage, grew up in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn singing in church and youth groups. "I come from a family of strivers and education was the answer my family saw as the way up and out, and I took that very seriously."

Through the scholarship program A Better Chance, he was placed in New Canaan High school and lived with a Connecticut host family. It was through the school's theater program that he discovered his love of acting, which he pursued at New York University.

After graduating from college in 2014, he started his acting career, mostly at regional productions. One role that was close to home was the lead in Tarell Alvin McCraney's play *Choir Boy*, which centers on a exceptional gay student who is the star of the prep school's boys choir. In the part, he saw the character's need for "code switching," something in which he was familiar.

During the New Canaan years, "my vernacular changed because of who I was associated with every day. I had to be clear and talk a certain way," he says. But Alladin was already well aware of social and cultural dynamics and how to navigate through them because his aunt insisted he take "charm" lessons in church when he was a boy.

"My aunt saw that as a tool," he says. "I'm so lucky that my family and my community had the wisdom to teach me those things to get me through the world with a sense of ease even before I knew I needed [these tools.] They knew



how hard it could be for me."

Besides acting, Alladin is developing a television script loosely based on his high school experience in Connecticut. In the meantime, he's been promoting *Fellow Travelers* and working the red carpet at awards shows and galas, looking stylish and effortlessly sexy.

"Mickey Freeman is my stylist, and he's morphed me into this fashionista," says Alladin, laughing. "I did have style, but it was more 'classic man' and Mickey is more of a 'contemporary outside-the-box' stylist so we meet somewhere in the middle. Through our collaboration I'm at a place where I feel so elegant, regal, and confident."

And his own man. 🚺



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FEATURE //



By BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

"I wanna a big reception at the Waldorf with champagne and caviar. I wanna wedding like the Vanderbilts have, ev'rything big, not small. If I can't have that kind of a wedding, I don't wanna get married at all!"

hese words, created by the great Irving Berlin for Ethel Merman to sing (as sharpshooter Annie Oakley) for the 1966 Lincoln Center Theater revival of *Annie Get Your Gun* may have resonated strongly for brides of that era–as well as for decades to come for the many Bridezillas and Groomzillas we've all come to hear about (and maybe experience).

But now, as an increasing number of LGBTQ+ couples are taking their vows-many of their weddings having been postponed due to COVID- industry experts note that many couples are scaling back their receptions, foregoing lavish dinners or elaborate flowers, and, above all, stressing the personal touch.

Says Catherine Poulin, events catering manager at the historic Haley Mansion in Mystic, "We have felt an upswing on both what we call micro weddings, as well as catering to couples who are just stepping back a bit from having a traditional wedding," she says. "The bottom line is that many couples are most interested in celebrating their love with family and friends and not sticking to all the stuffy traditions."

Internationally renowned wedding planner Adrienne Johnson of Connecticut-based Redefined Elegance says much of her clientele (which includes many Muslim and Indian couples) are simply reprioritizing how they spend their money while maintaining some sense of tradition. "With the high cost of fresh flowers, which have become increasingly expensive since COVID, they are choosing the 'cheaper end' of the floral market, such as spray roses, for things like their nosegays and floral bouquets. And they've decided having a traditional wedding cake is not important, since it's mainly for show, rather than taste."

"It's true. People are not having a big wedding cake, instead, they're going for an elaborate dessert station," says Chuck Kaval, director of sales at the popular Saybrook Point and Marina in Old Saybrook. "Couples are designing their weddings to be what we call 'full





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content.' Among other things, that means using a lot of soft seating such as couches and lounge-type furniture, so guests are not stuck at their table all night and are almost forced to interact with everyone else. It can feel like being at a nightclub."

The four-hour sit-down dinner has also gone the way of the dodo, although not necessarily for financial reasons. "It's more festive to have the food in increments," he says. "We might start with some passed hors d'oeuvres, then move on to food stations—we may even do two rounds of them—and finish with the dessert station," he says. "Moreover, it's really popular to extend the party for an extra hour where couples offer those who stay some fun, nostalgic, and personal food items, including mac and cheese, mini pot pies, or even potato knishes."

WEAR OR WHEN

As we party like it's 2024, gay brides and grooms have a lot more options for what they walk down the aisle in–and dance in afterwards–than ever before. Yes, there are men sporting dresses or skirts, but most people are still veering towards at least semi-traditional attire, albeit with a personal touch, says Matthew Benever, owner of custom clothier Bards.

"With LGBTQ weddings, we see a lot more emphasis on color



and color coordination in order to tell a story," Benever says. "We recently clothed a couple where one groom was in burnt orange and one was in lavender. It was beautiful and really made a statement. For lesbian weddings, it's more all over the map. Most often, the brides will both wear the same shade of white, but I would say in 60 percent of these weddings, one bride wears a traditional wedding gown and the opposite spouse wears something in the form of a suit. In other cases, both brides are opting to wear colorful separates, which I think is great."

Benever has noticed a couple of other noticeable trends. "First, there's a very big push for reception wear for both men and women. Ladies want to change into a cocktail dress, while men want either a second jacket or vest. Either way, they do not want to be sweating in their 'wedding clothes' while dancing."

Secondly, he notes: "Clients are looking for ways to personalize their wedding garment, whether it's embroidering wedding date into their garment or creating a custom lining with photos of

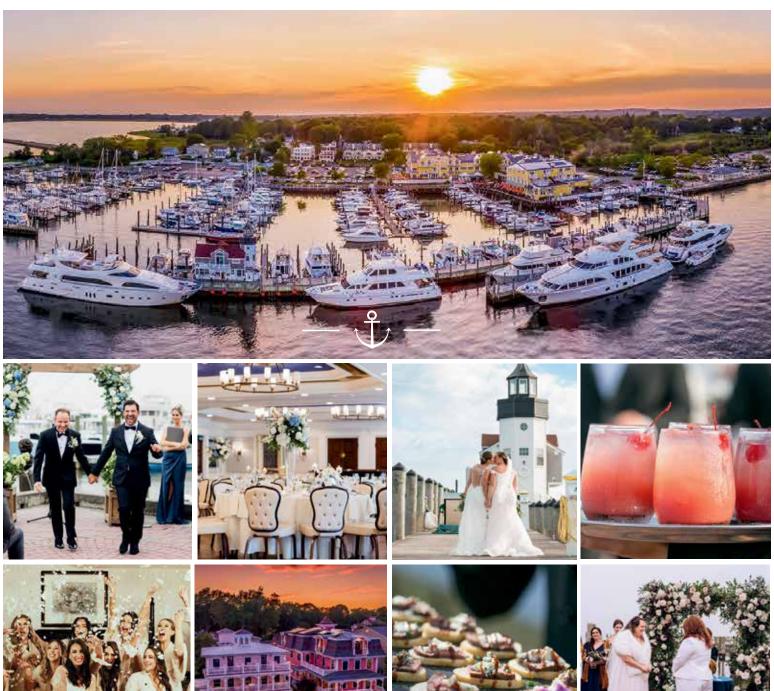


them as a couple, celebrating their life together. A lot of people don't realize they can do this!"

James Watson of renowned men's clothing company Jack Victor is also a big advocate for color. "We're doing a lot of sport jackets this spring in teal,

lilac and pink-brighter colors are going through the roof for us. I think coming out of COVID, people are feeling braver and more celebratory. We're even seeing people wearing dressy but fun sneakers with our clothing, even for weddings."

Adds Catherine Seaton, VP of Mar-











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keting for Connecticut-based retailer Windsor:

"Many women are opting for wedding dresses, both in white and other colors, with special details that set their look apart, specifically through styles with bows, ruffles, and rosettes. For those in the bridal party, brides are leaning into choosing dresses with pops of color to make a bold statement, such as bright red, hot pink and electric blue hues."

Men are also opting to replace their colorful boutonnieres with something just as beautiful but more permanent, says Andrew Werner, creator of Fleur'd Pins."As a photographer who has captured many weddings, I've

witnessed the fleeting beauty of fresh flowers on lapels and corsages, often wilting before the reception begins. Fleur'd, which uses fabric, leather, pearls, and other long-lasting materials, defy the short lifespan of real flowers, and can be customized in almost any color."

UP UP AND AWAY

One thing that never changes is that newly wedded couples still want to get away on a honeymoon. Some opt for true R&R, while others are more interested in exploration and excitement.



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I am getting more requests for true travel experiences with more exotic and adventurous destinations. I recently planned 10-day honeymoon tours of Vietnam and Argentina/Patagonia," says Avon-based Brigitte Worgaftik of BW Travel Design, an affiliate of Largay Travel. "And whatever the destination, I am sure to incorporate some intimate, luxurious accommodations, private touring or activities to make it extra-special."

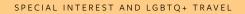
Josh Scheer, President of White Lotus Travel Design, suggests couples take to the high seas. "Cruises have come a long way from the days of super-traditional stuffiness and are a great way to visit multiple destinations without having to pack/unpack over and over during your honeymoon. And there are plenty of companies now who cater to LGBTQ couples."

Noted wedding expert Brittny Drye says LGBTQ couples should only consider destinations where they will be welcome. "For good reason, Key West has established itself as a gay mecca, and if you're into nightlife, this is a fantastic warm-weather option. Puerto Vallarta in Mexico is extremely LGBTQ-friendly, and has plenty of all-inclusive resorts to choose from," she notes. "And for couples who want adventure, Iceland is also extremely LGBTQ-friendly and has a myriad of activities to do; in fact, this year is going to be particularly great for viewing the Northern Lights!"

We wish every couple getting married (or considering it) a bright future! 💔

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Liat Feller: Living As Intersex

Meet Liat Feller. 24. of Stamford, You'll be glad you did; there's a lot to appreciate, and they own it all proudly. They identify as intersex, one of the most misunderstood cohorts under the LGBTQ+ banner.

Feller is an online influencer and natural comedian, who identifies as "raising queer, intersex, Jewish, disabled, anti-capitalist hell." They're an early childhood education student at American Jewish University. They're an educator, speaking and consulting on intersex and disability issues. And this year they were selected as an interACT Youth Advocate, charged by the advocacy organization with "empowering the next generation of intersex youth leaders."

Feller is an intersex woman who uses both she and they pronouns, and for purposes of this story chose the latter. They have what's commonly called Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), but

To be one's truest self

Written by JANE LATUS

what Feller prefers to call Stein-Leventhal Syndrome because it's more medically accurate (the "cysts" are actually immature eggs). With PCOS, ovaries produce an unusually high level of androgens. Symptoms vary but can include excess body and facial hair, inability to ovulate, insulin resistance and more.

Feller also has Cerebral Palsy and Hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, a condition causing overly flexible joints,

Having foot pain as a child, growing

facial hair as a 10-year-old girl, weighing

more than most... it was all so traumatic

that Feller says they've blocked out most

heat intolerance and migraines.

of it. Doctors were variously stumped or wrong-and gave harmful advice. On the positive side, Feller became a self-taught expert on their own medical conditions. They've learned to manage their physical challenges and embrace their multiple identities. And now, Feller is ready to represent. You'll find them dancing online, sometimes with crutches or in a wheelchair, answering questions, sharing hard-won information, and getting constructively silly. Here they are on TikTok, leaning into the camera with a sly grin, saying, "God gives his rootinest

battles to his tootinest cowboys. But that doesn't mean it ain't the wild, wild west."

is a beautiful thing.



Every intersex person's experience is unique, but it's fair to say Feller's is "more unique." They talked to *CT Voice* about their life and experience.

CV: When did you realize you were "different", and when were you diagnosed with PCOS?

LF: It happened in three parts. First, when I was a child my mom noticed something was different. I was 7 years old, and I was 5 feet tall already. I smelled like a teenage boy, I had breasts, and I had underarm hair. I went through puberty very early, and we now know it was most likely a mixed puberty.

My PCOS diagnosis came when I was 11 years old. I look back and I don't know how anybody could make this judgment only on my appearance, but I was a clinically overweight, hairy, 11-year-old. They didn't do any PCOS-relevant bloodwork; it was based solely on observation.

The third part was when I was 16 or 17 and coming into my own as my own medical advocate. I had doctors do the tests.

CV: What treatment did doctors propose?

LF: It was a period of forced feminization. But I would grow a beard with a clinically low testosterone level, and that's when my brain ticked off, well maybe this is just how I'm supposed to be. And that's when I switched to a more affirming and forward-thinking endocrinologist who's based in New York City.

My anti-diet culture identity is inseparable from my intersex story. The primary treatment that most doctors prescribe for PCOS is weight loss [because of its occasional connection with insulin resistance]. When I was 11, they told me I needed to lose weight, even though my blood work was normal. It led to an eating disorder, when in a year I lost 50 pounds. Except for facial hair, I had no clinical symptoms from PCOS. All my treatment was in the name of putting me into this box of looking like the typical female.

I wasn't bothered by my facial hair. I was more bothered by the expense and the pain of maintaining it. Meanwhile, I had other real problems. I just wanted to know why my feet were hurting.

CV: When did you decide to own your beard, and how did people react?

LF: I worked so hard to get rid of my facial hair. I later learned I was the only 11-year-old getting a chin wax every week.

It was for a project in a feminist psychology class in college that I started growing my beard. Campus was the safest place to be a woman with a beard. People cheered me on whenever they saw me. A week into the process, I went to the mall, and people were doing double-takes. I kind of took it in stride because I was doing research, and it didn't bother me. Now it bothers me because I'm not doing research. This is my life.

What Is Intersex?

ntersex is an umbrella term for natural differences in sex characteristics or reproductive anatomy that don't fit the traditional, binary definitions of male and female. There are many types of differences, including hormonal and chromosomal, and in internal

reproductive organs, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics.

People are born with these conditions. Some are noticeable at birth, and others appear at puberty, or even later.

Not everyone with these conditions considers themselves intersex. But advocacy group interACT says the umbrella term "invokes community" among a diverse group that shares similar experiences and challenges.

Bodily autonomy is the number one goal for intersex advocates. Let us decide, they argue, whether we have surgery. Let us make our medication choices. Let us claim our gender. Accept our appearance, they ask, and even consider celebrating it.

Banning surgery (performed almost entirely on infants) to "correct" non-health-threatening differences in genitalia is another main advocacy effort. No state has approved a ban, although a handful have raised the subject. In Connecticut in 2020, Senator Matt Lesser introduced a bill that was unanimously passed out of committee but didn't get to the floor before COVID closed down the General Assembly. Lesser tells *CT Voice*, "I continue to support restricting non-consensual and unnecessary surgical interventions on intersex kids. I plan to work with my colleagues on this issue in the next legislative session."

Worldwide health and human rights organizations, including the United Nations, have called for bans on this cosmetic surgery without patient consent. Three former U.S. Surgeons General warned it "can cause severe and irreversible physical harm and emotional distress."

For more, see "Speaking Their Truths" in the Fall 2020 issue of *CT Voice*.

"The most difficult part of being visible is that people feel entitled to your story. When someone asks me in the middle of the grocery story why I have a beard, I have to decide what to tell them. I find the same thing when I'm in my wheelchair."

Now I pretty much keep it grown.

CV: Has it helped that, although they aren't intersex, celebrities like Jonathan Van Ness and Billy Porter present androgynously?

LF: It's made a huge difference. Over the years there has been so much more representation, and so much more camaraderie and unity between different sections of the queer community.

CV: Do people tell you you're brave, and is it annoying?

LF: Yes! The pressure does get a little overwhelming. In PCOS groups, people are always asking, "How do I get rid of my hair?" And I pipe in, "I don't." People tell me I'm brave, and that they could never do what I do. Well, they could.

CV: What's it like being a visible representation that gender isn't binary?

LF: I enjoy being the visible figure in this. I made a conscious choice when I started my TikTok that I would never do anything I didn't feel enjoyable.

The most difficult part of being visible is that people feel entitled to your story. When someone asks me in the middle of the grocery story why I have a beard, I have to decide what to tell them. I find the same thing when I'm in my wheelchair.

Sometimes I tell people, "This is what my body does, and I like it this way." Sometimes I say, "I work in intersex advocacy," because when I tell people I'm intersex, they want to know what's in my pants. I often find myself in the position of debunking other people's assumptions. I hear, "Well, I have PCOS, and I'm not a hermaphrodite!" First, we don't use that word anymore because it's inaccurate, and it's a slur. They're like, "I don't want a beard!" And I'm like, "That's fine, you can identify however you want."

PCOS is a condition; intersex is an identity. For people who identify very much as cis females - and that identity may be valid and true-the fact they've been taking treatment to force their hair away forces them to confront this scary idea that nothing is binary. It comes out as a lot of trans and intersex phobia.

CV: When did Cerebral Palsy and Ehers-Danlos present?

LF: When I was in 5th grade, I took a step and felt something very, very wrong. I couldn't put my foot down. Then I'd have bouts when I couldn't put my foot down. Doctors couldn't find anything on an x-ray and said it was probably a fracture, so they put me in a boot. I used crutches more in high school, and in college I used a Razor scooter to get around. As I got older, I had more



and more neurological issues. Migraines, muscle twitching. Doctors just related [these conditions] with needing to lose weight.

From a community of people on Twitter with chronic illness, I learned that what was going on with my knees was actually overextending every time I walked, and that's a symptom of hypermobility. I learned Ehlers-Danlos symptoms also include migraines, and the very severe heat intolerance I'd been having.

I realized my medical history [including

premature birth] was a perfect storm for Cerebral Palsy. I was diagnosed at 22 with the spastic form, meaning tight and contracted. I'll never walk uphill without help, and I'll never walk a long distance.

CV: What are your current treatments?

LF: For PCOS, intuitive eating and stress reduction. They have done more to heal my body than any medication and dieting ever have.

I have saline infusion treatments twice a week for Ehlers-Danlos. It helped the heat intolerance and migraines overnight.

I spent about eight weeks in physical therapy, learning to walk without overextending my knee.

CV: What do people get wrong about you?

LF: They assume I'm transgender and that I've transitioned from one gender to another. There's nothing wrong with that, if that was the truth. I explain to them that I'm actually detransitioning; so much of my life was a forced transition into being a strict woman, and my beard is the result of my body letting me be me.

CV: What's your assessment of medical care in Connecticut for intersex people?

LF: Even in our little blue state, there's a lot of work to be done. Most doctors have never heard of intersex or have no idea what it means, and they're learning about it from outdated textbooks when they need to be learning about it from our community.

The most recent WTF moment I've had about it is I was in the hospital earlier last summer for a totally unrelated issue, cellulitis. I was on antibiotics and doing fine. And they were testing my testosterone level and prescribing a bariatric diet! I asked, "If I hadn't walked in here as a short, bearded woman, would you have treated me the same?" The hospitalist went flushed and silent because

she didn't have an answer. CV: How can people be good and helpful allies?

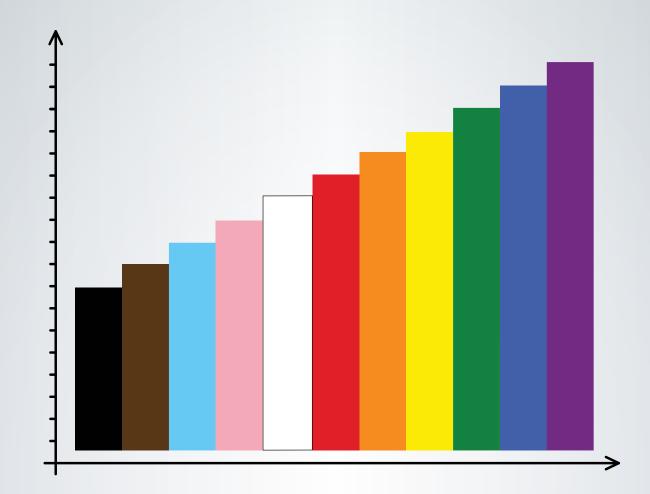
LF: For teachers and parents: surround kids with people who are intersex, trans, people with disabilities, etc. Early exposure to diversity is how children learn to be accepting.

For doctors and hospitals: learn about our community from us. Be open to new ideas. Invite an intersex doctor or advocate to be on your ethics board and review policies of intersex and genderaffirming care.

For others: listen to our stories, support intersex artists, and vote in support of our rights. The same goes for supporting the disabled community. You don't have to be an expert in queer history, or politics, or medicine to fight alongside us. You just have to value bodily autonomy, inclusion, and a better, more just future.

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Here She Is, Boys (And Everyone)... Here's Varla!

ttendees at this year's Connecticut Voice Honors, which take place April 27 at Hartford's Bushnell Theater, are in for a very special treat as drag legend Varla Jean Merman will be the celebrity host for the festivities. A singular performer–and Varla really knows how to sing–Merman is a master of giving audiences a good time! We recently talked with Varla's creator (and male alter ego) Jeffery Roberson about how Varla was "born," her decades-long career as both a drag artist and theater performer, her early drag influences, how she feels about "RuPaul's Drag Race," and how drag is received today by audiences.

feels about "RuPaul's

What does JR: I s wo

Varla Jean Merman

By BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

CV: We're thrilled you are hosting the Connecticut Voice Honors. What does Connecticut mean to you?

JR: I still do a lot of work there when I can. As an actor, I have worked at Hartford Stage and Long Wharf, which are great theaters. And my writing partner Jacques Lamarre lives in Hartford; he's great at punching shows up. In fact, he gets away with things I can't. I am so happy to be doing this!

CV: Back to the beginning: How did you become Varla Jean Merman?

JR: Sometime in the late 1980s, I read Ethel Merman's autobiography– t's just called "Merman"– which has a "chapter" on her marriage to the actor Ernest Borgnine, which lasted only 38 days. Actually, that entire chapter is just one blank page. So, I decided that if she had somehow had his child back then, she would have shipped her to an orphanage in Louisiana, where she would grow up as a child of celebrity who was worried about not living up to expectations. That's



how the whole character happened. Then, I did a talent show in Baton Rouge where Varla played, I did some videos in New Orleans with Varla running around in the French Quarter, and played in bars down there, and I became a local celebrity of sorts.

CV: Did you always plan to leave Louisiana?

JR: I went to a performing arts high school in Louisiana, but, yes, I knew someday I would not only live in New York, but I would do drag in New York. But unlike a lot of other drag performers. I am an actor and a singer. I don't lip-sync. In fact, in 1996, I was hired by the musical "Chicago" to be the understudy for Mary Sunshine, first on Broadway and then on the national tour. And when I came back, I knew I didn't want to go back to any sort of non-performing work.

CV: So how did you turn drag into a career?

JR: I opened for Lypsinka in Provincetown, and this woman heard me sing and then hired me to do my own show there starting in 1998. I remember she said, "you have to work hard, you have to basically busk on the street!" So, I'd hide in the bushes outside the tea dance and whisper "come to the show." It worked.

CV: Who were your early drag inspirations?

JR: My first introduction to drag was Harvey Korman and Flip Wilson on TV. I found the comedy in what they did so thrilling. Of course, I really wanted to play all of Carol Burnett's roles; in fact, I still pinch myself that her costume designer, the legendary Bob Mackie, now comes to our shows. Then when I was in college, where I studied architecture. I got introduced to the films of John Waters and Divine. It was like finding Santa Claus was real.

CV: Let's talk about some of your

New York acting experiences. Any favorites?

JR: Early on, I got connected to this company called Tweed Classics, which was basically dedicated to miscasting every role in every play they did. For example, I played Honey in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Back then I was 300 pounds, but I acted like I was the tiniest person on stage, and that's when I learned that doing the smallest gesture can get the biggest laughs. It was an amazing period for me to learn all about the art of theatricality. I still call it the best college education I have ever had.

"Luckily, I am not tired of performing. In fact, I am starting to get the hunger to go back to the theater. If I can work forever, that would be great!"

JR: My part, Miss Jeannie Jeannine (whom The New York Times called a conniving chantoozie) had been in the hands of many great women over the years, but when they finally did the show in New York, they went for a drag queen-me. The show actually made the cover of the *Times*, and the producers really wanted to bring it to Broadway. But we just could not get

CV: And then there was your "big break," the 2011 Off-Broadway musical Lucky Guy. Tell me about itand why it didn't become bigger.

enough people into the seats at Stage 42, despite all the money they spent. It was a great time, though, especially working with the late Leslie Jordan. I had known him before, since I had opened for his comedy shows, and I am so glad we got to work together on Lucky Guy.

CV: How do you think our country's attitude about drag has changed since you started performing?

JR: When I first started doing drag, even gay people didn't want to see it. They didn't even want it in their Pride Parades, I couldn't get into most bars to perform. And I couldn't get my shows onto Logo, which was a gay TV network. And then they took RuPaul, and everything changed!

CV: What do you think about RuPaul, and especially Drag Race?

JR: What I really love about *Drag* Race is that you see that drag is an art form and how much work goes into it. It feels like you are watching an Olympic sport. But what I also love is how people can get popular just because they're on that show. Many of them don't have any other real option to get known. In my day, you just would have worked your ass off like me!

CV: After all these years, are you still working your own ass off?

JR: Well, I always do a new show in Provincetown every summer, and then I tour that show from Labor Day until early Christmastime, and I then go back on the road in January. Then, I do some work until I go back to Provincetown for the summer, but I am always thinking about the new show. Luckily, I am not tired of performing. In fact, I am starting to get the hunger to go back to the theater. If I can work forever, that would be great! VV



It's a Bird! It's a Goat! It's a Furry!

Photos and interviews by JANE LATUS

> here were loads of doubletakes last fall in downtown Stamford. Especially on Summer Street, where lifesized animals were sliding out of cars, hoofing down the sidewalk, crossing the street with their wings,

antennae and ears flapping, all flocking to the Armon Hotel.

Inside, it was a total Furpocalypse. That's its name. "Furpoc," for short, is the Halloweenthemed convention that each year draws about 1,500 "furries" to socialize, dance, share their artwork, party and be their furry selves.

Furries are fans of anthropomorphism, the creative act of attributing human characteristics to animals. In a sense, they're like Trekkies or Comic-Con-goers; they attend conventions and dress in character. But unlike those other fandoms, furries create their own alter-ego characters. And unlike other fan groups, furries are a community beyond their shared interest, gathering year-round to socialize, and forming close friendships.

A few facts: furries create their own "fursona," a character with whom they identify, often based on real or idealized aspects of themselves. Those who can afford them, or can make them, wear custom-made costumes that represent their fursona. Others wear features, like wings, tails, or a mask. Furries are predominantly LGBTQ+, on the younger side, and male, but there's an increasing representation of gender nonconforming paricipantss. There are also little kids, straight, and senior furries ("gray muzzles," in furry lingo). They embrace philanthropy, raising money at their events. This year, Furpoc fundraised for queer youth advocacy group Q Plus.



Reece (Australian She

What furries aren't are sexual fetishists, and they don't use litter boxes; those are homophobic slurs and hoaxes. Mainly, furries just want to have fun. For more on the community, see "Animal Instinct" in the Fall 2019 Connecticut Voice, and www.furscience. com, the site of the International Anthropomorphic Research Project.

Marcy (Dutch Angel Dragon) and Willo (Wolf)

What do people misunderstand about furries?

Marcy: They think that we think we're real animals. We're all just humans, trying to have fun. Willo: They think it's a fetish. I love that the community is such a welcoming environment. No one judges. And when I'm in a fursuit, I feel like I'm not myself, like I'm on vacation almost. It's a good feeling.

Reece (Australian Shephard) What's best about being a furry?

Izzi (Border Collie)

Honestly, the community-seeing friends, hanging out. It's a really good vacation from work. It's also so hard to make friends as adults.

Izzi (Border Collie)

How did you choose this fursona?

Part of my personality is I like to organize things. It's like we're kindred spirits. I've been a furry for 15 years. I find it easier to interact with people when I'm wearing it. I can be more social, and more silly.

Ferdinand Ferret

What do you like about being a furry?

It's such a diverse community, and by and large a very accepting one. All walks of life find their place here. People who have trouble socializing feel right at home.

Wayon (Goat)

Ferdinand

Ferret

Why do you like wearing a fursuit?

It doesn't matter who you are, genderwise, or where you're from in the world. No matter who you are, you dress up and you're all pretty much the same.

Starberry (Cat/Fox hybrid)

What do you like about fursonas?

Being able to express yourself in a fun way. Being who you want to be. A lot of people are still a kid at heart here. It's really light-hearted fun.

Cyber Decker (Cyberdog)

How'd you come up with this fursona?

A friend has a cyperpunk fursuit. It's really cool. I thought, what if I made a dog version of that? I designed and made the whole suit myself. I love the creativity of the community. Fursuits are walking pieces of art. I love the selfexpression.

Wayon (Goat)

Tiger Shintan

Why a tiger?

Before, I was a World of Warcraft gamer and would play the animal race. The tiger was my most favorite animal to race. Then I played Skyrim, and that has a cat animal race. To me, being an animal character is more interesting than being a human.

Starberry (Cat/Fox Hybrid)

Meep (Gummy Salamander)

Why a salamander?

I've always thought they were adorable. I love how adaptable they are – they live on water and land. I've always adapted to things in my life. So, they speak to me.

Parker (Fox)

What would you like people to know about the furry community?

It's a great way to meet lots of people who are using their fursona to express their true self, or how they want others

to see them. It's especially helpful for people with social anxiety. I personally may not look like much, but look at me as a fox!

Hudson (Goat)

What's fun about being a furry?

People are really nice. I like how accepting the community is. The suiting part is fun, too. You get to surprise people and make them happy. Like today - the Uber driver's reaction. He pulled up [to the convention] and he's like, "What the hell is going on here?!"

Cyber Decker (Cyberdog)

Tiger Shintan



Меер (Gummy Salamander)

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CONNECTICUT'S NEWS LEADER

Dip Into Deliciousness

By AMY S. WHITE

good dip is the unsung hero of any get-together. Whether it's game day, cocktail hour or time at the pool, dips elevate snacks and turn veggies from "Blah!" to "Ahhh!" Making dips at home adds good healthy choices to the dip equation. Homemade dips combine the freshness of ingredients (which equals fresher flavor), the opportunity for nearly endless customization, and the satisfaction of putting something delicious on the table for people to gather around. Good ingredients are imperative for any recipe, but

this is extremely true for dips, as typically little-to-no cooking is involved. Dips are easy to make when one considers their four main components. First, start with a base ingredient, which is usually a dairy product: cheese or cream cheese, yogurt, mayonnaise, or sour cream. Find a local dairy and support them by using one of their products. Some suggestions include Arethusa Farm (dairy stores in Bantam and New Haven, available in some markets as well), Smyth's Trinity Farm (Enfield), Hastings Farm (Suffield), Woodstock Creamery (Woodstock) and Oakridge Dairy (Ellington), which is operating as The Modern

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Add flavor with an herb, spice, extract or other condiment. A dash of hot sauce, a sprinkle of dill or a touch of paprika all work wonders. Texture is also important to a dip. Add crunch with seeds; add chunks with chopped vegetables. Or, leave it creamy, depending on what is you're dipping. Finally, an often-forgotten ingredient is acid. A squeeze of citrus or a dash of vinegar can really brighten the flavor of a dip and give it additional depth. Choose fresh herbs over dried and a squeeze of a real lemon over a bottled lemon juice. Taste as you go. It's much easier to add more seasoning than to take it out. Be mindful of consistency. If the dip is too thick, thin it out with a bit of olive oil or even water. Finally, make it ahead of time to allow the flavors to develop overnight in the refrigerator.

Here are a few inspirational dip ideas to start with. All three are gluten-free and vegetarian, and all three come

Beet Tahini Dip (Gluten- and Dairy-Free)

Recipe courtesy of Chef/Owner Emily Mingrone of Fair Haven Oyster Co., Tavern on State, and Provisions on State, all in New Haven

Ingredients: 2 large beets 1 cup water 2 cloves garlic 2 cups tahini 1¹/₄ cups lemon juice **3 tablespoons salt** ¹/₂ cup extra virgin olive oil Pepitas or other seeds for garnish

Directions:

Boil the beets in salted water until they can be easily pierced with a toothpick or fork. Cool and peel. Slice into manageable pieces and place in a blender with water and garlic. Once blended, add tahini, lemon juice and salt. Continue blending and drizzle in olive oil. Garnish with pepitas, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds or whatever you wish. Serve with toast points.

Pickle Dip (Gluten-Free)

Recipe courtesy of Chef Ruby Van Guilder, Fire by Forge in Hartford

Ingredients:

16 ounces pickles 1 cup pickle juice 1 quart sour cream 1¹/₂ cups cream cheese 1 bunch scallions, trimmed and thinly sliced ¹/₂ bunch parsley, chopped 2 tablespoons minced garlic 1 tablespoon onion powder 1 teaspoon hot sauce ¹/₄ cup grated parmesan cheese 1 jalapeno, seeds removed, finely chopped

Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

Remove the pickles from the jar and set aside a cup of the pickle juice. Chop the pickles in a food processor. Put all ingredients (including the chopped pickles and pickle juice) in stand mixer and mix on low speed using the paddle attachment, until combined into a whipped texture. Serve with chips.



courtesy of Connecticut chefs who are working at award-winning restaurants. The first is Beet Tahini Dip from Chef/Owner Emily Mingrone of Fair Haven Oyster Co., Tavern on State, and Provisions on State, all in New Haven. Mingrone was featured in CT Voice last fall and has been on Food Network's *Chopped* and was the first female to win "Best Chef of the Year" in the CT Restaurant Associations "Crazies" Awards. which she did in 2021.

Pickle Dip comes from Chef Ruby Van Guilder of Fire by Forge in Hartford, runner-up for "Best Restaurant Newcomer" in the 2023 Crazies Awards, and one of Connecticut Magazine's 2023 Best New Restaurants. Pickles have been trendy the past few years, with a pickle cupcake even finding its way to The Big E, courtesy of LuAnn's Bakery in Ellington. So why not turn pickles into a dip?

Finally, Santorini Fava Dip, a favorite from Greca Mediterranean Kitchen + Bar in New Milford, comes courtesy of Chef/ Owner Dino Kolitsas. Greca has won several Connecticut Magazine's "Best of" awards, including Best Mediterranean/ Greek Restaurant for the past three years. In this dip, "fava" is not fava beans, but Santorini fava, a protected designation of origin produce item from the volcanic island of Santorini which you can find at specialty Greek markets or websites. You can substitute with yellow split peas, which can be found in most grocery stores.

Oliver Putnam, the dip-obsessed character played by Martin Short on Hulu's hit show Only Murders in the Building, exclaims in the second episode, "This is all I eat. Dips for dinner." As much as that is an unusual (and definitely not a suggested) diet, with a little bit of creativity, just about anything can become a dip. Some infamous dips that have made their way around America's tables include spinach and artichoke dip, onion soup dip, buffalo chicken dip, and even a dessert cannoli dip. If you can imagine it, you can dip it!

Santorini Fava Dip

Recipe courtesy of Dino Kolitsas, Chef and Owner of Greca Mediterranean Bar + Kitchen in New Milford

(Note: Santorini fava is a protected designation of origin produce item from the volcanic island of Santorini which you can find at specialty Greek markets or websites. Yellow split peas, which can be found in most grocery stores, may be substituted.)

Ingredients:

- 8 ounces Santorini fava (yellow split peas)
- 1 cup finely chopped spring onions (8-10 stalks)
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 tablespoons Greek extra virgin olive oil
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 bav leaf
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Capers, for garnish
- Extra virgin olive oil, for garnish Finely diced red onions, for garnish

Directions:

In a three-quart saucepan, combine all ingredients except salt, pepper and garnishes. Over medium heat, bring to a gentle boil, stirring occasionally to prevent burning. Turn heat down to medium/low, cover and cook until the water is absorbed (approximately 35-40 minutes). The peas should be extremely soft. If necessary, add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup warm water and continue cooking another until the desired consistency is reached (5-10 minutes). When the peas are almost disintegrated, remove the bay leaf, stir gently and taste before adding salt and pepper. Mix with a wooden spoon by gently pulling the mash up against the sides of the saucepan. If a smooth texture is desired, continue to mix in this way for 5-10 minutes. Can be served warm, room temperature or cold. Garnish with pickled red onions, capers and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil. Serve with warm pita or a toasted rustic bread.

Celebrating the bold and visionary leaders within the Connecticut LGBTQ+ community.



Connecticut Voice Honors

We are thrilled to present the 2024 honorees in our second Connecticut Voice Honors.

The people in these pages represent outstanding commitment to the LGBTQ+ communities in the state, passionate activism, lives dedicated to service, living authentically, and inspiring all of us.

Whether in the arts, politics, education, or of different ages and identities, these are the people who stand out this year—and throughout their lives and careers—as individuals and as proud members or supporters of our communities, demonstrating excellence in everything they do.

Our diverse, engaged, and productive LGBTQ+ communities make Connecticut a leader in the nation in acceptance and inclusion. Each of these people embody those values, and their work improves the quality of life for everyone they—and their outstanding work—touches.

Congratulations to all and our heartfelt thanks.

Stay tuned for more honorees to be announced!

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n so many ways, the Greater **Bridgeport Pride** Committee represents "A Glorious Tapestry of Progress, Unity, and Resilience." Connecticut's largest city is home to a history as colorful and diverse as its people. Unfortunately, in one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, Bridgeport too often stands out for the wrong reasons. Many urgent and critical needs, especially for the LGBTQ+ community, too often go unmet because of insufficient resources.



It is a situation that could easily become daunting or overwhelming. Luckily, the dedicated volunteers of the Greater Bridgeport Pride Committee are not easily daunted or overwhelmed. For over a decade, this group of visionaries, many of whom were born and raised in Bridgeport, or have called the city home for most of their lives, have refused to see these challenges as liabilities. Rather, they have embraced them as opportunities, a rallying cry for the larger community to come together in celebration, of both the vibrant LGBTQ+ community and of the City of Bridgeport. This past year, the Committee put together the biggest and boldest Pride celebration yet, including a Pride March, live performances, food trucks, art exhibits, a variety show, and a cabaret extravaganza.

It takes a small village to pull off an event of this scale, and while it would be impossible to list every single volunteer in Bridgeport, special mention must go to folks like Ange Sistrunk, Alexander Mnatsakanov, Erik Anderson, Mario Baez, Sean Tarantino, Alex Styles, Amanda Geib, Sarah Beirne, Jason Coombs, Vincent Farrell, Ricky Mestre, Stephanie Saujon, Carlos Biernnay, Luis Lopez, Elisha Brockenberry—and a very special salute to Suzanne Kachmar and the City Lights Gallery for

connections, memories, and community-building. In addition to this, there has been an ongoing need and vision—for Greater Bridgeport LGBTQ+ community to have a dedicated space year-round. Now it has become a reality. Last July, the Greater Bridgeport Pride Committee announced an initial funding agreement to establish the Bridgeport Pride Center, a permanent community center focused on creating safe and empowering resources and opportunities for LGBTQ+ people in Bridgeport. A task force of various stakeholders was convened, and the Bridgeport Pride Center was officially incorporated earlier this year. The Center's mission will be to create affirming and empowering spaces and provide sources for the intersecting and allied LGBTQ+ communities in Greater Bridgeport. This will allow the organization to pursue uplifting social and wellness opportunities, and to unite the community's

From humble beginnings to remarkable achievements, the Greater Bridgeport Pride Committee embodies a shared history that inspires us all to embrace diversity, celebrate inclusion, and forge an even brighter future together.

voices through collective action, education, and outreach.

being an early financial sponsor for many years. It hasn't always been an easy journey, but the results speak for themselves. This year already promises to significantly expand Bridgeport Pride, reaching new heights, with dozens of vendors, a broad array of entertainment, art, and performance, and, most importantly, another year of meaningful

awn Ennis (she/her/hers) is a native New Yorker who's lived in five other states but for 20 years has called West Hartford home. She is a journalist, a university professor, Mets fan and single parent who says, "Being transgender is the fifth most interesting thing about me!" She identifies as queer.

Her blog about her transition, lifeafterdawn.com, serves as a portal to better understanding the trans experience and has helped countless others on this journey. Ennis has come face to face with transphobia and bigotry both on the job and in everyday life. Her philosophy is best summed up by the Haitian expression, "Beyond mountains, more mountains."

In 2013, Ennis was the first journalist in

American network TV news to come out as transgender. After a tabloid frenzy that triggered a health crisis, she was pushedout by ABC News, and was subsequently hired as the first out, trans editor at The Advocate magazine. It is her byline atop the story of the 2015 marriage equality decision at the U.S. Supreme Court, Obergefell v. Hodges, as well as a one-one-one exclusive interview with Caitlyn Jenner in 2016 that made headlines around the world.

NYC Pride honored her as a Community Hero at its 2018 Pride March alongside Grand Marshal Billie Jean King.

After leading the teams at LGBTQ Nation and Outsports, she was on the initial board of advisors for Connecticut Voice magazine in 2019 and contributed content to its sister publication, Seasons. Ennis also worked as an on-air correspondent and host of CT Voice OutLoud!, the LGBTQ+ TV news magazine on WTNH-TV.

In her hometown, she hosted and produced WHC-TV's awardwinning RiseUP With Dawn Ennis talk show, served as cochair of the West Hartford Human Rights Commission and as a member of the boards of directors at West Hartford Pride as well as the Triangle Community Center. She continues to volunteer at her synagogue.



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Profiles in Courage Dawn Ennis



Her work at Forbes earned her the 2022 GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Online Journalism. In 2023, Ennis was part of the team at the Los Angeles Blade and Washington Blade that received GLAAD's Barbara Gittings Award for Excellence in Oueer Media.

Currently, Ennis teaches journalism among other classes at the University of Hartford and manages its state-of-the-art podcast studio. A 2023 recipient of the Laura Johnson Leadership Award, she will cap her five years in academia this summer when she graduates with her Master's Degree in Communications.

She's also resumed her mainstream television news media career, which now spans 40-years, as a newscast producer at

FOX61 WTIC-TV. the TEGNA-owned affiliate in Hartford.

Before coming out, Ennis won two Emmy Awards as a writer, producer, and news manager in network newsrooms as well at local TV stations across the country. She was the first ABC News staffer at Sandy Hook in 2012 and wrote and produced the first TV bulletin to air on September 11th, 2001. Other accolades she received include a Writers Guild Award and a Society of Professional Journalists Award, and shared the Peabody Award, several Edward R. Murrow Awards and Associated Press Awards with colleagues.

For a dozen years, she worked as a successful child model and actor and was the runner-up for a big part in a 1981 film starring George C. Scott, Timothy Hutton and Sean Penn. You may have heard of the other child actor who beat her out for the role: Tom Cruise.

Ennis is a widow and considers raising her three children alone these past eight years the most significant achievement of her life. She calls this prestigious award from her peers at CT Voice, "a very close second."





Health Equity Award Hartford Healthcare



artford HealthCare's commitment to supporting all the populations it serves with respect, dignity and exceptional care is evident in all its work and initiatives. The organization stands out particularly in its ongoing support of Connecticut's LGBTQ+ communities.

A deep and compassionate understanding of the unique medical needs of the LGBTO+ communities informs all of the organization's activities, both in the communities it serves and for the people who work there. Beyond providing essential care to its patients, Hartford HealthCare is committed to educating practitioners in all specialties to provide outstanding care and attention to the unique needs and concerns of everyone.

In 2022, Hartford HealthCare opened its Center for Gender Health, a groundbreaking service specifically designed to provide essential services and support for genderdiverse adults and teenagers. Bringing together experts in endocrinology, gynecology, plastic surgery, primary care, and behavioral health, the center tailors—and delivers care to each individual's needs in a supportive, private environment.

In its education initiatives. HartfordHealtcare has created a conference open to anyone interested in understanding the needs of a gender-diverse population. Entitled, Building Gender Literacy: Gender Affirmative Care across the Lifespan, the second conference is slated for summer 2024 and will provide insight into the history of gender dysphoria as well as many other issues and practical tools for incorporating gender affirming care across a practice.

And, because an organization is only as strong as its people, Hartford Healthcare consistently demonstrates its commitment to supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its operations. Their Colleague Resource Groups provide a safe, accepting environment for helping everyone understand different cultures, identities, and issues. In particular, its LGBTQ+ group are devoted to ensuring that everyone is providing sensitive, respectful care, and ensuring that Hartford HealthCare is a visibly and actively supportive environment for all who work there.



Commitment to Youth Initiatives Styx Hatch

tyx Hatch (they/them), an out queer senior at West Hartford's William H. Hall High School, has just turned 18. They are an honor roll student and serve as a member of Hall's Equity Squad, with an emphasis on theater.

"I've been very lucky to help mentor and support underclassmen, to work with all different kinds of people and help make the arts a safe place for people who otherwise would not have that," said Hatch. "I've used that as sort of a springboard to help others who are also on journeys of self-discovery."

Born in Baltimore. Hatch spent most of their childhood near Atlanta, Ga. before moving to Connecticut in 2015.

"I still I count myself very lucky that I don't live in the South anymore," they said,

"because there'd be no way that I could be living the way that I am."

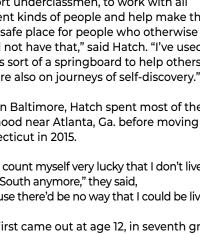
They first came out at age 12, in seventh grade, and found their authentic path two years later during the pandemic, in the summer of 2020,

"I had time to separate myself from the gender roles that I saw in my day-to-day life," said Hatch. "I came out as nonbinary when I was 14. Since then, there's been a lot of questioning and a lot of struggle to find out who I am and exactly how I want to present, and things like that. But I am very lucky to have a very supportive family. I would say that coming out to myself has been a lot more difficult than coming out to other people in terms of really accepting who I am and what I want to be."

Hatch changed their first name to Styx, after the River Styx, in sophomore year. While friends and administrators have been supportive, some students and even teachers still deadname and misgender them.

"When people are disrespecting me in that way, I have been able to stand up for myself and for my peers," Hatch said.

In June 2022, Hatch wowed the crowd at the Pride Rally at West Hartford Town Hall as one of the featured speakers.





"After more growth and work than I would like to admit, I am proud to say that as a queer person, I am happy, and part of that is thanks to the support of the community I have been lucky enough to have found in the Town of West Hartford," Hatch said. While there is a lot of work left to be done. they added: "Look how far we've come. We fought for this moment, y'all! The first 'Pride' was a riot. We fought to be here!"

Last year, West Hartford Pride put Styx to work as the stage manager at its Pride Celebration, organizing and managing bands and drag performers and speakers. Hatch received a Halo Award for their part in stage management of their school's production of Medea. They also perform as part of the Voce and Chorale music groups at Hall.

Hatch said they are looking forward to college and whatever comes next, including a return to the South.

"I always want to continue making the world a better place in whatever industry I'm in. Working in theater is a really wonderful opportunity where I can support all kinds of people. And I think after college, I look forward to continuing to work for justice and equity in all areas," said Hatch.

"The most important thing that anybody can do in order to continue fighting for what they know to be right is to continue loving one another and to continue engaging in things that bring them joy," Hatch said. And where do they find joy?

"I think the thing that brings me the most joy is loving people," they said. "Friends, family, partners, even people you've just met-loving completely and without hesitation has brought me more joy than anything else. It's healed me, made me happier, allowed me to see beauty in the world. You can find love anywhere; you just have to look. Finding it is one of the most joyful things on the planet."

-Dawn Ennis





The **Health** Collective

Be Well. Be Yourself.

orty years ago in 1983, as HIV/AIDS was devastating the LGBTQ+ community, a group of volunteer healthcare professionals and supporters came together to form the Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective. Its mission has always been to provide client-centered quality services in a safe, non-judgmental environment. In the last four decades, the organization has continually worked to reflect and embrace a dynamic community with unique health concerns and challenges.

Recently renamed The Health Collective (THC), the organization has been an important member of the community and has never turned away anyone in need of its services in four decades, providing invaluable help, education, and support for the communities it serves.

In 2024, THC continues its essential mission, providing targeted outreach and education for communities where HIV transmission is very much an issue and remains one of their major initiatives—even when it means expanding their reach to new communities.

Beyond medical support, under the leadership of executive director David Grant, the organization is providing support groups for people living with HIV, gamer nights, a food pantry and delivery service, and much more.

As the organization moves into its fifth decade, it is seeking to expand services to include comprehensive mental health programs, including substance abuse issues, as well as expanded support for domestic issues.

Under Grant's leadership, THC is also thinking beyond Connecticut and taking on issues of national importance, taking a leading role in Washington to advocate for increased federal funding for HIV spending and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Even as mainstream healthcare organizations adapt to be more inclusive and sensitive to issues faced by the LGBTQ+ communities, THC has been there from its inception, setting a standard for patient care, compassion, and depth of service that makes The Health Collective a powerful, important, and effective asset for all people in Connecticut.

ith more than a century of caring for the mental health needs of Connecticut's residents, Mental Health Connecticut (MHC) has in recent years redoubled its efforts and become a powerful leader in caring for LGBTQ+ individuals with a dedication to service and specific programs tailored to the unique needs of these communities.

MHC's roots date back to early last century. Connecticut native and Yale University graduate Clifford W. Beers founded the Connecticut Society for Mental Hygiene (which eventually became Mental Health Connecticut) in 1908 and co-

founded the National Committee for Mental Hygiene (which hatred toward this community cannot be ignored or written evolved into Mental Health America) in 1909 after witnessing off as anything other than what it is, a hate crime." firsthand the healthcare system's inability to offer effective and humane care for mental illness. Beers had spent three In 2023, MHC partnered with IDONTMIND, a campaign that years in several Connecticut hospitals after experiencing his inspires open dialogue around mental health and promotes first manic episode shortly while working as a Wall Street free support resources for anyone in need. A key element of financier. the program is the Write On! class specifically for LGBTQ+ adults ages 18-25 in Connecticut. Write On! helps participants While MHC is not a direct provider of clinical mental health hone writing skills to become powerful storytellers. The organization plans to make this an annual event.

services, the organization of 220 employees partners with individuals, families and communities to create environments that support long-term mental wellness through a diverse In addition, MHC's annual cultural humility training for staff service menu that includes residential, employment, wellness, and board of director members will focus on LGBTQ+ inclusion and lifestyle programs, as well as ongoing advocacy on behalf in 2023, aiming to make the organization an LGBTQ+ Safe of the people they serve. Zone.

Recognizing the importance of continuously building trust among Connecticut's LGBTQ+ community, MHC has taken deliberate strides over the past few years to demonstrate a specific commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ individuals.

In 2020, MHC launched the Equity, Social Justice & Antiracism (ESJA) Advisory Committee comprised of volunteer staff members from across the state. The group hosted an



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Advocacy Mental Health Connecticut



LGBTQ+ History, Health & Inclusion seminar as part of its monthly educational programs and created a resource and advocacy guide for the LGBTQ+ community.

After the November 2022 mass shooting at Club Q in Colorado on Transgender Day of Remembrance, MHC issued public support for the LGBTQ+ community, stating that the organization "stands in compassion and solidarity with the victims, their families and the LGBTQ+ community" and that "violence, discrimination and

MHC continues to work diligently on behalf of all the people it serves ensure more inclusive practices that strengthen our effectiveness and better enable full recovery for those who seek services.









Lifetime Achievement Jim Obergefell

t was—and always has been about equality under the law. As Jim Obergefell said when the landmark 2015 Supreme Court decision that affirmed equal marriage as the law of the land, "It affirms what millions across the country already know to be true in their hearts: our love is equal. The four words etched onto the front of the Supreme Court «equal justice under law> apply to us, too.1

Since that day when it was so firmly established that "Love Wins." also the title of a book on the lives of those who helped make this decision possible, Obergefell has been a tireless activist for marriage equality. It has been Obergefell's tireless fight though years of court battles, that all LGBTQ+ people now have the right to marry—and to have their marriages recognized in all 50 states.

When Obergefell's long-term partner John Arthur fell ill with ALS, they had to charter a plane to fly from their home in Ohio to Maryland where they were married on the tarmac, since Arthur was too sick at that point to deplane. However, when they returned home and after Arthur died, Ohio did not recognize the marriage, and Obergefell was not listed as the surviving spouse on the death certificate. The case Ohio v. Kasich (the then Governor) won, but it was overturned on appeal, which set the stage for the Supreme Court. The case was combined with five other cases and became Obergefell v. Hodges.



On June 26, 2015—two years to the day after the Windsor case which deemed the Defense of Marriage Act unconstitutional—the Supreme Court ruled with a 5-4 majority with Justice Anthony Kennedy writing for the majority, "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than they once were."

Today Jim Obergefell remains a tireless advocate for civil rights for all LGBTQ+ individuals and communities and is particularly mindful of the current state of the union in which laws are targeting trans people, drag shows are being challenged, and the full, free, and authentic expression of oneself in

private and public may not be fully assured.

Jim Obergefell did not seek to change the world. However, in advocating for love, justice, and equality, he became an historic figure nonetheless. There isand may always be-more work to be done to ensure that our rights and freedoms are both preserved and acknowledged. Jim Obergefell stands as a living example of what one person with a vision and passion can accomplish. It is because of his sacrifices and fight that we can say with pride, "Love Wins." He changed our world, and inspires us all.

Arts & Entertainment **Douglas Lyons**

is play Chicken and Biscuits is currently one of the most-produced contemporary plays in the country. It's more than an hilarious comedy about a gay, Black man, his white boyfriend and a return to his family church. Yes, there are a lot of laughs, but there's something more going on as well.

It's also a testament to the transformative—and healing—power of theater. The characters have to confront their own prejudices, pride and preconceived ideas, which sometimes doesn't happen in the real, offstage world.

That's because the play is drawn from reality-and the world Lyons experienced growing up as a preacher's kid in New Haven. His

mother was the first female pastor at the Thomas Chapel Church of Christ, and Douglas grew up singing in the Lyons' work is also drawing younger people into the choir. Later he joined the Unity Boys Choir, attended the Helen Grant School, Betsy Ross Arts Magnet and that "Hey, theater is for me." Career High School. It wasn't until his senior year in high school that he discovered theater could be a career and "I just feel like it's away to break so many barriers when attended the Hartt School in West Hartford. He had an it comes to race and class. It may affect each person impressive career on Broadway prior to turning to writing. differently, but the exciting thing is we're taking this journey together, and theater forces them to do that. Lyons comes by his theatrical sense naturally. Of the

church he says, "I always parallel the Black church For all his success, Lyons is on his own personal and to the theater in that the pulpit is the stage and the playwrighting journeys. "It's been a winding road of congregation is the audience, and so I grew up observing finding how to love myself in many different spaces, this very theatrical space where there was music, food, finding out what true love looks like. And on the writing community, and culture." Of course, he added his own side of things, I'm writing stories and characters that heal characters and drama, but what he observed was that there was historic homophobia in the Black church and me and anyone one who see it." the Black family where LGBTQ+ people may get "more It's working. There's much more ahead for Lyons and for pushback than love." The racial and sexual dynamics of the story are complicated, but, he adds, when an the audiences lucky enough to experience his work.

¹ "Same-Sex Marriage Supreme Court Decision, June 26, 2015." *Historic*

U.S. Events, Gale, 2016. Gale In Context: U.S. History



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audience encounters the situations and what the characters learn, then "beauty can come out of it." Lyons discovered when the play was produced that "people who in life might not embrace people like those characters did inside the theater." That's the power of theater—and narrative—to change hearts and minds.

The play has continued to open hearts and minds. As it's been produced around the U.S., Lyons says, a lot of Black women who have never stepped inside their local, regional theaters are suddenly the leads in these plays. "To me, it's a beautiful extension of the movement that's not just entertaining but is change the system of what theater is, and that

means so much to me."

theater who see his work, feel the characters, and realize





Team Leadership Award Connecticut Sun

he WNBA has a long history of being inclusive. In fact, since its founding in 1996, it has been a beacon for diversity, equity, and inclusion that has been unique in the world of sports. Since it was founded as the Orlando Magic in 1998, moved to Connecticut and became the Connecticut Sun in 2003, the team has stood out in its efforts to support DEI in all its operations.

As current president Jennifer Rizzotti says, "being passionate about the WNBA has a much bigger meaning than just being a basketball fan because if you're

going to really love this league and you're going to love its players, then it means you want to be part of something that's unique and special—and maybe an environment you've never found anywhere else."

Rizzotti adds that "the women in the WNBA gain courage by the support they get not just from each other but from their organizations and the WNBA league office. It allows us to set a standard for what things should be like." She adds that while may people observe sports teams—and WNBA teams in particular—and say things like "shut up and dribble," Rizzotti says that's not going to happen. "We're going to speak out when something isn't right, and we're going to support each other and give each other courage to take a stand. That's what makes our league unique compared to any other professional league."

What's true for the Sun on the boards is true throughout



the arena and the organization. Hiring is done without concern for age, gender, race, or anything other than a passion for women's basketball, the team, and the fans.

The fans have noticed—and keep coming back both for the exciting games but also for the feeling they get as fans. As Rizzotti says, she is constantly hearing from fans who feel that they are celebrated, that it's not just on Pride nights where, she says, "we are overthe-top celebrating the LGBTQ+ community.

"Every night when [the fans] come to the arena, they feel like

it's family. The email me and tell me that there's no other place in their lives where they can feel like they're just themselves. They find friend; they sit around in the games and maybe have interactions with players or coaches that are memorable. Nobody treats them differently here; it's a very inclusive environment."

Rizzotti says there are so many great stories around Pride and how the team supports—and is supported by-the community. "We make sure that we are creating opportunities for the disenfranchised population in our area. We want them to have access to our players, to our games so we have an environment that's fun and equitable for all."

It's a spirit that's transcends sports and touches the deepest humanity in everyone-and it's why the fans keep coming back season after season.

Pride in Education Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts

he Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts Half Dav Program and Full Day Program colloquially known as GHAA—are part of the Capitol Region Education Council. The school is a reallife version of TV's Glee, or for the older generation, Fame. And as Irene Cara sang in the 1980s, once you witness what these kids are capable of doing, you will remember their names.



Located in Hartford's Learning Corridor at the intersection of Vernon and Washington Streets, GHAA's Half Day Program brings students to Hartford by school bus four days a week, after a full morning at their public high schools in their hometowns. Monday through Thursday afternoons, they attend classes on art, dance, singing, acting, performing music, musical theater as well as stagecraft. That's until 4:15, when they board another bus for the long ride home.

"It's a busy schedule, but it is super fun here," said Cecil Pond when CT Voice interviewed them in 2023. Pond, who is a trans man, said what they like best is the diversity at GHAA.

"There's a lot more queer people here that I'm able to relate to than at my own high school," they said. "There's a lot less acceptance at my school. Here, we have Pride flags everywhere. And the student body here is a lot more accepting."

His teacher, Wesley Santiago, agreed. "One of the reasons I teach here is because of the diversity. And I think I've learned a lot since I've come here to open-up my view of what diversity is," Santiago said.

"I think it's also an education that's missing in a lot of schools,"

he said. "We talk about how the struggles between different people, whether it's the LGBTQIA+ community, whether it's the African-American community. the struggles are very similar and the struggles inspired each other."

What GHAA taught student Vivian Speaks of New Britain reflects its motto. "Make art... Change the world."

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

- According to GHAA Director Kim Stroud, about 400 students attend GHAA's Half-Day Program, and another 400 are enrolled full-time. There's no tuition; It's free.
- Transportation is provided, too, by CREC, for free. But there is one thing every student has to do, after taking part in a lottery process: the audition. "I think the word 'audition' scares people away in a way that it shouldn't," said theater teacher Hannah Simms, who identifies as queer. "It's really a 'getting to know you' process, and no one is told they can't come to the school based on the audition," she said. "It's to figure out which department is the best fit for you."
- Stroud said the curriculum at GHAA includes social justice. "We're really excited about it. It empowers the students. It gives them opportunity to be decision makers and have voices that are heard. And I think it makes them better artists."



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THE FINAL WORD //

PRIDE, HEALTH, AND TRUST: Navigating Connecticut's Diverse Tapestry

f there's one positive lesson to glean from pandemic times, it's the realization that life's challenges demand a collective response. First, there was COVID, with its multiple waves and accompanying guidelines. Soon after, "monkeypox" or "la viruela del mono" emerged—swiftly evolving into "mpox"—posing the challenge of reaching a specific vulnerable population: the LGBTQ+ community.

The healthcare system found itself compelled to craft an awareness message emphasizing prevention, action, and risk without resorting to stereotypical messages. This community, throughout its history, has consistently fought against stereotypes, making it imperative to approach health communication with sensitivity and nuance.

Leveraging our expertise in marketing and communications, we have collaborated with the State of Connecticut to implement communication and outreach efforts for many underserved communities, and the consistent source of messaging comes from a fundamental principle: Is the message crafted considering the reality and daily struggles of the affected communities? Are we building messages that make sense for these groups? Have we heard them first?



This principle of awareness has to be extended to all communities and all their prisms of life. Last year, amid the challenges posed by "mpox" in the LGBTQ+ communities, our strategy for effective yet sensitive outreach found its strength in organic partnerships. We placed our trust in partners to deploy a co-branded message, commencing with prevention, followed by a call to action for people to get vaccinated, promptly, and at no cost. Promoting vaccination becomes a

By MARIA LINO

daunting task without a seal of trust. You need to build connections from the ground, and yet, not an easy task; building trust is achievable by paving a way of understanding in both ways.

In 2023, under the leadership of CT DPH and in collaboration with Griffin Health and Harriott Home Health, the mpox prevention message was disseminated across ten significant community events in ten different cities in Connecticut. Health experts were present at these events, addressing audience questions and any concerns regarding vaccination and health. Meanwhile, partners and organizers actively supported the message on stage, through social media channels, and by generating organic content on the event day.

Interesting interactions, body languages, and facial expressions: "I already did it," "Me da miedo," "I did one shot, didn't know I need a second," "I don't have insurance," "Not now, but thanks for the info." From outstanding yeses to fearful noes, communication started, and that's the right step for more.

As a team, it was an enriching summer spent dedicating many of my weekends to every city in the state, celebrating both Pride and Health simultaneously.

It was a great post-COVID



Maria Lino is the principal at The Latino Way a marketing agency based in East Hartford. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the official views or statements of the State of CT or its health partners.

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