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EDITOR'S NOTE //



Joy at the Holidays

As I'm writing this, we are on the brink of a critical election—one that will shape our country for years ahead, no matter what the result. By the time you're reading this, we'll know what that outcome is, and we'll be confronting whatever that turns out to be.

While we don't know what's ahead, what we do know is that every holiday tradition—secular and sacred—centers first and foremost on love. The rituals we remember or the traditions we create connect us to one another and remind us of the importance of our connections. My family and I have traditions that stretch back to our youngest days; it wouldn't be the holidays without them.

The holidays are also a time of gratitude. In turbulent times, that may sometimes feel difficult to muster, but as we gather with our biological and chosen families, we can share in the joy of togetherness, that we've come through another year, and whatever is ahead—and however transitory—we can strive for peace in the present. The work will always be waiting for us, but we can come back to it refreshed and refocused.

We continue to be blessed in Connecticut by so many people and organizations who support our LGBTQ+ communities, and, as always, we are proud to showcase many of them here.

In health and wellness, both the Leonard-Litz Foundation and Mental Health Connecticut (MHC) are committed to serving LGBTQ+ individuals. Leonard-Litz provides grants

to organizations that support community programs, and MHC has unveiled a Mental Health Concierge Program that connects individuals to services and helps them negotiate the complexities unique to our communities. Kim Adamski covers the sensitive issue of body image and why it's central to LGBTQ+ experience in our current culture.

Jane Latus shares her personal journey through her wife Kendra's transition. It's a moving story that underscores that love is love and the joyful power of relationships to sustain even as life changes dramatically.

Our own Dawn Ennis provides our Final Word—another story of joy in finding and living as her authentic self.

As always, we look at the arts and outstanding and groundbreaking work of LGBTQ+ artists. Frank Rizzo talks to Zachary Quinto about his NBC show *Brilliant Minds*—as the first out, gay actor to headline a major network series. Frank also talks to author and commentator David Sedaris.

Holidays are traditionally a time for ghost stories, and we talk with paranormal investigator and author Susan Cummins about her new novel—perfect for some holiday chills—and where you can go ghost hunting in Connecticut. I can attest it's an otherworldly experience.

Our regular columnist Meghan Crutchley has tips on how to overcome the winter blues, and Kim Adamski talks about the unique needs of bi people in healthcare.

And if you'd like to toast the holidays with a suitable libation, check out Brian Scott Lipton's piece on Wildcat in Hamden for some ideas for innovative cocktails for your holidays and entertaining.

There's so much more in these pages and online at ctvoice.com.

On behalf of all of us at *Connecticut Voice*, warmest wishes for a happy holiday season.

Chris
Christopher Byrne, Editor
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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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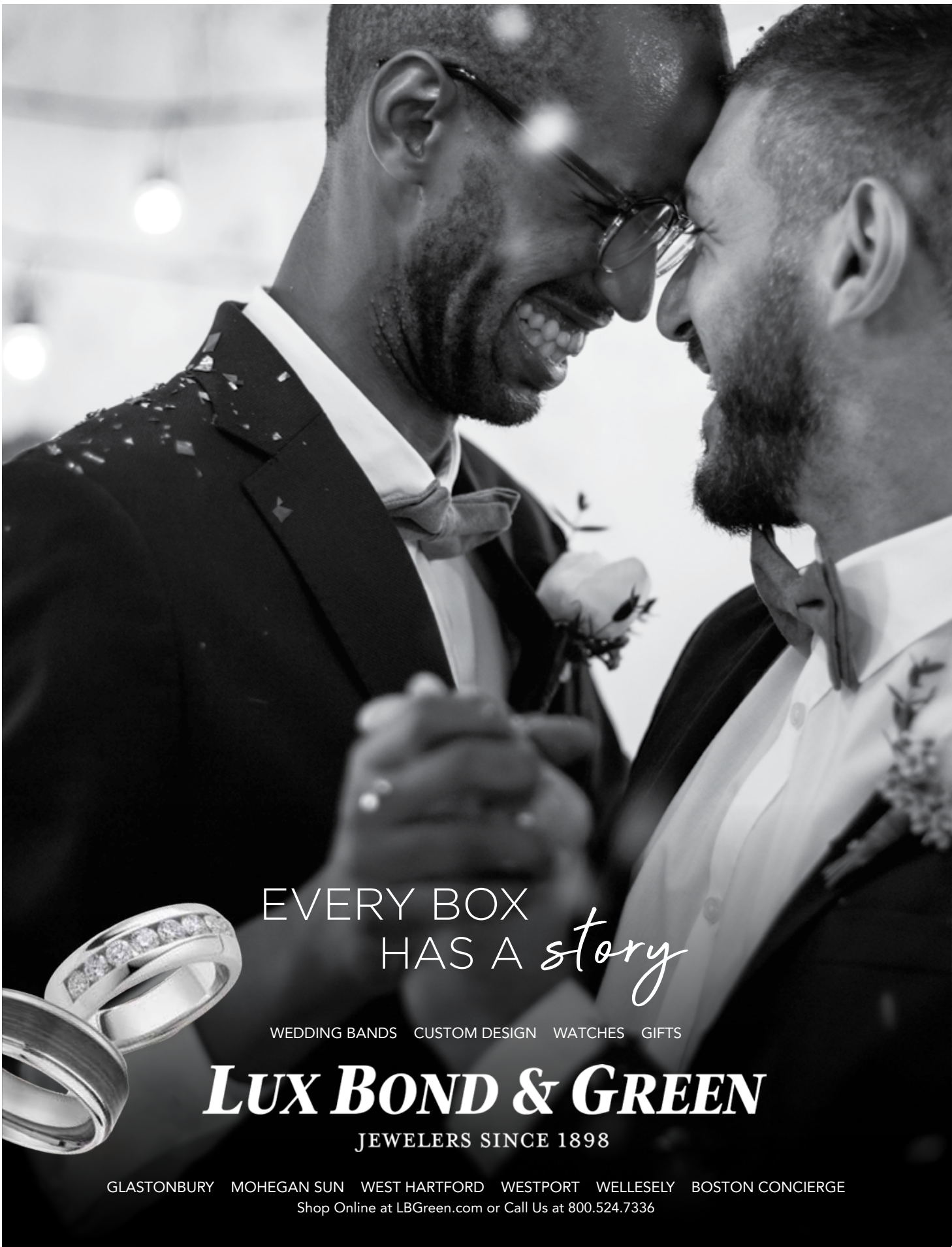


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Out actor Zachary Quinto leads a new NBC medical series





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CONTRIBUTORS //



FRANK RIZZO

Frank Rizzo wrote our cover story on Zachary Quinto (page 52), talked with David Sedaris (page 33) and author Komail Aijazuddin (page 26). 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 and she explores the issue of body image in the LGBTQ+ communities (page 41). 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.



RANDY B. YOUNG

Randy wrote our piece on legendary activist Eloise Vaughn (page 36). He is the author of *And the Stars Flew with Us*, a series of essays and meditations on the classic family road trip. He's won multiple awards as a journalist and advertising copywriter, and has been a regular contributor to regional lifestyle and sports publications.



BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Brian contributes our Delicious feature with a stop at Hamden's Wildcat (page 58). 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 contributed our Last Word (page 64). 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 tells the stirring story of her family journey with her wife's transition (page 36). 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.



“THERE IS NEVER ENOUGH TIME TO DO OR SAY ALL THE THINGS THAT WE WOULD WISH. THE THING IS TO TRY TO DO AS MUCH AS YOU CAN IN THE TIME THAT YOU HAVE.”

—A Christmas Carol (in the movie *Scrooge*)



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Healthy Life, Happy Life

In some ways, the LGBTQ+ community has never been healthier. After losing almost an entire generation to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and '90s, medical advancements in HIV treatment and prevention, Pre- and Post-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP and PeP), have transformed what used to be a death sentence into a manageable chronic disease, allowing more than one million PrEP users in the US to reclaim their sexual freedom while avoiding the disease altogether. People living with HIV have also been empowered in a new way by knowing that Undetectable equals Untransmissible.

Not only that, the medical community's evolving understanding of sex and gender has made it possible for more transgender and gender-non-conforming people to access treatments to help their bodies match their gender identity. And expanded access to insurance, especially in places where advocates have lobbied for the expansion of Medicaid, puts good healthcare within reach of more LGBTQ+ people.

We are on track to be healthy. But are we happy?

After a string of judicial and legislative victories in favor of LGBTQ+ equality—marriage equality; the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell;” conversion therapy bans—we now repeatedly find ourselves on the back foot, defending



... The overwhelming majority of Americans (84 percent) support equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community, that percentage has recently dipped slightly for the first time in a decade.

against vicious attacks on our rights, especially against the most vulnerable among us: transgender youth and people of color. The number of anti-LGBTQ bills proposed in state legislatures has continued to rise year after year, and despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans (84 percent) support equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community,

that percentage has recently dipped slightly for the first time in a decade, according to a report from GLAAD.

Factor in the epidemic of loneliness that has affected people of all identities, but especially the LGBTQ+ community in the wake of COVID-19, and an alarming picture begins to take shape for our wellbeing.

While we continue to make important strides in addressing our physical health, we may be facing a mental health crisis.

It's why we at the Leonard-Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation have made Health and Wellness one of the core priorities of our grant program. Not only is it important for us to provide resources to organizations that help the LGBTQ+ community gain access to targeted social services, but we want to help make sure our community is treated with dignity and respect in all healthcare settings.

Further, we know that for all the reasons above and more, members of the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately at risk to struggle with mental health. A lifetime of ingrained discrimination and prejudice tends to have that effect. One of our goals at the Leonard-Litz Foundation is to support cost-effective intervention programs that can deliver long-term positive outcomes for participants, enabling them to lead the fulfilling lives they were meant to lead.

We have also partnered with our friends at Circle Care Center, another institution that's near and dear to my heart, to support a growing coalition celebrating Pride in small towns and communities throughout Connecticut and New York. Yes, Pride is about having a good time with our community and our allies. But it is also an opportunity to

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LGBTQ+ foundation



connect LGBTQ+ people with affirming services that can help improve their lives. Many of us have spent too much of our lives trying to learn how to love ourselves fully. At its core, Pride is a celebration of joy and acceptance, a radical expression of love for ourselves and each other.

Circle Care Center was Connecticut's first public health center specializing in LGBTQ+ affirming care and sexual health. In addition to high-quality, sensitive, and comprehensive primary care for all patients, our providers specialize in working with people living with HIV and responding to the unique health needs of members of the LGBTQ+ community.

But we know that being healthy far goes beyond the physical.

Our partnership with the Leonard-Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation allows us to think of health in a holistic way that celebrates both mind and body. We are living longer and more fulfilling lives than ever before. Let's make sure we enjoy them, too.

To your health! 🍷

—Anthony Crisci



Anthony Crisci is a Trustee of the Leonard-Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation, and the CEO of Circle Care Center.

Reclaiming Her Time

A NEW DOCUMENTARY CHRONICLES THE LIFE AND WORK OF LESBIAN ACTIVIST SALLY GEARHART

Few people have done as much for gay rights and women's rights as Sally Gearhart (1931-2021). She was a feminist, academic, often called a "firebrand," and she was in the thick of gay rights activism during the 1970s and 1980s in San Francisco. After a life more or less in the closet—a requirement in academia at the time—Sally moved to San Francisco specifically so she could live as an out lesbian. She was soon caught up in the spirit of the times, and among her many accomplishments, she was instrumental in helping to defeat Proposition 6, also known as the Briggs Initiative in 1978, which would have banned any LGBTQ+ people from working in the schools. She worked with Harvey Milk in that effort and went on to score a series of firsts in her career.

She was the first out lesbian to be granted tenure at a university, achieving that at San Francisco State. She helped co-found a women's community, wrote fantasy novels, and established one of the first women's studies department at the college level.

And yet, in LGBTQ+ history, Sally has often been forgotten, despite appearing in the classic, 1977 documentary *Word is Out*, which had a profound effect on the gay rights movement, but also, to the extent possible, normalized the reality of



Sally (center) with Craig (center right) with the production crew from the documentary.

“She was a radical lesbian feminist, but she always had men in her life. She even wrote a little blurb about herself in one of her later books that said, ‘Sally Gearhart lives in Northern California on a mountain of contractions. So she knew she was complicated.’”

LGBTQ+ people in the culture. Happily, Sally's extraordinary life and career is being preserved and celebrated in the new documentary, *Sally!* Director Deborah Craig didn't set out to make this

film. Rather, as part of the public health department at San Francisco State where she teaches, she had begun to study lesbians and aging. One of her interview subjects pointed her to Sally, and the film took off from there.

Craig says that one of the unique characteristics of Sally was that she was complicated. “She was a radical lesbian feminist, but she always had men in her life. She even wrote a little blurb about herself in one of her later books that said, ‘Sally Gearhart lives in Northern California on a mountain of contractions. So she knew she was complicated.’”

Craig says that Sally loved the limelight and speaking, and the film includes plenty of her inspirational and motivating appearances, but she also adds that the film is “not just about Sally but about that whole movement and how we need to work together.”

“Her legacy is really fighting so hard for gay rights and



Sally speaking out against Prop 6, aka the Briggs Initiative. Photo credit: Steve Savage

women's rights at the time. We forget how hard it was. We forget about how brave it was to come out when you were a teacher because you could lose your job. You could even be assassinated." [As Harvey Milk was.]


Sally didn't believe in hatred, Craig says. "That's the third part of the film. She was a sort of separatist for years... who wasn't really a separatist, again contradictions. She was a radical and she was willing to 'throw bombs,' but she managed to do it with

charm and humor and even love." Whatever the issue, Craig says, Sally was able to reach across the aisle, largely because she came from the other side of the aisle. Raised in conservative Virginia in the bosom of the church, she had a deep connection with that world, and though she ultimately rebelled against the established church, she was able to understand where her opponents came from and engage them with curiosity rather than antagonism. In the vein of 'throwing bombs,' though

Craig says that when Sally was asked to preach at the MCC in San Francisco, according to one of the pastors Sally said, "feminism has done more for women in 20 years than Jesus Christ did in 2,000 years."

Craig says it's important to get this film out now. Like many, she is concerned about the loss of LGBTQ+ history if it's not chronicled. She also feels that in a time marked by acrimony and conflict, it's important to channel the energy of someone like Sally

who, as Craig says, "didn't vilify anybody. She wanted to understand people who thought differently than she did. We've lost that, and our country's in trouble because of that. So we need Sally's fighting spirit, but we also need Sally's loving spirit."

Sally! is currently being screened at festivals around the country, and a Connecticut showing is planned. For more information, visit the film's website at sallygearhartfilm.com 

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Invisible: How Bi Erasure Impacts Sexual Health

Bisexual people comprise the largest group within the LGBTQ+ community. This surprises a lot of people when they first hear it. Bisexuality isn't discussed as much as other queer identities, which makes it easy to assume it's a very small group. It's not, though: 50 percent of people who identify as LGB are bisexual.

Why the disparity? Well, for starters, appearances can be deceiving. It's much harder to identify a person as bisexual based on the partner you see them with. If the person is a woman, and is with a female partner, you might assume she's gay. If the same woman is with a male partner, she would likely be assumed straight.

Unless she informs you she's bisexual, you can't tell from looking. And in most scenarios, she won't. After all, it's hardly appropriate to walk around town with your partner shouting "I'M BISEXUAL!" at every passer-by.

Unfortunately, myths about bisexuals abound. You've probably heard jokes about bi folks being slutty or promiscuous, or not being able to "choose" a side. These jokes come from deeply rooted heteronormative social values. Ambiguity can



make people uncomfortable, and instead of accepting bisexuality as a variation of human attraction, society portrays bisexuality as a phase, or the “last stop on the train to gay-town.”

There is also the matter of definitional misunderstanding. When we first learn about bisexuality, we are told it’s an equal attraction to men and women. Right? Wrong! In our modern world with an ever-expanding knowledge of gender diversity, the label “bisexual” has expanded accordingly. Even the *Oxford Dictionary* now defines bisexuality as an attraction to more than one gender.

Many major LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations and individuals use “bisexual” as an overarching term known as the “Bi+ umbrella.” The use of the plus sign denotes the wide range of experiences and labels that may fall under the category of bisexual: pansexual, omnisexual, plurisexual, and more.

So what does this all have to do with sexual health?

If you’re a long-time reader of my Sex Talk column, you will know that I am always harping on the way marginalizing identities leads to worse health outcomes. It’s no different for bisexuality. When bi individuals are treated differently, unfairly, or with poor understanding at the hands of healthcare professionals, the result is subpar healthcare.

For example, say a bisexual man who is in a primary relationship with a woman goes to the doctor. The doctor asks what gender their partner is, hears “female,” and asks no further questions. This doctor has most likely assumed that the patient is a straight man. This means he will receive care that is considered standard for men who only have sex with women. He will

The assumption that someone is either straight or gay, renders bisexuals virtually invisible to the medical establishment at large, according to the American Medical Association.

probably not be tested for rectal STI’s, nor will he be told about interventions like PrEP.

On the flip side, imagine a man whose primary relationship is with a man seeing the same doctor. The doctor assumes he is gay and gives him information on PrEP and rectal STI screening. However, the patient receives no counseling on pregnancy prevention, because he was never asked if he also has sex with women. If enough professionals omit this information often enough, the patient may lack the knowledge he needs to protect himself and other partners, present or future.

This binary view of sexuality—the assumption that someone is either straight or gay—renders bisexuals virtually invisible to the medical establishment at large, according to the American Medical Association. In the rare instance where bisexuals are acknowledged, they are often categorized with gay or lesbian folks, rather than as their own distinct group with their own sexual health needs.

Fear of self-disclosure can complicate the situation even more. According to the Human Rights Campaign, LGBTQ+ individuals frequently omit mention of their sexual orientation to healthcare providers, or even lie about it, for fear of discrimination. Bisexual people, in particular, are likely to feel uncomfortable fully disclosing their sexuality to anyone at all, let alone doctors. When a provider doesn’t have the full picture of a person’s sexual behaviors and orientation, they cannot address sexual health comprehensively.

Okay, so this all sounds really negative. What do we need to do to change it?

For starters, healthcare providers must be well-versed in LGBTQ+ identities—and receive continuing education on such topics. As science advances, so does our understanding of gender and sexuality. The risks experienced by different groups within the LGBTQ+ community may also change over time, and providers must be aware of these changing risks to address them adequately.

As a society, we need to start talking about bisexuality more. Being gay is normalized in many parts of the country now, but when we find out someone is bi, many of us still react with surprise. Bisexuals often experience “double discrimination.” That is they’re too “straight” for queer spaces and too “gay” for mainstream or straight spaces. Bisexual people are neither straight nor gay. Bisexuality is its own unique identity. The sooner we acknowledge this and extend our inclusivity to bisexuals, the sooner we can address sexual health and wellness disparities that the community faces. 

—Kim Adamski

More Than Just The Winter Blues?

The change of seasons in New England is a time where it feels like a lot of things are changing: what we wear, the temperature, the amount of light in the day, how much time we spend outside, and the foods that we eat. And for many of us, the winter months can also trigger significant changes in our mood and behaviors.



Meghan Crutchley

This is sometimes called the “winter blues” which affects around 10-20 percent of Americans. The winter blues are when we might lounge around in bed and have a hard time getting up or feel a little more melancholy or lethargic. And, frankly it’s normal for the change in seasons to affect us, since so much of our environmental stimulus, especially light/dark and the change in temperature, naturally influences our physiology, sleep, and mood.

However, the change of seasons can be a more extreme and disruptive experience for around 5 percent of Americans. Called “seasonal affective disorder” or SAD. SAD is a type of depression brought on by the change in seasons, from fall into the darker winter months, and the less common spring into summer. According to health professionals at the Mayo

Clinic, most people with SAD are triggered by the change into darker, colder months when they start oversleeping, feeling low energy, have a depressive mood, crave carbohydrates, and gain weight.

Now, you might be thinking, “Wait, I have that experience every winter too, do I have SAD?” Maybe. But these symptoms are part of having the “winter blues” too, whereas other symptoms of SAD include: depressive episodes that occur during a specific season for 2 consecutive years, losing interest in activities you usually enjoy, feelings of hopelessness, having difficulty concentrating, suicidal thoughts, and feeling sad most of the day every day.

Some people are at higher risk than others for SAD, including:

family history of SAD or depression, living far from the equator where the changes in light/ dark are most extreme, and low levels of vitamin D.

We don’t know what causes the onset of SAD, but there are specific physiological changes that happen in our bodies when sunlight is diminished. Some research suggests that the reduction of sunlight in the autumn/winter could disrupt our circadian rhythm—our 24-hour body clock that our hormones, sleep, and wakefulness all depend on. The reduced levels of sunlight can also significantly affect mood since sunlight impacts serotonin levels; serotonin is one of the neurotransmitters in our brain that affects mood. Our sleep patterns and mood might be further impacted by the change of season through melatonin disruption where the loss of light impacts the production of melatonin, which occurs in the morning and midday when we take in natural sunlight. But that doesn’t mean everyone experiences symptoms to the extent of having SAD.

Considering all this information it’s recommended you see a doctor when you notice that you feel down for days and weeks at a

time, your sleep patterns, mood, and appetite have changed, and that you’re using substances for comfort or relaxation.

There is clear research on the effective management and treatment of SAD. According to the Cleveland Clinic, these include things like light therapy (phototherapy)



where you sit 2-3 ft away from a special light that's 20-times brighter than regular indoor light for 15-30 minutes every morning. Cognitive behavioral therapy (which has been shown to produce the longest lasting effects of any treatment approach), as well as antidepressants, vitamin D supplements, and spending time outside.

It's important to point out that light therapy is contraindicated (may

be harmful) for people who have diabetes or a retina condition, take medications that make them sensitive to light, or those with bipolar disorder. So, if you're seeing your own experience reflected here and want to skip the diagnosis and just go get a light to sit next to, that's not always the right thing. Also, if you are having symptoms of SAD and feel like you need support, it's important that you reach out and let your doctor know

what's going on. There's no shame in having difficulty no matter what brings it on. If you haven't noticed, going through difficult times, seasons, and experiences is part of being human, and getting the support that you need to feel good is your right.

While we can't control the weather, we can control what we can regarding our health behaviors and environment. So, we can do specific things to help prevent and

address SAD or the winter blues when they come up, like getting outside everyday even if it's cloudy, getting exercise for 30 minutes, three times a week, seeing friends, and seeking out help from mental health professionals when you experience symptoms. I hope this was helpful. Let me know @habitqueer on Instagram. 🍇

—Meghan Crutchley





Expanding Access to Care Through MHC's Mental Health Concierge Program

For individuals with or without insurance, securing timely and suitable mental health services can be a daunting process. This is especially challenging for people in the LGBTQIA+ communities who often have trouble getting compassionate and affirming care. They may also have difficulty sorting through various mental health professionals to identify the right one, or ones, to meet their needs. The process can be overwhelming. To support communities needing care, Mental Health Connecticut has introduced the Mental Health Concierge program, a collaborative approach to securing care, including therapy, complete case management

services, and assistance for individuals and caregivers. The program strives to bridge the gap by connecting individuals to comprehensive support services, helping them navigate the complexities of the mental health system confidently, and ensuring they receive the high-quality care they deserve.

It's an important—and much-needed—initiative. For example, individuals may live in one of the many provider deserts throughout Connecticut, forcing them to drive far distances for care. Medicaid rates are also very low within the state, with a recent study showing that Connecticut pays 50 percent less than surrounding states like Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New

York, and New Jersey, on top of private providers not accepting Medicaid. Connecticut has also not kept up with inflation in the rates they currently offer.

The Mental Health Concierge program is modeled after Mental Health Waiver Services, a group of services provided by the state of Connecticut for individuals with severe mental health conditions. Mental Health Concierge offers flexible in-person and telehealth therapy, case management, and in-home support for individuals ages 18-plus throughout Connecticut, with or without insurance. By offering a virtual option like telehealth, the program removes barriers related to travel that may limit a person's ability to receive

mhc concierge

A Program of Mental Health Connecticut

For more information about Mental Health Concierge and to contact the Mental Health Connecticut team, please visit their website mhconn.org.


the services they need. Services can also be provided at home, making it easier for those with travel limitations due to limited public transportation options or no personal vehicle.

Mental Health Connecticut's Connecticut-based team is familiar with the services available within various communities throughout the state. Because of this in-depth knowledge of the state, the Mental Health Concierge uses this local knowledge to provide personalized recommendations on a case-by-case basis. After a thorough assessment, the concierge team members can recommend services by Mental Health Connecticut or make outside referrals to match you with the proper care.

Mental Health Connecticut also operates in collaboration with DMHAS, a transitional program for children coming out of the DCF system that protects abused or neglected children. When children "age out" of this system at age 18, the transition can be difficult, and a program like Mental Health Concierge can assist in supporting individuals as they navigate the complexities of entering an adult system.

Services are offered at competitive rates, and Mental Health Connecticut will provide invoices to bill insurance and can consider a sliding scale when appropriate. The sliding scale is available thanks to generous individuals, grantors, and organizations supporting Mental Health Connecticut. The organization's 2024 end-of-year

appeal [Winter Wellness with MHC](#) will support the Mental Health Concierge sliding scale.

The program's flexibility makes it well suited to support individuals with unique and varying needs, from supporting individuals looking for therapy to assisting individuals with a severe mental health condition. It can also provide services that may not meet medical necessity criteria but are critical for people's quality of life and functioning. For example, these services can assist someone with agoraphobia who may need someone to go grocery shopping with them. The program could also benefit young adults aging out of services or losing coverage under a parent's insurance plan. 

—Jennifer Guhl



The graphic features a background of a snowy, frost-covered landscape. At the top left is the Mental Health Connecticut logo, which consists of a stylized 'm' and 'h' in a square followed by the text 'mental health CONNECTICUT'. The main title 'Winter Wellness with MHC' is prominently displayed in large, bold, dark letters. To the right of the title is a QR code with a curved arrow pointing to it and the text 'Scan me to learn more.' Below the title is a teal-colored rounded rectangle containing white text that describes the campaign's goals and the types of support provided. At the bottom of the graphic, there are three social media icons: a Facebook icon with the handle 'mentalhealthct', an email icon with the address 'development@mhconn.org', and a website icon with the URL 'mhconn.org'.

mental health CONNECTICUT

Winter Wellness with MHC

Scan me to learn more.

For many in our community, the winter months can be particularly tough. Mental Health Connecticut's Winter Wellness campaign is dedicated to ensuring that everyone, regardless of background or identity, has access to the mental health resources they need. This holiday season, with your generous support, we are providing Mental Health First Aid trainings, empowering individuals to support each other during difficult times, and releasing a free, digital Winter Wellness Toolkit. The proceeds from the campaign will support the MHC Mental Health Concierge sliding scale, increasing access to therapy, in-home support, and case management.

Donate today to ensure equitable mental health care for all.

 mentalhealthct  development@mhconn.org  mhconn.org

In 'Manboobs,' Komail Aijazuddin discovers coming to the U.S. has its challenges, too

By FRANK RIZZO

When queer visual artist and writer Komail Aijazuddin was growing up in Lahore, Pakistan, he knew he was attracted to boys. But it wasn't easy being gay. At his all-male prep school where, as an overweight, effeminate kid who loved *The Little Mermaid*, he was frequently bullied for his "manboobs."

So as a youth he believed his only chance at a happy life would be found in America, where he believed freedom rings and gays live in an all-accepting, non-judgmental existence. But he discovered that a post-9/11 life for a dark-skinned man from Pakistan who did not fit into the physical gay ideal, was not quite what he imagined—and his personal issues, questions and doubts were still part of his baggage.

In his humorous, coming-of-age book *Manboobs: A Memoir of Musicals, Visas, Hope, and Cake*, Aijazuddin with wit and frankness reflects upon his coming out, and examines the American dream, his struggle with body issues and his finding self-acceptance as well as his place in the world.

Responses to the book have been glowing: Publishers Weekly found the memoir "[A] sterling debut . . . Aijazuddin combines blazing wit with heartbreaking candor as he recounts his path toward self-acceptance as a gay Pakistani." Kirkus Reviews calls the book "a poignant reflection on identity, race, and the meaning of home. A wickedly funny and often moving memoir." Perhaps the most special appreciation came from author Edmund White who called it "one of the funniest books I've ever read."

Aijazuddin, 40, is a graduate of New York University in art and art history and holds an MFA from Pratt Institute. He now lives and works in New York City. He was vacationing in Fire Island when I spoke with him about the book.

"My story is not extraordinary but the way I tell it is," he said over a FaceTime chat.

It's a story of a queer man who was "too gay for Pakistan and too Muslim for America."

"In the West, in general, I am acutely aware that I am seen as a brown, bearded man before I am seen as anything else," he said. "So, one of the things that I wanted to do with the book was to talk about things that may seem to be completely unfamiliar to [the Western reader], but, in a way, that is cheeky."

In the memoir, Aijazuddin playfully speaks of being an

A portrait of Komail Aijazuddin, a man with a dark beard and mustache, smiling and looking towards the camera. He is wearing a dark t-shirt. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Growing Up Queer in Pakistan

effeminate young boy tricking his cousins into “making” him play with dolls. He writes about his love of *The Golden Girls*, Broadway musicals and his crush on Colin Farrell (“mostly because of his eyebrows”). Aijazuddin also writes that the only representation he saw of himself in popular culture was in *Aladdin*. (“Just having something or someone that looks familiar to you was such a powerful thing.”)

As a gay man growing up at that time, Aijazuddin writes about how he and other queer men maneuvered through early life, despite not being taught “the rituals of growing up, from courtships, to friendships, to family interactions” and instead suffered “a thousand cuts you go through as a queer person a straight person would not experience.”

When his dream of coming to the U.S. came true, he quickly discovered that it was far from “the gay promised land.”

“I was naive when I came here,” he said. “America has many of the same issues I faced [in Pakistan]. “One of the impulses I had to write the book was to show that despite my best efforts I could not be seduced by America and its idea of exceptionalism. Both countries were equally rejecting.”

“The truth is that people have the same difficulty in coming out here than they do anywhere else in the world,” said Aijazuddin, now a U.S. citizen. “The idea that we are somehow safer here is more hope than fact. We know now there are people here who want to attack us and take away our rights in the same way they do there, so I wanted to talk about gay rights from a global perspective.”

Part of that perspective is an acute awareness of political dangers.

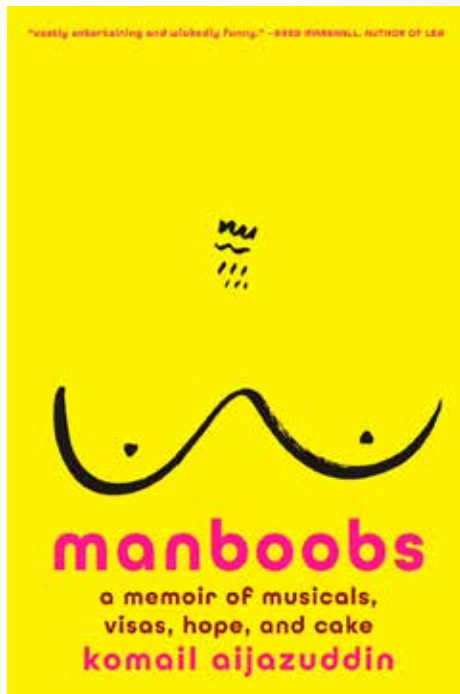
“I know what happens when a group of fascists emerge—and I’m saying this with humility and hope. I think if you grow up in a place without fascism or obvious references to fascism or totalitarianism, it can be easier to spot when it starts to happen compared to those who didn’t grow up in that environment.

“Gay men of an older generation can see it because they witnessed it,” said Aijazuddin. “But a lot of younger gay men who

have grown up with the law on their side, well, I hope Americans can see what is happening now.”

Despite the painful adolescent coming-of-age and coming-to-the-U.S. stories (especially at the immigration offices and incidents of Islamophobia), it is also a very funny book, too.

“I didn’t want it to be preachy,” he said. “I believe if you can root something in humor and the moment, you can make someone laugh, then you’ve got someone on your side.”




I asked him about the reaction from his family—especially his parents—since the book came out. “Their response has been measured,” he said. “Things are slightly quiet at the moment. I think it’s been an overwhelming experience for them. The only parts I write about them—or anyone in the book—are the parts that intersected with my actuality. There was a lot that was left out.

“It was not meant to be a big book of grievances, but I wanted to be honest and open about the fact that it wasn’t an easy

journey for me. Yet even acknowledging that felt like such a betrayal on my part,” he said. “It took a lot of therapy to get to a point where I realized that I’m telling my own story, and happiness can sometimes exact a price. I have come to terms with it all but, as I write at the end of the book, acceptance is not the destination. It’s something you have to do every day.”

An excerpt from “Manboobs: A Memoir of Musical, Visas, Hope, and Cake” by Komail Aijazuddin

“No one ever talked about being gay at all, really, even though I saw more homosexual desire around me than not. It was perfectly normal, for instance, to see two boys at school or two men on the street in Lahore walking together with their hands intertwined like lovers. For an unmarried heterosexual couple to do the same was, by comparison, nearly unthinkable. College professors later called places like Morocco, Pakistan, and India “homosocial environments,” societies where the cultural separation of genders meant public affection between men became an act of social conformity to segregation rather than any conscious declaration of an individual sexual identity. In places like these, the segregation confers a sense of plausible deniability on homosexual relationships. After all, hiding in plain sight is one of the ways that queer people can live with some measure of agency in repressive states the world over (How else do you think we got through the Middle Ages?). How can you be gay where gayness doesn’t exist?”

“This lazy conceit works right up until boys are expected to marry, which is usually when things fall spectacularly to pieces. Most of the gay men I know in Pakistan, even Western-educated, quasi-liberal ones living in the twenty-first century—unclench, I’m not outing you—are intent on marrying women. These men rarely call themselves gay (though enough of their ex-wives do) because to do that would require an acknowledgment of a reality they’ve worked extraordinarily hard to deny.” 

To learn more about Aijazuddin and his art, visit komailaijazuddin.com.

Ghost Stories for the Holidays

By CHRISTOPHER BYRNE



As the song suggests, ghost stories are a beloved part of our holiday celebrations. The “spooky season” doesn’t end with Halloween, and the origins of the tradition date back centuries. On long, dark, cold, winter nights, families would gather close to the fire and entertain one another with scary tales. Some also believe that winter is also the time when the veil between the dimensions thins, and you might be more susceptible to specters during these months.

It was Charles Dickens in 1834 with the publishing of *A Christmas Carol*, who firmly established the ghost/Christmas connection, and the Victorians loved it. Even Queen Victoria herself became a believer in the paranormal and attended seances and after the death of her husband Albert. Ironically, the rise of spiritualism in Victorian England stood cheek-by-jowl with advances in

science and the materialists who thought spiritualism ridiculous.

The belief in the hereafter and the interest in the paranormal persists nonetheless, and today, interest is at an all-time high with TV shows, podcasts, books, ghost tours, and more purporting to lift the veil between dimensions and providing a look for the curious...and perhaps some convincing. You never know.

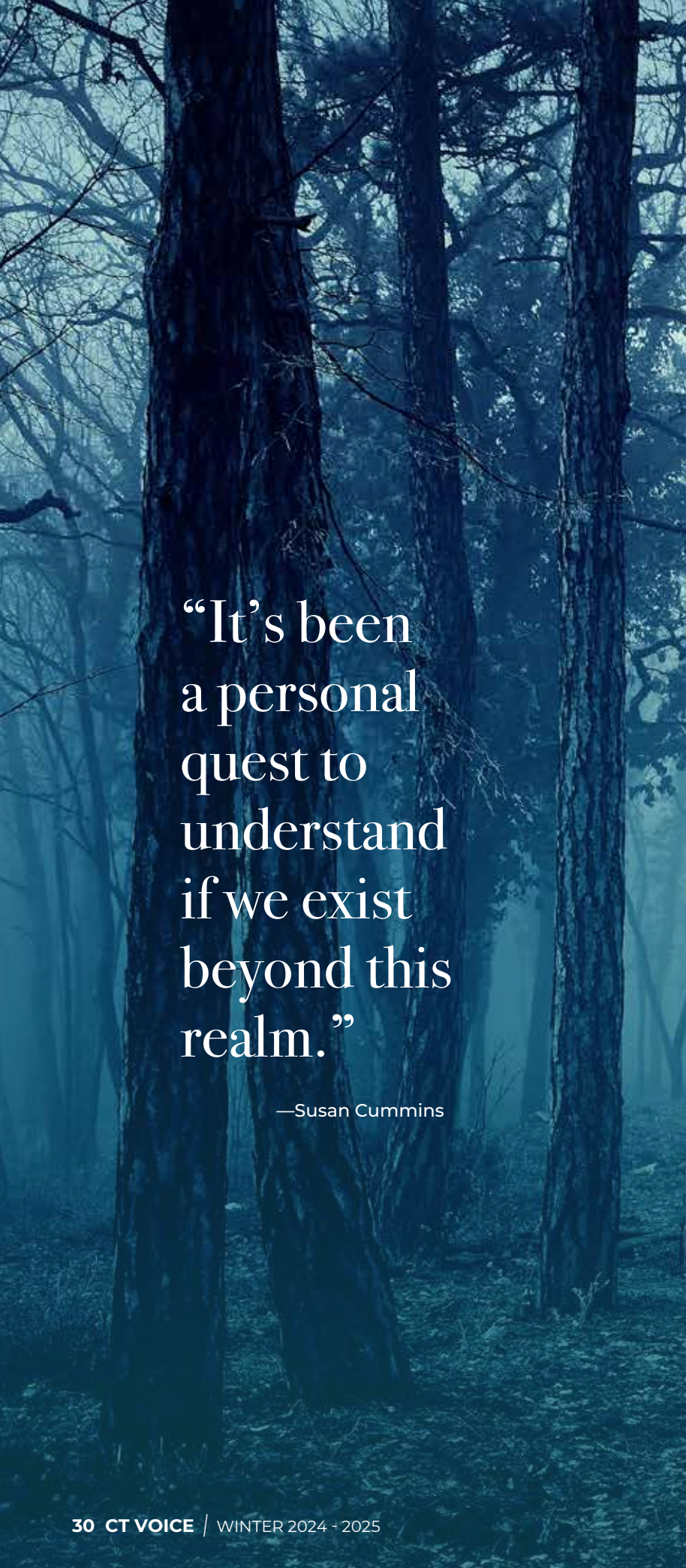
Author and paranormal investigator Susan Cummins is a believer. She has investigated some of the most haunted sites in the world—and even lives in a haunted house...well condominium, which she says she shares with three ghosts. And she’s seen them—as have guests. Cummins says, at least two guests have reported seeing “a flash of a person walking into my closet,” to which she jokes, “I have a ghost that loves Prada.”

Using technology that has been developed specifically for paranormal investigation, Cummins and her fellow investigators have recorded images

“*There’ll be parties for hosting Marshmallows for toasting And caroling out in the snow There’ll be scary ghost stories And tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago.*”



Author and paranormal investigator Susan Cummins



“It’s been
a personal
quest to
understand
if we exist
beyond this
realm.”

—Susan Cummins

and voices, and experience unexplained presences first-hand. While in the 19th Century, mediums sought to contact the dead mysteriously, today, technology allegedly scares up the spirits.

I had the opportunity to go along on an investigation last summer, and I have to say I came away saying, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy,” to quote Shakespeare.

Using what’s called an SLS camera, we were able to see figures in a haunted theater that were not there physically. The cameras were designed specifically for ghost hunting, and they create skeletal images of everyone in a space. Everyone in the room appears as a stick figure. What we saw were those of us in the room—and two others. Upstairs, we saw a figure sitting in a box watching the stage. I started out skeptical but open-minded and ended up intrigued at the possibility that we had stared across the dimensional divide.

When asked about her fascination with ghost hunting, Cummins says, “We all want to believe in miracles and that there’s magic out there. I love investigating because it’s like finding confirmation that we exist beyond this life. We all want to know if that’s true. It’s been a personal quest to understand if we exist beyond this realm.”

Cummins adds that while many authors have, “twisted ghosts into stories about dark evil. That’s not what we’ve seen. It’s about love and forgiveness, and paranormal investigators want to know the personal stories of the people who are left behind and try to figure it out from the history of a location.”

Cummins has taken her many years of experience—and one encounter in particular—and turned them into an engaging family story...one that just happens to have communication over the dimensional divide.

“The uncle of a girlfriend of mine had died, and the family gathered for his funeral. The uncle had been very wealthy and had a sophisticated security system that could identify movement—and who was moving if they had been entered into the system. As they were at the funeral, they got a message

that someone was walking through the house...and it was the uncle.”


At that point, Cummins says, the entire story came to her, and *Within the Wake* started to take shape. She interviewed technology experts, mediums, and noted paranormal investigator Bill Chappell, who developed much of the technology used in ghost hunting. The resulting story is as heartfelt as it is, at times, delightfully chilling. Cummins is a wonderful storyteller and says the goal was to encapsulate her experiences and beliefs into a story people could relate to.

She believes she had some supernatural help as well. After working her day job in the medical field, she would come home and write into the early hours of the morning. “As I wrote, I would get into this ‘open space,’ and the next day I would read what I had written and have no memory of it,” she says. “I felt like I was being guided by the other side... or else I was very tired.” Healthy skepticism is part of paranormal investigation, but Cummins adds that creatively, the writing process felt like magic.

The story follows James Allen and his family as they discover a path between dimensions and a way to heal old losses and come to believe that there may be something beyond what they see. Cummins says, the story is “wrapped up in the idea of family being taken from us, and the love of a past existence can still communicate with us.”

“We’re here on this planet to appreciate every single day and to love those people every day without the regret of words not spoken. Those lessons are important every day, but at the holidays, we’re reminded that Christmas is a symbol of love that doesn’t know time.

“So, we have a little spookiness, and some darkness, and the hope that we’ll all be together again, that we’re never far from each other, and we hear each other even if we’re not in the same room.”

Within the Wake is available at Amazon. 

Hunting Ghosts in Connecticut

Cummins and others note that Connecticut is very active in the paranormal realm. The ghosts here are different—at least some of them. Cummins notes that ghosts who have been around for centuries, like many she’s encountered in haunted castles in Ireland and Scotland, are tied to the places where they lived.

If you’re thinking of embarking on your own ghostly adventure, the Connecticut Tourism Board has compiled a list of some of the most haunted locations in the state. Many of these have tours, and there are self-guided tours for many, if you plan to venture out one day, or, if you’re daring, after dark.

Among the noted spectral spaces are:

The Mark Twain House, Hartford. There have been sightings of a mysterious lady in white walking about—and the lingering smell of cigar smoke where none have been lit for many years.



The Fairfield State Hospital. Though it closed in 1955, this former institution for the criminally insane is said to have many hauntings. Cummins says such places are ripe for paranormal investigation, and she has investigated several closed sanitoriums.

The Shubert Theater, New Haven. Theaters are reportedly full of ghosts. From the Belasco in New York to the Avalon Hollywood, and so many more, one may encounter those who didn’t know when to exit.

The Captain Daniel Parker Inn, Mystic. This Colonial landmark is said to be haunted by Ada Bryon Clift, who died of Scarlet Fever at the Inn in 1874. Visitors say she is still there, and there are even reports of Ada playing with contemporary visiting children.

Whether you’re a believer, a non-believer, or a skeptic who could be convinced, ghost hunting can be a fun way to delve into history—and spend some time exploring historic Connecticut as well.

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David Sedaris Is ‘Gay,’ Not ‘Queer’

Humorist Speaks on Age, Dressing Up and Memorable Haircuts

By FRANK RIZZO

David Sedaris is proud to be gay.

Not in the marching-in-the-streets-waving-placards way.

He is proud of the word ‘gay’ — as opposed to any number of the homosexual-defining terms that he says he has been saddled with over the decades.

The author of such collections of humor essays (*Me Talk Pretty One Day*, *Barrel Fever*, *Naked*) and the hit holiday perennial *Santaland Diaries*, caused a stir when he spoke on gay identity issues in one of his regular commentaries on CBS’ *Sunday Morning*. Sedaris presents 90-second mini-essays on the program, reminiscent of the cranky mini-rants that Andy Rooney used to spout at the end of *60 Minutes* starting in the late ‘70s and continuing to 2011.

I talked to Sedaris on the phone when he was at his Paris apartment which he shares with his longtime partner, painter and set designer Hugh Hamrick. It was just prior to his popular, twice-annual U.S. tours in which he reads from his works, promotes the work of other authors and chats with the audience. (Sedaris presented his two-hour show at New Haven’s Shubert in late September and at Hartford’s Bushnell in October.)

“It’s like I’m the old man always complaining about stuff,” he says of his *Sunday Morning* gig where he bitches about relationships with Siri,

condescending geniuses at Apple stores, and 21st century etiquette. “But sometimes it’s like, ‘Wait a minute, I *do* have a point here’ and I’m still allowed to be angry.”

For example, being labeled “queer.”

“You reach a certain age and you just become invisible. I try not to be bitter about that and I try to look at young people and think, ‘Well, that’s good. This is your time to shine.’”

DAVID SEDARIS

On *Sunday Morning* he said: “I started out as a homosexual, became gay, then LGBT and now queer — and for what? Why the makeover? And what will it be next?”

On the phone he told me: “I don’t like the word ‘queer’ — and I don’t dislike it because it was a slur. I just dislike it because it’s the fourth time in my life I’ve been re-branded — and

nobody asked me. I’m just tired of it. I think it’s just a generational thing because men who are at my age feel the same way as I do. But young people, well, it’s their word and they like it.”

Don’t get him wrong, though.

“I’m not a bitter person,” he insisted. “I am aware of the fact that I’m a pretty fortunate person. I mean, I really have gotten everything I’ve ever wanted. I just complain about stuff because it’s funny to complain about some of it.”

His life as an older gay man (He turns 68 in December.) is of the sources of his material.

“You reach a certain age and you just become invisible,” he said. “I try not to be bitter about that and I try to look at young people and think, ‘Well, that’s good. This is your time to shine. I had my time. I try to keep that in mind.’”

Times change as life goes on, he said, adding:

“We’re getting rid of some furniture at the apartment, and a guy came over last night with his wife. We’ve known him since he was a baby, and now he’s in his 30s, and he has his own apartment in Paris. I was showing him our stuff, and I thought, ‘We’re old men. He doesn’t want any of this. This is not what young men want. Young people don’t want antiques like a writing desk from 1860, which I paid a fortune for. It’s not what they’re interested in.’”

His observations — quirky, but



David Sedaris. Photo courtesy of Little, Brown and Mulholland

relatable—can be seen as simply him being persnickety, but often they speak to larger truths, too. He noted many of them in the diaries he’s kept from 1977 and have since been collected in two books: *Thefts By Finding: Diaries 1977-2002* and *A Carnival of Snackery*, which cover 2003-2020. His published and unpublished diaries, along with his drafts, artwork, miscellaneous writings and other personal ephemera are now housed at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

His fans know that it’s the little, easily dismissed details in life that most catch his eye and ear. That’s the way it’s always been for him. If he were to look back at a diary entry from 30 years ago, he said, it would be something like: “‘I went and got a haircut in Chicago’—and it would be all about the haircut. In fact, I just wrote about a haircut the other day. I’m always happy to hear about a haircut and, if it’s written well, I go right back to that haircut.

“Someone would say to me, ‘Remember that canoe trip we took down the Nile?’ and I would have no memory of it. But that haircut I wrote about 30 years ago! Maybe it was something I saw out the window while I was getting the haircut—or some other little thing—and it can take me right back there in time. I found some woman’s diaries in the trash in Chicago one time...and in it she wrote about going from one crackpot religion to the next. But I just don’t care about that kind of thing. But anyone who can write about a haircut in detail, well, *that* I would be interested in.”

Besides his CBS gig, his essays for *The New Yorker* and his touring, this year Sedaris’s first children’s book was published: *Pretty Ugly* with illustrations by the late, great artist Ian Falconer (*Olivia*). Sedaris’ most recent book, *Happy-Go-Lucky*, was published last year and debuted at number one on the New York Times bestseller list. He also promotes the works of other

writers at his shows. In New Haven, he raved about Claire Keegan’s *Small Things Like These*. He also had local author Cindy House read from her book of humor essays, *Mother Noise*. (She was terrific. I bought her book.)

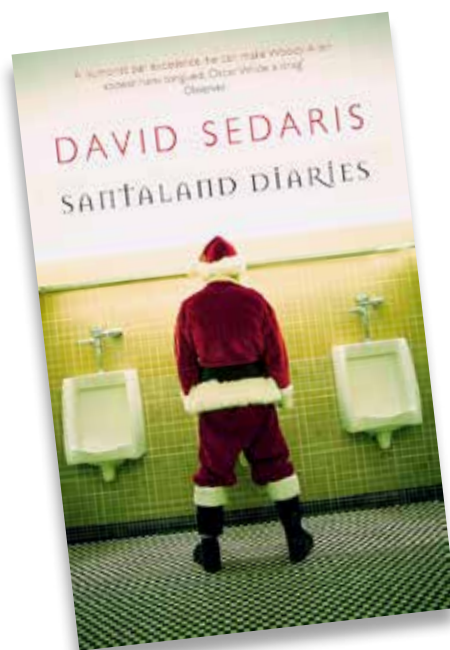
Before our conversation ended Sedaris touched on a few other subjects:

“You reach a certain age and you just become invisible. I try not to be bitter about that and I try to look at young people and think, ‘Well, that’s good. This is your time to shine.’”

DAVID SEDARIS

On the possibility of someone writing his biography: “I’m a rather dull person on which to base a biography. I do love biographies, though, especially when I was young man. I would read them, and it was always fascinating to me how these [famous] people gravitated towards each other; how they found each other in each other’s lives, and I imagined them all struggling, not knowing they were destined for better things. But for someone to do a biography of me, well, I don’t think I’m dramatic enough. I don’t have affairs or deep fights with people. I just don’t do that much.”

On AI: “It doesn’t know how to be dirty-funny; you know what I mean? It doesn’t know how to sneak on with people with dirty-funny, which is kind of my forte.”



On dressing for the theater — and for travel: “When I talked on *Sunday Morning* about [dressing up when going to the theatre] people got *furious*. ‘Oh, you can afford to wear a suit to the theater.’ You know what I want to say to them? ‘You just bought as \$200 tickets and you can’t afford a nice shirt. C’mon.’”

“Years ago, I was on an airplane, and I was in first class and I overheard one flight attendant say to the other because there was an empty seat in first class: ‘Go find someone in the B section who looks like they’re first class material.’ These days everyone’s wearing *shorts* in first class. Someone flew in to visit us, and I thought, ‘*That’s* what you wore on their airplane? Good god.’”

On name changing: “I change my name all the time. Like today my name is ‘Girolle.’ Hugh and I went out to lunch, and we were at the market and there were these girolle mushrooms for sale and I said, ‘Can my name be Girolle today?’ Tomorrow it will be something different. I do it all the time.”

LIVES IN TRANSITION: A Personal Journey

By JANE LATUS

“First of all, no thanks.”

My wife Kendra was talking back to a sign. It was stenciled in all-caps on a streetside dining booth that we were approaching while walking down 3rd Avenue. Kendra’s doctor wanted her to take lots of short walks. She’d been discharged from the hospital that morning, five days after surgery.

“Second of all,” she told the sign, “too late.” By five days, to be exact. The sign said, “STAY COCKY NYC”.

It was August in Manhattan, and the garbage along the streets had reached sunbaked, high-stank level. New Yorkers who could were outta there for friendlier air. But that day, in that city, was a happy milestone for us.

My family seems to have made a habit of doing big, gay things in the summer. Monumental, life-altering, happily-forever-after kinds of things—and with an almost gleeful disregard to comfort, climate or seasonal timeliness. Nine summers ago, I spent a few weeks with our son Elliott as he had and recovered from top surgery—in Miami. You know, where the crowds clamor every June for the 24/7 peak humidity and constant temp of nearly 100.

It isn’t always hot, humid, or smelly, and it doesn’t always involve doctors. It may be tons of fun! But it’ll be queer.

Because Elliott and I were in Miami that June, we missed something I’d once thought would never happen: my brother’s wedding. Tom married Sanford in Pennsylvania. The next week, the Supreme Court ruled for James Obergefell, and the Obamas lit up the White House like a rainbow.

In August 2023, we missed our other son Ian’s wedding to Evan, his boyfriend



On our way to NYC for Kendra’s surgery



My favorite pic of Elliott and me, despite him squinting. Eating ice cream in Asheville in summer 2023.



Just married: July 27, 2023, Evan McDuff and Ian Jones

of 13 years. At least this time we didn’t miss it because we were doing a *different* gay thing. Nobody got to go. It was just them and a justice of the peace, in a little New Hampshire town hall.

We did, though, kick off that summer of 2023 with Kendra’s top surgery. It was June second, and the last thing she heard before going under anesthesia was the nurse leaning over her, whispering, “Happy Pride.”

An acquaintance once told me, “Your family really *is* interesting,” and I discounted it. Aren’t all families interesting in their way? Maybe it’s less common that we aren’t all cisgender or straight, but does that make us *interesting*? I only decided she might be right when Kendra found out who her biological father was. DNA and a little sleuthing unearthed the secret her mother thought she’d kept: that dad was the local, married, father-of-four, Episcopal priest. Okay, I thought, that’s as good as fiction, like the plot of my favorite novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

Things weren’t always like this. Initially, I never thought about gay stuff. I didn’t have to, because I was cisgender and straight—until I was a teenager and my brother Tom told me he’s gay. I was just a kid and only knew what I’d been told by the priest: it’s a sinful abomination. But fortunately, also by my innately skeptical gut: it’s cool. And until I started having slight girls-also-seem-kind-a-squeezable thoughts.

One June I married a cisgender guy—so we both thought. We had a daughter—so we thought. That’s Elliott. I’d given transgender people some thought, but nothing like when our child told us



I'm unusually patient, *but I have none* for people who think it's possible to decide your gender, or who you're attracted to. *FFS!*

he's trans. Then we had a son. That's Ian. A few years ago, Kendra was diagnosed with cancer in a body part she wished wasn't there. It became obvious to her that it was now time to live as a woman. I got to discover that her changed body is just fine with me, too.

Ian was in high school when Connecticut's Supreme Court ruled for same-sex marriage, and he changed his Facebook status to "Gay and Proud of It." People started texting me. Ian's gay? Good for Ian! Tell Ian congrats on coming out.

"Congratulations, I hear you're gay," I said when he came home from school. He said, "What? Oh. I thought you knew." It was the best kind of coming out—almost not one at all, unremarkable.

Being trans is unfortunately way too remarkable, for reasons I can't fathom except for unnecessary, misplaced projections of internal guilt and shame. Why anyone cares about other people's bodies is a mystery to me, unless it's some deep-seated desperation for control over their own deeper issues.

Elliott struggles with PTSD over his experiences, some of them low-level but long-term, and some from outright ill-intentions. Kendra increasingly struggled with her gender identity, until prostate cancer and ensuing complications clarified that she needed confirmation surgery for her health and happiness.

I'm unusually patient, but I have none for people who think it's possible to *decide* your gender, or who you're attracted to. FFS! And, BTW, I don't mean the conventionally vulgar acronym but

"Facial Feminization Surgery," which Kendra had this fall. FFS (in the other meaning), what is wrong with people who think it's a choice? Have *they* tried it? How did it go? And do they think people who opt for surgery do so on a whim? Show me all those millionaires with high pain tolerances and no need to show up to work, who "change" their genders and bodies as often as they easily swap swimsuits for sweaters.

To be trans takes knowing yourself. Better than cis people do. It takes fortitude. Even practically, it's tough. It's expensive. Not every gender nonconforming person wants surgery, but may want electrolysis, or hormone therapy, or puberty blockers and, at least, good medical care. Even with insurance, Kendra's high deductible and the cost to stay in New York for weeks made this an experience we couldn't afford to repeat.

Nor could our blood pressure bear repeating it. Kendra's insurance is through the Affordable Care Act so must cover gender affirming care. However, the insurer's almost admirably steadfast determination to pay nothing, ever, is inhumane and borderline criminal. You may not want the details, but remember this: the state Office of the Healthcare Advocate will help you, for free. Our bulldog on staff there, attorney Sarah Carr, kept Kendra from losing it as Anthem denied, denied, denied.

Our queer summer doings weren't in far-flung places because that's our *style*. Elliott's insurance didn't cover his surgery anyway, so he chose the best doctor in a reasonable distance from his southern home. (I needed a plane.) There isn't a doctor

in Connecticut who does Kendra's surgery. She's lucky that her first choice is in New York. Lucky is, at least, one way to look at the outcome of a difficult journey.

Honestly though, a lot of it was difficult (and not our fault), so getting anything *done* feels so damn good.

The downsides (to repeat, none of them self-inflicted) of being queer now having been addressed, there is nothing like the kind of closeness and love that comes from getting to *really* know your children, your siblings, your spouse, your parent. A dad of a trans girl told me, back when I was worried whether Elliott would be okay, that not only would he be, but he'd be happier than ever, and we'd grow closer than I could imagine. It was 1,000 percent true.

While we were in New York this summer for Kendra's surgery, we started helping Ian and Evan plan their wedding celebration, which they decided to hold this fall in our backyard. They invited only family members, and they're mostly distant, so we expected 35 or 40. But 67 RSVP'd. I wished it was 68. I'm sorry I can't meet Evan's late grandmother, who once hugged him goodbye with an "I love you," then turned to our son, hugged him and said, "And I love you because you love him."

There were serious things Kendra and I addressed in our marriage, but geez it's been 42 years. None were related to our or our kids' identities. Except for external issues, all that gay business has been nothing but joyful. Fortunately, frequently even uninteresting. 🍷

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WE'RE HERE; WE'RE QUEER, AND WE'RE INSECURE:

The Queer Body Image Struggle

By KIM ADAMSKI



** Names changed to protect anonymity.*

Body image concerns affect virtually everyone at some point in their lives. Everyone has a body, and it can be hard not to compare our bodies to others', especially those we see in advertising, movies, and TV.

The media regularly sensationalizes dramatic body image issues, from tragic stories of eating disorders to social media's influence on teens' perceptions of their bodies.

Sometimes, this coverage leads to positive social changes about how bodies are perceived and commodified, but even with this publicity and

social awareness, we still have a long way to go with normalizing body diversity. According to the National Organization for Women, 78 percent of seventeen-year-old American girls feel dissatisfied with their bodies; even at age 60, 28 percent of women still feel this way. Men, who are often overlooked in discussions on body image, also suffer from body dissatisfaction. A study published by the journal *Body Image* found that 85 percent of men feel dissatisfied with how their bodies look.

Body image issues start young, too. According to Nicole*, age 27, going clothes shopping as a kid made her self-conscious about her body. "All of the

pants were low-rise,” she says. “They didn’t fit my body shape, and they weren’t flattering to my body type.” This experience made her feel like her body “wasn’t normal.”

Some research suggests that poor body image may surface as early as preschool. The concerns only increase in adolescence. A YMCA survey of UK 11-16 year olds reported that 35 percent of respondents were “often” or “always” worried about the way their bodies looked.

Negative body image is a pervasive issue for people of all ages and genders. The LGBTQ+ community, however, is disproportionately affected. The Trevor Project reports that 9 in 10 LGBTQ+ youth report body dissatisfaction. Another survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that a third of LGBTQ+ adults reported suicidal thoughts due to their body image, as compared to 11 percent of the straight people surveyed.

Gay men are by far the most reported-on LGBTQ+ group when it comes to body image issues. Body dysmorphia disorder, defined by the Mayo Clinic as a mental health condition where a person can’t stop thinking about a perceived physical flaw, is far more common in gay and bisexual men than in straight men. Ada*, age 27, says that “the term straight thin/gay fat probably is the best way to describe it.” Gay culture, even more so than mainstream culture, pushes an unrealistic and often conflicting standard of beauty. “Either I was too big for some, too thin for others or not muscular enough,” says Ada*. “[For example], someone [turned] me down because my butt wasn’t big enough!” Between social media fitness influencers, comparing oneself to more “fuckable” men on dating apps, and an almost fetishistic view of the ideal male body, the pressure can be intense.

Among trans folks, body image is incredibly complex. Gender dysphoria—the distress caused when one’s gender identity differs from their assigned sex—and body dysmorphia are closely

connected. Robin Gatter, MS, CNS, CDN works with trans folks as a nutritionist and regularly encounters body dysphoria in this group. When a person’s body is in opposition to their gender identity, it can cause a great deal of stress. This combined with mainstream ideas of what a body should look like can result in profound dissatisfaction with one’s body, which can lead to negative mental health outcomes and higher rates of eating disorders.

“When a person feels negative about their appearance, it can seem impossible to attain body acceptance. *But know this: it can be done!*”

On top of this, Western beauty standards are extremely gendered. Masculine and feminine appearances are heavily socially regulated. We idealize men who are muscular and tall; women, on the other hand, are encouraged to be hairless with large breasts and small waists. These standards are not attainable for most people, especially those whose assigned sex differs from their gender identity. When an individual subverts a socially prescribed aspect of gender, such as being cisgender or straight, they may feel more pressure to “make up” for it by strictly conforming to other gender ideals, sometimes in unhealthy ways like excessive dieting or exercise.

It’s not all doom and gloom, though. For some people, queer

identity can have a protective effect on a person’s body image. “Since coming out as nonbinary I feel more comfortable dressing femininely,” writes Reddit user Destriek. I have seen this sentiment echoed on X (formerly Twitter) many times. X user @chamelea22 reports that since realizing they were nonbinary, they feel more comfortable presenting as feminine, too, because they don’t feel as much pressure “to be feminine in a certain, specific way.”

Lesbian and bisexual women in particular tend to have better body image than their gay male and trans counterparts. A 2023 study from the National Institutes of Health found that gay and bisexual women are not as concerned about physical appearance and more likely to have positive feelings about their bodies. Nicole*, 27, states that as a queer woman she has “a better understanding about the range of attraction that people can experience.” She continues, “I feel more confident that I am attractive in my own way, even if [I’m] not universally attractive.”

So, what constitutes a healthy attitude about one’s body? The Australian National Eating Disorders Collaboration defines positive body image as when a person accepts, appreciates, and respects their body. Having a positive body image is associated with higher self-esteem, healthier eating and exercise practices, and better mental health.

Clearly, a positive view of one’s body is associated with better health outcomes. But how do we get there? When a person feels negative about their appearance, it can seem impossible to attain body acceptance. But know this: it can be done!

Seeing a therapist about body image concerns is a great place to start. Therapy helps a lot of people work through negative perceptions of their bodies, and most insurance plans have therapy coverage. There are even therapists who specifically focus on body image! Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge the reality

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A study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggests that *focusing on personal health rather than physical appearance and weight loss* tends to lead to better health outcomes.

that professional mental healthcare is not accessible to everyone, and that some people don't trust the mental healthcare system. That doesn't mean all hope is lost; there are steps you can take yourself.

The Cleveland Clinic suggests focusing first on self-talk. When you think about your body, is it negative? Begin consciously thinking, or even saying aloud, body-positive phrases like "This dress flatters my figure!" or "I look so happy today." It may feel weird at first, but if you keep at it, it can help a lot.

Next, stop comparing yourself to others! This can be very difficult, because we are socialized to value competition and hierarchies. When you start comparing yourself to another person, try countering it by admiring one of your own qualities, either in your head, aloud, or in a journal. "I tend to focus on parts of myself that are pleasing and that I think look good," says Ada*, 27, rather than worrying about "the standards of the gay male gaze."

Ask yourself: What factors are contributing to a negative view of my body? Does scrolling social media make me feel worse? Flipping through dating apps? Reading fitness magazines? Comparing myself to others? Once you figure out your body negativity triggers, it'll be easier to reduce your exposure to or address your feelings about them.

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Engaging in health behaviors can also improve self-esteem and mood. Note that I said “health behaviors.” We are focusing on health, not specifically appearance. A study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggests that focusing on personal health rather than physical appearance and weight loss tends to lead to better health outcomes. A healthy—not excessive—amount of exercise, along with eating plenty of nutritious food to fuel your body, can improve your mental image of your body and your physical function. Seek the support of friends and family in your health goals. Even better, enlist a friend to join you in making healthy changes.

Robin Gatter also recommends an approach called “body neutrality.” The body positivity movement, though helpful in many ways, can also lead to feelings of guilt when negative feelings about one’s body arise. “Some days you’re going to wake up in your body feeling bad,” she says. Body neutrality is not about pressure to feel a certain way about your body. It’s about acknowledging your feelings while not treating your body as a problem that needs to be fixed. Given the way most of us were socialized, it’s understandable to have some negative feelings about our bodies, and it’s okay to take baby steps toward body acceptance.

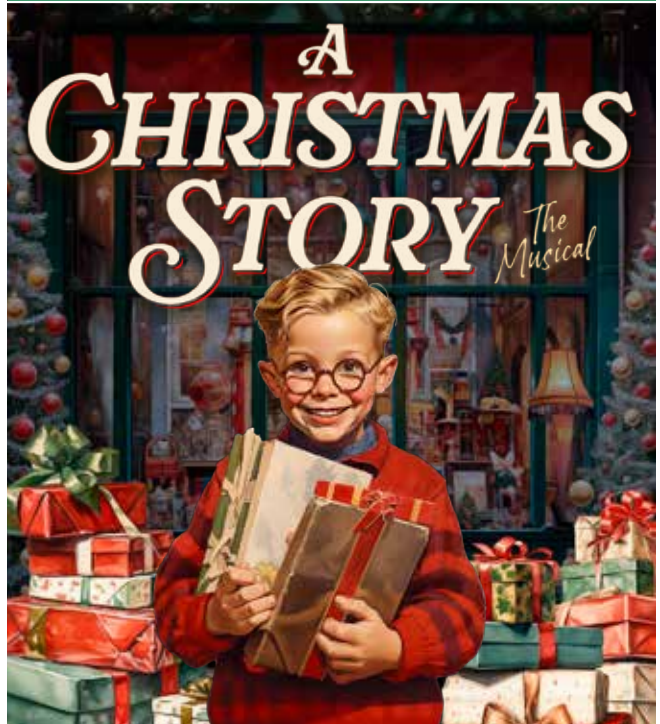
Body acceptance isn’t just an individual endeavor; it means social acceptance of all bodies. We need to work together as a society to change the culture from body shaming to body appreciation. Body acceptance movements have already made significant progress by pressuring companies to use more diverse models in advertising, educating healthcare providers on more inclusive health interventions, and promoting healthier social attitudes about bodies.

We have the power to create change! Modifying how we talk about bodies is an impactful way to shift social attitudes toward body acceptance. Even small changes in your phrasing can make you a role model for others. Avoid using body-critical language. Instead of saying, “I’m going to regret eating this piece of cake!” try “I am so looking forward to this treat.” Rather than “Wow, this guy on Grindr has twig arms!” acknowledge how great it is that there are so many types of bodies in the world to appreciate.

Cultivating a positive self-image of one’s body can be very difficult. There are a lot of factors that get in the way, from unrealistic representations of fitness on social media to fear of romantic rejection. It takes a lot of work and dedication, but be patient and keep at it. You’re getting closer every day. ♡

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Eloise Vaughn Worked her MAJIC

By RANDY B. YOUNG

Eloise Maddry Vaughn sits in a high-backed chair at her assisted living residence in Raleigh, North Carolina. The former teacher, wife, author, and LGBTQ+ ally can gaze through her window at neighborhoods named for southern flora or old churches.

At 92-years old, she is confident, compassionate, and sharp as a knife.

About her private apartment are hundreds of family photos, some documenting her late husband Earl's rise in Democratic politics before his death in April 1986. There are photos of her six grandchildren and of her four children: Rose Williams (60), Stuart Vaughn (64), John Vaughn (66), and Mark, who she nursed through AIDS before his death in 1990 at age 34.



Eloise Maddry Vaughn

Here are uncountable reflections of battles won and lost over the past sixty years, including a campaign in the 1990's to depose the late Republican Senator Jesse Helms, infamous for racial and homophobic vitriol.

Some pictures chronicle her co-founding of the political action committee "MAJIC" (Mothers Against Jesse in Congress) with Patsy Clarke, 95, who also who lost her own son Mark to AIDS in 1994. The pair published *Keep Singing: Two Mothers, Two Sons, and Their Fight Against Jesse Helms* (Grassroots Printing, 2001).

"The book was a gift," celebrated novelist Allan Gurganus (*Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*) wrote in the foreword, "from two lionesses in good linen suits."



Meeting President Johnson and Ladybird at the White House.

A Real “Steel Magnolia”

A Democrat from a family of Democrats, Vaughn was instrumental in her husband’s successful bid for the NC House of Representatives, where he was eventually named Speaker and delegate to the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. It was a tumultuous year in politics, which took the Vaughns all the way to the White House, where the couple met President Lyndon Johnson and his wife Ladybird.

Tragically, as Earl had just assumed a role heading the NC Supreme Court

Board of Appeals, he was diagnosed with cancer, succumbing in 1986.

The next year brought the news that Vaughn’s son Mark was battling AIDS, said Vaughn’s daughter Rose Williams, Executive Director of the NC League of Municipalities. “That was when we first understood that Mark was gay,” she said. “He must have been so frustrated with us. I mean, ‘How dumb were we?’”

Eloise knew it was time to take off the silk gloves and assume the role of caregiver.

“It was like something from Dante’s

circles [of hell],” Williams explained. “There was no AZT then, and there was a lot of suffering. My mother cared for Mark in an upstairs bedroom. The doctors told her, ‘You’re the reason he’s lasting this long and doing as well as he is.’” Nevertheless, Mark Vaughn died in Spring 1990, the Thursday after Mother’s Day.

“Eloise regularly ventured outside of her own comfort zone to provide comfort to others,” said Tony Burden, an artist and gay activist who was friends and classmates with Vaughn’s son Mark (Burden designed Mark’s



Eloise and son Mark



Eloise with Mark's panel in the AIDS quilt.

memorial panel for the AIDS Quilt).

"She would go and buy marijuana," he said. "A physician said that it might ease nausea and allow Mark to eat, so here's this widow of a State Supreme Court Judge doing a drug deal."

Burden and his husband Barry Mangum even took Eloise to a gay bar in Charlotte for a fundraiser. "She credits us for introducing her to the gay bar scene," Burden said with a laugh.

"There were also so many other young men dying that were kicked out by their families," Burden said. "Eloise was a surrogate mother to so many young men, driving them to appointments or even helping to make final arrangements."

Vaughn had no sympathy for the unsympathetic. Burden recounted the story of a particular young man who passed away after being rejected by his own family:

"Eloise had helped to make arrangements to have him cremated," he said. "When the family later realized they wanted his ashes, she sent them some potting soil in a box, because she said that was all they deserved."

Hell Hath No Fury...

A story holds that NC Senator Jesse Helms once whistled "Dixie" at a young, Black, female legislator in a US Capital building elevator.

When he campaigned against Roberta Achtenberg (the first gay woman nominated for high federal office), Helms said, "She's not your garden-variety lesbian...She's a militant-activist-mean lesbian."

Clearly, Helms was a "garden-variety" homophobe.

Vaughn was also shocked at how her church—and many more—saw gays as willing pariahs and saw AIDS as modern-day leprosy.

"Going into a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car," said retired Baptist minister Mitch Simpson, who appeared with Vaughn and Clarke in the movie *Dear Jesse* by gay filmmaker and friend Tim Kirkman (NC Film Foundation and Cowboy Pictures, 1998).

"Tim had told me about his project," Simpson added, "and I was just delighted to help eviscerate Jesse Helms."

Then the Vaughn's family funeral home refused to come and pick up Mark's body.

"I will never get over that," Vaughn said. "I called a different funeral home in Chapel Hill, and they burned up the road to my house in Raleigh, which felt like everything."

Vaughn's friend Clarke, a longtime Republi-

can, wrote a letter to Helms after the 1994 death of her own son Mark, urging AIDS research funding and an end to anti-gay rhetoric, but the Senator's response was right in character. The reply, "I wish Mark had not played Russian roulette in his sexual activity," floored Clarke, forcing her to rethink her Republican allegiances. Characteristically callous, Helms' response was a gut-punch, but it galvanized the resolve of many unlikely heroes, including both Clarke and Vaughn.

Making MAJIC

Self-examination would lead these mothers and others to form MAJIC to strike back at Helms where it hurt—the polls. They'd likely be tilting at windmills, but, as Martin Luther King, Jr., (who Helms branded a "Marxist") said "the time was always right to *do* what was right."

Republicans would be a hard sell, but Vaughn found that even fellow



Patsy and Eloise

Democrats were dismissive.

"There was still so much prejudice against gays then," Vaughn said, "and these politicians were protecting their careers."

Around a dozen grieving mothers—including many more "recovered Republicans"—soon coalesced around Clarke and Vaughn and their message.

"When Mark died, I started to campaign as I had for my husband Earl years before," Vaughn wrote, "but instead of a seat in the government, it was a campaign for compassion and understanding."

"Around the creation of MAJIC, we met and fell in love with Eloise and Patsy," said retired NC business owner and gay activist Art Sperry, 80, "and we worked on fundraisers together, particularly for the Alliance of AIDS Services Carolina."

"Eloise was a warrior very early on," Sperry's husband Paul Otto said. "The important thing was the way she confronted the straight community head-on."

Vaughn and Clarke were invited to share a stage with Senator Ted Kennedy at an event associated with the 1996 Democratic National Convention (again in Chicago). This and a feature in *People Magazine* led to interviews in *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, and more media requests and



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donations began flowing in.

In October 1996, the ladies visited the Mall in Washington, D.C. to see display of the AIDS Quilt, a traveling 54-ton memorial honoring those whom churches and funeral homes would *not*. Both Marks' lives were celebrated, along with 40,000 others, with beautifully crafted panels. The quilt is now in San Francisco and accessible virtually.

A "Moral" Victory

As winners were projected on election day in November, the ladies of MAJIC knew it was over. Helms had won again, earning 52.6 percent of the vote (to Charlotte Mayor and Democrat Harvey Gantt's 45.9 percent).

Coaches diminish the term "moral victory" as just another cheap euphemism for a loss. But, though MAJIC's triumph would not be at the polls, if ever there had been a victory that was "moral," *here it was*.

"You can't stop prejudice. You'll always have it—always—but, *honey, we have come too far to go back.*"

"We never really thought we could bring down Jesse Helms," Vaughn wrote, "but we're confident that we said to politicians: 'It isn't right to use my son as a means to an end...'"

There was a still a righteous indignation about Vaughn and Clarke, com-

municated (as proper southern ladies are *wont* to do) in barbs and thinly veiled insults.

Responding to a letter from an anonymous critic, Clarke cloaked her response in mock-appreciation: "Thank you for showing me the face of fear."

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When a frustrated Clarke once asked Vaughn what it might take to end the hate, homophobia, and prejudice, Vaughn replied matter-of-factly, “Embalming fluid.”

Helms did not seek re-election in 2002 due to worsening health. Later diagnosed with vascular dementia and failing memory, he died in 2006.

Vaughn’s efforts over the years didn’t go unnoticed in the LGBTQ+ community.

“She took on the whole world,” Paul Otto said as he looked back. “She was absolutely fearless.”

“There was so much about her work that was significant,” Art Sperry added. “It grew out of the AIDS crisis, but rather than walk away, she took up the fight.”

Tony Burden agreed, noting: “What was so beautiful to see was how—after the death of both her husband and her son—she became fully her own

person, not defined by her relationship with anyone.”

Honey, We’ve Come too Far...

Even in the early 2000’s, Vaughn felt her and Clarke’s efforts afforded a brighter future.

“So much good information is all around us,” Vaughn wrote, “that to deliberately ignore it or purposely turn our backs is willful ignorance.”

Eloise Vaughn remains in touch with many of her LGBTQ+ friends.

“At my funeral, the majority of the people there will be gay people—mostly gay men,” Vaughn says with a smile. “They are my best friends.”

And if the saga seems cinematic, it’s not been lost Hollywood. “Once in a while, somebody will want to do a movie treatment of the book,” Burden said, “so, some producer will come talk with Eloise.”

“Here are two souls who found a way to speak, then shout, and finally... create a kid of moral vocal music,” Gurganus wrote. “It’s a cry of pain—both tin-pan alley and pure hymn. And may it become a ‘standard’ for those forced to act, answer, and grow. Because they could not stop loving.”

A stately grandfather clock across Vaughn’s room chimes at 47 minutes past the hour, which she casually dismisses. This place, like Eloise Vaughn, is sacred and timeless.

“There will always be prejudice,” Vaughn laments now, “but it’s nothing like the 1960’s or even when my son Mark was sick.

“You can’t stop prejudice. You’ll always have it—always—but, *honey*, we have come too far to go back.”

Photos courtesy of the Vaughn family.

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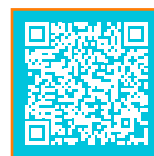
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LANDMARK ROLE IN NBC MEDICAL SERIES

By FRANK RIZZO

In NBC's new medical series *Brilliant Minds*, (Mondays at 10 PM ET), Zachary Quinto plays an idiosyncratic neurologist inspired by Dr. Oliver Sacks, best known for his writings on neurological disorders in the books *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, and *Awakenings*.

The series is significant as it's the first time an out actor is playing a leading role of a gay doctor in a network medical series.

"I was a little ambivalent coming back to a network environment," said Quinto in an appearance I attended this fall at an event for LGBTQ+ journalists in Los Angeles.

"But I read the script and felt so drawn to the character."

Quinto first became widely known in 2006 as the bisexual best friend of Tori Spelling on her VH1 series *So NoTORious*. Major TV roles also included the villainous Sylar in the science-fiction drama series *Heroes*, as Charlie Manx in the AMC series *NOS4A2*, and as Dr. Oliver Thredson in *American Horror Story: Asylum*, for which he received an Emmy nomination.

"It's an honor for me to play a character like this in such a mainstream way at a time when

LGBTQ+ issues are really at the forefront of our political and social discourse," said Quinto. "It's incredibly important that representation remain stronger than ever right now... and that was a huge part of what drew me to the character—but only one part of many."

Quinto said he knew "somewhat" about the London-born Sacks who practiced medicine in the U.S., but once cast Quinto read all the neurologist's books and memoirs, which allowed him to go deeper into the character of the series' Dr. Oliver Wolf. (Wolf was Sacks' middle name.)

"I love the idea of playing this character inspired by a real person but not rooted in all of the trappings of that person's actual life," he said.

Though Sacks practiced medicine and wrote from the 1960s to his death in 2015 at the age of 82, the series is set in the present. "In a way," says Quinto, "it's sort of imagining the way his life could have been under different circumstances."

Sacks was deeply influenced by the times when he came of age and the social restrictions on people living fully who they were, said Quinto. "[Sacks] didn't come out until very much later in life, and for 35 years he was celibate. It wasn't until very late in his life that he opened up to being gay and opened up to a loving relationship. Being gay is an essential part of who he is but it's a complicated part of who he is."





Quinto and the cast. Photo Credit: Brian Meadows NBC

An active supporter of gay rights and organizations, including The Trevor Project early in his career, Quinto, 47, publicly came out as gay in 2011.

Quinto's career also included many film roles, notably as Spock in 2009's *Star Trek* and its sequels. "On Broadway he starred in *The Glass Menagerie* and the 2020 revival of *The Boys in the Band*. His next Broadway role is in this season's *The Cult of Love*."

What makes *Brilliant Minds* distinct, Quinto said, are the neurological and psychological cases, many inspired by Sacks' own case studies.

"We are part of an incredible evolving history of medical shows, but a lot of them deal with cases that are easily quantifiable. Someone comes in with a gunshot wound or some other kind of injury or illness

that a resolution will be ultimately healing. One of the fascinating aspects for me about our show is that we're dealing with neurological disorders and mental health issues, and often these patients are never going to return to the life that they lived before.

He asked, "how can we still find integrity and joy in life even in the face of seemingly catastrophic adversities? I think that ultimately there is a message of hope in our show, and I hope that that's what people take away."

LGBTQ+ REPRESENTATION ON TV

Quinto is supported in these goals by the series creator, writer and executive producer, Michael Grassi.

"One of the reasons I wanted to create this show

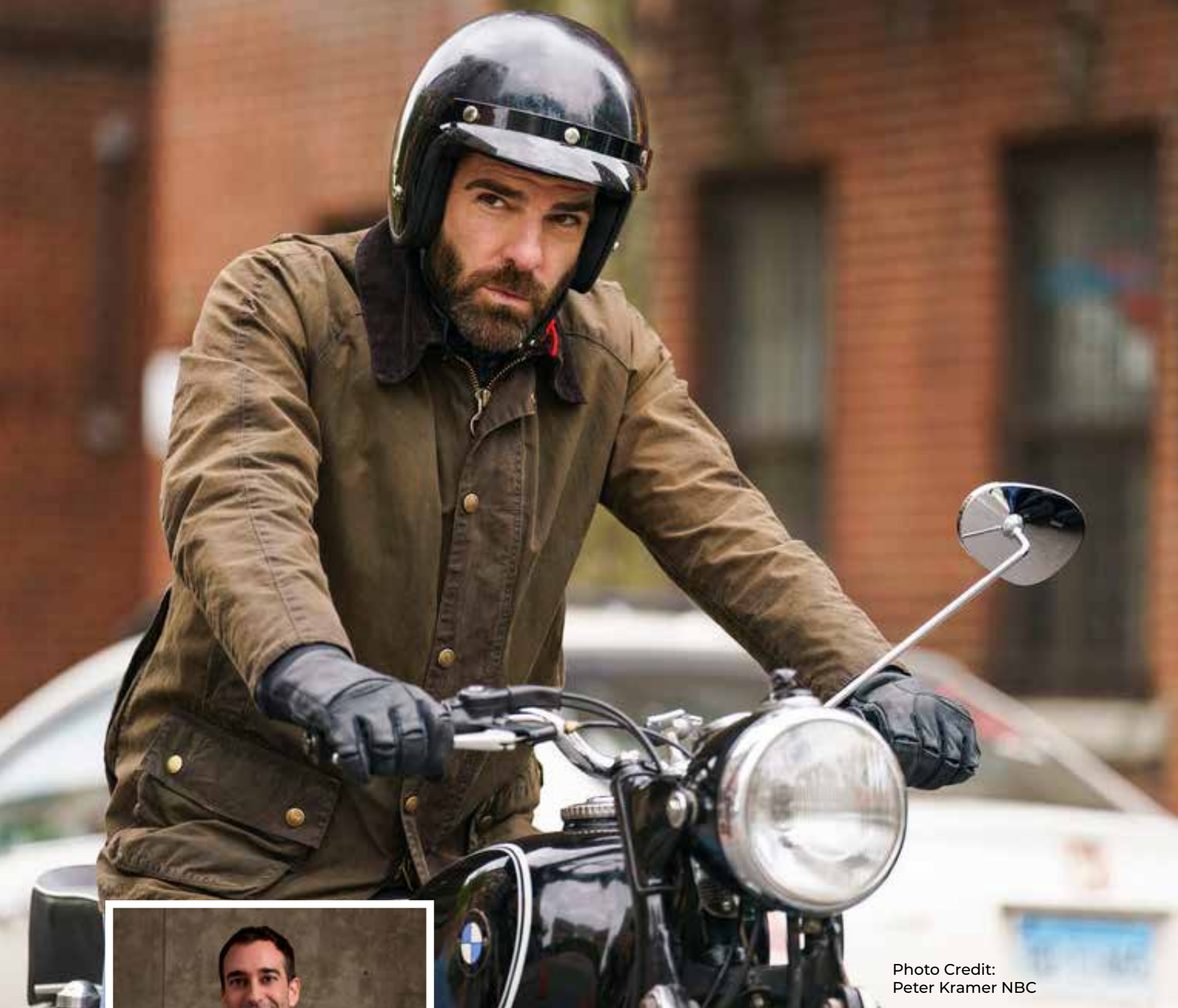


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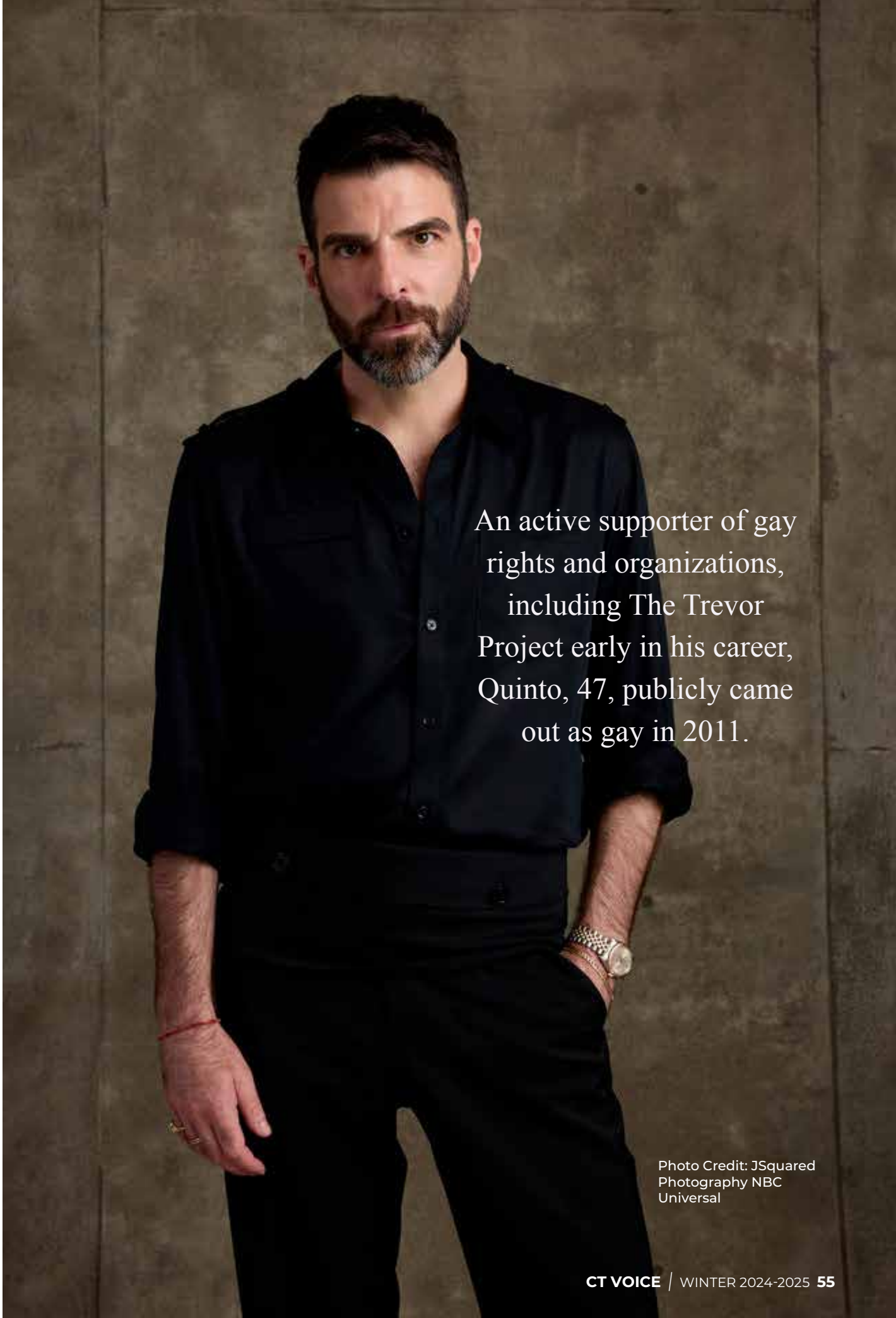
Michael Grassi
Writer and executive producer

and this character was to have the opportunity have a gay lead in the center of a big American network medical drama,” said Grassi, whose writing and producing credits include such shows as *Schitt’s Creek*, *Pretty Little Liars: Originals*, and *Riverdale*

“But being gay is only part of [Dr. Wolf’s] life,” said Grassi, “He has many things that define him: He’s a doctor, a mentor, a friend, and a son.”

It was also important for Grassi to cast an out actor to play the leading character who is based on a man who was gay.

“We’ve had a lot of LGBTQ+ stories told by non-LGBTQ+ people or actors, and that’s 100 percent okay. But it also felt important for us to have a gay actor at the center. Zachary was the first person we thought of for the role. Zachary brings so much more to the role than I could have ever imagined; so much depth, humor and emotional resonance.”



An active supporter of gay rights and organizations, including The Trevor Project early in his career, Quinto, 47, publicly came out as gay in 2011.

Photo Credit: JSquared
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Photo Credit: Rafy NBC

“Being a gay man in part allows Dr. Wolf to identify more closely with his patients, many of whom had been written off by other doctors.”



Photo Credit: Rafy NBC

Being a gay man allows Dr. Wolf to identify with his patients, many of whom had been written off by other doctors, said Grassi.


“As a gay person, you can often feel like you are ‘other,’ like you are on the outside, like you are invisible. I think Dr. Wolf growing up as a person with prosopagnosia (commonly known as ‘face blindness’) and also being gay; I think he knows what it’s like to be different and the outsider. While he can’t see their faces, he can really see who they are. I think empathy is really his superpower in a lot of ways. It’s what Oliver Sacks brought to his patients and where we want our Dr. Wolf to follow in those footsteps.”

Because Grassi was producer of the sexy, teen-centric series *Riverdale*, might there be those kind of intimate, heated scenes in *Brilliant Minds*?

“What I’ll say is there’s definitely sparks that fly this season, but I don’t want to spoil

anything,” he said. “This series is more about relationships and love so I can’t promise anything as steamy as *Riverdale*.”

As he considers his own life as a gay man, Grassi says the show has given him much to reflect on.

“I often think about when I was growing up and the only gay content that I had access to in my household was a laser-disc copy of the movie *Philadelphia*. I would watch that movie and sort of projected, well, that is my fate, and that is going to be my life and it was sad for me. Then came *Will and Grace* I was so grateful because I could sort of see myself in that show, and it made me feel that it was okay to be who I am. I don’t think I’d be where I am today if *Will and Grace* didn’t exist.” So, to be making this big NBC medical show with a gay character at the center of it feels especially exciting and—fingers crossed—just as iconic.” 

DELICIOUS //

Wildcat

By BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Dining-wise, there's little question that Connecticut is most famous for New Haven-style pizza (although whose—and which flavor—is definitely a bone of contention among students and connoisseurs alike). But the state is full of hundreds of inventive, delicious eateries that appeal to residents' more sophisticated taste buds.

Wildcat, which opened in late May in Hamden, definitely fits that bill. Owned by brothers Kris and Shane McGowan—42-year-old identical twins—the restaurant focuses primarily on creative cocktails that can be paired with a small but thoughtful selection of delectable appetizers and main dishes, from charred grapes and olives to catfish and airline chicken breast.

Connecticut Voice recently spoke to Kris about his background in hospitality, the creation of Wildcat, working with the local community, and his plans for the restaurant's present and future.

CV: Are you and Shane natives of Connecticut?

KM: No, we grew up in Pawling, New York. I went to the University of Hartford, and Shane went to SUNY Albany. I've always been in the hospitality industry since college, whether bartending, managing, or opening restaurants. And I've been in Connecticut since 2019. Shane has also been in the industry for a long time, and we wanted to do something together. Starting in the summer of 2023, we did Tiki pop-ups throughout New Haven, some at friends'

restaurants and hotels. We would redecorate these spaces with disco balls and Christmas lights, play 1980s music, and serve Polynesian-style food and our take on Tiki cocktails. It was like a big, really fun party.

CV: What happened next?

KM: Shane and I started looking for a permanent restaurant space, first in New Haven. We knew we wanted to do a cocktail-forward restaurant with a lot of small plates. Then we met Mike Farber, the former owner of the Wildcat space for over 20 years, and he told us he wanted to move on but also wanted to make sure someone would do something special with it.

CV: Did you instantly fall in love with the space?

I did love the idea of this 20-foot bar and a fairly small dining area. But we totally revamped it from the studs down. Now there are 50 seats at the bar and 25 at dining tables, although they are all high-top seats. Our goal was to create a refined but casual setting that is not just for date nights or weekends, but somewhere you can go every night of the week.

CV: Have you been pleased by the initial response?

KM: Yes, we now have a lot of regulars, some from New Haven and more from central Connecticut. Our area has a lot of Italian restaurants and burger joints, so people are



happy to have something different. But we're still working on different ways to get people to come to Wildcat, via community events, the Chamber of Commerce, local universities, charities and collaboration with local groups and businesses. We work with the Honeybee Project which does outreach to urban youth via beekeeping. We're participating in New Haven Cocktail Week. And we always try to be an ally of the LGBTQIA community. In fact, our younger brother—who is not in the business—is gay. We truly love having diversity among both our staff and our customers.

CV: Tell me about the cocktail menu and why that is so important to you?

KM: Shane and I devised the cocktail menu. We have both been bartenders, and he had a cocktail consulting company and worked for the hotel chain Andaz. We are rooted in classics like the Old-Fashioned and the Manhattan, but we like to be able to do our own thing. What's most important to us is that every drink is well-balanced. We created a shaken section and stirred section. Stirred is more booze forward; while shaken is lighter, often more tropical. We also try to make things easier for customers who might not know what they want by making thoughtful suggestions. And if we get new spirits from suppliers, then we like to figure out a creative way to use them!

CV: Let's move on to the food. What's the philosophy there?

KM: Like with the cocktails, we try to stay seasonal as well. But we would never roll out a whole new menu. Our philosophy is to evolve not replace. You're always worried if you take something off [the menu] then a customer can get upset, but it's usually replaced by something better. It's hard not for chefs to get bored; one reason we do small plates is they allow them to be more creative. We're also always trying to create balance in the menu. I think we'll be adding more handhelds and burgers, but our regular burger won't ever leave the menu. And we will always have a veggie entrée on the menu, not just for our customers, but because that also allows a chef to think outside the box. Most importantly, nothing on either menu should ever feel like an afterthought! 🍷



Charred Gr...

Grapes & Olives



CHARRED GRAPES & OLIVES

INGREDIENTS:

**mixed red & green grapes
(1 lb of each)**
**pitted castleveltrano &
kalamata olives (1 lb of each)**
rosemary, thyme, bay leaves
orange peels of 1 orange
1/4 lb of blue cheese
1/4 lb of cream cheese
raw honey
dried chilis of your choice
extra virgin olive oil
3 tbsp of lemon juice

RECIPE

Mix grapes, olives, olive oil, thyme, rosemary, bay leaves and orange peel in a large bowl. Cover and let marinate for at least 3-4 hours or let sit overnight. Drain oil after marinating. Heat a slotted grill pan on the stove till very hot, add the grapes & olives until they have a nice sear on all sides.

In a food processor, blend blue cheese and cream cheese with lemon juice. Salt to taste.

Heat raw honey in a pot on low with dried chilis for 30 min.

To plate, spread the blue cheese whip on the plate, add 1-2 tbsp of olive oil over the whip. Add the grapes & olives and drizzle chili honey over top. Garnish with micro herbs or greens of your liking and serve with a side of toasted bread.



ALPINE ARROW

1.5oz Gin
.5oz Dolin Genepy
.5oz Simple Syrup
.25oz Jalapeno Agave
.75oz Lime
Muddled Cucumber
1 Egg white

Muddle cucumber in a shaker tin, add egg white and all remaining measured ingredients. Dry shake for 10 seconds, add ice and shake again. Double strain into coupe glass, garnish with a cucumber wave if desired.

Cocktails



CLEVER COYOTE

.75oz. Sotol
.5oz. Strega
.75oz. Blanco tequila
.75oz peach habanero cordial
.5oz. Lime juice
1oz. Grapefruit
Dash of Peychauds bitters
Cucumber ribbon

Add all ingredients except bitters to shaker with ice. Shake and strain into a rocks glass with ice. Use bitters to float on top and garnish with a cucumber ribbon.

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Embracing Differences

By DAWN ENNIS

I was four years old when I came out to my mother as transgender, even though that wasn't the word I used, or anyone used, way back in 1968. What I said was, "I'm a girl."

"No, no," said my mother, with a broad smile. "You're not a girl," she told me. "You're special!" This was in the weeks after she gave birth to my sister. I told her how much I looked forward to becoming a mommy myself someday. Just like her.

I'm confident that she didn't really intend to traumatize me saying that, but her blunt response did exactly that. Here is what she said: "Oh, honey, you can't have a baby!"

I was crushed! It would be years before I realized what she meant; I thought the reason I couldn't become a mom was because something was wrong with my body. In retrospect, I guess it could be said something was indeed wrong, since my body did not align with my gender identity. I knew I was a girl, even if everyone thought I was a boy. A "special" boy.

The boys in school didn't call me special. They called me that other "F word," among other things that bullies say, usually in combination with a punch. Many people who've come out as adults have told me they've known the truth since they were children, often at four or five years old.

Three years later, I learned from my mother that she had chosen the name "Dawn" for me before I was born, because she was convinced that she was carrying a girl.

It would be decades before I finally, legally, changed my name and came out to the world. And in between, I did what every closeted person does: I hid who I really am, believing it would be best to follow the script written by my parents. I was a child actor who excelled

in my performance of the role of "boy;" I would go on to win the part of "man" and "husband," and ultimately, my favorite role: "father."



Dawn and her kids.

All these years later, I am the woman I always knew I should be but never believed I could be. I am also a widow, because of the scourge of cancer. While I usually don't refer to myself as a mother, I now accept the title, having done "the job of mom" for close to a decade. I have raised three children all by myself for close to a decade. And I've been told I did it well. I inherited this position, which I call the hardest job I've ever loved.

"As a mother..." I once said to an anti-inclusion activist from the U.K. A viral video of that 2022 encounter shows her confronting me about using a women's public restroom at a sports facility where I was credentialed to cover a championship meet. Thousands of times, her followers and those who read the right-wing rag *The National Review* have watched us tangle; They

especially enjoyed the reaction of outraged TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) surrounding me, like the bullies in grade school, shouting at me, "How dare you!"


But it's not just the word "mom" that causes pushback. Our three kids still get odd looks when they call me, "Dad." When I came out in 2013, we agreed that the name they had always called me was the best fit, even if strangers and in-laws didn't approve. So, I've often been asked why I, a woman, refer to myself as a "dad."

My answer is, "I'm both a woman and a dad because... women can be anything."

But so much of the world today disdains differences. They gawk at tall women, short men and other people whose bodies are a size that is bigger or smaller than theirs. They reject nonbinary individuals and those with different abilities, autism or mental health struggles. They call themselves "normal" to distance themselves from those of us who have reclaimed the word "queer."

Being a writer, I've managed to harness my skill with words to my advantage in all kinds of difficult situations. Such as, when people mispronounce my last name, I've taken to telling them, "My name rhymes with 'tennis' not with 'penis.'"

But even I am at a loss to come up with words that will change closed minds. People across America, even here in Connecticut, see women like me as men. They cannot be swayed. They refuse to accept, to even consider my humanity. I wish they would recognize that no two women are ever alike; I don't claim to be the same as a cisgender woman.

I am different. But I say, being different is perhaps the most American thing anyone can be. 



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