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EDITOR'S NOTE //



An Important Fall

As the leaves start to turn, mornings are cooler with hints of frost on the lawn, more than ever we are reminded of life's passages and what Shakespeare called "the whirligig of time."

This fall is going to be historic, and in the political realm, there is a stark choice to be made in our national election. In the waning days of summer, many of you may have been glued to the seismic political shifts, as I have been. I was particularly struck by the convention speech of Pete Buttigieg (cover story Spring 2023) who said that our historic choice this fall is between darkness and light. That choice could not be more evident—or critical.

Virtually every faith tradition includes the dichotomy between darkness and light, and that light is a symbol of truth, wisdom, and power. When we live in light, we can also see our fellows, and when we see them, we can help, support, and celebrate their lights, as the need may be.

As I thought of that, I thought that in our small way, our goal at *Connecticut Voice* is to be a light in the LGBTQ+ communities in our state. We strive to shine a light on those areas that need our attention and care and amplify the lights of the many people and organizations who have devoted themselves to the service of others and to working—sometimes fighting—tirelessly for the under-represented to provide care and compassion for those who need it and who stand as models for what is possible and a commitment to living authentically.

Nowhere is that more evident than in our cover story on Shavana Clarke, Miss Connecticut USA. She is a person of color, identifies as lesbian, and has struggled with mental health issues. She has lived her own life and followed her dreams and now she stands as a model of what a person can achieve when she perseveres and stays true to her vision of possibility for herself—and that beauty is the sum total of a person's being.

We also shine a light on Mel Cordner, who founded Q+ a growing organization designed to serve and support LGBTQ+ youth by giving them a place and a group where they are free to be and express themselves.

Andrew Mitchell-Namdar writes about SilverConnect, a program of the Leonard Litz foundation designed to support the aging LGBTQ+ population, a group that is still vital but not always well-served. At the other end of the age spectrum, we cover the need for foster parents especially for queer kids in Connecticut—emphasizing that we live in a multigenerational community.

This issue also includes our regular columnists, the inimitable Chion Wolfe, Kim Adamski has some frank advice about sex and social media, and Meghan Crutchley focuses on the importance of sleep.

Plus, we have entertainment, highlights of community leaders and more representing the richness and diversity within our LGBTQ+ communities.

So, here's to your best fall ever, and even though the days may be growing shorter, our wish for you is a season filled with light.

Chris

Christopher Byrne, Editor
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Connecticut VOICE™
is published by Seasons Media

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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

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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A photograph of two women walking away from the camera down a dirt path in a rural setting. The woman on the left is wearing a white sleeveless jumpsuit and holding a bouquet of flowers. The woman on the right is wearing a long white dress with long sleeves and a wide-brimmed hat. They are holding hands. The background shows trees and a white building under a soft, golden light.

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CONTRIBUTORS //



FRANK RIZZO

Frank Rizzo profiles author Gregory Maguire (page 36), looks at an important LGBTQ+ literary legacy (page 58), and talks with TheaterWorks Hartford (page 45). He has written about the arts in Connecticut and nationally for more than 40 years; for the *The New York Times*, *American Theatre Magazine* and dozens of other outlets. He is also a theater critic for *Variety*. Follow Frank's work at ShowRiz.com and on Twitter@ShowRiz.



KIM ADAMSKI

Kim Adamski continues her frank columns on sex with a look at the impact of social media on relationships and practices. (page 23). She also writes 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.



BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Brian wrote our cover story on Shavana Clarke (page 50) and the look back at the Disco era (page 28) he has been a nationally renowned journalist for more than 30 years. He has been editor-in-chief of TheaterManiacom and Resident Publications, Managing Editor of men's fashion magazines DNR and MR, and his byline has appeared in Forbes and the Wall Street Journal.



DAWN ENNIS

Dawn profiles Garret Ecuallitto (page 56). Dawn is also a member of the CT Voice advisory board and an award-winning journalist, professor at University of Hartford, and a producer at WTIC in Hartford. Dawn was America's first transgender journalist in a TV network newsroom when she came out more than nine years ago. Follow her @lifeafterdawn on X, Facebook, and Instagram. Dawn and her family reside in West Hartford, Connecticut.



JANE LATUS

Jane Latus catches up with CT Voice Honors winning organization Mental Health Connecticut (page 14). 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.



MEGHAN CRUTCHLEY

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 queer professional and queer affinity groups.



"THE WORK TO ADDRESS
INJUSTICE WHEREVER
IT EXISTS REMAINS THE
WORK AHEAD."

—Vice President Kamala Harris

The Audacious Voice



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

You can see her full columns on [CTVoice.com](https://www.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.


Enter the Dragon—Body modification—even in an extreme—can be healing. Chion talks to Tia Legion Medusa whose quest to find his authentic self resulted in body modifications designed to transform him into a dragon. It's a journey of heartbreak and searching, and Chion approaches it with her usual curiosity and openness. The conversation prompts Chion to explore her own tattoos and piercings—not that unusual in today's world—and what they mean to her, as well as the freedom to choose what one wants to do. In typical fashion,

Chion also asks kids about whether they want tattoos, and despite the fact that parents may be aghast at the question, what emerges is that we might all benefit from the freedom children have to imagine living authentically.

Talking With Jada Star—Perhaps you don't know who Jada Star is. She's Dolly Parton's niece, and while she appeared on the reality show *Claim to Fame*, Jada appreciates all the good her famous aunt does. Jada tells Chion about the loving environment she was raised

in and the amazing good works Dolly has done to support education, vaccines, and of course the LGBTQ+ communities. Jada notes that as a queer person, she has been the benefit of the love and acceptance of her entire family, and she talks about how this is the kind of love that the Bible talks about. As she notes, it says to "love thy neighbor" and it says that without limitations.

Fishing with Your Inner Child—Chion's conversation with Deepsea Dawn, a marine biologist whose work has taken her to the

deepest depths of the ocean, reveals something many of us suspect: Our inner child has a lot of influence over who we become as adults. While Chion fished with a magnet and toy fish, Dawn dreamt of the seas. And those dreams led her to being Chief Scientist of the Environmental Systems Research Institute, and the first and only Black person ever to visit the lowest known point on Earth. Chion ends with the suggestion each of us find our inner child—and perhaps pay attention to its ideas for how to play. 



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

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INCLUSION IS POWER:

MHC Leads the Way

By JANE LATUS

If you feel the need to leave your identity at the office door, you'll never love your job, no matter how much you love your work.

Mental health can suffer from having to hide or downplay who you are. On the other hand, companies that support their LGBTQ+ employees by providing a safe workplace give them an enormous health boost.

This is why Mental Health Connecticut (MHC) is offering its new LGBTQIA+ Inclusion training to any employer interested in creating a supportive space. MHC anticipates that the results—increased empathy, understanding and allyship—will also spill over into the community at large.

This spring, MHC completed providing this training to its own staff of 200-plus. A few employees shared with *CT Voice* how much it meant to them.

"MHC is already an inclusive organization, so I feel safe sharing my lesbian identity with coworkers. However, I'm not out to program participants, and I used to worry that educating participants about LGBTQ+ culture would out me. Now, I feel validated that my knowledge is meant to be shared with others. It helps me be a better advocate for social justice," says Dana Walker, residential specialist.

Another employee actually came out during the training, to a roomful of cheering co-workers. "Coming out to the class was truthfully a last-minute decision. I have only come out to one other person," says C. Grace, residential specialist. "It felt like a weight off of my shoulders. I have been on a journey of self-acceptance, and this helped me love myself and not be ashamed of who I am."

MHC is taking "LGBTQAI+ Inclusion" on the road to workplaces across the northeast and has already delivered this interactive workshop to employees in

Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York.

The timing couldn't be better, with nationwide attacks increasingly stressing out the queer community. This year the Trevor Project reported that "90 percent of LGBTQ+ youth say their well-being was negatively impacted by recent politics." The Williams Institute announced in June that "53 percent of transgender young adults meet the criteria for serious psychological distress."



Journalist Erin Reed's Anti-Trans Legislative Risk Assessment Map keeps turning redder and now includes a northeastern state (New Hampshire). These laws hurt people here in Connecticut, too. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving in June released a report on the well-being of area LGBTQ+ residents which found, "Despite Connecticut's relatively affirming status, the stress of the broader climate has negative implications for the health and well-being of the LGBTQIA+ population."

MHC isn't a direct clinical provider (with one exception: it now offers in-home therapy). Its mission is broader: to partner with individuals, families and communities to create environments that

support long-term health and wellness. It provides services, education, and advocacy. Its goal, in simplest terms, is happy, healthy, independent people.


It provides services, education, and advocacy. Its goal, in simplest terms, is happy, healthy, independent people.

MHC's training takes a half day and can be virtual or in-person. It uses group activities and empathy building stories to create an environment that is inclusive of all gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. It covers:

Getting to Know the Community: an overview of terminology, the diverse identities, and dos-and-don'ts.

LGBTQ+ History, Health and Inclusion: a review with a focus on health, mental health and inclusion. Local statistics are included to provide an overview of the participants' community.

Intersectionality of Privilege and Allyship: learning how to use your personal power to be an ally. Includes interactive exercises and scenario-based discussion.

Those interested in this or other trainings that support workplace and community mental health can contact collab@mhconn.org. MHC is a statewide nonprofit organization with the mission of partnering with individuals, families, and communities to create environments that support long term health and wellness. They are committed to supporting communities statewide through educational programs and workplace wellness. They believe education is critical to changing the way in which mental health is perceived and how individuals take action for themselves and loved ones. 

Earlier this year at the second CT Voice Honors awards, CT Voice honored MHC with its Advocacy Award, for being "a powerful leader in caring for LGBTQ+ individuals with a dedication to service and specific programs tailored to the unique needs of these communities."



Bring Inclusivity to Your Workplace

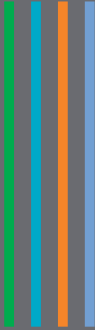


Our workshops include:

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- Recognizing and Mitigating Burnout
- Developing a Self-Care Plan
- Intersectionality of DEI and Mental Health
- Allyship and Antiracism
- Intersectional Allyship
- Racial Healing in the Workplace
- The Art of Effective Communication
- Effective Time Management
- ***And custom workshops!***

Looking for more? Join the MHC Collaborative.

Well-being, particularly within the workplace, is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of overall health and happiness. The MHC Collaborative is a membership-based program designed with multiple tiers to support individuals and workplaces. Membership includes coaching, training, networking, and resources.



“Working with MHC has truly been what I envision as a shared partnership. One of the best parts of The Collaborative was the deep dive assessment and how MHC took the time to really understand what we needed. The team at MHC listened to our feedback, and when things had to be adapted for FCP Euro, it was clear that MHC was invested in this work being the best that it could be for the specific demands of our employees, and our unique culture and workplace environment.”

- Nicole Batista, Wellness Coordinator, FCP Euro

Email collab@mhconn.org to sign up or scan the QR code to join one of our upcoming networking events and learn more.





Andrew Mitchell-Namdar

Bringing the Sexy Back to our Silvers

There is an entire generation of LGBTQ+ people who are entering the 55-plus age group in record numbers. Yet this demographic is often marginalized, overlooked, and ignored within the LGBTQ+ community. While we recognize and join the urgent efforts to help young people navigate the often-challenging journeys of coming out of the closet, understanding their gender and sexual identities, and finding meaningful connections and community; we know it is equally important to remember that older LGBTQ+ people have the same needs, but often lack the support and resources to achieve them. And the experience of surviving a(nother) global pandemic and adjusting to the lingering feelings of isolation, loneliness, and solitude has not helped, either.

That's why we at the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation launched SilverConnect. The program is intended to

SilverConnect seeks to support organizations and programs that connect, empower, and respect our aging LGBTQ+ population.

celebrate our community as we enter our golden years.

In other words, it's time to bring the Sexy back to our Silvers.

A recent Gallup survey showed that in New Jersey, nine percent of people who identify as LGBTQ+ are 65 and older. These older adults have to combat ageism along with all the discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion that we all face in the entire LGBTQ+ community. The Princeton Senior Resource Center has partnered with SAGE to create safe and inclusive environments where individuals can express their identities without fear of judgment or harm. Moreover, they have created a community called "Aging

Gaily," which seeks to foster intergenerational queer gathering by hosting events where people aged 55-85 can share stories and foster connections with people aged 18-35.

Facilitated by an LGBTQ social worker, the group focuses on addressing the unique challenges faced by older LGBTQ+ individuals, including issues related to health and social connections. They have created a committed community of people who meet monthly to discuss books, health, and personal life issues they may need help with. They support one another. They laugh together. And they address sometimes difficult and thorny issues by inviting legal and

financial advisors to facilitate discussions and provide relevant guidance specific to the LGBTQ+ experience. Programs like "Supporting Your LGBTQ Grandchild" help grandparents learn what LGBTQ+ students are facing in middle and high school, as well as how parents and grandparents can support their young LGBTQ+ loved ones at home and in the community.

Here's another example: when the Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST)—often known as the "gay synagogue"—was founded in 1973, it was mostly a small number of gay men no longer satisfied with living in the shadows. Today, the congregation has grown much larger, and many of its members are experiencing the special vulnerability of LGBTQ+ people as they age. A survey showed that 68 percent of members are over 55, of whom 39 percent live alone, and 67 percent don't have children. The impact of COVID was particularly devastating—particularly the



rapid shift to robust online programming (i.e. religious services, classes, pastoral intervention, peer check-in, and socialization). Many elders were without support of younger family, and many needed technology instruction.

The new “Aging Together” program at CBST comprises a range of services, including case assistance/referrals, health and wellness education, and social and peer support. Specific resources they have implemented include advanced care planning, online dinners


and recreation, emergency case management and a dedicated lifeline for elderly couples managing illness. CBST is a proud model of what it means to be a truly multigenerational community.

This is exactly what SilverConnect is all about—connection.

From depression and other mental health concerns to food insecurity, to technology challenges, to legal hurdles, and more, SilverConnect seeks to support organizations and programs that connect,

empower, and respect our aging LGBTQ+ population. We are especially interested in programs that promote connectivity, individual advocacy, independence, education—and fun! We hope this will inspire many more organizations to center our seniors, and we invite you to learn more by

visiting our website.

We look forward to hearing from you soon! 

—Andrew Mitchell-Namdar

Andrew Mitchell-Namdar is a Trustee of the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation.

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Foster Families Needed in Connecticut

NEED IS PARTICULARLY ACUTE IN LGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES

Currently in Connecticut there are 3,100 kids and young people in care, and only approximately 1,400 foster families, according to Deb Kelleher, executive director of the Annie C. Courtney Foundation, which provides support through trainings, support groups, referral services, and recruitment of families for children who need them. The need is particularly acute in the LGBTQ+ communities, Kelleher says, noting that 30 percent of the youth currently in, or seeking, foster care identify as LGBTQ+. Additionally, they are eight times more likely to experience suicidal ideation and live with greater levels of anxiety than youth who identify as straight.

Kelleher herself became a foster parent in 1990/1991, and it inspired her. "I found myself so engaged with the idea of foster care and what was happening to families and to kids that I became interested in spending my life doing this work. So, by 1994, I had started teaching classes on licensing and continue to work in the industry on issues that were most important to us."

Kelleher says that she named the foundation after her grandmother who ended up raising her siblings, then marrying and having four children of her own. All of this inspired Kelleher to focus on the needs of families and trying to find more families





for kids. “I have always been interested in what happens to kids when they age out of care, so we have a very strong focus on trying to find housing and employment opportunities for these young people.”

Particularly for the LGBTQ+ young people and families finding affirming situations is of utmost importance. Kelleher says, “our kids in foster care struggle more. They not only struggle with the same things their peers struggle with, but they also struggle to find affirming families to care for them.”

She adds that no one is a perfect parent, but for kids coming out as LGBTQ+, it can be especially difficult. Coming out, if the young person is able to be open about it, becomes a journey for the entire family, she says, and that can be risky for kids. Kids in families that are supportive do better. However, Kelleher is quick to point out, “it’s important for foster families to know that they don’t have to transform themselves. They have to figure out how to do some core things to support the identities and care of these young people.

“Mostly it’s about putting your personal beliefs aside if they’re in conflict [with providing affirming care]. It’s about letting kids talk about their identities and letting them know they are loved. Straight and cisgender allies are an important part of the process as well as LGBTQ+ folks.”

There is also a need for foster families of color, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth of color, as these young people may face additional challenges dealing with multiple social identities, Kelleher says.


The rewards of building a family through fostering can be profound and well worth the effort. Connecticut has a robust, if imperfect, child welfare system, and the Foundation works closely with them and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to support their work and the families they serve.

There are very few limits as to who is eligible to be a foster parent. Kelleher says they place kids with single moms, single dads, older and younger people, as long as they are at least 21 years old. And for those who might be nervous about taking on the challenges of a foster child—particularly a teenager—Kelleher stresses that there are many support services available. She notes that the Wheeler Clinic in Waterbury in particular has programs that support LGBTQ+ young people, as well as programs from the DCF.

It’s about letting kids talk about their identities and letting them know they are loved. Straight and cisgender allies are an important part of the process as well as LGBTQ+ folks.

One of the programs that Kelleher says is especially important is that under the Connecticut paid leave program, if a foster parent is bringing a new person into the household, they are eligible for twelve weeks of paid leave, no matter the age of the child. If it’s a two-parent household both are eligible within the first year of placement. Kelleher adds that this can be particularly useful as a new family member gets situated.

There are many inspiring success stories from the Annie C. Foundation. You can read them at their website: anniec.org. If you are interested in fostering, or simply want to ask questions, Kelleher wants to talk to you. You can call the office directly at (475) 235-2184 or look up their Facebook page—Annie C Courtney Fdtn.

For more on this, and the revitalization of the True Colors program in Connecticut, listen to our interview with Kelleher and Robin McHaalen on the Voice Out Loud podcast. 

SMALL BUSINESS PROFILE

Shuttercraft, Inc.

Thirty-eight years ago, Colleen Murdock's father, a minister and carpenter, was looking for wooden shutters for a project he was working on. Unable to find them he thought he would make them himself...only to find out that it's not as easy as it might sound.

So, according to his daughter Colleen who has been part of the company since 1996, he found a mill who could make them, bought a paint sprayer, and got the job done. He was, however, inspired to start a small business out of his garage. Colleen bought the business in 2006 so her dad could retire, and the business—Shuttercraft in Madison— has grown and thrived since then.

Of course, Connecticut is probably an ideal place for a shutter business, given how many antique houses there are in the state and how much restoration goes on. As Colleen says, shutters were the first storm windows, and closed with the louvers pointing down, they provide great protection, not to mention a stylish look.

Shutters are great for new construction as well. Moreover, there can be shutters on the inside a house as well. Plantation shutters, mounted on the interior of a window provide privacy and protection from sun.

While Shuttercraft has been Connecticut-based, their fame has spread. The company created plantation shutters for Laura Bush in the White House for three rooms. (Look for them if you ever happen to be in the residence part of the White House.)

Shuttercraft has also been on Broadway. Colleen says that the producers of *On Your Feet*, *the Gloria Estefan Musical* built a backdrop for the show out of shutters, most of which were overstocks, or mistakes, but they turned out to be exactly the look the designers were going for.

If you look closely, you can also see the company's work in the movies *The Post* and *College Road Trip*, as well as making an appearance on Saturday Night Live.

Stardom, however, hasn't diminished Shuttercraft's commitment to quality and service. Colleen says that every shutter is custom made and made to the fraction of an inch. It's important since function is as important as style.

Check out the great designs, and perhaps think about adding shutters to your home. Visit shuttercraft.com



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Healthy Social Media habits in the LGBTQ+ Communities

If you're an American adult, you're likely a social media user. According to a 2023 Gallup poll, 89 percent of Americans have used social media websites or apps before, and in the 18-34 age range, 56 percent say they use social media at least weekly. Why is social media so popular? Social interaction and validation are human needs, and social media allows us to fulfill these desires without even leaving the house.

For the LGBTQ+ community, social media can have special benefits. For example, individuals may use it as a safe space to discuss and express their identities and connect with peers who share similar experiences. In a national atmosphere that is increasingly hostile toward LGBTQ+ folks, this aspect of social media is invaluable. A 2023 study from the University of Hong Kong found that LGBTQ+ people who use social media as part of a varied social routine felt less internalized stigma and more community connectedness. However, this positive effect was dependent on how an individual interacted with social media. Participants of the study who were very emotionally reliant on it felt lonelier and had greater internalized stigma.

Clearly, social media use is a double-edged sword for the queer community.

It is well-documented and widely understood that social media has a major impact on how we engage in sexual relationships. For example, research from Ghent University in Belgium reports that users are more likely to have a black-and-white, essentialist view of gender and sexuality. Labeling sexual identities as "good" and "bad" removes nuance from the conversation and enforces a moral code on sexuality. Sexual agency and diversity cannot flourish in such an environment.

Dating apps are fraught with this kind of narrow thinking. Are you too slutty or too cautious? Are you taking PrEP? Are you white, muscular, and conventionally attractive? Not fitting neatly into a "sought-after category" can sting. Besides this, risky behavior is often encouraged, like not using a condom or meeting in an unsafe location.

Another issue on some social media platforms is the proliferation of hate speech. Research suggests that up to a third of internet users have encountered hate speech. It can be a frightening experience, especially in a time where, according to FBI reports, hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community are increasing. Under these circumstances, LGBTQ+ folks may feel anxious about or try to hide their sexuality or gender identity to avoid violence. Hateful misinformation on social media platforms also leads to state-sanctioned discrimination, like "don't say gay" laws or legal denial of sexual and gender health services to the queer community.

To be fair, social media does offer some positives when it comes to sexuality. A plethora of credible educational resources can help people lead healthier, more satisfying sexual lives. There are lots of inclusive and reliable sexual health resources across every social media platform. It just requires time and patience to sort through the noise. But how?


The first step is to create a plan for managing your social media use. It's very hard to cut back. These apps were designed to keep you scrolling for hours. For some people, tracking the time spent on social media apps, or designating media-free time each day,

SEX TALK

With Kim Adamski

helps them reduce screen time. Others find that something as simple as turning off your notifications removes some of the temptation to check.

It's not just about time spent, though. Look at the content you're following. Do you have a lot of very attractive, unattainable influencers in your feed? Are you following exes and finding yourself feeling worse for it? Clicking "unfollow" or "mute" takes just a second and can make a big impact. Surround yourself in the virtual world with supportive friends and positive, affirming content. When seeking sexual health information on social media, research your source. Are they credible? How can you tell? Exercise critical thinking to filter out unreliable accounts.

It is possible for social media to be compatible with healthy sexuality. It just takes time, patience, and a lot of thought and care. And remember: social media is not a replacement for face-to-face social interaction. Finding your people in "real life" is just as important as participating in online communities. Used with caution as part of a balanced social life, social media can have a positive effect on your sexual self-perception, self-acceptance, and wellness. 

—Kim Adamski

Sleep isn't a Dirty Word

Do you lie in bed wide awake, have trouble turning off your brain, or feeling “wired and tired,” with no idea what to do? If you're not sleeping, it can feel like things are never going to change. And while our experiences of sleep might all be different, the behaviors that influence our sleep and the mechanisms in our bodies that keep us awake and lull us to sleep, are actually the same. What's really behind the sleep mask of our perception, is that most of our sleep experience depends on our behaviors.

In fact, research shows that 70 percent of our sleep experience depends on

our behaviors, and only 30 percent is linked to things like our chronotype, or personal preferences.

This is great news; it means our sleep is not predetermined and we have way more influence over our sleep experience than you might think.

After years of working with clients as a certified sleep coach and witnessing massive transformations, the formula for better sleep became clear: knowing the most impactful ways to influence sleep, and deciding where you want to start.

Our bodies and brains are driven to sleep, the mechanisms that repair

our tissues, dampen our emotional fear responses, and cleanse our brains of waste byproducts, are all dependent on sleep. In fact, all the gains that we want to see in the areas of weight loss, muscle building, cognitive acuity, and having more peace and less stress all happen when we're sleeping.

So why are more than one-third of adults in the US not getting enough sleep? My geeky answer would be that we don't know how sleep actually works in our brains and bodies, and we end up believing we're just not good sleepers—when it's about our conditions around sleep. Sleep is made up of two systems and our circadian rhythm. Our arousal system



Meghan Crutchley

is like a dimmer switch that moves depending on light, sound, and temperature. While our sleep drive system uses our daily life behaviors, like movement, to “drive” us to sleep at night.

Since our bodies are ancient and conditioned to living in nature, the most impactful changes we can make to help us sleep involve



manipulating our inner and outer environments. Temperature acts as a cue for sleep when it's cold and as a wake-up call when it's warm. The amount of light and noise in our room will stimulate our wakefulness system, so will technology, and stressing about our day before bed or during the night when most people struggle with ruminating thoughts. This keeps us up because it activates our sympathetic nervous system, releasing stress hormones, and increasing our heart rate and blood pressure. Therefore, practicing stress reduction strategies and a calming pre-sleep ritual is important for sleep.

Everything in the body is interdependent, so all our behaviors play a part in different physiological


systems. Our sleep drive system is a perfect example of this. It runs off adenosine, a byproduct of our body burning energy throughout the day. Adenosine binds to receptors in our brain and builds up until we literally fall asleep. Thus, getting more daily movement can significantly improve your sleep. Fun fact: caffeine binds to the same receptors in the brain as adenosine, so when it's present adenosine can't bind, and it builds up. When the caffeine dissipates, all the adenosine rushes in (like buying concert tickets) and binds to the receptors, literally putting us to sleep. If you're a caffeine drinker and you've experienced the afternoon crash, this is why!

Our behaviors also significantly impact our circadian rhythms, which

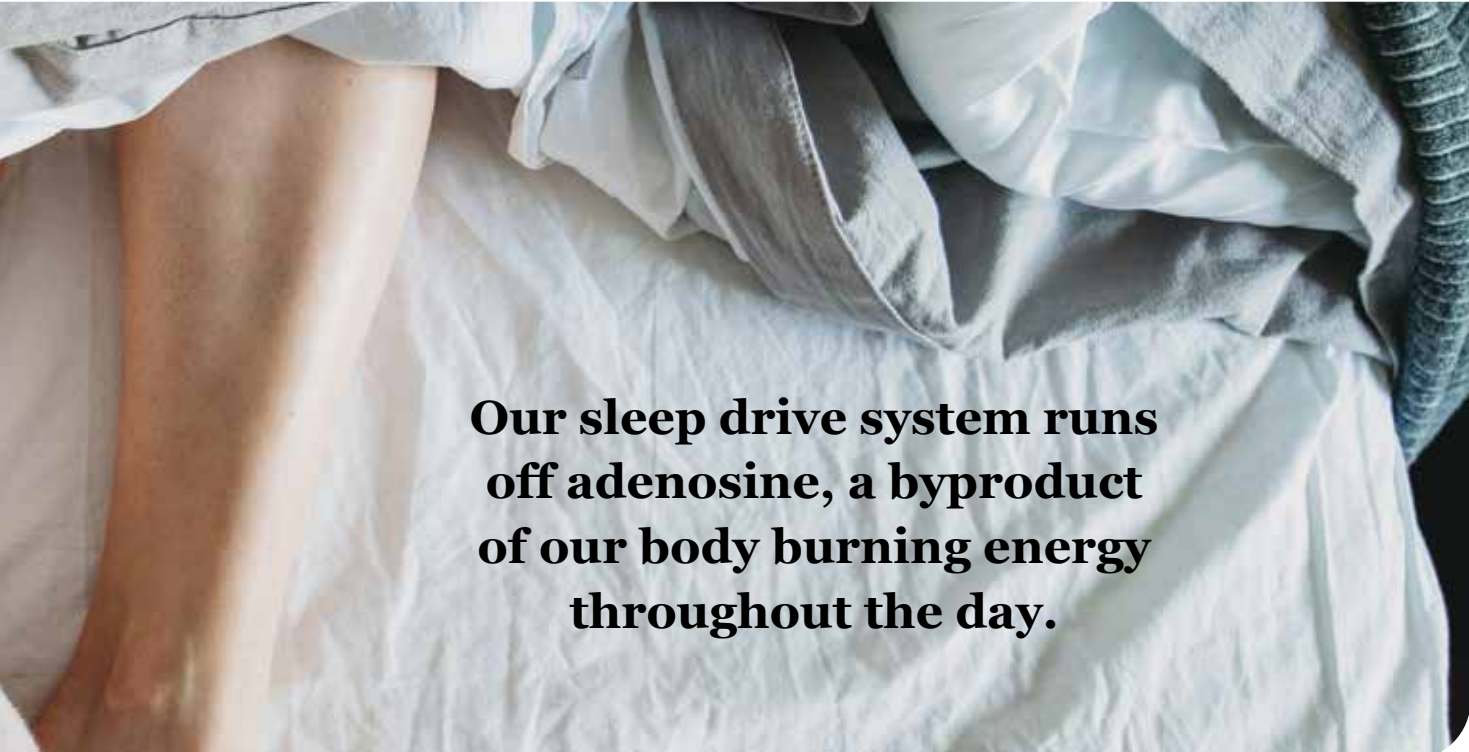
occur naturally over a 24-hour cycle. The main clock in our brain receives data from little circadian clocks in places like our heart, adipose tissue, and gut. We can enhance our sleep and daily life experiences by getting into rhythm with our bodies, through having consistent: sleep/wake times, meal times, the time of day we exercise, and our pre-sleep ritual that signals to our body and brain that we're winding down and sleep is coming. Our circadian rhythms are somewhat unique to us (That's the 30 percent part.), and it's fun to find out which out of the four main chronotypes we align to, but at the end of the day it's our behaviors (70 percent) that determine our sleep experience.

Here are some other key behaviors to drastically improve your sleep:

- **Bedroom dark/cold as possible for sleep**
- **Use a light alarm clock**
- **Dim the lights one hour before bed**
- **Technology cut off one hour before bed**
- **For melatonin production get 15-30 minutes of natural light in the morning and midday**
- **Relaxing pre-sleep routine**

Need some support improving your sleep and well-being during these crazy times? Join the Queer Health Revolution, my LGBTQ focused wellness community, and it's Free: www.queerhealthrevolution.love. 

—Meghan Crutchley



Our sleep drive system runs off adenosine, a byproduct of our body burning energy throughout the day.

Growing Up Authentic

A groundbreaking book encourages kids to celebrate being themselves

Finding family, acceptance, and validation for who you are can be a challenge for nearly everyone. It's especially hard for children—and even harder for children growing up queer who don't live in a supportive environment, or even worse, a hostile environment.

That was the experience of Jonathan Merritt who was born into the home of a televangelist where it was not safe to be his authentic self. However, he did overcome all of this and became a leading writer on faith with *Master of Divinity* and *Master of Theology* degrees, and a list of publications about finding, experiencing, and expressing faith in today's world.

It wasn't always an easy journey. As he told *Connecticut Voice*, "I grew up in a time when people like me, when gay people were considered to be threats to the family. And so I never really had an imagination for what it would be like someone like me to be part of a family, to be kind of a loving and included. And a few years ago, I moved into a kind of intentional community here in New York City alongside a lot of other families. And they invited me in, and that for me was a profound transformation of imagination where I began to experience what it would be like to be a valued member of a family."



Jonathan Merritt

He began to interact with the children of his now-extended family, and it inspired him to write a children's book. A friend of his suggested that he write about what it was like in his new life to be a gay uncle, also called a Guncle.

The result was a heartwarming book, *My Guncle and Me*. Written

in rhyming couplets with illustrations by Joana Carilo. The story centers on a young boy Henry Higgleston, who, as Merritt describes, "feels very alienated. I think a lot of us who grew up, especially when I grew up and had to hide anything that was unique or different or militantly express it by, by separating ourselves from it. Yeah. He has a hard time. He likes his math homework. He likes to dig for worms, which I think is hysterical, but he doesn't fit in."

What concerned Merritt in writing the book was that Henry felt he had to hide his differences, the things that make him who he is. "When we hide the things that make us who we are, we're



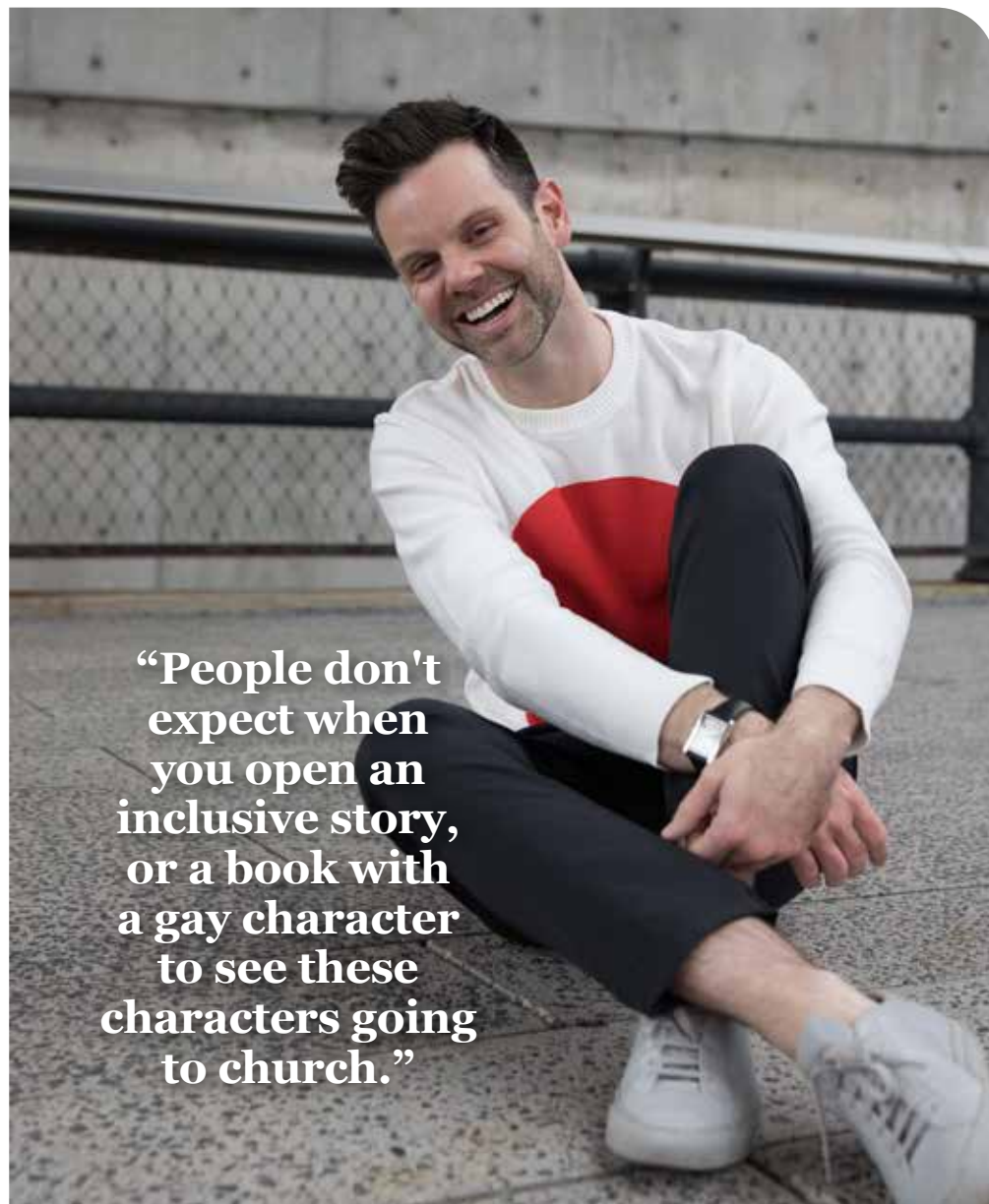
hiding our gifts from the world, and the world is poorer as a result of that. So I hope when kids read this book, they'll feel free to be who they are, despite the fact that other people may struggle to accept those parts of them.

That's certainly the case with Henry's Guncle. He's unafraid to be who he is in the world. He's aware of his difference, but he doesn't feel hampered by it. In fact, Merritt adds, "when you grow up and, and you feel so misunderstood and so unseen; when an uncle can reflect back into a child's life, and when their very presence bears witness to the fact that it truly does get better; I think that that can really spark hope in the life of a child that helps them to keep going through what can be some of their most difficult years."

One of the central scenes in the book is when Henry goes to church with his Guncle, and while some people may be surprised by that, Merritt says it is, to his mind, the most important scene in the book.

"People don't expect when you open an inclusive story, or a book with a gay character to see these characters going to church. The truth is, studies show that roughly 50 percent of gay and lesbian people consider themselves to be religious. And our stories so often go untold in the media. And so, I wanted an image that was recognizable to a lot of people whose stories, seemingly don't matter because, because they're not told."

What Henry's guncle teaches him by his lived experience and example, is that what



“People don't expect when you open an inclusive story, or a book with a gay character to see these characters going to church.”

makes Henry different is what makes him special, and that's something to be celebrated, even when he may face difficulty or challenges. As for his own life, Merritt and his father have worked together to forge the best possible relationship they can. "I can only speak for my relationship. Everybody's situation is unique. I'm glad that we've done the hard work, and there has been a

lot of hard work that we've had to do to continue to build that relationship. It comes in phases, some times are better than others. But I'm glad that we've put in the work to make relationship possible, even though it often comes with some pretty real boundaries."

Whatever the difficulty, however, what Henry's guncle teaches us all is

that it's worth it to live authentically.



My Guncle and Me is out now, and you can hear the full conversation with Jonathan on the Voice Out Loud podcast. [V](#)

—Christopher Byrne



DISCO

By BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

No one may be doing the hustle or wearing all-white polyester suits in public, but 50 years since Disco began to dominate popular culture, its musical and fashion influences live on, whether in the songs of performers like Daft Punk, Dua Lipa, and Miley Cyrus, or even in the fact that Sir Barry Gibb, the co-founder of the Bee Gees, received a 2023 Kennedy Center Honor.

The highs and lows of the 1970s Disco era are thoroughly examined in the upcoming Rizzoli book, *Disco: Music, Movies, and Mania under the Mirror Ball*, by popular culture guru and acclaimed writer Frank DeCaro. This entertaining and comprehensive tome includes year-by-year “must-have” Disco playlists, as well as interviews with numerous artists and celebrities of the era, including disco divas Donna Summer and Gloria Gaynor; Village People icons Felipe Rose and David Hodo; fashion legend Norma Kamali; and *Dance Fever* host and choreographer Deney Terrio, to name just a few.

Connecticut Voice spoke to DeCaro about why he chose to write the book, why Disco so quickly fell out of favor, what the music meant—and still means—to the gay community, and his favorite parts about writing the book.

CV: Why did you think this was the time to reexamine Disco?



Acclaimed author **Frank DeCaro**

FDC: I was looking for a project I could bring my heart to. And I admit I always loved Disco and still do. I’m the guy you see dancing in aisle 7 in the supermarket when a Disco song comes on. I was too young to get into Studio 54, so I wanted to do a book for people who, like me, couldn’t get into 54 but consumed disco via TV or while waiting at the mall for someone to sign our records. I think I fell in love with Disco the first time I heard “I Feel Love” by Donna Summer. I remember reading that David Bowie said that when he heard that song: “This is what the future sounds like.” And it is still the future!

CV: So, is Disco is in your DNA?

FDC: I think it’s in a lot of our DNA, especially for people of my generation. During COVID, my husband (writer Jim Collucci) and I watched a lot of reruns on TV. Did you know there was an episode of *Barnaby Jones* where Buddy Ebsen did “The Hustle” or there’s an episode of the old *Hawaii 5-0* featuring Yvonne Elliman?

CV: So why did it fall so far out of favor – and so quickly?

FDC: While it was only one night, that famed Disco Demolition Night (at which a crate filled with disco records was blown up on the field between games of a doubleheader in 1979 between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers at Chicago’s Comiskey Park as the result of a radio promotion) really changed everything. And what’s so frustrating, looking back, is that night looked like the original MAGA rally. It wasn’t even about the music; it was about the people making the music and listening to the music. Disco was about being queer, POC, or a woman, and the people who tried to destroy it were basically homophobic, racist and misogynistic. Straight white men were offended by the people who made and loved Disco—and often continued to be long after the “Disco Sucks” movement. Back then, if we, as gay men and



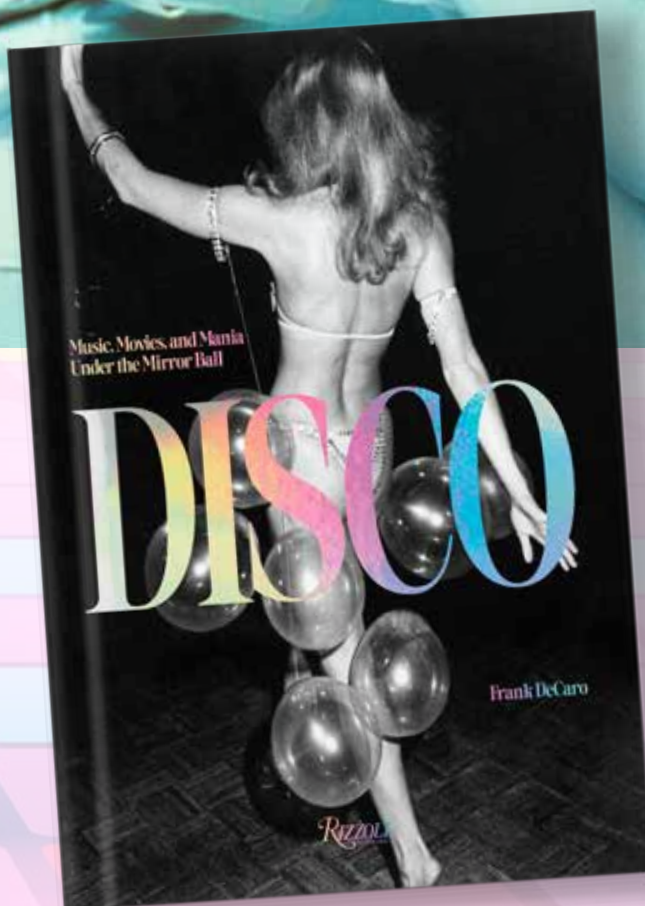
The Bee Gees in 1970. Shown from left: Maurice, Barry and Robin Gibb.
Photo credit: Photofest

women, had more cultural agency, Disco wouldn't have stopped.

CV: Did Disco really stop, though?

FDC: In America, yes. But Disco didn't stop around the world after Disco Demolition Night! It also influenced New Wave and Electropop. Somehow, we all fell for this bigoted radio promotion when it only reflected how a small number of people felt about the music.

CV: Can we talk about what Disco really meant to the gay community?





The Brady Bunch

FDC: Disco helped people through tough times in the 1970s and became the soundtrack to people fighting the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. I believe you could have the worst day ever and you could still dance to Disco and find joy. Even today, it still provides a way to feel better. I know during COVID, a lot of us danced around in our kitchens to Disco... and it helped!

CV: You got to talk to a lot of legends from that era! How hard was it to contact some of those people?

FDC: Originally, it was a bit

harder for me than with my book *Drag*, because I don't come from a music writer background. But once you get a couple of Village People to talk to you—and they were my first contacts—so many people got on board for me. And it was such a surprise and delight talking to these people!

CV: Let's talk about a few specific highlights, okay?

FDC: While I didn't have enough time with Nile Rodgers, it was great that we could speak about the origin about "Freak Out" by Chic. I found out it was 100 percent true that they originally

wrote the song as "Fuck Off" because they were turned away from Studio 54 when Grace Jones forgot to put them on the guest list. I guess it's true spite is always a good motivation. And it was a big deal to find Pete Bellotte, the co-writer of "I Feel Love," because he never gives interviews. We had such fun!

CV: I think I would say perhaps the best interview in the book was the one with Donna Summer. Was that something you saved from long ago?

FDC: I found a box of tapes in my storage unit that had two



The Village People's Can't Stop the Music in 1980, directed by Nancy Walker. Photo credit Associated Film Distributors/Photofest



Saturday Night Fever from 1977, directed by John Badham. Shown from left: Karen Lynn Gorney and John Travolta. Photo credit Paramount Pictures/Photofest. Inset: Choreographer Denny Terrio, future host of "Dance Fever" with John Travolta for his role in the movie. Photo credit: Photofest



The Solid Gold Dancers (1980–1988). Photo credit: CBS/Photofest

microcassettes of Donna Summer talking. I literally jumped for joy! I believe Donna sent them to me after I had done an interview with her decades ago. But you know, they were microcassettes—so I had to buy a used recorder on eBay just to listen to them. Then, I had them digitized and transcribed them, and I found, happily, that the quotes I used the first time were really just trivia, not the important stuff about Disco that you can find in this book!

CV: For all the great female Disco singers, like Donna or Gloria Gaynor, it's interesting that we think Disco was really created by gay men. But that's not totally true. Or is it?

FDC: I think some of the important men in the disco era were gay, but they just didn't talk about it. But a lot of people we thought were gay weren't! Still, what everybody knew was that gay people were the best consumers and had great taste! ♀

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FEATURE //

Gregory Maguire Returns to Oz— And Goes Far Beyond It

*Message of book, musical—and now two-part film—
has special resonance for the LGBTQ+ community*

By FRANK RIZZO

Gregory Maguire remembers the first time he saw the extended trailer earlier this year for the upcoming film, *Wicked*. He was stunned by the expansive film fantasy world that had its beginnings from his 1994 novel.

“The trailer has had millions of views—and a great many of which are mine. It’s become my morning prayer ritual,” he laughed, blessing himself. “I think the reason for the repeated viewing is that it’s like listening to the same track on an album over and over because there is something deeply satisfying you get from it. You don’t watch something over and over like that unless there is a particular pleasure, and the trailer is deeply moving.”

The movie, based on the 2003 blockbuster Broadway musical—still going strong 21 years later—will be presented as two films, directed by Jon M. Chu (*In the Heights*, *Crazy Rich Asians*). The first movie will open November 22, and the second part November 2025. The films star Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande, Jeff Goldblum, Michelle Yeoh, and Jonathan Bailey. Also featured are Peter Dinklage, Bowen Yang, Keala Settle, and Ethan Slater.

The 3 1/2-minute trailer gives a snapshot of the first part of the two films, presenting the back story of *The Wizard Of Oz’s* Wicked Witch of the West. It streamlines much of Maguire’s book as it follows the young green witch’s arrival at a university, her relationship with good witch

Glinda and their travels to encounter the Wizard. There, Elphaba—Maguire’s name for the unnamed witch of the L. Frank Baum books and the iconic 1939 film—discovers not only her full powers but her purpose.

Maguire feels the movies will ratchet up the moral concerns that were at the heart of his book (which was written as a 400-plus page adult novel; not a young adult book, as many surmise).



Gregory Maguire

Those moral concerns centered on the abuse of power and the great psychological and actual danger—and even death—that unchecked power has on marginalized characters.

“The story of *Wicked* and the story of endangered people and endangered populations has become more current

in the 30 years since I wrote *Wicked*,” said Maguire, who lives with his husband, American painter Andy Newman. They live outside Boston in a rambling colonial home where their three now-adult children grew up.

“The Wizard (played in the film by Goldblum) is a sham and evil figure, who is manipulating all those levers at his palace for his own protection and purposes, not for anyone else but himself.”

Does that remind you of anyone we know?

Maguire smiled and noted the heightened rhetoric in the present political and violent environment, and increased attacks on the LGBTQ+ community as deeply concerning, making his story even more relevant in 2024.

VISITING THE FILM SET

Though Maguire has not yet seen the movie, he did visit the immense studio complexes in England where the two films were being shot, taking up every one of the giant production facility’s stages.

“They created an actual forest in one building and in another, the throne room, which alone took up a building the size of a Home Depot. You are going to have to see it in a real theater to appreciate the sheer size of it,” he said.

Complete and complex settings were built in their entirety and CGI was limited, primarily for the flying monkeys and the goat-professor. Maguire was also impressed by



Mary Kate Morrisey Broadway's current (and 25th) Elphaba. Photo by Joan Marcus



Alexandra Socha, Glinda
current Broadway cast.
Photo Credit: Joan Marcus



Ariana Grande as Glinda and Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba in the upcoming *Wicked* film. Photo Credit: Universal Pictures

The current company of *Wicked* on Broadway. Photo: Joan Marcus

the detail in which the world he first imagined in his novel was made real. Wandering during a break in the filming on the set of *Madame Morrible's* study he noticed that all the hundreds of books on the shelves were real, and on their spines were gilt lettering for the titles, all having to do with magic. "It was all designed within an inch of its life," he said, "including magic-related props in table drawers."

He was, however, a bit disappointed he was not asked to do a cameo in the film. "I didn't ask because I have a certain amount of pride, but I would have been very happy to have played a Munchkin."

MAGUIRE'S OZ BOOKS

Maguire said after the publication of *Wicked* in the mid-1990s he moved on

to other stories but felt compelled to return to Oz following the release of disturbing torture photos taken during the second Gulf War in 2003.

Those books followed the son of Elphaba in *Son of a Witch*, *A Lion Among Men*, and *Out of Oz*, which ended the Oz series in 2011 with Elphaba's granddaughter Rain flying out of Oz with the intent of drowning the Grimmerie into the sea.

"That was going to be the end of the Oz series, with Rain flying away to live a life without magic. It wasn't necessarily going to be a happy life, but I wanted her to be free and on her own."

After that Maguire wrote a wide range of novels, including *After Alice*, *Hiddensee: A Tale of the Once and Future Nutcracker*, and *A Wild Winter Swan*, the latter set all within the confines of a single house and

Maguire said his new book, *Elphie: A Wicked Childhood* explores the Wicked Witch of the West as a child and teen, before she made it to academy.

released, appropriately relatable during the pandemic shutdown.

During the global uncertainties and anxiety of the pandemic, Maguire did the only thing he could do to make sense of it all: Write. "I began to be worried about Rain."

The result was a new trilogy called with the umbrella title *Another Day*,

which followed teen Rain on her new journey to another land called Maracoor.

"In the 10 years since [the Oz books ended], my own daughter had gone from being 10 to 20. When COVID started she returned home from college, and she didn't know what would be happening with her life, her mental health, and her sense of security, which was endangered. I saw these young people around me suffering, and there wasn't very much I could do about that. But I could do something about this child Rain."

"Knowing that I left someone hanging—literally over the ocean—I felt irresponsible. I began to care again for this child. I'm not a helicopter parent, and I'm not a helicopter author rescuing a character. But I can at least follow her journey and

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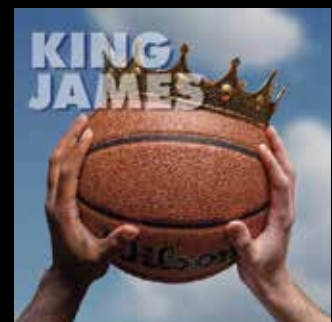
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see what happens to her and that's where *Another Day* came from."

NOT QUITE THE END

Would that be the last of the Oz stories and Elphaba's prodigy? Well, not quite.

Maguire said his new book, *Elphie: A Wicked Childhood* explores the Wicked Witch of the West as a child and teen, before she made it to academy. (If you look carefully, there's a nano-second in the trailer that shows Elphaba as a child being taunted.)

Maguire said he had several episodes of a much younger Elphaba from the original 1995 book that were cut out. He used them as a starting point of his look back at the green girl as she matures to be a young woman.

"The intellectual of property of *Wicked* is going to outlive me," said the 70-year-old Maguire. "Eventually someone would do the young Elphaba, so I want to do it first and do the way I want to. If this is my last novel, then I think it is appropriate to go back to her childhood. The vast part of her pain was before college. It wasn't just at the university where she didn't fit in and feel right; she has never been fit in and felt right in her whole life."

Elphie will be published in March, 2025, 30 years after the original "*Wicked*."

I asked him about the lasting impact *Wicked* has had on the second half of his life, and this "a giant green cloud" that followed him overhead over the decades.

"I now think of it as this giant throne room—one that goes farther

than I can reach."

How so?

"I am reminded on a daily basis on social media of its impact, in letters and by people on the street, too. I know it meant a hell of a lot to thousands of people, such as gay men, who tell me that *Wicked* saved their lives in high school, as well as 90-year-olds who read Baum's Oz books when they were little, telling me that it not only brought back their childhood—but extended it. I hear from immigrants, especially from the Middle East, who tell me that they come from a religious culture where good and evil are actively spoken about, as in *Wicked*." They tell me that it is the first time that they see themselves portrayed in this country because of Elphaba's passion and courage and not fitting in. So...wow." 🍷

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As TheaterWorks Hartford Evolves, So Does Rob Ruggiero

By FRANK RIZZO

For Rob Ruggiero a directing gig in Hartford turned into an unexpected life in the theater—and in a particular theater.

Ruggiero's association with TheaterWorks Hartford began 31 years ago, first as guest director, then as associate artistic director, and, for the past 12 years, as producing artistic director.

The theater, which was founded and run for more than 25 years by Steve Campo, has grown considerably over the years from its humble and hard-scrabble roots to its 1994 purchase of a four-story, art deco building in downtown Hartford. It's not only a subterranean showcase for intimate, off-Broadway-style theater specializing in new and recent works, but it has also

been home over the years for some small, local, not-for-profit arts groups.

In that time, the theater has presented scores of productions, many giving young theater artists their starts, some shows featuring stars such as Kathleen Turner, Richard Dreyfuss, Valerie Harper and Tovah Feldshuh, and many works which have won awards for their casts and creatives. Ruggiero has directed nearly 60 plays and musicals at the theater and several, such as *Ella, High*, and *Make Me a Song: The Music of William Finn*, have gone on to theaters across the country, including Broadway.

Since the Rutgers grad began his leadership role in 2012 the theater has flourished, debt-free, with a string of surpluses, and with an enviable 5,000-plus subscription base for the 188-seat theater.

But then came the COVID-epidemic in 2020 and the 18-month shutdown of theaters which led Ruggiero to reassess what his—and the theater's—future would be.

It's not the first time the Massachusetts native faced an epic challenge. In 2007 Ruggiero's career and life nearly ended after a cancerous tumor was discovered wrapped around his spine. An emergency operation and extensive treatment followed, and he has been cancer-free ever since.

But the health of TheaterWorks and American theaters in general due to the epidemic is another matter. Some theaters across the country eventually flatlined, and many are still in intensive care.

"After a month or so into the shutdown [which began in March of 2020] we realized COVID was not going away," says Ruggiero over lunch at



Rob Ruggiero



Rob and Dina Silva (right), director of development greeting audience members on an opening night. Photo by Joël Cintron

Max Downtown, around the corner from the Pratt Street theater. “People were saying then it would be four years or more before things would be returning to normal. We were reeling from that idea.”

But in the TheaterWorks spirit of nimble resilience, Ruggiero says the staff collectively made the decision to take action, “and not bury our heads in the sand.”

“We felt such a strong relationship with our audience,” says Ruggiero, “and knowing that everybody felt so isolated in their homes, we decided that we were going to continue to produce—just not traditionally.”

The tight-knit TW team learned new social media and Zoom skills and quickly began programming virtually. Instead of its usual season of five fully produced works on stage, by May 2020, there were monthly online readings and presentations of mostly new work by writers of color. There were also more personal features such “Getting Sauced with Rob” which Ruggiero presented from his kitchen while making spaghetti sauce and talking with theater artists and pals. Virtual music presentations were also offered. A highlight from the pandemic period was an outdoor river-

side production in 2021 of *Walden*, a play that earned top honors from the Connecticut Critics Circle.

But the period was stressful and took a toll on Ruggiero and the staff. Emerging from the pandemic period, there was continued uncertainty. Subscriptions plummeted by 50 percent. The theater had its first deficit in years.

Ironically, when it came time for government funding for theaters’ shut-down losses, TheaterWorks received less than many because it produced and presented in non-traditional ways that generated modest revenue, while still facing large deficits. “Do you believe that? It was all based on numbers so the theaters that simply shut down, laid off staff and waited it out—which was most of them—got more [governmental grant] money.”

Fortunately, individuals noted TheaterWorks’ continuous activities and engagement with its loyal fans during the shutdown. Many supporters continued to donate, and in many cases doubled or tripled their gifts, Ruggiero says.

“For the years before COVID, we were on this big upswing,” he says. “It’s been a tough time in American

‘We’re Legal!’

Sometimes LGBTQ+ life, theater and world events combine to create its own dramatic moment,

Rob Ruggiero vividly remembers a June night in 2015 at the Goodspeed Opera House when he was directing *La Cage Aux Folles*, a musical celebrating drag and gay family values. It was the same day the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage.

“It was our first performance with an audience and Jamison Stern, who played the drag queen Zaza, was to make his first entrance from the back of the house and then go to the stage. He used to joke ‘I’m making my entrance from the rear.’ Well, when it came time for him to make his entrance, he strode down the aisle and grandly shouted out, ‘We’re legal!’

“There were enough people there who got it — and loved it — and there were some who perhaps didn’t understand the magnitude of it. But for the queer artists who were associated with the show, that was a case when life and theater intertwined and those are the best. That was a moment I’ll never ever forget.”

Rob's Top Picks

I asked Ron what five shows made the most impression him from a gay perspective. They are:

The Laramie Project — “That show had profound meaning on my career path. I was struggling with the frustrations of making a living at an artist, and that production reminded me that I have no choice on what I do. Working on that play inspired me deeply. I am director and a storyteller — and this production showed me that the work of theater makers can have great impact.”

Take Me Out — “Still one of the most talked-about productions in our history. One of the great plays I think, but also features

two characters that are very relatable to straight audiences that wonderfully live in the beloved world of baseball. Audiences fall in love with the gay character’s transformation to fandom. I did that show at two theaters and could easily tell that story again!”

The Legend of Georgia McBride — “Not only another of our most popular productions, I love that it centers a straight man who falls in the love with the art of drag. I also love that central relationship is a deep and caring friendship between a drag queen and his most unlikely *Drag Daughter*. In this story, the relationship move beyond gay and straight. Love

that (and I am a fan of drag artists).”

Fun Home — “A beautiful musical that centers a lesbian cartoonist on a journey to reconcile her past. I love that this musical celebrates the art and individuality of Alison. What I found more challenging was how to communicate the damage and complexities of her father—a closeted gay man—to audiences without reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice on his character. The casting of that pivotal role helped redefine perspectives a bit. Proud of that.”

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theatre, but we've managed to now get our heads above water, and we can even touch ground a little bit. But we're not completely on dry land yet. We're not back to where we were, but we are definitely stable."

RE-EMERGENCE

The recent hiring of the theater's first managing director has eased responsibilities on Ruggiero's shoulders. "I already feel the relief and it has allowed me to dream again because I'm not longer constantly dealing with business or HR issues, and I can be more out in the community. Everything feels better now and I'm more hopeful."

Ruggiero, who directed Broadway productions of Matthew Lombardo's *Looped* with Valerie Harper and *High* with Kathleen Turner, is also directing again outside TheaterWorks.

This year Ruggiero is directing the musical *The Mystery of Edwin*

Drood at Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam and *Fiddler on the Roof* at The Muny in St. Louis, an 11,000-seat venue where he has frequently directed.

There's also more personal time now for Ruggiero; to visit his family home on Cape Cod, to finally do some traveling—"and one more thing, dating. I'm still a single gal," he laughs.

Ruggiero is completing planning for the new '24-'25 season, which will include *King James* by Rajiv Joseph in February and *Your Name Means Dream* by José Rivera in June 2025. He also is imagining special productions the following season for the theater's 40th anniversary.

Separate gigs and special presentations will also be on the theater's calendar, such as presentations of drag star Varla Jean Merman, a return of the theater's hit, *Woody Sez* in July, bookings for The Living Room Music Series and an annual refreshing of its

hit holiday show, *Christmas on the Rocks*.

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONING

Ruggiero says, at the age of 62, and after his long association with the theater, he is starting to plan the leadership transition

Looking three or more years ahead, Ruggiero says he wants to finish the vision of the renovation of the building which was deferred because of the epidemic. "Thank god the previous [nearly \$6 million] phase of theater's renovation was completed before COVID started, and everyone has honored their pledges."

The final phase, he says, will create a second arts space which could be used for multiple purposes so that "people can gather in different ways, for music, art and special functions. I would like to see bathrooms on the first floor and a bar area upstairs, as



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Christiane Noll and David Harris in *Next to Normal*. Photo by Lanny Nagler

well as a catering kitchen. All of this is so we can do more storytelling, have more conversations, bring more community into our building. I'd like to see multiple things going on in different spaces so the building would be engaging all the time."

GAY AWARENESS

As an out gay man for decades, Ruggiero marvels at the growth and depth of LGBTQ+ stories on stage, including his own. TheaterWorks has presented LGBTQ+-centric shows throughout its existence, such as *As Is*, *Patient A*, *Take Me Out*, *Four*, *The Little Dog Laughed*, *The Laramie Project*, and the recent *Fun Home*, among many others.

Ruggiero also notes that there are many more stories that have a character who is gay where the story isn't centered on them being gay, it just is."

But there are more stories to tell about LGBTQ+ lives. As for the controversial topic of whether to exclusively cast gay people in gay roles, Ruggiero says the issue calls for a nuanced response.

"I don't mean this to sound like a cop-out, but it comes down to individual cases," he says, adding that he is uncomfortable saying "that only gay people can play gay roles, or only a gay director can direct gay plays, or only a director of color can direct plays about people of color."

But he also believes there is a certain experience that is brought to productions in these cases, too, "and to acknowledge when that experience isn't there, then to seek assistance."


Ruggiero talked about a recent play he directed that involved the relationship between a male white character and a female black character. Ruggiero says he brought in a black director/producer to observe rehearsals, to lead discussions, and to be an advocate. "That helped me see the storytelling through a couple of lenses that I

wouldn't have otherwise understood at that level. Without that input, it would have been on the actor to be the advocate of that information. We're learning things like that, about what is assessable to artists."

"People don't realize you can't ask an actor in auditioning if they're gay or not. Casting director might say they're looking for authenticity, but that's it," he says, noting that one of the finalists for the role of the closeted gay father in *Fun Home* was not gay. "I was happy for the Allison's ended up being queer artists."

"But I think we're in an oversensitive time right now that has caused the theater to lose ourselves a little bit in what made it most unique—in a good way, of being unpredictable and provocative."

He quickly adds the structures to protect, advocate and create representation for actors and theater artists are necessary now, given past abuses by those in power.

"New tools are now available, and I think we're close to the time that we can have the freedom [of presenting theater] where we are able to communicate in a way that doesn't create trauma but creates inspiration." 



Jen Cody in *Christmas on the Rocks '21* Photo by Mike Marques.

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Shavana Clarke

By BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

History is often made in ways both big and small. In April 2024, history was made in Bridgeport when Shavana Clarke became the first openly LGBTQ+ woman to be crowned Miss Connecticut

USA, the precursor to the Miss Universe pageant. No stranger to the world of pageants—she had competed off-and-on since childhood—Clarke stood out. Yes, she has poise and beauty, but she is also intently honest about her sexuality and struggles with mental health.

Connecticut Voice caught up with Clarke to discuss her journey, her choice to be open about these controversial subjects, her message for other LGBTQ+ people, her most memorable encounters during her reign, and her ultimate dreams and goals for her life.

CV: Tell me about your journey to Miss Connecticut USA?

SC: I started doing pageants as a little kid, mostly I think because I loved strutting across our living room, and I did them through my early teens. Then, I took a break for a while! But when I saw Miss South Africa winning Miss Universe in 2019—someone who was dark-skinned, short-haired, and looked like me—I got inspired all over. In 2021, I competed as Miss New York—I lived in both states back at the time—but I didn’t do great at that pageant. So, I took a year or

two off, and then competed for Miss Connecticut in 2023. I was third runner up, but at age 28, I was afraid I had aged out. I was still very proud of myself, and I walked away without any regrets. But in 2024, the pageant decided there was no age limit, so I came back, and this time, I won!

CV: Why do you feel a beauty pageant is still relevant in today’s world?

SC: I have friends who don’t understand why I do it, but I think pageants are evolving in beautiful way to be more inclusive. And personally, I get so much confidence by strutting across stage in a bathing suit or having interviews with judges you’ve never met before.

CV: Were you ever concerned about being open about your sexuality?

SC: I have to say I was never discouraged by any of my coaches. No one ever said don’t do it. But initially, I had some misgivings

about discussing it. It is scary to be in a system that usually crowns a certain type of women. I already have things people don’t understand—being Black and having such short hair—that I thought I don’t want to stick out more. But my mom and girlfriend were so encouraging; in fact, my girlfriend loves beauty pageants, that was part of our conversation on our first date. And over the last two years, I became



Photo Credit Mike Chaiken



Photo: kgarciaphotography

“In the LGBTQ
community,
sometimes
*I wonder if I am
queer enough.*
But the truth is no
one can tell you
how to best describe
what you had to go
through to be where
you are.”





Photo Credit Fadi Berisha



Photo Credit Fadi Berisha

“I truly believe there should be mental health education starting in middle school, and we should give children the resources and vocabulary to identify their emotions and ways to seek help, not just expensive therapy.”

much more confident in my sexuality. I feel so settled now about who I am that I felt it was important to talk about all aspects of my life, including being a lesbian. And when I asked my new coaches if discussing this was ok, they all said why wouldn't you talk about it?

CV: What do you believe that wearing the crown can express to LGBTQ+ people, especially younger people?

SC: I don't want to call myself a role model, but since my win, so many people have reached out to me for being open, honest and vulnerable. Those messages keep me going and remind me why I did this, and they also help me keep other things in perspective. As for advice, I would say everyone's journey is their own; so, don't compare your journey to other people's. For example, I knew I liked girls since middle school, but I am really a later-in-life lesbian. This is my first real relationship. In the LGBTQ community, sometimes I wonder if I am queer enough. But the truth is no one can tell you how to best describe what you had to go through to be where you are. It upsets me that social media makes all of us feel like there's one way to do something, and that's just not true.

CV: You've also openly discussed your battles with mental health, especially having borderline personality disorder. Why?


SC: I think generally we do not see people in public positions talk about these struggles, and I wonder why we need to watch people actually struggle before we allow them to be open and honest about their battles. If as a society, we were more open about our personal issues, then there's a chance other people would realize the people we look up to go through the same things we do and we would feel more hope. I started struggling with BPD [borderline personality disorder]

in middle school. At the time, no one else I could see was struggling with mental health, so I felt so alone. One of the biggest issues of having a mental health disorder is not feeling heard, seen or understood. In my church, my mental health disorder was used against me. People said it was the Devil! I truly believe there should be mental health education starting in middle school, and we should give children the resources and vocabulary to identify their emotions and ways to seek help, not just expensive therapy. I am so grateful I eventually got the help I needed!

CV: What have you found to be the most surprising—and affecting—experiences during your reign?

SC: I've loved connecting with people across the board; especially older people who aren't always used to someone like me. And one day, I went to visit a K-6 school, and that was so beautiful because those kids were so pure and loving. They treated me like a queen. It was an important reminder to me that children are not inherently racist, and we need to keep reminding other people about that.

CV: I know you have so many interests—and so many jobs including your crochet business and your full-time job in sales for a home décor company—but do you still want to pursue a career in entertainment?

SC: Yes! I would love to get back into acting. I think about that often. It was my first love, whether on stage or on camera. And I have two big dreams: I would love to play Viola Davis' daughter in any kind of project, and I would love to be in a Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun* playing Beneatha, because I really love and identify with that part! But what I am most excited is eventually becoming a wife and mom. I know we don't always see that perspective in LGBTQ people, but that's my ultimate goal! 

All Roads Lead to Garrett Eucalitto

Meet the out, gay commissioner of the D.O.T.

By DAWN ENNIS

Of all the detours, delays and potholes Garrett Eucalitto has had to navigate in the year and a half since he took the wheel as Gov. Ned Lamont’s commissioner of the State Department of Transportation, few challenges compare to this past Spring’s emergency project to re-open I-95 in Norwalk. The interstate was shut down for days in both directions following a fiery, multi-vehicle crash, causing headaches and bumper-to-bumper backups for drivers from New York to Rhode Island.

“It takes a village, and from the response from local and state police and fire departments to the environmental cleanup by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the demolition and rebuilding by the Connecticut Department of Transportation and contractors, everyone did their part,” said Gov. Lamont after the highway was re-opened on May 5, ahead of expectations. “I am impressed by these efforts and thankful for the dedication, skill, and labor of everyone who has been involved,” Lamont added.

“This has been a team effort, and I can’t thank enough the CTDOT crews, contractors, and workers who spent the weekend ensuring the public could resume traveling on I-95 as soon as possible,” said Eucalitto.

Teamwork is something this self-described “policy nerd” knows all too well, having once been an award-winning long-distance swimmer at Torrington High School in 1999.

“I was never the best swimmer, but I put in the work,” Eucalitto said. That’s an Olympic-sized pool of understatement. In high school, Eucalitto was a three-time All-NVL swimmer—meaning Naugatuck Valley League—specializing in the 500 freestyle and 100 breaststroke. He was also named the Academic All-American choice of the National Interscholastic Swim Coaches Association.

He went on to swim in the NCAA Division I and was named senior captain at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, a private, Roman Catholic Jesuit-run institution, where he took his first brave steps outside the closet.

“I came out to a couple of people in college,” he told *CT Voice*. “Really only two people.”

Eucalitto left Holy Cross with a B.A. in political science and received a Master’s in international relations from Boston University, where he decided to take bigger steps out of the closet as a gay man.

“I came out to my family at that point, but I still wasn’t out everywhere,” Eucalitto said. He had long considered military service to help pay for his studies, but was deterred by the anti-gay policy of that era. “I realized ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ was a thing, and it would be difficult.”

After grad school, Eucalitto confessed that without a clear path to joining the military, he didn’t have a map to his future. “I never knew what the next step would be,” he said. But a skill he learned swimming in competition would soon pay off outside the pool.

“I learned to prioritize my time management,” said Eucalitto. “The 500 [meter swim] helped build a sense of when to kick it into gear and when to pull into yourself. Now, in the midst of really long nights and days, the memory of double practices before and after school helps me focus on a slow, steady pace to get through them.”

That skillset would be highly valued in Washington, D.C., even if Eucalitto started at the very shallow end of the pool.

His first “job” was as an unpaid aide in Sen. Joe Lieberman’s office on Capitol Hill, doing grunt work: opening envelopes and sorting through emails. He’d soon move into the deep end, ultimately becoming the senator’s assistant for appropriations, transportation and infrastructure advocacy for Connecticut. “I loved it,” he said, spending six years learning from the man who would one day run for Vice President.

“The focus was on public service,” said Eucalitto. “Every correspondence should get a response. Try to make a difference, but stick to your values and beliefs.”

That he did, pushing Sen. Lieberman and his staff to fight the anti-LGBTQ discrimination policy of the U.S. military, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1993.

“I pitched him and the legislative director on repealing ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’” said Eucalitto.

This was personal, he said. “I was the gay staff member who went to him, the chief of staff, and the legislative director and said, ‘Look, this personally impacted me. We need to do this.’ And so, you know, they’re like, ‘Well, if you can do the work, line it up, see how you could get the votes to do it, we’ll take it on.’ He was so supportive of that effort, and he took it on, personally.”

The bipartisan congressional repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was introduced by Lieberman in March 2010 and signed into law



Garrett Eucalitto

by President Barack Obama nine months later.

When Lieberman died in March, Eucalitto mourned. “He was my mentor and hero, passionate about policy. He fought to protect ANWR [the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge], Long Island Sound, and our climate. He repealed DADT [“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”] when others told him it couldn’t be done. He was devoted to his family, his faith, his staff, Connecticut and the nation.”

After working for the senator, Eucalitto was hired by the National Governors Association as its Transportation Program Director.

“It broadened my horizons,” he said, “and my understanding of how engineers think.”

But then Connecticut called him home. Gov. Dannel Malloy appointed Eucalitto Undersecretary for Comprehensive Planning and Intergovernmental Policy for the Connecticut Office of Policy Management. A long title for a guy who admits he knew absolutely nothing about state government back then.

Clearly, he learned, because in 2020, then D.O.T. Commissioner Joe Giulietti brought Eucalitto in as Deputy Commissioner. When Giulietti retired at the end of 2022, after four years on the job, Eucalitto was Gov. Ned Lamont’s easy choice to replace him.

“I am blessed to be able to work for an administration that is very supportive. Both the governor and the lieutenant governor are extremely supportive of LGBTQ+ rights,” Eucalitto told *CT Voice*. “Throughout my career, since graduating from grad school, I’ve been lucky to work for individuals who have been very supportive of those rights.”

Eucalitto made it clear from the beginning of his tenure as D.O.T. commissioner that the new boss was an out gay man.

“I told all of our staff on my first day on the job,” he said. “I had an all-hands quarterly meeting, virtually. Some people in the office knew, but I don’t go around talking about it all the time because I focus on work all the time. I just work 18 hours a day. So, I just told people about my background. I wove it in, off the cuff: ‘Some things about me. I am a history nerd. I’m a Minnesota Vikings fan, and I’m gay.’”

Some may ask, “Why did he feel the need to come out to his employees?” Eucalitto says the question should be, “Why not?”

“Well, it’s because it’s a part of me, right? It’s a part of how I identify. It’s a part of my everyday life. It’s impacted my life. But it hasn’t really impacted the job at all.”

If it has impacted his job, it’s only in a positive way, he said.

“I was contacted by other staff afterwards, privately, who just said ‘thank you,’ saying that they didn’t know, but it made them feel more comfortable being able to tell people in the agency, that they feel more comfortable, talking to their colleagues about their personal lives, knowing that they have support and someone like them at the top. So, I think that was helpful. And, for me, that means a lot.”

The 43-year-old shared that he is single. “Work has been my focus, and yes, I need to change that,” he said with a smile. “I’ve been married to the job for so long.”

Eucalitto spoke at length with *CT Voice* about the projects on tap. Among them: reimagining how I-84 and I-91 intersect in Hartford by reconnecting both the divided capital city and the riverfront, as well as connecting Hartford to East Hartford; doubling the number of railroad tracks north of Hartford in hopes of expanding rail service to Massachusetts; repairs to the Connecticut-owned railroad tracks from Greenwich to New Haven; and a \$25 million program to improve bus stops and shelters for all bus systems across the state with real-time arrival signage, seating,


lighting and fully ADA-compliant.

“That’s really important for me, to ensure that all individuals of all forms, any mobility impairment or visual impairment or hearing impairment, is able to use the infrastructure that we’re going to build,” he said.

Also of importance to Eucalitto is how severe weather has impacted transportation across the state, including the torrential storms in 2023 that tore through his hometown.

“All of Torrington, downtown Torrington was decimated,” he recalled. “My family lives in Winsted, too. Decimated. Gone. My fear is we’re going to see more bridge washouts, culverts destroyed, roads upended because of increased rainfall events. All of our infrastructure that was built 60, 75 years ago, 50 years ago. It’s undersized. So, now with everything we do, we are constantly having to say, ‘Okay, do we need to make a larger culvert? If we do make a larger culvert, what does that mean for property downstream? Or property upstream?’ So everything we touch is going to have a ripple effect across the infrastructure in the community.”

Eucalitto also recognizes that most people in Connecticut have no idea what his department does until something goes wrong.

“People don’t realize what the D.O.T. does, right? I mean, we have 3,100 employees across the state and 65 facilities. Someone from the D.O.T. lives in every community of Connecticut. We’re your neighbors,” said Eucalitto. “And what I’ve been telling myself is our diversity, both in geographic location and what we bring to the table as individuals is what makes a strong CTDOT.” 

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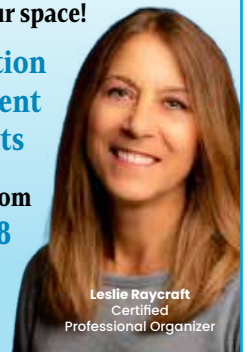
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The Gay Couple Who Created a Literary Bonanza

Donald Windham and Sandy Campbell's pals included Tennessee, Truman, Gore...with plenty of drinks and drama

By FRANK RIZZO

Sometimes we are best known by the company we keep.

Starting in the 1940s and continuing for decades, the friends of longtime gay partners Donald Windham and Sandy M. Campbell included literary and artistic legends of mid-century America: artists Paul Cadmus and Pavel Tchelitchew; dance impresario Lincoln Kirstein; actors Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne and Montgomery Clift; poets, playwrights and novelists such as Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, John Ashbery, W.H. Auden, Gore Vidal, Gertrude Stein, Christopher Isherwood—and many more.

One suspects that no one in their

intimate circle would have imagined it would be the names of this little-known couple that would be associated with one of the great literary prizes of the 21st Century.

When Campbell died suddenly of a heart attack in 1988 at the age of 66 on Fire Island, Windham was the beneficiary of Campbell's sizable estate. The couple, having no heirs, had agreed years earlier following their deaths to establish significant grants giving writers the opportunity to focus on their work independent of financial concerns.

The inheritance—at the time in the high seven figures comprised of stock from Campbell's family, which owned a chemical manufacturing

company—grew substantially over the next 20 years—to \$50 million. Following Windham's death in New York City in 2010 at the age of 89, the Donald Windham-Sandy W. Campbell Literature Prizes was established and overnight became the largest collective annual financial gift in the world exclusively to English-language writers. To date, 99 writers representing 21 countries have received the prizes.

The prizes, administered by Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, total \$1.25 million annually, with \$175,000 given each to eight writers: two dramatists, two poets, two fiction writers and two non-fiction authors.

Michael Kelleher, founding direc-

tor of the Prize, explains that writers do not apply for the award; rather they're nominated privately by an invited network of leading international literary figures and academics, reflecting the Prize's four categories. The names of several dozen writers at all stages of their careers are chosen and vetted in the initial round of judging, which is followed by two further rounds of deliberations, winnowing the candidates. The final eight recipients are decided in mid-winter by a permanent nine-member selection committee made up of two lifetime members established in the will with Yale's president appointing the other seven. Kelleher then makes a Zoom call to the surprised award-ees.

"People scream and cry and laugh," says Kelleher of the reactions to the out-of-the blue call. "They're very intense emotionally."

The names of the recipients are announced in March and in mid-September the writers participate in several days of free readings, lectures and discussions in New Haven.

Prize winners over the past 11 years — many from the LGBTQ+ community — include Tarell Alvin McCraney, Naomi Wallace, Kia Corthron, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Lucas Hnath, Suzan-Lori Parks, Julia Cho, Michael R. Jackson, Margo Jefferson, Dominique Morisseau and dozens of others.



FRIENDS TO MANY

But who were these two men who lived on the periphery of literary greatness, while residing modestly off Campbell's trust fund in a Manhattan rent-controlled apartment?

The Atlanta-born Windham was raised by his mother and aunt in a large Victorian home that reminded the young man of the family's once prosperous past. By the time he reached adolescence, even that vestige of a flush past was gone. Following high school, his mother got him a job at the Coca-Cola factory where she worked, but by the time he was 19 in early 1940 Windham was off to

New York City with his lover from Atlanta, Fred Melton, 21.

It was in New York that year that the two met Tennessee Williams, a published but-not-yet famous writer. The three became friends, with Williams encouraging Windham to pursue writing, which he began in Atlanta.

In 1942, Windham began writing his first novel as well as co-writing the play *You Touched Me* with Williams, based on a D.J. Lawrence short story—and the playwright's sole co-authorship. That work several years

later received a Broadway production with Montgomery Clift, who during an earlier period was Windham's lover.

Also in 1942, Windham became an editorial assistant under Lincoln Kirstein at the ballet magazine, *Dance Index*. When Windham is drafted the young man declares himself homosexual and is rejected. But when Kirstein is called to duty in 1943, he does not declare himself gay and is drafted into service.

"When Kirstein leaves, he essentially says to Donald, 'OK, you're the

From “Tennessee Williams’ Letters to Donald Windham — 1940-1965.”

July, 29 and 30, 1940

Captain Jack’s Wharf, Provincetown, Mass.

Dear Donnie —

Your letter came at a very opportune moment as I was feeling blue. My life now is full of emotional complications which make me write good verse—at least a lot of it—but make my mental chart a series of dizzy leaps up and down, ecstasy one moment—O dapple faun!—and consummate despair the next...Depression this morning occasioned by fact the ballet dancer stayed out all night. So far no explanations, though I suspect a nymph at the other end of the wharf and am moving to a single bed downstairs till suspicions confirmed or dispelled....Isn’t it hell? But, oh, God, Stinkie, IO wish you could see him in his blue tights!...

...Later: Everything is okay again and I didn’t have to move downstairs after all. He slept alone on the beach because he needed some sleep. Doesn’t get much with me. But that’s his own fault for being so incredibly beautiful. We wake up two or three times in the night and start all over again like a pair of goats. The ceiling is very high like the loft of a barn and the tide is lapping under the wharf. The sky amazingly brilliant with stars. The wind blows the door wide open, the gulls are crying. Oh, Christ. I call him baby like you call Butch, though when I lie on top of him I feel like I was polishing the Statue of Liberty or something. He is so enormous. A great bronze statue of antique Greece come to life. But with a little boy’s face...I lean over him in the night and memorize the geography of his body with my hands — he arches his throat and makes a soft, purring sound. His skin is steaming hot like the hide of a horse that’s been galloping. It has a warm, rich odor. The odor of life...And now we’re so tired we can’t move. ‘I like you, Tenny’ — hoarse—embarrassed—ashamed of such intimate speech! I laugh for I know he loves me!...

...Then everything ’s gone and when I wake up it is daylight, the bed is empty. Kip is gone out. He is dancing. Or posing naked for artists. Nobody knows our secret but him and me. And now, you, Donnie—because you can understand. Please keep this letter and be very careful with it. It’s only for people like us who have gone beyond shame.”

editor now,” says Kelleher. That becomes Windham’s entré to the elite world of visual, performing and literary artists. “He is an intelligent guy and a good writer, and he clearly knew how to make friends,” says Kelleher.

Strikingly different in his upbringing, the boyishly handsome Campbell had privileged beginnings, attending the Kent School in Connecticut, then to Princeton University, before coming to New York City to become an actor.

In 1943, Windham met Campbell, then still an undergrad, at a chance meeting when Campbell was modeling for one of Paul Cadmus’s paintings at the artist’s studio.

“They were more of less together after that,” says Kelleher off the two men who remained together for 45 years.

As a young actor, Campbell had modest roles on Broadway in *Life with Father*, *Spring Awakening*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, performing alongside actors such as Marlon Brando, Spencer Tracy, Jessica Tandy, Tallulah Bankhead and Lois Smith. Campbell was also in several films and television shows of the late ‘40s.

Having severe stage fright, Campbell eventually stopped acting in the 1950s. Campbell wrote profiles for Harper’s Magazine and worked as a fact checker for the New Yorker, where he also wrote unsigned book reviews. He later devoted himself to privately publishing Windham’s work through a publishing house in Italy.

Windham’s books over the years included LGBTQ+ characters and gay themes, such as his novels *The Dog Star*, *The Hero Continues*, modeled after Williams, *Two People*, about a married man’s love affair with teenage Italian boy and *Tanaquil*, based on the life of photographer George Platt Lynes, noted in part for his nude and homoerotic works. In the 1960s, Windham published a series of recollections about his childhood in the New Yorker which became his 1964 autobiography *Emblems of Conduct*.

“The few people whom I’ve met who knew him loved him dearly,” says Kelleher. “Everyone loved Sandy. He was a sweet, beautiful man.”

GAY TIMES

The post-war years saw the country booming and the arts flourishing, too, especially in New York. Many were LGBTQ+ artists who bonded, creating their own discreet—and often not-so-discreet—network of allies.

Looking at the couple’s photographs of

themselves with their dashing friends—frolicking on Fire Island with Tennessee, strolling in Venice with Peggy Guggenheim, brunching with Gore Vidal—one can picture a world of possibilities for artists, both aspiring and established, of international traveling, of a gay life lubricated with endless cocktails, and enlivened with parties, rivalries and betrayals, which Windham chronicled in detail in his 1987's *Lost Friendships*.

Lost Friendships centers on the couple's challenging relationships with Williams and Capote and was a follow-up to Windham's 1977 book, *Tennessee Williams' Letters to Donald Windham 1940-1965*.

That book was a response to Williams' own 1975 memoir, simply titled *Memoirs*, which barely mentions Windham and bore little resemblance to the man he knew. Windham's book of their letters details a deep and personal—though not sexual—relationship, and ended their decades-long friendship.

"Donald was the sane one, the loyal one, the good guy always trying to keep these drunken genius friends on track," says Kelleher. "My sense of things based on Donald's book was that he was clearly wounded by Tennessee and Truman, but especially Tennessee. Donald was someone who was ambitious to a point, but his friendships were more important than his career. I don't think that was true about most of his friends. He struggled with the fact that Tennessee was going to put writing and fame above anything they experienced together. I think Tennessee was like, 'I'm off to stardom, man' and there was this 20-foot-from-stardom thing with Donald."

But with Sandy and Donald's generosity in helping future writers with significant financial help, they have made an impact far greater than perhaps anyone imagined.

"In awarding the prizes," says Kelleher, we are saying, 'We think you're a great writer but we're not trying to pit

you against others and saying you're the victor.' That's not the spirit of the prize. Basically, we search around the world and we find writers who are interesting and who we think Donald and Sandy may have been interested in and may have wanted to support. In a way, we're saying here's a gift from one writer to another. Do with it what you will."

This year's recipients are in Fiction: Deirdre Madden (Ireland) and Kathryn Scanlan (United States); Nonfiction, Christina Sharpe (Canada/United States) and Hanif Abdurraqib (United States); Drama, Christopher Chen (United States) and Sonya Kelly (Ireland); Poetry, m. nourbeSe Philip (Canada/Trinidad and Tobago) and Jen Hadfield (Canada/United Kingdom). They will all be part of a series of free events over several days in mid-September at Yale University in New Haven. 



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CTSTRONGER

Q+ Supports and Celebrates Youth

Creating safe spaces for queer youth where these individuals can be and express themselves is the mission of Q+. Founded by Mel Corder in 2019, it was created with the vision to fill the gaps in programming for queer youth throughout Connecticut. Beginning as a grassroots organization in 2019, it has been an official non-profit organization since 2022 with an ever-expanding slate of services and opportunities for young people.

Originally designed to serve young people ages 13-19, Q-Plus has a wide variety of in-person and online groups. From support groups, to game nights, to groups dedicated to black and brown queer youth, Corder says they formed the group with teens looking for support. The goal became “centering queer experience and normalizing queer identity.”

Corder says that very often queer young people often feel like they have something to hide, even in a more accepting environment. Q+ programs are there to provide peer exposure and support that is accepting and reinforcing. “There are small things—or big things—that keep queer kids on edge,” she says. The intent is “to be able to take all of that off the table and just engage with people as they are, build social skills, confidence, and interest without being afraid to show other people who they are. It’s just leveling the playing field for kids.”

They add that as young people get to be 18 or 19, there aren’t many places to send them. Many organizations are focused on older people, perhaps 30 and up. And, Corder says, they certainly can’t go to bars, so there are very few safe spaces for them. They continue, “this is a rough age, learning how to take care of yourself as an adult. We

give a kids a structured difference and create a safe space for folks to launch from.” Corder refers to these programs as “adulting crash courses.”

The organization continues to expand and serve the tween population, ages 9-12. As Corder explains, as children are becoming aware of themselves and their developing identities at earlier ages, they want to be able to provide the

spaces and support for these individuals. “Imagine, knowing that you are queer at age five, that there’s nothing wrong with you, and that there’s language for that and having your own identity known and respected [from that age].”

There are meetings all over the state, and Corder says the goal is to continue expanding. For those who can’t or don’t



Mel Corder with mascot Tapioca the Unicorn making a difference for LGBTQ+ youth. Photo courtesy of Q+



The Q+ team reaching out to the community. Photo courtesy of Q+

wish to attend in-person events, there are weekly online groups providing the same support, activities, and games.


Q+ is also committed to providing trainings, and Corder and their team work actively in communities and with GSA (Gay-Straight-Alliance) groups in high schools around the state. The objective is to educate and raise awareness across the entire population. The LGBTQ(AIAP+) program provides an in-depth discussion on the meaning, importance and use of orientation labels and gender pronouns, while addressing myths about queer art and history. The LGBTQ+ Youth Program is targeted to adults and provides in-depth education about the challenges facing queer youth—

and how adults can effectively support them. Both of these programs can be customized to a school or group's needs. The intention is always to foster greater understanding and acceptance.

Because Q+ is a non-profit organization, it depends on donations, and Corder stresses that all programming is determined by what young queer people need and activities are developed around youth input. Earlier this year, they had an end-of-school Pride party, which Corder says was well-attended and very popular. Other programs include Ice Cream Socials, Open Mic nights to let queer youth express themselves, summer camps, school support, and GSA services, as well as the annual Sweet Treats Gala. The organization recently launched its

Pin Club, a program that will send regular donors uniquely designed enamel pins every month.

Corder emphasizes that there are many other ways to get involved. The organization is currently active in ten cities around the state and is looking to expand. There is a need for games, and craft items. "We can never have enough pearly beads," they say. There are also volunteer facilitator positions, which require less training and responsibility than staff positions.

As needs change and evolve, Q+ will be there to support the young people it serves, allowing them to be fully, authentically, and joyfully themselves. 

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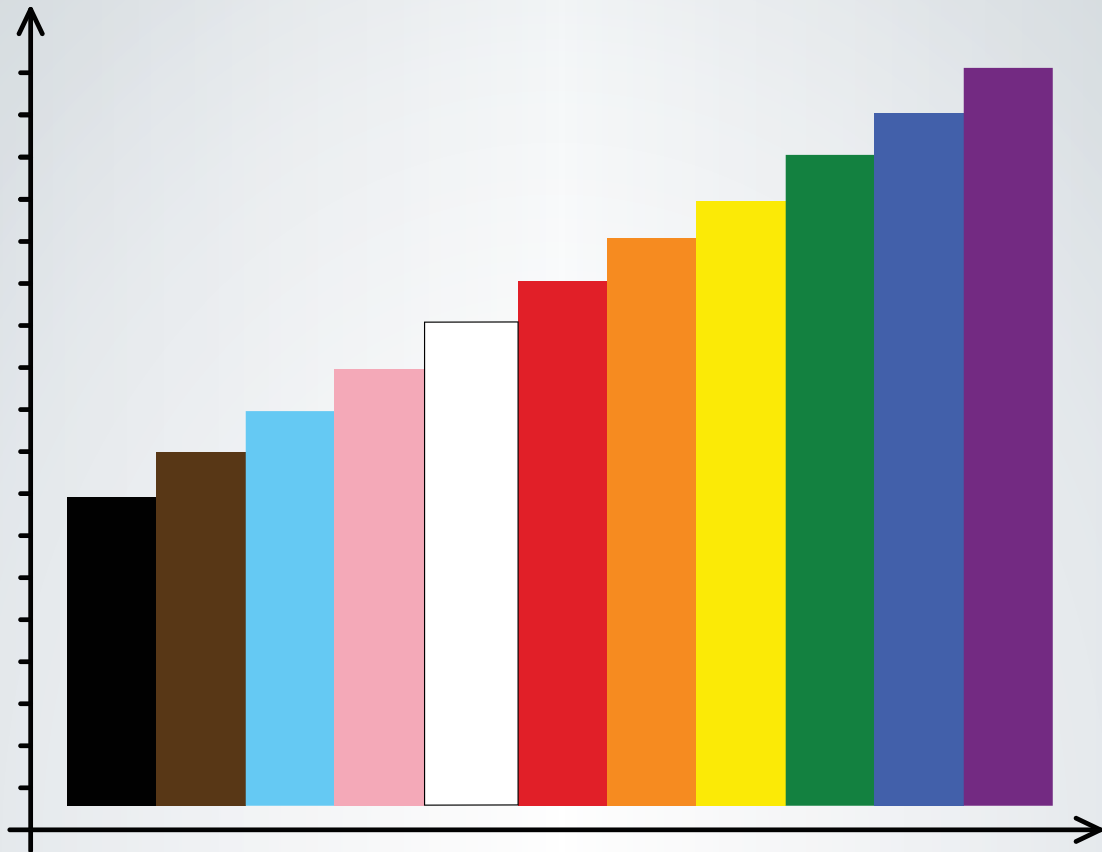
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