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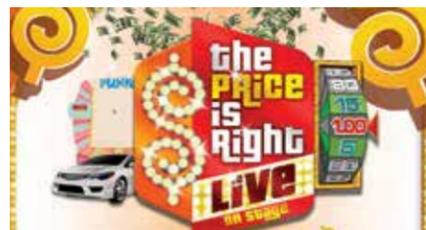
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CONNECTICUT VOICE™

EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome fall!

As I complete my first year working here with *Connecticut Voice*, I am consistently amazed by the people of our state. It is an honor and humbling to see how many people work so tirelessly and dedicate themselves so completely to ensuring better quality of life for all LGBTQ+ communities in our state. From our Governor to members of the LGBTQ+ caucus in Hartford to our representatives in Congress, to community, faith, and health leaders, Connecticut continues to be a model for the nation.

In these pages this month, you'll meet just a few of the people who have given themselves so generously to our communities. The first Connecticut Voice Honors program celebrates the individuals and organizations that have made diversity, inclusion, and acceptance hallmarks of their efforts. The people who appear in these pages—and who have appeared here in the past—are the beacons of hope. Our goal to amplify their voices to stress that they are motivated first by love—of civil rights, of humankind and of individuals—and to demonstrate that love always wins. It isn't always easy, and recent developments and rolling back of established rights are a major cause of concern. To paraphrase *Angels in America*, the great work was begun a long time ago, and the people keeping that going deserve our respect and support every day.

We also celebrate life in Connecticut in this issue. Jane Latus has compiled a list of non-profits in the state serving our LGBTQ+ communities. If you're looking to get out for an autumn adventure, check out the list of orchards compiled by Amy S. White. Brian Lipton gets us in the mood for fall fashion, and Dawn Ennis looks at student life for LGBTQ+ communities in our colleges.

Plus, there's much more here and online at ctvoice.com. It has been a remarkable privilege to meet and talk with so many dedicated and inspiring people over the past year, and I look forward to much more in the seasons ahead.

Personally, fall is my favorite season in Connecticut, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I will!

Chris

Christopher Byrne, Editor
chris@ctvoice.com

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is published by Seasons Media

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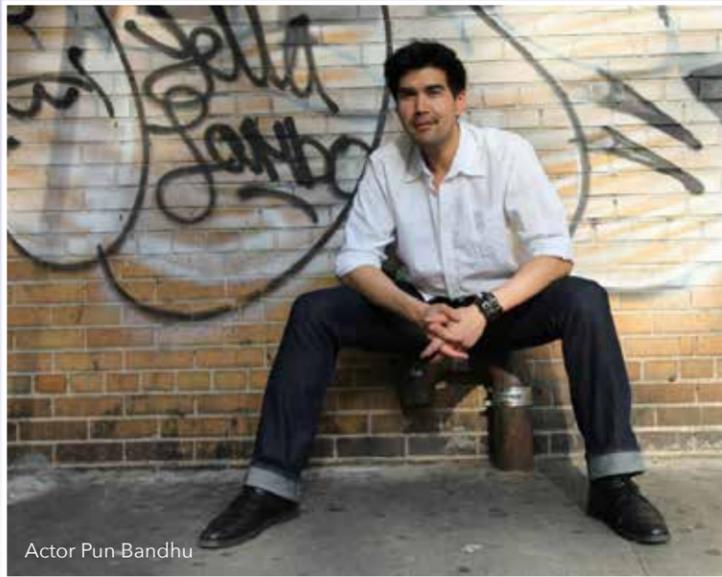


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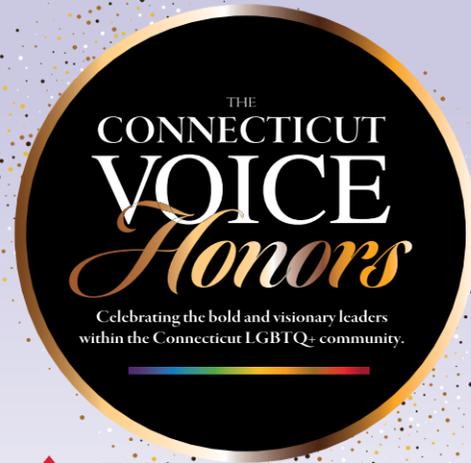


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FRANK RIZZO

Frank Rizzo caught up with actor Alex Ringler (page 10) and profiled actor and activist Pan Bandhu (page 34). He has written about the arts in Connecticut and nationally for more than 40 years; for the *The New York Times*, *American Theatre Magazine* and dozens of other outlets. He is also a theater critic for *Variety*. Follow Frank's work at ShowRiz.com and on Twitter @ShowRiz.



BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Brian Scott Lipton talked with Goodspeed about their commitment to inclusion (page 14) and looks at leather fashion (page 24). He has been a nationally renowned journalist for over 30 years. He has been Editor in Chief of TheaterMania.com and Resident Publications, Managing Editor of men's fashion magazines DNR and MR, and his byline has appeared in *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal*.



DAWN ENNIS

Dawn Ennis profiled professional coach Amit Mehta (page 12) and dug into LGBTQ+ campus life (page 30). She is an award-winning journalist, a professor at University of Hartford, and writes for several news outlets. Ennis was America's first transgender journalist in a TV network newsroom when she came out nine years ago. Follow her @lifeafterdawn on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Ennis and her family reside in West Hartford, Connecticut.



KIM ADAMSKI

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



AMY S. WHITE

Amy S. White lives, teaches, cooks, eats, and writes in Eastern Connecticut. She peeled back the inside information on Connecticut's orchards (page 68) and created three savory and sweet recipes for apples for the fall. You can find out more about her at her website: amyswhite.com



JANE LATUS

Jane Latus covers health and politics. She profiles nonprofits serving LGBTQ+ communities (page 44) and contributed to the CT Honors program, as well as covering Middlesex Health's support for transgender individuals. (Page 56). She is a writer and personal trainer living in Canton. She and her husband Ken have an escalating number of cats and two grown sons, one transgender and one gay.



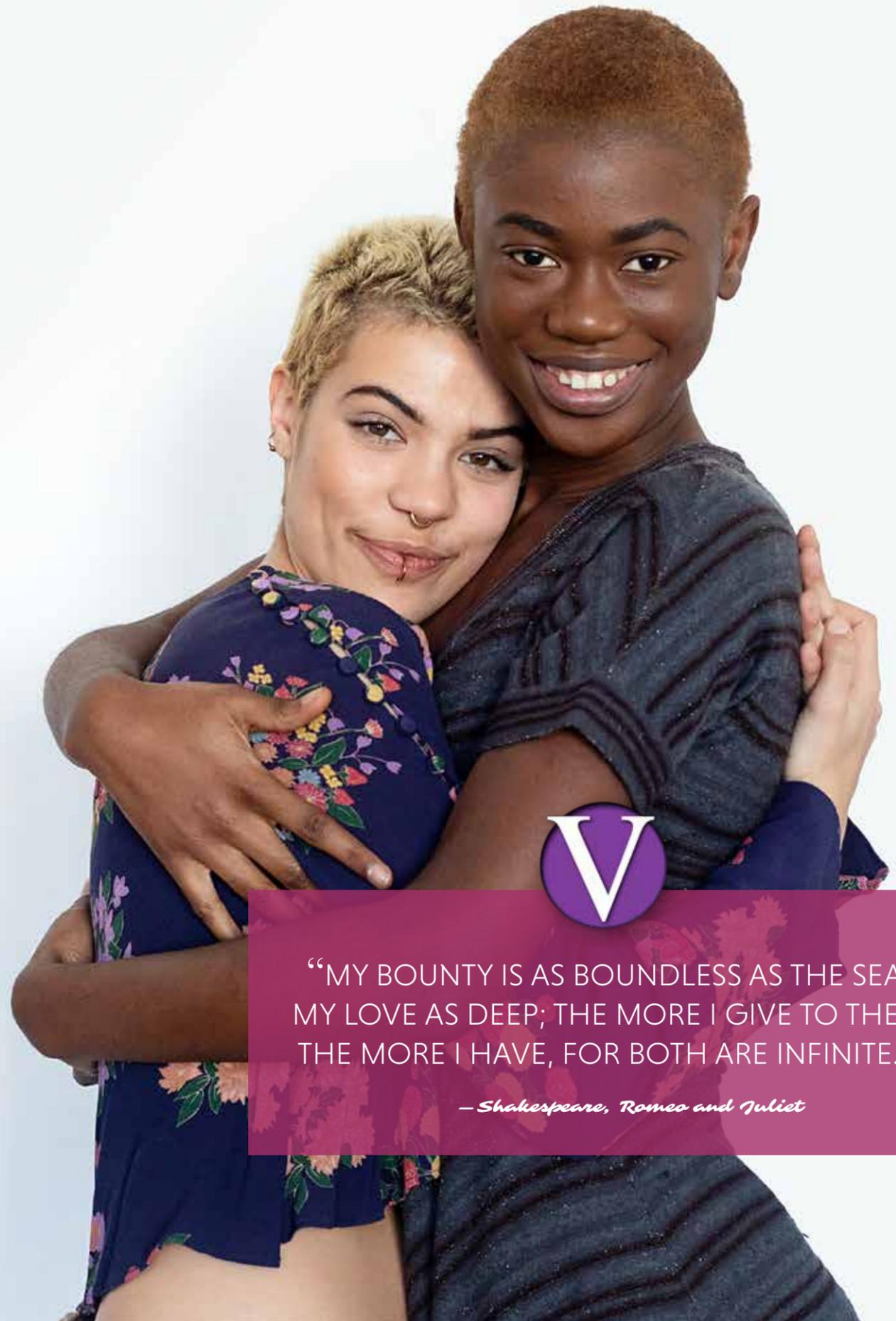
MICHELLE CUTRALI

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



TEDD LEVINE

Tedd brings more than 40 years' experience as an attorney and CPA to the discussion of matrimonial and relationship law. His insights on protecting assets in a relationship (Page 14), are based on many successful cases. In addition, he has worked in business, finance, corporate, and licensing law. He is on the Connecticut Bar and admitted to practice before the Supreme Court.



“MY BOUNTY IS AS BOUNDLESS AS THE SEA,
MY LOVE AS DEEP; THE MORE I GIVE TO THEE,
THE MORE I HAVE, FOR BOTH ARE INFINITE.”

— *Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet*

Actor Alex Ringler Is a Fashion Target

Alex Ringler never says he hasn't a thing to wear.

The Broadway and television actor-dancer-choreographer knows what a creative imagination and a heightened gay sensibility can do when one needs an outfit for a special occasion that will land a bullseye.

Ringler's latest occasion was Fire Island's annual Fourth of July "Invasion of the Pines" celebration where a ferry boatload of drag queens dressed in their most spectacular outfits from the relatively sedate community of Cherry Grove arrives at the neighboring chi-chi gay enclave where they are welcomed by throngs in thongs. For more on this, search online for the short film *Invasion of the Pines*.

This is not the first time the tall, tanned and svelte actor has slipped into stilettos, having appeared in several productions of *La Cage Aux Folles* (one at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam), *Pageant*, and the national tour of *Priscilla, Queens of the Desert*. In his most elegant drag, he's a ringer for Patrick Swayze in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. His lean, taut body has also been on playful display in eight of the annual strip-a-thons, *Broadway Bares*, which benefits Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS.

But Ringler is much more than drag. He performed on Broadway in *West Side Story*, toured in *Cats* and *A Chorus Line*, and returned to Goodspeed to play a bullwhip-cracking cowboy in *Oklahoma!* Though the pandemic curtailed work for the entertainment

community, Ringler created a witty web series, *Annoyingly Fit Neighbor*, in which he played both himself and an insufferably sweet and buff neighbor that drives him mad. The collected



Alex Ringler

five-minute episodes were featured at film festivals this year.

Ringler can also be seen in the upcoming film *Bros*, starring Billy Eichner and Luke Macfarlane which is being marketed as the first gay rom-com from a major studio with an entirely LGBTQ+ cast.

For this past Fire Island Invasion, it was Ringler's first time dressing up drag in a while. But what to wear when you don't have a glam budget...or any budget for that matter?

Inspired by the way contestants fashion extravagant outfits from

unconventional material on the many *RuPaul's Drag Race* episodes, Ringler looked at a pile of shopping bags from Target he had collected and thought: "Fabulous."

The distinctive red-and-white bulls-eye plastic bags were graphically bold, but did he have enough for an elegant summer gown he envisioned for his six-foot frame?

A few friends contributed their Target bags and soon Ringler has enough for a Met-gala-worthy gown for himself—and a matching Targeted harness and jockstrap for his boyfriend Philip which was made up of woven bag handles.

With glue gun in hand, and a few extra safety pins for good measure and security, Ringler crafted the plastic bags (made up of 40 percent recycled content) into a winning look for Lady and

Lord Target that stood out on ship and shore.

"People were pretty flabbergasted when they figured out it was made of Target shopping bags," says Ringler. It was a fun day on the party island, but he didn't expect the wave of "likes," comments and shares when he posted his bag-drag pics and clips on his social media.

Has Target contacted him yet, perhaps for its holiday marketing campaign?

"Well, kind of," says the New York-based actor. "Just this morning on my Facebook page I received a communication from them on the transformation video I just posted, saying they'd like to use this so I'm going through some channels now to see if it can be like a paid promotion for Target. I'm sure it would get a lot of hits for them, plus following Pride month, it shows they support the LGBTQ community all year round. It's good for them and good for me. But the reason I originally did it was that it wasn't about money. It was just about having fun."

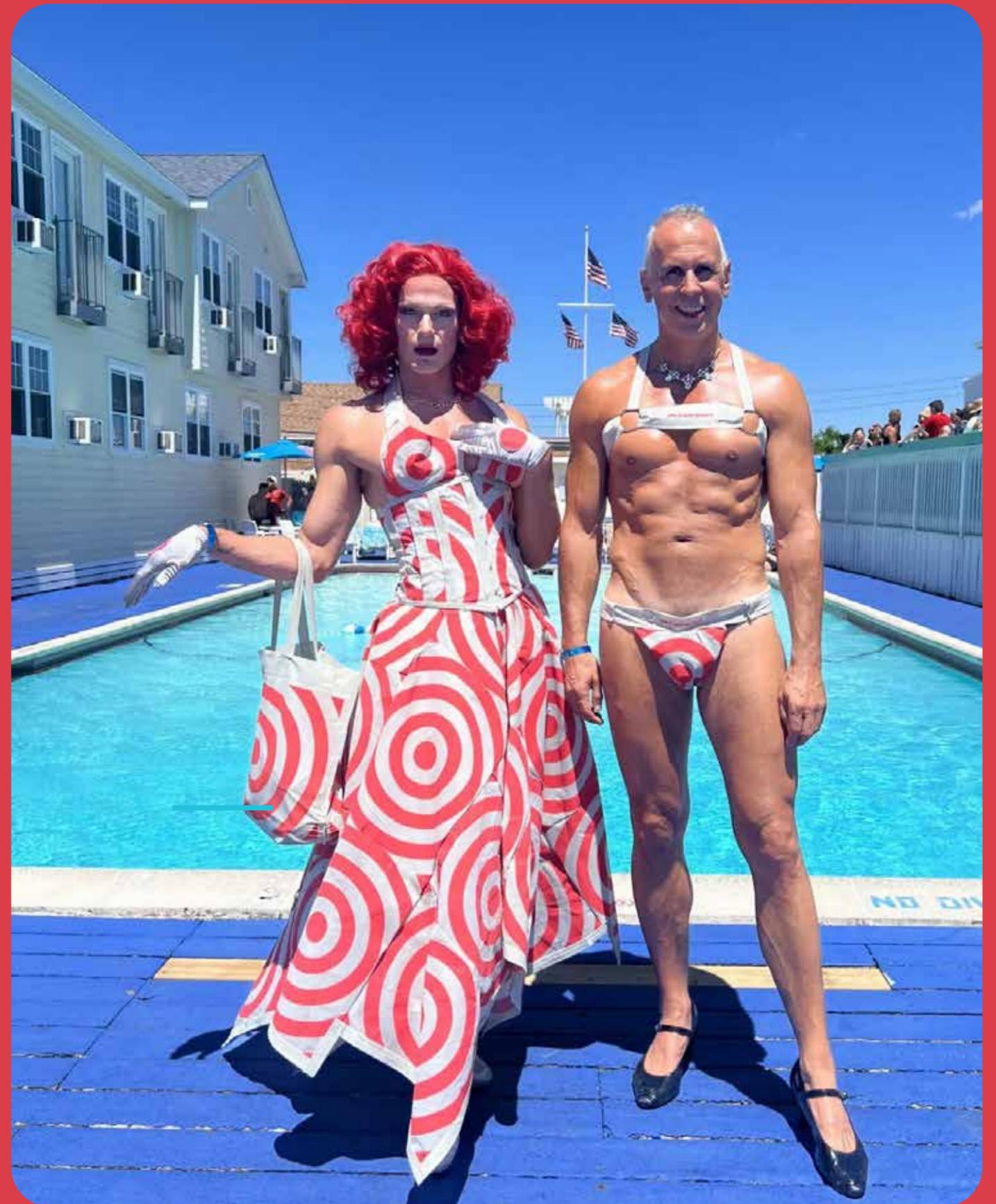
Still, one could imagine a holiday commercial campaign.

"There could be a '60s mod ready-to-wear bag dress that they could sell," he says laughing. "I could even make a little wrap to go with it."

Perhaps could Lady Target be the next spokesperson for the brand?

"Maybe I could even be the next Flo!" (The character in ads for Progressive Insurance.)

—Frank Rizzo



Amita Mehta Is Living Out Loud

THIS PROUD LESBIAN LIFE COACH PROVES ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE, BY EXAMPLE

"There's so many dimensions and intersectionality to my journey and my story," says career and leadership coach Amita Mehta, and so there are many words one could use to describe her: Only daughter to conservative parents, woman, lesbian, refugee, Indian, Amish, business strategist and CEO. Mehta's seen and done it all, from Wall Street to our streets.

"Connecticut is like a secret gem," Mehta told *CT Voice* in a recent Zoom conversation. "I often traveled there and got to work with some amazing people." Her Connecticut connections led to her landing an opportunity earlier this year, to speak at the YWCA New Britain's Biennial Women in Leadership Luncheon. *CT Voice* was a proud sponsor of the event, which drew hundreds of people to the Aqua Turf in Plantsville on May 12.

That day, Mehta delivered a powerful keynote address, including the story of how she came out to her parents during a tour of Lower Manhattan. First, she told her mother, who made her promise not to tell her father. "That, to me, was just heart wrenching to hear," she says. But not as difficult as the next words her mother said, when her dad asked them, "What do we want to do next?"

Her mom says, "Tell him!" "Tell me what?" says her dad. "In that moment, I was feeling this sense of terror and fear that I was saying goodbye to my parents," Mehta said. "And also, I felt this sense of relief and release that I was actually going to be living my truth here. And so, I'm convulsing, I'm crying. It's echoing throughout the Winter Garden and everybody scatters. I was making noises



that I never thought I had inside me."

"Are you sick?" he asked.

"I'm a lesbian," Mehta told her father. His response left her speechless: "Well, Dick Cheney's daughter is a lesbian. And you know, she's pregnant with her partner. They're having a baby."

"He asked, 'Are you happy?' And I said, 'Yes.' And that's when he said, 'Look, you're still our daughter. We love you.'"

But her mother had the last word, telling Mehta: "If you get divorced or if you break up, you're marrying an Indian man!" Unfortunately, that relationship did end in divorce, but she says she's now very happily partnered with another woman. "I like to call us 'The HinJews. She's Jewish, I'm Hindu, and now we're the HinJews!'"

Those attending the luncheon gave Mehta a rousing standing ovation when she finished, but it's what happened next that sticks with her all these months later.

"What I found interesting was having people come up to me afterwards, after the event, to say, 'Oh my gosh, I'm an immigrant,' or 'I'm a refugee,' or 'I know what it feels like to have an ally.' And so, for me, it was just an amazing experience to not only lean into who I am as a woman, a lesbian, but to be able to share the fact that I do enjoy leaning into my culture, my history, and my past."

Mehta's family enjoyed an affluent life in Uganda, until 1972, when former military ruler Idi Amin expelled them, along with 50,000 other Asians, accusing them of "milking Uganda's money."

"We landed here as refugees with no money, and we had to rely on the Head Start program for at-risk youth, to rely on the government for assistance to get back on our feet," says Mehta, who was just a child at the time.

Her parents raised Mehta and her brothers in Amish country, where the first work they could find was gluing soles on shoes. Mehta says she struggled to discover her identity as an American.

"I just wanted to be the all-American kid, so I would hide my culture or hide who I was," she says, a response to the obstacles in her way tied to her gender and her ethnicity. "I just felt like there were always these roadblocks that I would face."

To overcome those, she turned a childhood pastime into a skill that propelled her

career spanning more than two decades as an executive in financial services: Her love of sports.

"I have three brothers," who forced me to play sports so they could compete 2-on-2, says Mehta. And before long, she started to excel at sports.

"That gave me a bit of an edge relating to men, particularly in the workplace. I learned how to play golf," she says. As the only underrepresented minority working in a commercial lending department otherwise filled with white males, she learned not just how to play, but how business gets done.

Mehta says that insight helped her move up at major companies, including J.P. Morgan Chase and Prudential Financial. In her almost 25 years in financial services, she developed a reputation as a trailblazer and trusted advisor to C-Suite executives. In 2018, she launched her own consulting practice as a business strategist and career architect. Her company is AMP, which stands for Amita Mehta Possible. Say that out loud and you'll hear yourself deliver her clever tag line, "Amita Made It Possible."

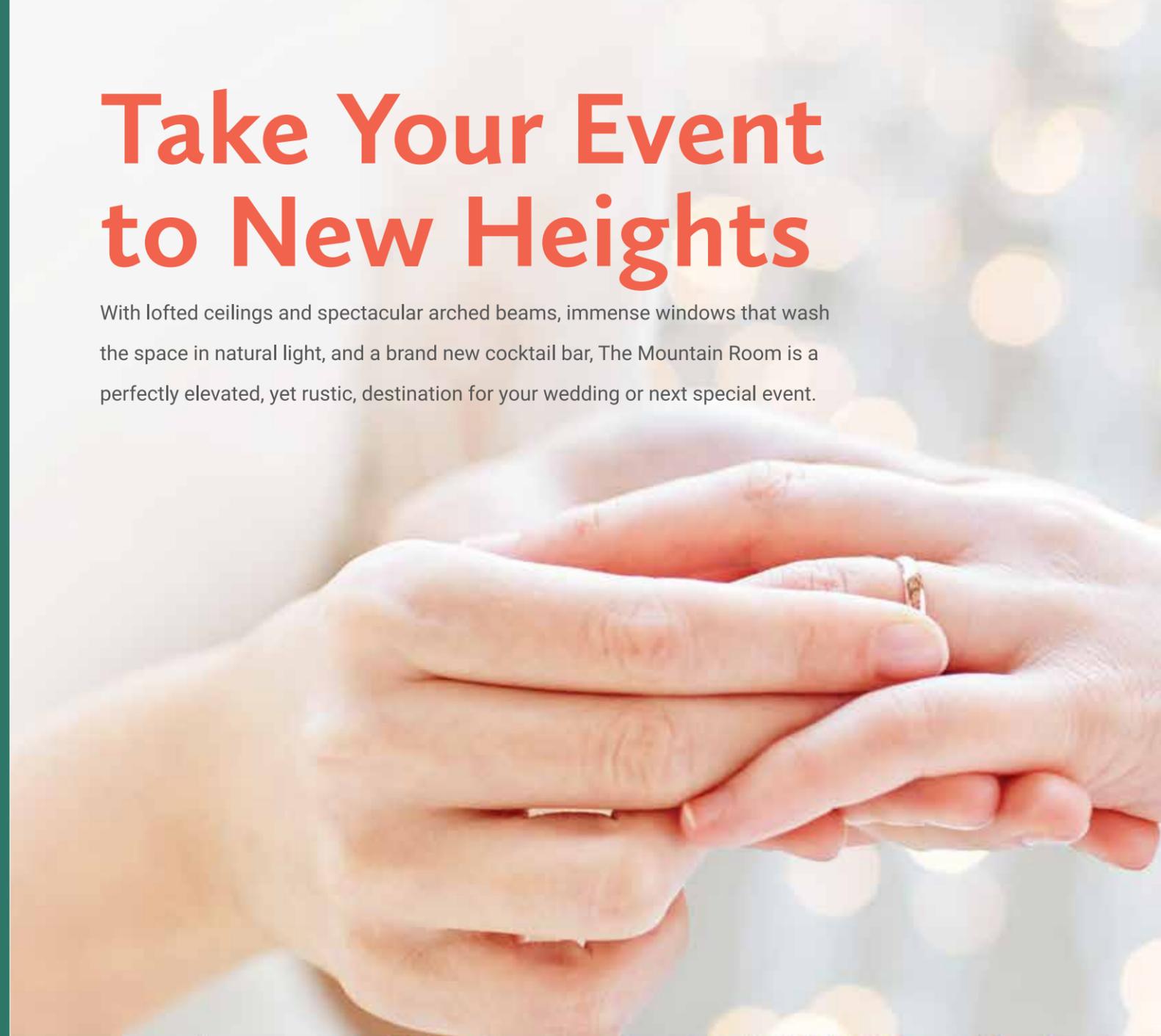
She says her expertise in diversity, equity and inclusion helps companies distinguish themselves from their competition, build sustainable bottom-line results, increase their return on investment and positively impact the communities they serve.

As CEO of AMP, Mehta helps others to find their silver linings: "Having hope and a sense of humor has served me well." 

—Dawn Ennis

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Good for Goodspeed



Since it opened its doors in 1963 on the banks of the Connecticut River in East Haddam, Goodspeed Musicals has been a theatrical mecca for Connecticut residents and theatergoers from the Northeast and beyond. Their commitment to nurturing and presenting new musicals, along with carefully thought-out revivals of classic shows—both at the magnificent Opera House and the charming Norma Terris Theatre in neighboring Chester—has earned Goodspeed two special Tony Awards, along with the loyal patronage of subscribers and first-time visitors alike. *Connecticut Voice* recently spoke with David R. Byrd, a Connecticut arts veteran who was appointed the theater's managing director in 2021, about Goodspeed's mission, its commitment to LGBTQ+ patrons, and its innovative programming, which includes the upcoming world premiere musical *Christmas in Connecticut*, based on the 1945 film starring Barbara Stanwyck, debuting in November.

CV: What do you think is Goodspeed's primary role in

the CT artistic community?

DB: We see ourselves as a leader of this artistic community by always serving our mission of presenting the highest quality musicals, whether they be revivals—or what I call “revivals”—or whether we are fostering new work and new talent. In addition, part of our role as an artistic leader is to serve all the community; we need to represent a plurality of voices on and off the stage. In every way possible, we want Goodspeed to be as open and affirming a place as it possibly can be. We want it to be a space where everyone can be authentically who they are. That means, for example, we have those conversations about which pronouns people use, which some people don't understand.

CV: Tell me what Goodspeed specifically does to interact with all members of the local population, as well as any special efforts to attract LBTGQ+ visitors?

DB: It's also important that our audiences don't see coming to the theater as a barrier. People need to feel comfortable here; we try to make it clear you don't need to wear a bowtie to

sit in the audience. Seeing younger folks come to into theater, many for the first time, is really great, and we try to encourage that through our programming. And as we navigate through this pandemic, I hope we can do more events for the LGBTQ+ audience, like special nights out.

CV: Can you talk about what decisions go into programming a season?

DB: It is a long, thoughtful process, with the goal of creating a well-rounded season artistically. We work far in advance; we often think two or three seasons ahead, but our plans often shift at the last minute. Sometimes, we take on a musical we really want to revisit, and sometimes a great project comes to us, unsolicited. We have even started commissioning new work—and, believe me, it can take a long time to create a show from the ground up. It's always about what stories do we want to tell, while needing to serve both our subscribers and the community at large. And it's also about reminding ourselves that sometimes the biggest risk turns out to be the biggest success. Remember, many years ago, that show about a little red-headed girl (*Annie*) was just some new show we put on.

CV: Can you talk more about balancing your subscription base with attracting new audiences?

DB: Naturally, a lot of our programming has to do with keeping our subscribers happy. We have patrons who have been around for almost all our 60 years, and they take pride in their long tenure. But we still need to attract new people to grow and diversify. It's one reason we produced *Cabaret*, earlier this year; we

knew there are people who know the show and would want to see it again, and we knew there would be people coming to Goodspeed for first time because they wanted to see this particular show. In fact, 20 percent of the audiences at *Cabaret* were newcomers. It would be deadly for us to only cater to one group of people.

CV: Tell me about how *Christmas in Connecticut* came about and how you think audiences will react to it?

DB: People are already responding to it! The creators had been working on the show and reached out to us, so Donna Lynn Hilton, our artistic director, and I attended a reading in New York City. We found it to be incredibly charming, funny, and a natural fit for our fourth slot this season, which hadn't been filled. Believe it or not, I didn't know the film when I went to the reading. However, not long after that, my husband Jeff and I got on a plane to visit some family, and it was available, which was the first time I watched it. I think the show is a great musical comedy and will be a fun and cheery way for everyone to spend the holidays.

Christmas in Connecticut runs from November 18 to December 30 at Goodspeed Opera House, 6 Main Street, East Haddam, CT 06423. Ticket prices range from \$30-\$76, and can be purchased at goodspeed.org. or by calling 860-873-8668. 📍

—Brian Scott Lipton

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Taking Steps to Prevent Youth Suicide

Data shows LGBTQ+ teens are at greater risk of suicide in the past three years, and the risk keeps growing. This is according to a new study from The Trevor Project published earlier this year. The survey tracked responses from nearly 35 thousand young people ages 13-24 in the U.S., deemed eligible by the researchers and were unique to the LGBTQ+ experience.

Of the responders, 75 percent said they had felt anxiety in the past year. Sixty-one percent experienced symptoms of depression. Eighty-two percent wanted mental health care related to their identities, but 60 percent of those were unable to get it. They also reported physical threats and intimidation related to their identities and gender expression at high rates—nearly 40 percent in some cases. Most tellingly, more than 45 percent of all LGBTQ+ teens considered suicide in the past year, and 20 percent of transgender and nonbinary young people considered it. Moreover, rates were higher among youth of color in all categories. Significantly, the numbers among LGBTQ+ youth are significantly higher than youth in any other demographic group, defined by race and ethnicity.

September is suicide prevention month, and it's an important time to be mindful of the need for care for both young people and everyone. According to the CDC, all suicides in the U.S. increased

more than 30 percent between 2000 and 2020.

Jennifer A. Rumboldt, vice president regional operations officer for Worcester and Northwestern MA for TD Bank, is a strong advocate for attention—and seeking care. She heads up the LGBTQ+ group at the bank for the region, and notes that they are paying particular attention to suicide prevention among LGBTQ+ people, an area in which they haven't been active previously. She has experienced the loss and tragedy firsthand:

"I lost my daughter to suicide eight years ago, and she was a member of the LGBTQ+ community. So I really wanted to spearhead something around prevention and awareness for others, but certainly recognizing what were up against in today's world.

"With the shutdown and the pandemic, people's lives have changed. Outside groups that were able to support our LGBTQ+ youth have shut down, or were limited and may not even operate at all."

She adds that she didn't want people to be afraid or nervous about talking about these issues and that it's important to educate people, particularly about warning signs, which in her case she didn't see.

Mostly, she wants people to know that there is help out there for people who are struggling, and the good news is that the Trevor

Project study also found that the risk of suicide or other self-harm among LGBTQ+ youth in supportive environments—whether at school, home, or work—was significantly reduced.

And there are many places to get help. In July, the FCC began a new mental health hotline. Simply dialing 988 will put callers in touch with the Suicide & Crisis Hotline. The Biden administration has invested more than \$400 million in expanding crisis centers and other mental health systems to support this effort. In Connecticut, callers can also dial 211 to be put in touch directly with a caseworker who can help them. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.afsp.org) has a range of services on their site, including listings for special services for LGBTQ+ people, seniors, and veterans.

Prevention, however, begins on an interpersonal level. Providing a supportive environment for LGBTQ+ youth, allowing them to communicate their concerns, and seeking professional treatment are all essential. Young people who have close personal relationships are also at lower risk for suicide or self-harm. September is a good time to make ourselves aware of what we can do—but we need to be engaged all year.

You can access the entire Trevor Project study online at www.thetrevorproject.org.

—Christopher Byrne

Tying the Knot? Tie Down the Legal Issues

Getting married? Living together? Together apart? (An established practice in The Netherlands where people are in committed relationships but don't cohabitate.) Each of the choices we make in our relationships has personal, financial, and legal implications.

In these columns, we have focused primarily on the legal implications of the choices that are made. The question this month is what are the pros and cons of getting married. Since the Obergefell ruling in 2015 that requires all states to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and recognize valid same-sex marriages from any jurisdiction, the question of whether or not to marry has taken on new importance for couples, as what had been mere symbolic ceremonies had no legal standing. Now they do. Any couple considering marriage should plan carefully—and do the hard work of looking at their individual situations before tying the knot. No, these aren't always easy conversations, but we have seen time and time again (and with any contract to be honest), doing one's best to anticipate what may lie ahead and addressing any potential issues generally results in a happier outcome for everyone. A few hours spent in what is decidedly an unromantic conversation, can free you up to experience romance more fully.

Certainly, there are all the social benefits of

marriage, which can include emotional security, a public commitment to another person, the support of family and friends, a stable environment for children, and, in some cases, a political statement. Many of these can be established without a legal marriage, as well, but for many they are important reasons to get married.

From practical and legal perspectives, in addition to building a life together, couples can build wealth together. Connecticut is an "equitable distribution" state and an "all-property state," which basically means that all property is marital property, unless there is a prenup (or postnup) agreement, which, in most cases will be honored by the courts. The advantage is that couples can make joint decisions regarding work, childcare, income, etc. with an added level of security. There are also tax advantages relating to marriage and how income is combined, which can contribute to your long-term financial planning. Always consult a tax advisor as you look into how these issues apply to you.

Marriage also makes it easier to deal with the death of a spouse. For example, property-transfer taxes—estate and gift taxes—don't apply when transferring your property to your spouse, although they do come into play when property is transferred between unmarried couples. Plus, there are government benefits that apply to married couples, including Social

Security, and unpaid leave to care for family members.

Because marriage has only been available on a widespread basis throughout the U.S. to same-sex couples for just over seven years, many couples who choose to marry have had established lives before saying "I do." There may be previous marriages, children, and a host of other concerns or issues. (Some of these apply to later marriages for straight couples as well.) Particularly where there are blended families, you'll want to speak to your accountant and lawyer about setting up trusts to ensure that assets are transferred consistent with the parties' wishes when one spouse dies or becomes legally incapacitated. For instance, you may want to ensure your spouse is cared for throughout their life, but on their death, remaining assets should be distributed to your own family members. All of this is feasible; however, it takes time and attention to set it up.

From a legal perspective, the downside is that when you have combined two lives, a divorce, should that happen, makes things more difficult to unwind. As noted, Connecticut is an "equitable distribution" state, with a very broad division of what constitutes property. Also, as an "all property" state, all property may be divided, even if it is only in one spouse's name, or if it was owned prior to the marriage. Some states, however, such as New York, recognize separate property claims. You'll want to consult a



Attorney Ted Levine

lawyer who specializes in this field, but among the assets that will have to be divided are real estate, inheritances, businesses, pensions, and other investments.

One thing you will want to do is preserve all records prior to and throughout your marriage—whether it's investments, who paid for what and so forth. Having a record of all of this will be very helpful, and perhaps determinative, if you are looking at dividing property.

Once you get all of this established, you can turn your attention to issues such as where are you going to spend Thanksgiving, or what kind of vacation do you want to take, or setting healthy boundaries around visiting with in-laws. All of that comes with marriage as well.

Finally, as we've said in other columns, because people change and grow over time, it's important to revisit your agreements and adapt as situations change. Being responsible to your legal and financial well-being is as important as any other element of your marriage. 

—Tedd S. Levine, Esq.

DISCLAIMER: The information provided in the column does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal advice, or be relied upon in any legal matter. Instead, all information in this article is for general information purposes only. You should always contact your lawyer for additional advice based on your individual situation.



First Choice Health Centers' location dedicated to LGBTQ+ health has re-opened for in-person medical visits.

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WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

Porn's Not Going Anywhere. Let's Talk About It!

Did you know that 73 percent of women and 95 percent of men report using porn in the last six months? It's true, according to a 2016 study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. The age at which people are first exposed to porn is quite young, too. The American Psychological Association reports that the average age was 13 among men (porn use among women and nonbinary individuals is not as well studied). Most of these first encounters with porn were reported to be accidental, but a third reported accessing pornography intentionally.

Based on these numbers, it's clear that the majority of people view porn at some point in their lives, and many, fairly regularly. So why don't we talk about it more? Porn is a subject that many parents feel uncomfortable talking about with kids and may be unsure how to even approach it. Adults, too, have difficulty talking about porn, even within close relationships with friends or partners. This can lead to feelings of guilt, as well as unhealthy attitudes toward sex. So, let's talk about it here!

Porn literacy, is, in short, being able to think critically about pornography. UConn PhD candidate Rachael Farina, LMFT, compares using porn to driving a car. Both activities carry risk and can potentially result in negative outcomes. Just like learning

to drive, learning to use porn safely can reduce one's risk of harm.

Some people like to gloss over or ignore the risks associated with pornography, but it's important to acknowledge them so we can address them. Age of first exposure is closely associated with bad outcomes. Doctoral student Alyssa Bischmann, co-author of the APA study mentioned earlier, states that "...the younger a man was when he first viewed pornography, the more likely he was to want power over women." (Interestingly, the older men were the first time they viewed porn, the more likely they were to adhere to what we think of as more promiscuous masculine norms.)

Much of the evidence on whether porn is "good" or "bad" is inconclusive. Some studies say it leads to higher relationship satisfaction; others say the opposite. Others say that it leads to increased safer sex behaviors, and some say it's associated with less condom use. To me, this suggests that the effects of porn are largely individual. It depends on a person's unique personality, sexual preferences, porn of choice, and even brain makeup. Thus, it's all the more important to develop the tools we need to use



SEX TALK

With Kim Adamski

porn safely and critically. The earlier we start talking about healthy sexuality, and by addressing porn in a timely manner with our kids, the more likely we are to approach porn in a healthy way.

So how do we help our kids (and ourselves) become porn literate? It's all about asking questions. Why do we like the porn we like? Is it realistic? If not, what about it isn't? How are performers of different genders portrayed? How can the porn we watch affect our expectations of sex and gender? When we start thinking critically about porn, we can make informed

decisions on what kind of porn we watch and how we use it, if we use it at all. We can also evaluate how it affects our sexual selves, and if it's affecting us negatively, take steps to address that.

Porn use is just like any other facet of sexuality. We have our preferences and habits. Some are positive, some neutral, and some negative. Porn literacy can help us identify the habits that cause us harm, and work to change them for the better. 🍆

—Kim Adamski

Parenting and Parentage

Becoming parents has special challenges for LGBTQ+ communities. Yet, that doesn't stop people from planning, starting or adding to their families, and it's getting easier and clearer in Connecticut, thanks to the Connecticut Parentage Act, which went into effect in January of this year.

While older members of the LGBTQ+ communities chose not to have children or raise families, a 2019 study by Family Equality found that 63 percent of LGBTQ+ millennials ages 18-35 planned to start or expand a family in the next few years. Of those, 63 percent plan to use assisted reproductive care, fostering, or adoption, compared to older people for whom the majority of children were conceived through intercourse.

Helping families, whether or not they identify as LGBTQ+, has been the mission of the Center for Advanced Reproductive Services, based in Farmington with offices in Hartford, New London and Branford. Established in 1983, the Center has been responsible for just over 17,000 live births, according to CEO Paul Verrastro. Of those, approximately 2,000 have been to LGBTQ+ individuals, though he adds that the Center has only been tracking LGBTQ+ parents as a separate group for the last decade.

The Center serves many LGBTQ+ people, he says: "Single people, gay male couples, lesbians, and transgender people at various points in their transition." They offer in-vitro fertilization (the only option for men) or intrauterine insemination, and option for lesbian and trans people. He adds that most lesbian use reciprocal IVF where one partner pro-



vides the egg and the other carries the child so there will be a biological connection to both parents.

Whatever method people select, Verrastro is eager for everyone to understand the ramifications of the Parentage Act and how it serves LGBTQ+ communities. He says, "Connecticut has always been LGBTQ+ friendly, even if it hasn't meant to be. In the early 90s, we were the first to recognize sperm donation as a legitimate way to build a family. In the early 2000s, we were also the first to pass legislation to recognize the gestational carrier, another word for surrogate."



Paul Verrastro

These moves were mainly designed to support heteronormative parenting, but they benefitted LGBTQ+ people as well. To that end,

Verrastro says, it's essential for people who are considering becoming parents to be informed about the act and its benefits.

"The beauty of the act," he says, "is that when the child is born in the hospital, the parents or parents are able to complete an 'Acknowledgement of Parenthood.' It has removed gender as an assumption as to who is the parent of the child, and it has removed the number of parents.

"In the past, it was automatically assumed that all kids had two parents and that they were a mom and a dad. Now, at the time the child is born—prior to completing the birth certificate—they can choose the parent." Verrastro notes that this form has streamlined the process of parenthood significantly. The Acknowledgement of Parenthood is a legally binding form. Previously, the prospective parents would have to go to the courts to obtain a pre-birth order, and allow the child to be born. At that time, the woman delivering the child would be the parent on the birth certificate, and the other parent would have to do a post-birth adoption.

Over and above the legal advantages, there are emotional benefits as well. Because parents can be legally ac-

knowledged from birth, they achieve a level of equality and legitimacy as parents that cannot be questioned. This can be essential for practical matters as medical decisions, insurance, inheritance, and preserving parental rights should a couple ultimately separate. The intangible benefit is that the family is recognized by the state as equal to traditional, heterosexual couples.

Since it only went into effect this year, Verrastro says that they are still educating people about the parentage act and what it means. Verrastro himself identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and the Center is currently undergoing the accreditation process for the Healthy Equality Index, which Verrastro describes as a seal of approval for policies, training, use of preferred pronouns, new names, genders, and new genders. All of these are established practices of the Center.

Verrastro says the door is always open for prospective parents seeking advice. The Center's website (www.uconnfertility.com) also includes a dedicated section with comprehensive information for LGBTQ+ individuals exploring building their families. 

—Christopher Byrne

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College Funding – Where do we begin?

The mere thought of funding a college education can be completely overwhelming for some families. College costs continue to escalate and a college education is a necessity for many career paths. Then there's the challenge and competitive nature of application and acceptance. Finally, figuring out how to pay for college has been the cause of many sleepless nights. Parents and kids very often feel a lot of stress around this process. Parents especially because figuring out how to pay for college and limiting long-term debt is one more thing they feel they should be doing for their kids.

There are merit scholarships available but finding one that covers all the costs is rare. In fact, most financial aid will be determined by family financial need. Saving for college can be a big part of a family's financial plan—even if that

first day is years off. Fortunately, there are smart ways to do this.

Let's start with the easy CT 529 College Savings Plan—CHET. CHET is a great way to start investing in your child's college fund with no minimum deposit. You can fund it monthly, quarterly or whenever you have some extra cash. Sick of your relatives giving short-lived toys for holidays and birthdays? Just have them write that check out to CHET instead!

Let's talk about the benefits of the CHET account, beginning with my favorite, Tax-Deduction! Connecticut families can deduct up to \$10,000 from their state taxable income per account per year. This only gets better, funds taken out of the CHET for college-funding purposes are completely TAX-FREE (my favorite words).

The great Nutmeg State allows you to put up to \$300,000 into your child's CHET plan. Let's say you have a child prodigy and "they" get that elusive full ride scholarship, not to worry, you can transfer a 529 CHET plan to a sibling and/or parent to fund their higher education costs. On the contrary, your child may grow up to be a business entrepreneur and you would like to take the funds in the CHET plan to support their endeavor, not to worry, you can do that too, but you WILL pay taxes on the gains in the account.

CHET offers several investment options including ones that automatically rebalance your assets to become less risky as your child gets older. You do not need any investment knowledge to enroll in this plan because the CHET comes with its own investment options and is a 'set-it and forget-it' college education fund.

It's free to open a CHET account, but there are always costs to investing. Each account carries a total annual asset-based fee that is made up of mutual fund, program management and administration fees. The annual fee is anywhere from 0.11 percent to 0.99 percent and is deducted from your account balance. You should speak to a financial advisor, like me, to determine your best option and see how investment fees may affect your CHET plan over the long haul.

For more information on the Connecticut Higher Education Trust, search "CT Chet" online to be taken directly to the CT portal with all the information on the program. 

— Michelle Cutrali
contributed to this article.

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



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FASHION //

LEATHER WEATHER

BY BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Leather? I hardly even know her. Actually, that's not true for most of us. Especially as temperatures begin to cool down,

we consciously make leather an essential part of our daily wardrobes. The cotton t-shirts, the canvas sneakers, the Target bags we now use as our everyday totes get pushed to the back of closet as we relish the opportunity to drape ourselves once again in cowhide and lambskin, which are not only luxurious, durable and fashionable—but just right for the nippy breezes of autumn or even the chilly winds of winter.

Moreover, while we may replenish a piece or two (or three) each fall—either for fun or from necessity—the fact remains that many of us have leather goods that we sport year after year, if not decade after decade. (Personally, I still treasure—and wear—an Italian-made leather jacket I purchased in the Berkshires more than 20 years ago!)

“In an era of disposable fashion, consumers understand that leather goods not only stand the test of time, but they also provide a timeless approach to building a closet of core items that is the ultimate expression of sustainability,” notes Mark Kohlenberg, CEO of Moral Code



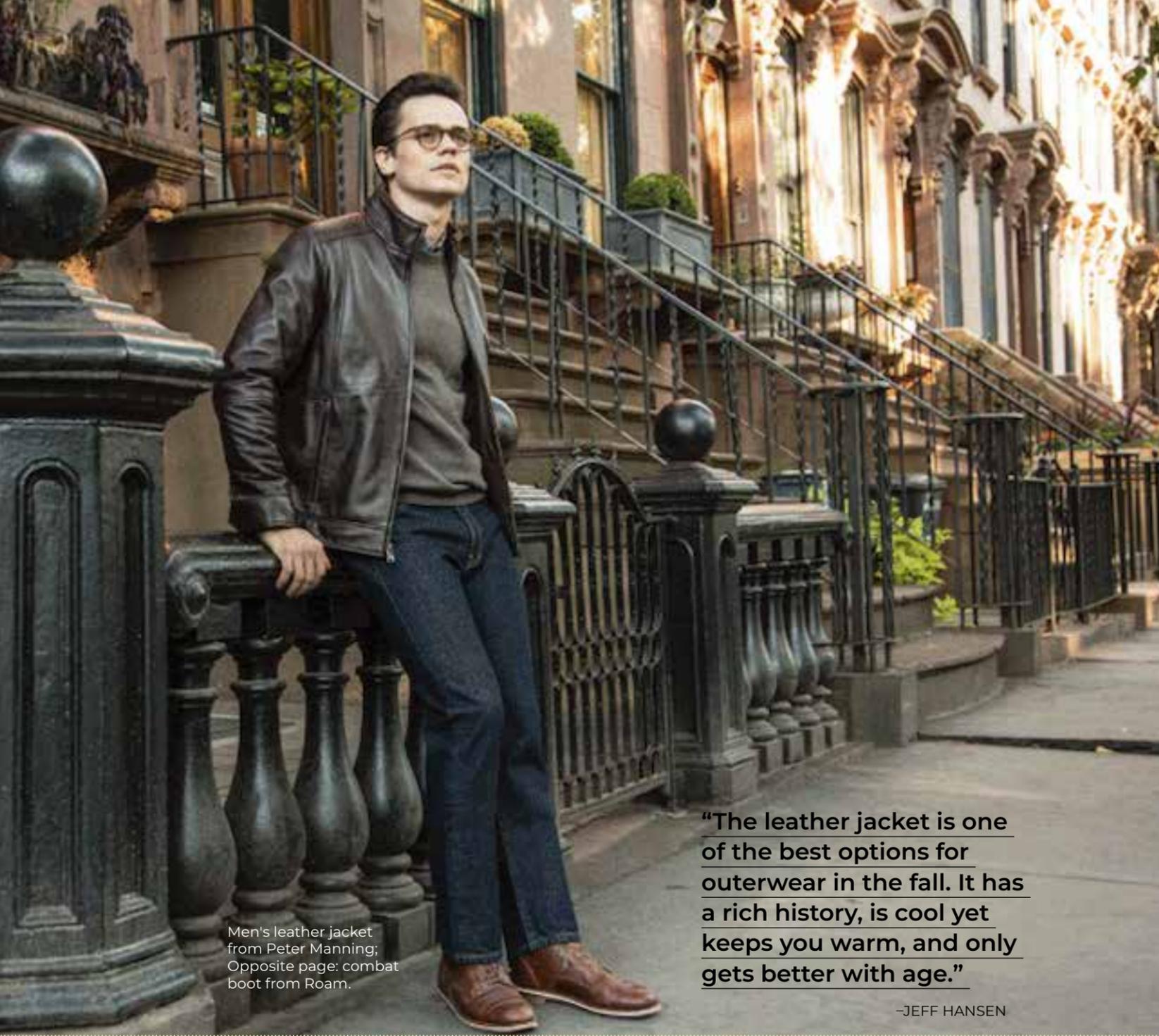
Red patent leather jacket from Diesel

“The continuing popularity of well-made leather goods is the main reason why our family-owned company has been satisfying customers generation after generation. Our jackets and bags never go out of style.”

—JOSE-NOEL ROCHA



Men's leather jacket from J.L. Rocha



Men's leather jacket from Peter Manning; Opposite page: combat boot from Roam.

"The leather jacket is one of the best options for outerwear in the fall. It has a rich history, is cool yet keeps you warm, and only gets better with age."

—JEFF HANSEN

and Milwaukee Boot Company.

Adds Jose-Noel Rocha, marketing director of California-based luxury leather goods maker J.L. Rocha: "The continuing popularity of well-made leather goods is the main reason why our family-owned company has been satisfying customers generation after generation. Our jackets and bags never go out of style."

Indeed, the perfect leather jacket remains the most desirable item for consumers. "The leather jacket is one of

the best options for outerwear in the fall," says Jeff Hansen, co-founder and CEO of Peter Manning NYC. "It has a rich history, is cool yet keeps you warm, and only gets better with age. Indeed, choosing a jacket made from high-quality leather is critical for both its look and feel, as well as its ability to age properly."

Adds Ralph Auriemma, creative director at Paul Stuart: "Beautiful leather is a material that I'm always drawn to. In fact, I've always thought that a leather

jacket, whether it's a bomber jacket or a motorcycle jacket, is an essential element of a well-dressed man's wardrobe. That's why, when I'm designing my collections each season, I always make sure to include at least one style of leather jacket."

Still, more than ever before, leather is being used for a variety of apparel, including shirts, pants, dresses, and vests. These pieces are now targeted to consumers of all ages and all genders;

LET OTHERS WEAR LEATHER

Not surprisingly, there are plenty of environmentally conscious consumers who opt not to wear (or eat) animal products on moral grounds. Fortunately, they have plenty of options that allow them to remain fashion-forward, especially when it comes to footwear and accessories. Indeed, independent brand Georgie & Lou, recently created a special vegan leather bag for women who play pickleball, one of America's fastest growing sports.

"Women who want to sport non-leather handbags can search for a variety of materials," says Emily Blumenthal, author of "Handbag Designer 101" and founder of The Handbag Awards and National Handbag Designer Day. "There are bags made from Desserto, which is cactus leather. Another option is looking for bags made from "Leatherette" which is the nouveau version of faux leather. Or you can also search for bags made from a variety of materials like seatbelts and plastic bottles."



ROAM has made great strides by creating a line of vegan leather footwear that is popular with many women. "I have personally been a vegan/vegetarian for the majority of my life and choose to not harm to animals," notes company founder Kay Sides. "That is why at ROAM, we choose to cause as little harm as possible by using in-market vegan materials. What that specifically means is that we don't mill additional fabrication each season. We'd rather be part of the solution than add to the constant issue of waste in our society."

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leather is no longer just for the rock 'n' roll generation or the Hollywood elite—though you may be mistaken for a movie star or pop music icon while wearing the stunning offerings by such designers as diverse as Rudsak, Frame, Salvatore Ferragamo and Diesel.

“Rudsak’s leather products create a feeling of uniqueness, and allow their users to feel powerful, glamorous and confident,” says a spokesperson for the Canadian-based outerwear brand.

Unsurprisingly, today, leather is most often found on one’s feet, in everything from clunky-yet-cool boots from Dr. Martens to sleek dress shoes by Florsheim to stylish yet comfortable sneakers made by everyone from Adidas to premium unisex brand Culture of Brave. Says Michelle Wray, the latter company’s co-founder. “There is nothing as durable as leather, which is why so many of our customers wear our sneakers year after year—and keep buying more.”

The same philosophy applies to both men’s and women’s accessories from wallets to handbags to gloves. Says Robert Ettinger, CEO of London-based accessories brand Ettinger. “Leather has different grains and finishes and a huge assortment of

colors, making it ideal for both for men and women who are seeking to enhance their wardrobes through their accessories. At the end of the day, no material made by man can match the versatility and feel of leather.”

Leather purse from Angela Valentine, leather boots from Dr. Maartens women's coat by Rusdak.



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Connecticut's Colleges and Universities Welcome back LGBTQ+ Students

What's changed and what still needs to be changed to make everyone feel welcome

BY DAWN ENNIS

Autumn always brings change, not just to trees and temperatures but to our lives. Across Connecticut this year, the season's fall colors appear ever more vibrant as the backdrop for more and more rainbow flags popping up on our college and university campuses.

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ tell *CT Voice* these varied symbols of Pride send a message: "You matter. You're an essential and integral part of campus life. You are welcome here."

"You see the world differently, as a queer person, versus as a straight person,"

said 19-year-old Mellody Massaquoi, a junior studying social work at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, where an out gay man, Joe Bertolino, is president.

They talked about how, as a Black bisexual person, intersectionality is respected on campus.

"I can't really leave my Blackness at the door, especially if I enter queer spaces," Massaquoi said. "It's not that I'm just bisexual. It's not that I'm queer, I'm also Black. And that experience still matters. Especially when we look at different spaces and how straightness is accepted while queerness is not. I'm very fortunate at Southern that there are queer spaces, like the SAGE Center and Prism."

The SAGE Center is committed to

providing a positive academic, cultural, and social environment for Southern's LGBTQ+ community and Prism is an undergraduate student club dedicated to boosting educational awareness of the wide variety of sexualities and identities across the SCSU campus.

Those kind of safe havens for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer students have become as common as STEM and the model U.N. clubs at universities.

"When I graduated high school in 2013, people were accepting of gay people. But it wasn't as it is today," said Angelo Virone, a graduate student at St. Joseph's University in West Hartford. "Now there's online social media influencers who are gay, TV shows, books. There are a million

different examples of representation, and I think that kind of brought us into the mainstream and made it way more accepting. I wish I grew up in that era," he said.

Growing up in an immigrant family, Virone said his teen years were challenging in having to confront "traditional Italian values" as a young, out gay man who wasn't looking for a wife. The Avon resident is now 26 and celebrated his first wedding anniversary with his husband this past summer. His parents took a while, he said, but they came around eventually.

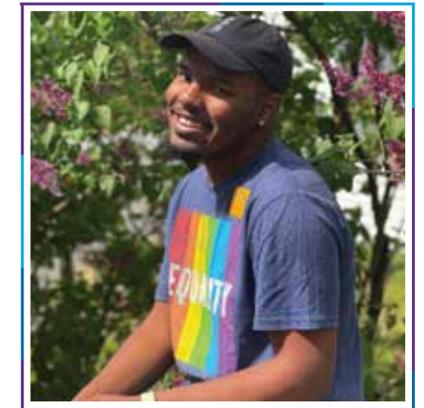
"Just thinking about the difference from when I came out," Virone said. "I remember my mom being at my wedding, crying and being so happy. She considers my husband another one of her sons."

What may surprise some is the acceptance Virone said he has found on the campus of his Roman Catholic-run university, St. Joe's.



Mellody Massaquoi, a Southern Connecticut State University Junior.

TIMOTHY PRINCE, CLASS OF 2022



"I became president of the Gender Sexuality Awareness Club, captain of United We Step, and a member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council. All of my UB student experiences have made me the successful student leader that I am today."

WWW.BRIDGEPORT.EDU/LEARNMORE

"That was like one of the things that I was hesitant about. I was worried that it was going to be more of a religious focus, teaching that 'homosexuality is a sin,' and all that kind of stuff with the Catholic religion. But I was surprised," said Virone, who is studying for his master's degree in school counseling and will graduate in the spring.

"St. Joe's has been nothing but accepting and amazing," he said. "All the professors are just so kind, especially when I talk about my husband. I don't feel like I have to keep that a secret or anything like that. I definitely think that there's been a lot of growth in society that made it way more accepting to be gay."

A gay student working on his bachelor's degree in management at the University of Hartford's Barney School of Business asked that we not use his real name for this story, because although he is out on campus, he's not out to his family back home in the Greater Hartford area. So, for the purposes of this article, we're calling him Miguel Antonio. This semester, the 19-year-old has taken the reins of a campus affinity group for LGBTQ+ students and allies and connected with both queer faculty as well as other students in the community. "I've made some really strong, lasting friendships," he said.

Making those connections, Antonio said, is harder for LGBTQ+ students than their straight classmates.

"Definitely, but only because society forces a lot of us to live in ways that hide our true identities. It's harder to find



Angelo Virone, a graduate student at St. Joseph's University

"My high school experience was really the height of the 'That's So Gay' Era. *Brokeback Mountain* was coming out when I was in high school, and no one from the LGBTQ community likes that movie. But anyway, it was a longstanding tradition that you waited to come out until you went away to college," said Towers.

"I got death threats under my door," he recalled about what happened after coming out in his first year of college. "It was just because people thought that I was looking at them in the shower. It was not me. I was way too terrified to do that. It took me a long time to be comfortable saying that I was a gay man."

Fast forward to 2022, and Towers said he considers himself very lucky that he is a gay man. "And why I feel lucky about that is because everyone knows what that is. Everyone understands. They may not agree with it. They may think it's a sin, but they know what a gay man is. They get it. And they accept that it's a thing," said Towers.

In addition to gays, lesbians and bisexuals, the students of today who he counsels identify as transgender,

nonbinary and other students who are gender nonconforming. "For so many of our college students, they're kind of breaking the mold and they are and often creating their own new identities and new labels that, not only do they have to fight to express themselves, and to have the courage to come out, but then they have to continuously justify that what they come out as is even a thing. That's a whole new level of unfair."

Massaquoi made a point about how trans students feel that unfairness now more than ever, as some lesbians and gays have raised their voices to take the "T" out of "LGBTQ."

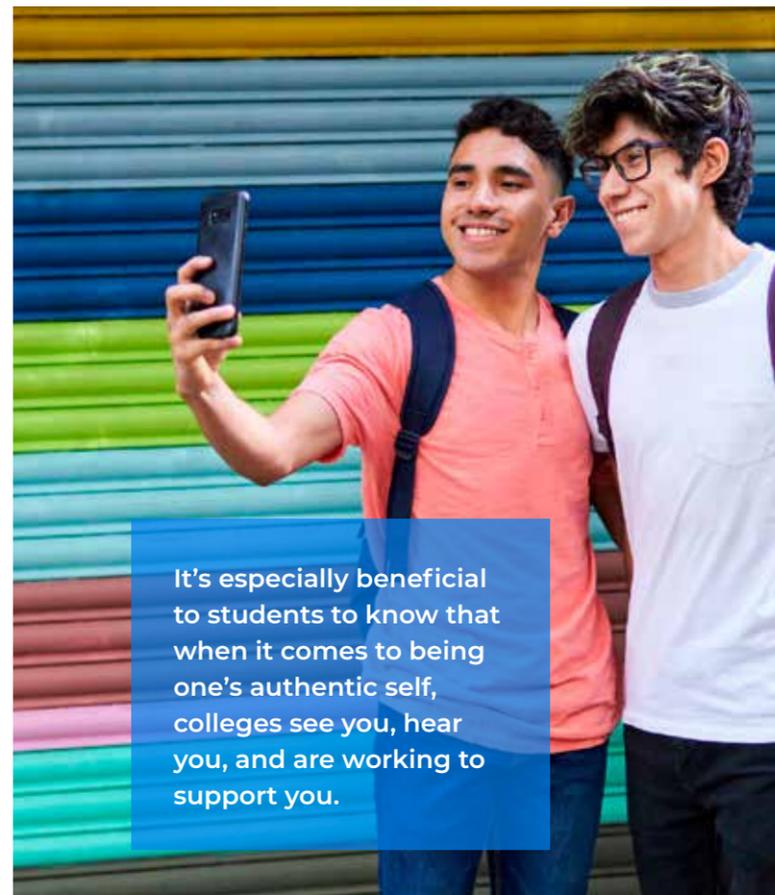
"We're all a community, we're all family, we're all together in this, and you can't just separate," they said. "I feel like a lot of people just pretend, like, 'Oh, we could just cherry pick who we want.' No, they're still part of this community and we still love them because they are part of this community as well."

"Definitely," Antonio added. "Nonbinary people, trans people should be considered a part of a community."

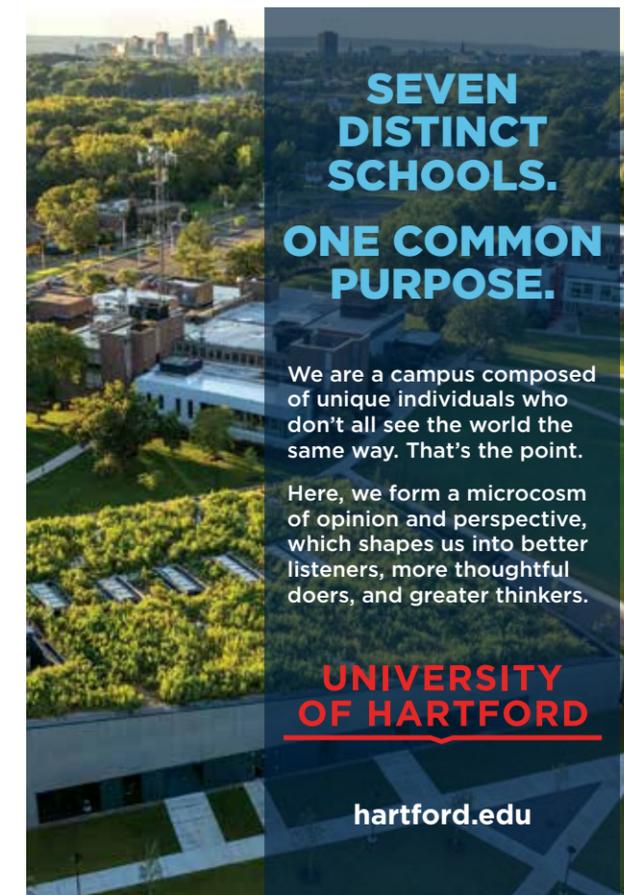
At Bridgeport University, Provost

other people who are like you or other people in the community," he said. "But it has been easier at UHart to find my tribe than it has been in other places."

Scott Towers is coordinator of the Pride Center at Western State Connecticut University in Danbury, an alum as well as the deputy Title IX coordinator and an out gay man. The 34-year-old said coming out in 2006, as a freshman at Western, was perilous.



It's especially beneficial to students to know that when it comes to being one's authentic self, colleges see you, hear you, and are working to support you.



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"As a public university in an urban setting, Southern is highly engaged with the external community through an institutional commitment to social justice. At Southern, we celebrate diversity, we do not tolerate hate and we value the right to free speech. On campus and beyond, we work to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity, respect, kindness, compassion, and civility."

President Joe Bertolino



Manyul Im considers respect for personal pronoun usage a component of diversity and inclusion, said the director of multicultural affairs, khristian kemp-delisser, Ed.D. kemp-delisser also chairs the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Council.

In 2021, the university took part in the Campus Pride Index, which is conducted by the only national nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to creating a safer college environment for LGBTQ+ students. That first assessment resulted in a disappointing overall score of 1 out of 5 stars, far behind the other four Connecticut schools that took part: Trinity College and Connecticut College with 4.5 stars, Southern Connecticut State University and University of New Haven with 3.5.

So, kemp-delisser got to work. They crowdsourced a campaign to identify gender-inclusive bathrooms on campus, conducted workshops and campus-wide assessments on feelings of belonging and discrimination, and addressed those issues with community-building

and educational programming. Then they took the Campus Pride Index assessment again.

"We are now a 3-star campus. That's more than halfway," said kemp-delisser. "So, more is left to be done to uplift, amplify and underscore the work 'build' the inclusion. But I am a firm believer that if you build it, (and I do mean the following in a gender non-binary/neutral sense) THEY will come!"

Western recently relocated its Pride Center to its Midtown campus, the university's home base for its first-year students, just a 10-minute campus-to-campus shuttle bus ride away from its visual and performing arts center on the West Side. The university also partners with Apex Community Care to provide PRoP, HIV and other STD testing and treatment, as well as behavioral health services.

"And then we have the more fun aspect of social activities," said Towers, like a drag show on campus last Spring and a trip to Broadway. "It's just fighting for their voices to be heard,"

he said, "making sure that they feel recognized day one when they walk on campus, which is why the Pride crosswalks were so important to me."

Western's campus boasts two Pride-themed crosswalks, and Southern has two as well. Towers, a proud "guncle," explained how his niece reacted to those rainbow-colored crosswalks when she moved into her dorm in New Haven.

"She got so excited when she saw that Pride crosswalk," he said, "because she knew from that very first moment that she could be seen for herself, and that there would be someone at that university to recognize her true self. And that's what I'm making sure is taking place here."

It's encouraging to see all this movement in such a short period of time, and it's especially beneficial to students to know that when it comes to being one's authentic self, colleges see you, hear you, and are working to support you.

Trying To Find Yourself On Stage

Pun Bandhu saw few Asian-Americans in shows. Then he took action.

By **FRANK RIZZO**

Pun Bandhu confesses to having been naive when he graduated from the Yale School of Drama in 2000. After having no difficulty being cast in a wide variety of roles in plays while at school, the actor faced real-world obstacles when he left New Haven to pursue his professional career.

Being passionate about working on new works by young artists, he targeted Off-Broadway's Playwrights Horizons as a theater where he most wanted to perform.

But forget about being cast there, he learned. Even after working in films (*Michael Clayton*, *Burn After Reading*, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*), on TV (*Bluebloods*, and a recurring role in a *One Life To Live*), on Broadway (*Wit*), and Off-Broadway and regional theaters throughout the next decade, he could never even get an audition there.

"They never called me to play even a [minor] role as a doctor, lawyer, or neighbor, much less a leading role," he says. When he finally got an audition in 2011, "it was only because a white playwright had written a character that was specifically Asian."

That was the last straw for Bandhu, who after much deliberation posted his frustration on Facebook,

"knowing what the ramifications could be" in going public on social media.

"I think as actors you never want to be seen as complaining, as disgruntled or being a diva," says Bandhu from his home in Cornwall, Connecticut where he lives with his husband Marc Falato "I think Asians are taught growing up—and this is a generalization, but it is part of every Asian culture—not to rock the boat."

His posting set off a quake that caused a tsunami of responses, mostly from other Asian-American, working theatre artists. The more than 400 comments echoed the frustrations, anger, and humiliations they faced over the years at theaters across the country, not only of the inability to get auditions but in the limited, marginal, and even racist roles they were expected to play when they were cast.

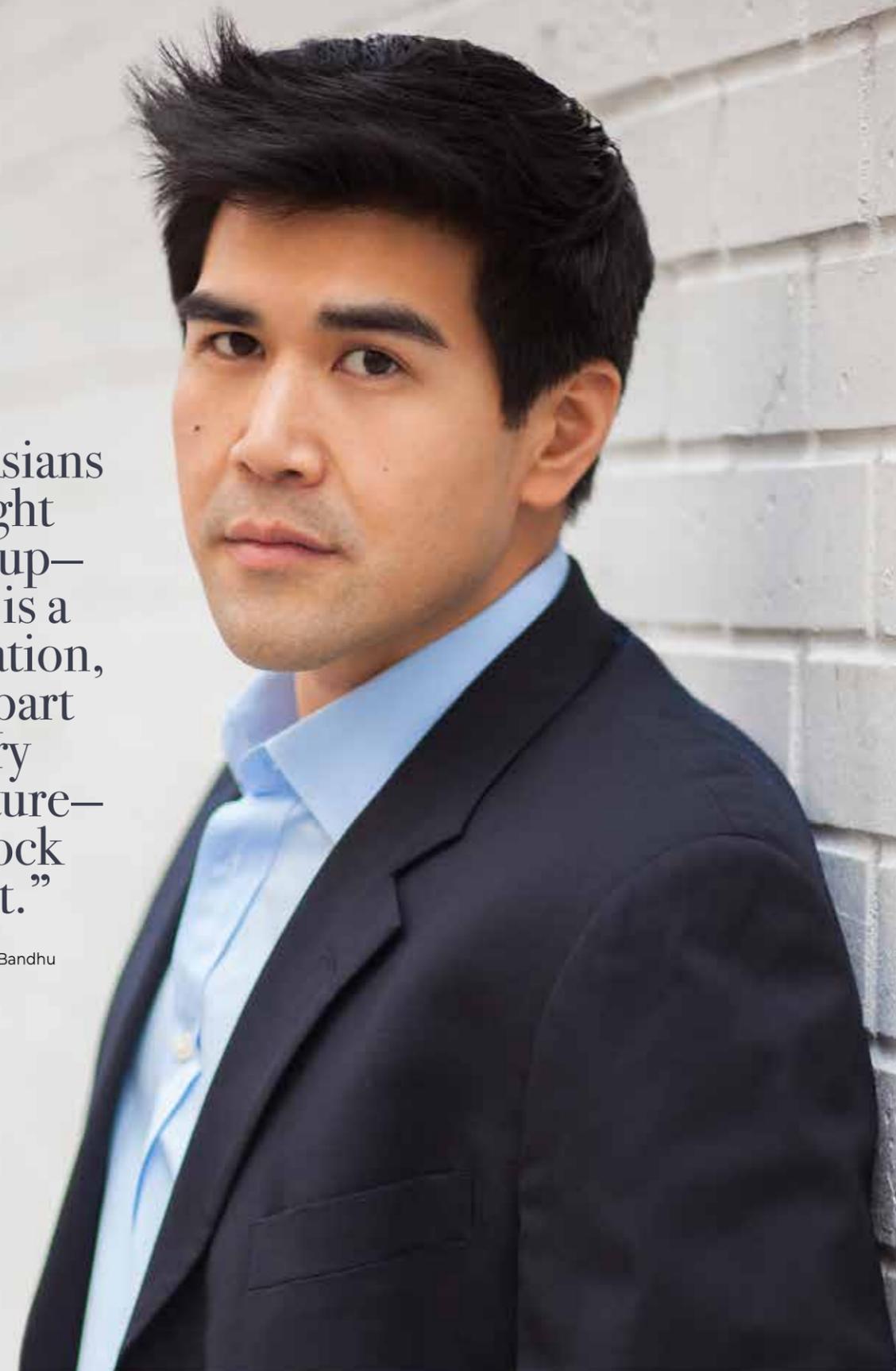
"My colleague Christine Toy Johnson told me, 'I'm so sick and tired of Asians being the perpetual 'foreigner' in America. My ancestors have been here since the 18th century and yet we're not considered part of the American landscape.'"

Many of the responses were from award-winning Asian-American theater artists who had been in the profession for decades. "I thought, 'Is this what I have to look forward to? Why am I giving myself over to this craft and career just to toil in the margins?'"

With the increase of violence against Asians in this country, exacerbated by right-wing disinformation

"I think Asians are taught growing up—and this is a generalization, but it is part of every Asian culture—not to rock the boat."

—Pun Bandhu





Pun Bandhu and Marin Ireland, *The Bells*, McCarter Theatre Center. Photo by T. Charles Erickson

When numbers were finally gathered from the New York professional theaters, the Asian-American actors were even more stunned when the new data from the previous five years was revealed: Less than one percent of employment was for Asian-Americans.



Pun Bandhu in the world premiere of *The Bells* by Theresa Rebeck, McCarter Theater Center. Photo by T. Charles Erickson

around COVID-19, the group's efforts to be seen on stage was also more than just a matter of employment opportunities.

Says actor Kenneth Lee, "Our invisibility has only reinforced negative stereotypes. Representation is truly the key to expanding perceptions."

Being Gob-smacked

Soon after Bandhu's initial posting, the Asian-American artists decided to meet off-line to further the conversation in a more productive way.

"That meeting was so empowering because all of us being in a room together

made us realized, 'I'm not the only person feeling this way.'"

But the group needed hard data to prove their points about their feeling of "invisibility." Though regional theaters kept tabs of hiring practices about people of color and made them public, commercial producers kept those statistics under wraps.

For good reason. "The numbers don't lie," says Bandhu.

When numbers were finally gathered from the New York professional theaters, the Asian-American actors were even more stunned when the new data from the

previous five years was revealed: Less than one percent of employment was for Asian-Americans.

"What was so great about these stats was that it brought it to a conscious level for us and revealed that these issues were systemic," says Bandhu. "It was such an amazing moment or empowerment." Once the group has access to the statistics, "there was no place to hide."

Bandhu says the next step for the group—now known as Asian American Performers Action Coalition—was to bring these stats to producers, directors, casting heads and artistic directors—and

THAT TIME I WAS TOLD I COULDN'T BE SEEN FOR "MY FAIR LADY" BECAUSE I WAS ASIAN.

AND I ALREADY WON MY TONY.

@MSLEASALONGA

#MYYELLOWFACESTORY

THAT TIME ON A TV SHOW A WRITER SAID "WE HIRED YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE ASIAN. BE ASIAN!"

@EQUILL

#MYYELLOWFACESTORY

THAT TIME I WAS CALLED IN TO PLAY A THAI HOOKER AND ASKED TO TRANSLATE THE LINES INTO WHATEVER ASIAN LANGUAGE I SPOKE.

@FRANDELEON

#MYYELLOWFACESTORY

WHEN A TEACHER TOLD ME TO STOP WORKING ON MY SOUTHERN DIALECT BECAUSE I WILL NEVER BE CAST IN A SHOW WITH ONE.

@IMSAMIMA

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Pun Bandhu and Robert Sicular, regional premiere of *Warrior Class* by Kenneth Lin, Theatreworks Silicon Valley. Photo by Mark Kitaoka

say, “What are you going to do about it?”

When that meeting took place later in 2011, there was a collective gulp from the theatrical power brokers and gatekeepers.

“They were gobsmacked,” says Bandhu. But they also shifted responsibility to their staffs, playwrights and even to the Asian-American artists themselves.

One leading New York artistic director admitted to having blinders on, and he urged the group to email him when they’re being overlooked for a role. “But why is the onus on us and not those in power?” says Bandhu.

LGBTQ+ inspiration

It was clear a lot more education was needed for these gatekeepers—and their funders—to get over their unconscious bias, says Bandhu.

“It doesn’t mean they’re bad people and we were not there to burn down the theater,” he says. “All along there was a willingness from them to hear what we had to say and to do better. We were providing a different perspective, which allowed them to see where their blind spots might be. That has been the source for their success. They understand that we’re there to partner with them to help and give them the resources they need.”

Bandhu points out that part of our success “is that we’re extremely diplomatic.” But sometimes it takes more public action to produce real results in practice.

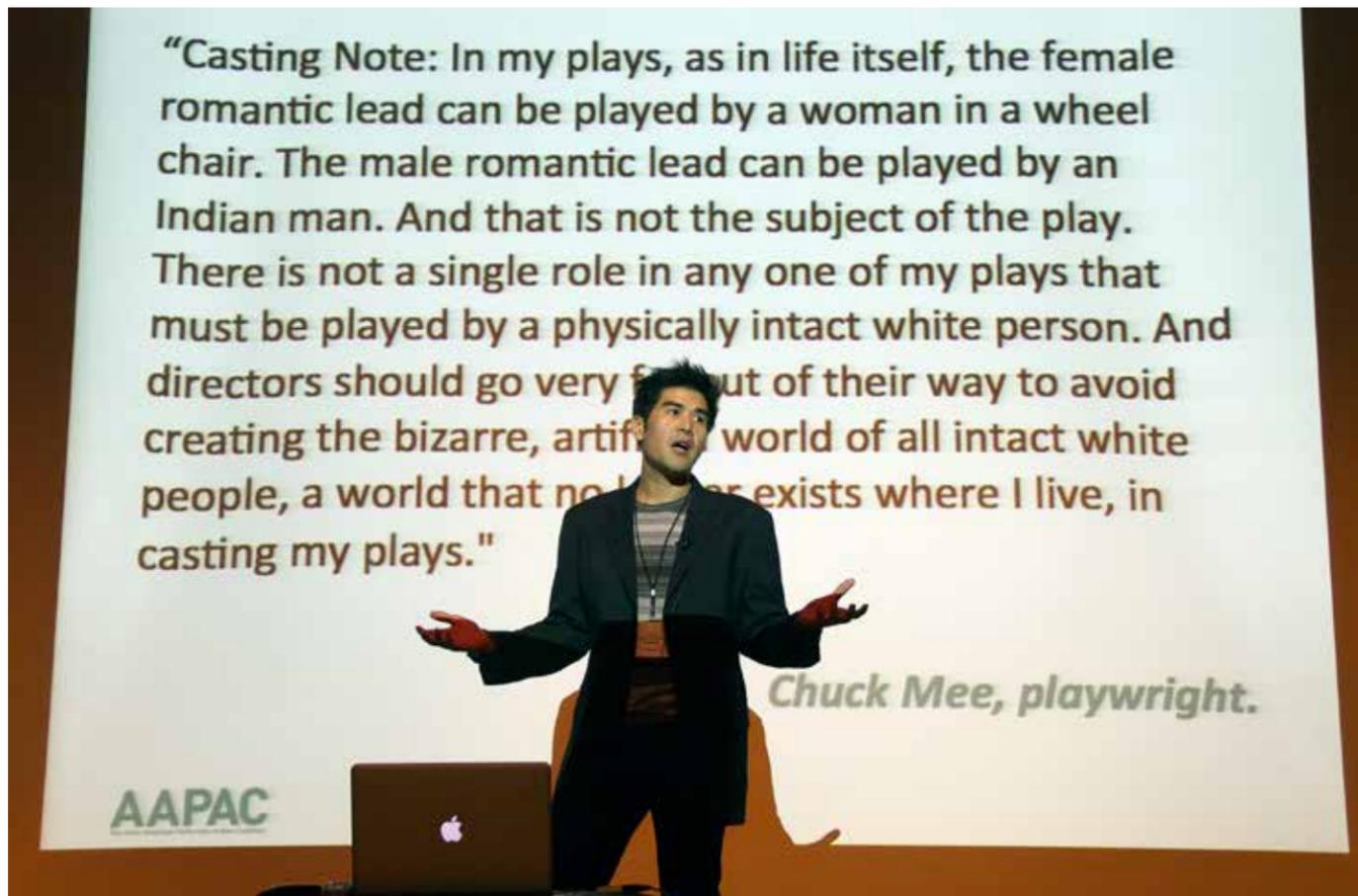
“I take great inspiration from LGBTQ movement,” says Bandhu. “Especially that breaking point of, ‘We’re not going to take it anymore,’ that happened at Stonewall.”

Bandhu says there’s a close connection among disenfranchised peoples, including those in the LGBTQ+ communities.

“There’s no difference from those in marginalized communities turning on the TV or going to a movie which are populated with white heroes and having to see ourselves through a white lens. There weren’t stories that were made for us and by us. Those feelings of invisibility were doubled in my case.”

Growing up gay, Bandhu rarely found pop culture images that reflected who he was.

Bandhu, the son of Thai parents, was born in Indonesia where his banker father worked. He went to an international school there until he was a 13 when his father relocated the family to New Jersey, where his mother would run an acclaimed restaurant, The New Main Taste in Chatham, N.J. His undergrad studies were at Washington University in St. Louis, followed by Yale’s graduate drama program.



Pun Bandhu at one of AAPAC's many forums to bring about more inclusive casting in the theatre industry. Photo by Bruce Johnson

While Yale embraced diversity, it did not prepare him for the commercial realities. Former grads returned to the college to speak to students about their experiences, “but no one was a person of color, and so no one told me explicitly what to expect and how typecast I would be.”

Despite stereotypes, Bandhu managed to grow a career in film, TV, and on stage. Beyond his acting roles, he became one of the few Asian-American producers working New York. His credits with his ZenDog Productions include such high-profile productions as the 2005 Tony Award-winning revival of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, 2006’s Tony Award musical *Spring Awakening*, and the 2019 hit *Beetlejuice*.

As for Playwrights Horizons, Bandhu has since performed at the Off-Broadway theater “and they actually asked me to consult with their diversity team.”

Improvements in Data

Meanwhile, the work of the advocacy group continues—though slowed by the nearly two-year shut-down of theaters caused by the pandemic, but progress has been made since those shocking statistics more than a decade earlier.

Further meetings, negotiations and actions have resulted in greater access in auditions and casting and better awareness to the type of roles being offered to Asian-American actors. It also had an impact on how Asians were depicted on stage and screen and the organization was a major force in efforts to stop “yellow-facing”—where white actors put on make-up to portray Asians.

The coalition’s last study examined the 2018-19 New York theater season—the last full season before the pandemic—and found that at the 18 major nonprofit theaters examined

by the group, 100 percent of artistic directors and 88 percent board members were white. On Broadway, 94 percent of producers were white, as were 100 percent of general managers.

Data showed the hiring of Asian-American actors increasing to six percent from the coalition’s 2011 less-than one percent. “Now many more Asian-American stories are being written and produced,” says Bandhu.

The group is calling for “a fundamental paradigm shift.”

Bandhu says context is everything and by joining forces with other coalitions from the African-American and Latinx communities “the scarcity model” has become evident thanks to further data.

That’s where the numbers for marginalized groups would go up and down depending on the latest hits—*Hamilton* and *In the Heights* saw spikes in their group’s demographics, but there always seemed to be a cap on how



AAPAC is creating progress for inclusion in theater. Photo by Lia Chang



Pun Bandhu with husband and producing partner Marc Falato at their production of *Beetlejuice the Musical* at the Marriot Marquis Theatre on Broadway.

much diversity the industry could withstand. “It never went above 20 percent for marginalized and underrepresented groups from year to year over the course of 10 years,” says Bandhu, adding that it pits these groups against each other for a relatively small piece of the pie.

Bandhu says AAPAC’s data helps prove that it’s a larger problem centering on white narratives and artists overseen by a systemic white power structure, at the expense of all else.

“I hate the word ‘minorities’ because it’s not just about a mathematical equation,” he says. “The root of [the word] is ‘minor’ and it suggests that we are ‘less than.’ People who are marginalized in a society need to start realizing that we are the global majority and to move beyond minority thinking.”

In June the Asian-American Performers Action Coalition was recognized for its decade of service with a Special Tony Honor for Excellence in Theatre.

While the future for Asian American—and other marginalized—artists is yet to play out, one thing remains clear. Bandhu and his group are counting on, and creating, progress. 🍷

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with **Garrick Ohlsson**, piano
Sun, Oct 16, 3 pm (\$35-38)

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Garth Fagan Dance
Sat, Nov 12, 8 pm (\$25-35)

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Sophie Shao, cello
with **John Blacklow**, piano
Tue, Nov 15, 7:30 pm (\$32-36)

Samara Joy
Sat, Nov 18, 8 pm (\$25-35)

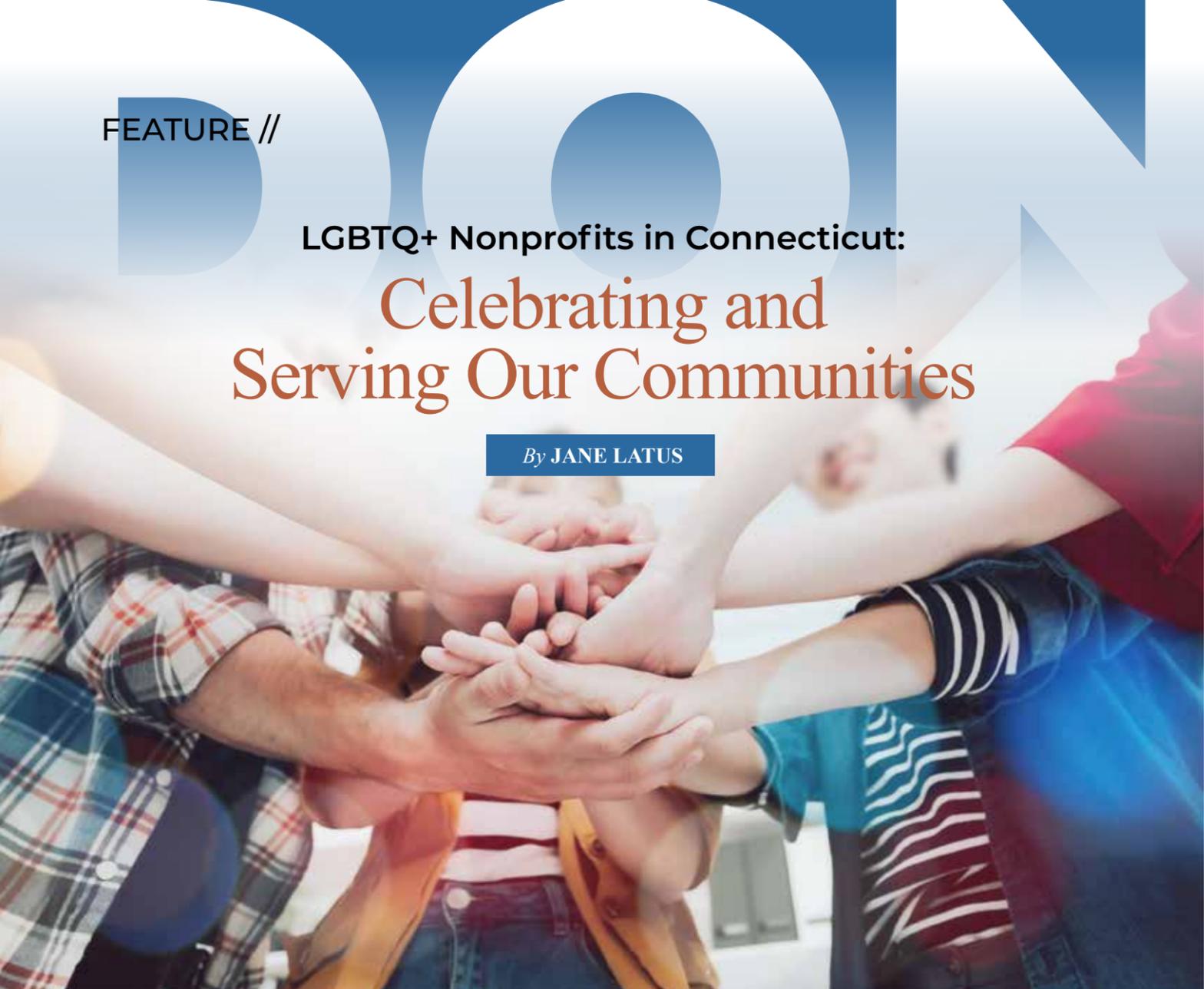
Holiday Pops
Sat, Dec 3, 8 pm (\$65-85)

The Boston Camerata
Tue, Dec 6, 7:30 pm (\$35-38)

Note: All artists, events, dates, programs and COVID-19 policies are subject to change.

LGBTQ+ Nonprofits in Connecticut: Celebrating and Serving Our Communities

By JANE LATUS



To the young people reading this: would you believe that many adults remember when there was only one organization in Connecticut of, by, and for queer people?

In the mid-1960s, Canon Clinton Jones of Christ Congregational Church, Hartford, formed a counseling group for gay men, who in turn formed the Kalos Society in 1968. Keith Brown (longtime host of WWUH’s Gay Spirit Radio) helped found the group and chose its name.

“I chose the name to impart the positive values of male-to-male relationships,” Brown explains. In ancient Greece, it was customary for men to give another man a drinking bowl inscribed with the word “kalos” – an adjective meaning all kinds of wonderful.

Brown isn’t surprised that the Kalos Society wasn’t the only organization of its kind for long. It soon morphed from the mainly social group to the advocacy group Kalos Society-Gay Liberation Front. That was soon followed by the pioneering lesbian group, Daughters of Bilitis. Groups had begun in other states. “The movement was already going. It just kicked into a higher gear,” says Brown.

The following are nonprofits serving Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ community. Most were created by community members. Others have expanded to focus on serving LGBTQ+ individuals. This isn’t a complete list of all queer Connecticut organizations, as it doesn’t include primarily social ones. We’ll save those for another list but as a resource, opportunities for participation, and an illustration of how services for our LGBTQ+ communities have grown in the state, this is a good start.

Advancing CT Together (ACT) – Hartford

ACT is the parent agency of AIDS Connecticut, the CT Association for Human Services (CAHS), the CT Center for Harm Reduction, and Connecticut Pride. Their mission is to strengthen and broaden the range of services provided to families throughout the state.

AIDS CT offers services to those living with HIV/AIDS or related health issues, among them: a drop-in wellness center, financial assistance, care aid, and housing assistance.

CAHS offers safe and affordable banking, financial workshops, and free financial coaching to low-income children and families, with the goal of eliminating poverty in Connecticut.

The Center for Harm Reduction conducts syringe swaps, overdose prevention education and sexual health education.

Connecticut Pride is a resource center, connecting the community with available resources.

“Advancing Connecticut Together has launched pride-ct.org as a repository of resources and events focused on the LGBTQ+ community. We continue to provide HIV and Hep C testing free of charge,” says CEO John Merz.

How to help: Volunteer for events. Donate food, beverages, and raffle prizes for events. Donate either to the overall organization, the Connecticut AIDS Memorial fund, or the Fried Endowment. Contact: act-ct.org

Anchor Health – Hamden and Stamford

“Health care for queer people, by queer people.” That is both Anchor Health’s motto and reality. Its employees care for some 2,500 patients, more than half of whom are transgender or gender nonconforming. Its mission is to provide “groundbreaking, radically inclusive, gender-affirming and sex-positive care.”

Services include primary care, gender and life-affirming medicine, HIV prevention and treatment,

STI testing, assistance with name changes and updating identification documents, and a pharmacy.

“Our website features in-depth accessibility information, helpful FAQs, a timeline of our history, and resources available through our blog. Additionally, we now provide in-house behavioral health services that are trauma-informed and experienced in the unique needs of queer people,” says Michael DeWolfe, head of communications and events.

How to help: Donate, follow on social media, and share resources from their blog, such as Dr. AJ Eckert’s “All about Chest Binding” guide. Contact: anchorhealthct.org

Apex Community Care – Danbury, New Milford, Torrington and Waterbury

Apex provides HIV, behavioral health, substance abuse, prevention and harm reduction services, and advocates for people living with HIV/AIDS, mental health and substance abuse disorders, and their loved ones. Apex also promotes education and prevention in the community.

Apex offers HIV, STI, and Hepatitis C testing, Narcan, clean syringes, HIV health care, oral care, financial assistance, transportation, therapy, and support groups.

“Apex Community Care provides all of our services with cultural humility” says Chief Development Officer Jill Schoenfuss. “We are striving to be THE resource for LGBTQ+ education and training for other organizations and businesses within our geographic region of Western/Northwestern Connecticut. We have a broadly diverse staff, who reflect the people we serve, including gay, trans and nonbinary individuals, as well as those of many races and ethnicities and who speak and can provide services in Spanish and other languages.”

How to help: Volunteer or donate. Contact: apexcommunitycarect.org

A Place to Nourish your Health – New Haven

APNH provides “high quality, relationship based, holistic care to inspire health and well-being and to empower people at risk of, or impacted by, HIV, substance use, mental illness and related conditions” and “who face stigma or challenges in receiving culturally competent care.”

It provides health and wellness services, case management, behavioral health, nutrition, an emergency food bank, prevention education, free testing and screening, support groups and Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

It also organizes the annual New Haven Gay Black Pride event, and two fundraising events: Dining Out for Life every April, and The Anniversary Event, with a date TBA this year.

“APNH has a lot of great programs including our Outreach, Testing and Linkage program that focuses on our young African American and Latinx populations, specifically men who have sex with men (MSM). We also have our Safe Space Program that recently opened up in conjunction with our MPowerment program. This program also focuses on young MSM of color who need a space to go where they can be themselves, get HIV/STI testing services but also engage with their community through drag, outreach, social media and education,” says Nike Jackson, medical case manager.

How to help: Donate, or volunteer at events or in the office. Sought-after volunteers include massage therapists, acupuncturists, outreach and testing volunteers, handy-people to paint and build, and volunteers to staff the reception desk. Contact: apnh.org

Circle Care Center – Norwalk

Circle Care Center provides LGBTQ+-affirming primary care. It specializes in transgender and gender nonconforming care, HIV prevention and care, mental health, and sexual

health. It has an on-site pharmacy.

The center also works closely with Mid Fairfield AIDS Project and the nearby Triangle Community Center (both also on this list.)

“Circle Care Center is a leading primary care medical practice and sexual health center in Norwalk with new patients coming daily for our services. Our providers have more than 60 years of combined experience in HIV research and treatment. Circle Care Center also has an adjacent nonprofit pharmacy making us the most comprehensive and experienced primary practice for the LGBTQ+ community in the state,” says interim executive director Anthony Crisci.

How to help: Use its services. Circle Care uses revenue generated from its services to give grants to local organizations that provide HIV and other services to the LGBT community. Contact: circlecarecenter.org

Connecticut Latinos Achieving Rights & Opportunities (CLARO) – Hartford

CLARO is best known as organizer of the annual Hartford Pride Fest, but it also holds events throughout the year to celebrate the community’s achievements, foster inclusion, educate, and create awareness on issues impacting the community.

It also publishes *Out in CT*, an online guide to news and events in the state, as well as stories about the community’s history and culture.

How to help: Volunteer, donate, and shop at CLARO’s online store for Hartford Pride clothing. Contact: [Claro CT Latinos on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/claro.ct)

Connecticut Trans Advocacy Coalition

This group’s mission is to make Connecticut a safe and tolerant place and to attain all human rights, for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. In addition to education, advocacy and

support efforts, it has held 16 annual Transgender Lives conferences where attendees obtain up-to-date health, legal and other news, as well as the opportunity to network.

“We have brought about major changes here in Connecticut, passing legislation to ban discrimination, to allow birth certificates to be changed, banning Conversion Therapy for minors, and banning Gay and Transgender Panic Defense,” says recently retired president Diana Lombardi. “As part of CTAC I have done training at state agencies, correctional institutes, hospitals, and homeless shelters. We worked to make sure trans seniors are accepted in nursing homes and long-term care facilities. It has been my greatest honor to help the trans population of Connecticut.”

How to help: Presenters and volunteers are needed for the annual Trans Lives conference. Contact: transadvocacy.org

GLSEN Connecticut

This is the Connecticut Chapter of the national organization that fights for all children to have a safe, supportive education, no matter their gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

The organization bases its programs, advocacy, research and policy work on these four priorities: activating supportive educators; advocating for affirming curriculum; implementing policies that ensure LGBTQ students will thrive, and supporting GSAs.

How to help: Volunteer or donate. Contact: glsen.org/chapter/connecticut

Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective

Since its 1983 inception, HGLHC has become one of the LGBTQ+ community's most trusted resources for health care and support, health education and fierce advocacy.

“The Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective empowers

individuals of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions to lead healthy lives through the provision of health and support services, education and advocacy,” says Kim Adamski, HIV prevention specialist.

The Collective provides dental services, an STD clinic, PrEP, free condoms, HIV testing, and support groups. For those without insurance, services are on a sliding scale. It also provides education to the general community.

HGLHC is especially known for its advocacy and services for those living with HIV and AIDS, including hot meals, a food pantry, connecting people with medical providers, and support groups.

It provides youth scholarships and hosts the annual Queer Prom for high school students.

How to help: Volunteer or donate. Share their social media posts. Contact: hglhc.org

Health Care Advocates International–Stratford

Health Care Advocates International is a public health and advocacy organization serving the LGBTQ+ community and working to end the HIV health crisis, fight stigma and discrimination, and end homelessness through prevention programs, education, advocacy and treatment. It offers comprehensive primary and specialty health care.

“While the medical practice and pharmacy alone are changing lives, HCAI offers additional programs that offer life-saving support in many forms including the Zimbabwe AIDS Project, Youth and Family Program and the HIV Advocates/Stigma Warrior Campaign,” says creative director Thomas Evans.

Trans advocate and life coach Tony Ferraiolo is director of HCAI's Youth and Families program, which includes workshops, school programs and a binder drive.

How to help: Donate and

volunteer, especially for events. Follow on social media and spread the word. Contact: hcaillc.com

Jim Collins Foundation

This foundation raises money to fund gender-affirming surgery for those who are unable to pay for it themselves. Founders Tony Ferraiolo and Dru Levasseur explain on the website, “We recognize that for those people who require surgery for a healthy gender transition, lack of access to surgery may result in hopelessness, depression and sometimes suicide.”

It is named in honor of the late Jim Collins, a social worker, group psychotherapist, clinical instructor in the Department of Psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine, and avid ally to the transgender community.

How to help: Donate. The foundation does not have an endowment, so donations are its only means of providing grants. The organization is all-volunteer, so donations go entirely to grant recipients. Contact: jimcollinsfoundation.org

Kamora's Cultural Corner–Hartford

Founder Kamora Herrington describes Kamora's Cultural corner as a space for people to learn cultural humility: increasing our self-awareness of our biases and perceptions and learning to put them aside in order to engage with and learn from others. Herrington explains on the website, “We approach Cultural Humility through a Black Queer Afrocentric Perspective and create and navigate brave spaces with the intention of building and supporting organic community connections.”

The organization offers workshops and trainings, supports and celebrates artists, and holds open mics, readings, community conversations, picnics, art bazaars, book discussions and more.

How to help: “Kamora's Cultural Corner is currently building our

community through a membership drive and we invite our community to join us by either purchasing a membership, supporting us on Patreon, or joining us on a Volunteer Thinking and Doing Day where volunteer hours lead to membership,” says Herrington. Contact: kamorasculturalcorner.com

LGBT Aging Advocacy

This coalition of service providers, state agencies and individuals is working to create an open and affirming aging services environment for LGBTQ+ elders in Connecticut.

One of its initiatives is the LGBT Movable Senior Center, now a pilot program in Avon, Bloomfield, Canton, Newington, and Simsbury, that will soon expand throughout the state. The program includes a meal, entertainment, and programming. It provides resources including hookup sites. It is also creating an LGBT Cultural Competency program for its member organizations.

How to help: Donate and spread the word. Contact: lgbtagingcenter.org

Lesbian and Gay Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Association (Pride CAPA) – Hartford

This affiliate of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry is dedicated to the mental health needs of young people related to sexual minority issues.

One of its goals is to promote changes within the practice of psychiatry that will improve the mental health of LGBT youth and youths with LGBT parents. Another is advocating for research, and educating providers on topics like teen suicide, families with LGBT parents, and parents of gender nonconforming children. It also advocates for policies that foster the mental health of LGBT youths and their families.

How to help: The organization seeks psychiatrists to mentor new child and adolescent psychiatrists. Contact: pridecapa.org

Mid Fairfield AIDS Project–Norwalk

This organization's mission is to provide “health, housing and hope” to people living with HIV/AIDS, those suffering with addiction, and the disabled homeless.

MFAP provides medical case management, drug health services, housing, mental health services and prescription assistance.

MFAP works closely with Circle Care Center and Mid Fairfield AIDS Project (also on this list).

How to help: Volunteer and donate. Regular donors are needed to fund the cash prizes for its most popular social event and fundraiser: Gay Bingo. Contact: mfap.org

Middlesex Health– Middletown and satellite offices

Middlesex Health's Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness serves more than 1,200 patients who are transgender, gender nonconforming or gender expansive. In addition to this program, primary care doctors in 12 locations are well-versed in providing respectful, knowledgeable care to trans and nonbinary patients.

Middlesex provides a full array of services for trans and nonbinary patients, including physical therapy, gender confirmation surgery, hormone therapy, voice therapy, behavioral health care, and more.

Recently the program expanded to welcome adolescents, relieving a statewide backlog for young patients who previously had to wait a year or more for a first appointment.

“Middlesex Health is consistently recognized by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation as a LGBTQ+ Healthcare Equality Leader. The health system supports its LGBTQ+ employees in a variety of ways, and its Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness is committed to providing equitable and inclusive care to individuals who are transgender, gender nonconforming, or gender expansive,

as well as excellence in access, services and outcomes,” says public relations director Amanda Falcone.

How to help: Donate. Website: middlesexhealth.org

New Haven Pride Center

What doesn't the New Haven Pride Center do? Its expansive mission is “to provide educational, cultural, and social enrichment to the LGBTQ+ community, its allies, and members, and to make a positive contribution to the entire community of Greater New Haven.”

This ranges from the daily work of providing support services, to planning the annual Pride New Haven, to hosting the annual Dorothy Awards that honor people who have created positive change for the state's LGBTQ+ community, to expanding its youth programming.

“The New Haven Pride Center is one of the leading LGBTQ+ nonprofit agencies in Connecticut and the only organization focused on LGBTQ+ representation in the arts,” says executive director Patrick Dunn. “All of our work centers one or more of our programmatic principals: creating a safe space for case management and support services; bringing people together for shared social experiences; educational activities, awareness building, and youth empowerment; arts, culture and humanities programming; and advocacy for the community.”

Pride Center's new youth initiatives include:

- the Connecticut LGBTQ+ Youth Conference, formerly the True Colors Conference, an annual place for middle school and high school age LGBTQ+ youth to learn, laugh, and build community,
- the Peer Support Network, a mentorship program that pairs youth with LGBTQ+ mentors to provide year-round support and case management, and
- a new year-round series of youth programming.

How to help: Donate, especially monthly – this provides a reliable steady source for program funding. Volunteers are needed for events and ongoing projects. Mentors are sought for the new youth mentorship program. Contact: newhavenpridecenter.org

outCT–New London

First organized in 2013 to plan the New London Pride Festival, the group has expanded to offering an educational series, monthly youth program, drag shows, a film festival, art exhibits and the “BYOD” (bring your own dog) Yappy Hours—all geared toward its mission of “creating a network of people, programs and experiences that celebrate our growing understanding of sexual and gender identities in Southeastern Connecticut.”

Among the organization's goals are to: “create opportunities for integrating and promoting positive visibility” for the community, and “provide opportunities and venues for people to celebrate their sexual orientations and gender identities.”

Earlier this year, outCT moved into its very first physical office space, in downtown New London—of special importance because of the rapid growth of its youth program.

How to help: Donate. Check the website for volunteer needs. Contact: outct.org

PFLAG

There are 4 PFLAG chapters in the state: Hartford, Norwalk, Southeastern Connecticut and Waterbury. They are affiliates of the national PFLAG organization, which provides support, information and resources to LGBTQ+ people, their families, and allies. It is also an active advocacy group at local, state and national levels. It offers many educational resources online. Many chapters offer youth scholarships.

“PFLAG Hartford provides support for LGBTQ+ folks ages 13+ and for parents and family of LGBTQ+ individuals. On a national

level, PFLAG is fighting the wave of anti-LGBT legislation and your PFLAG Hartford chapter is working hard to keep making Connecticut more and more inclusive and affirming,” says Hartford chapter president Mark Pixley.

How to help: Visit your local chapter's website, or attend meetings, to learn how to support their work or volunteer. Donate. pflag.org

Q+

Q+ is a youth-led organization focused on filling the gaps in queer youth programming statewide. It holds open mics, supports school GSAs, provides social support and training, and is continually expanding its programming. Its overall goal is “to create space for queer youth to be authentically and entirely themselves.”

The group runs weekly online teen support groups, online game nights, and in-person youth groups Friday nights in West Hartford. It also holds online open mics.

Staff members offer consultations and visits to GSAs, and staff trainings.

“We're currently running our summer program, which is an educational program focused on social justice and youth advocacy. I'm hoping to launch a similar school year program in the fall, which is also when we will be expanding the in-person social and support programs we offer! Our online support group and game night and in-person social programs are all going strong,” says executive director and founder Mel Corder.

How to help: Donate. Volunteer, including to organize fundraisers. Spread the word about their programs and resources. Contact: qplusct.org

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Queer Unity Empowerment Support Team (Quest)—Waterbury

This community collaborative aims to “create healthy, inclusive, and safe spaces for members of the LGBT+ community, and their allies, in the Greater Waterbury area, fostering meaningful relationships, learning and joy.”

It also strives to educate the public on matters important to the community; act as a liaison to the youth development, medical and mental health fields; and advocate for the community’s socio-political needs.

In 2018, it produced an LGBTQ Youth Needs Assessment for the region. It provides training and workshops for schools and organizations. It holds youth meetups, and many social events including a Rocky Horror Picture Show screening and Ride With Pride.

How to help: See the website for current needs. Website: questct.com

Stonewall Speakers

This is an all-volunteer speakers’ bureau, telling the LGBTQ+ communities’ many stories, one at a time. Speaking engagements usually include one or two speakers and include personal life stories. Volunteers speak at schools, workplaces and for civic organizations.

Their goal: “to eliminate hate and promote understanding.” It was originally named “Speak! Out!” when formed in 1988 after two teenagers beat and murdered 33-year-old gay man Richard Riehl of Wethersfield.

“We continue to speak either in person or via Zoom (virtual engagements in June had us speak to two out-of-state corporations whose DEI leaders had us speak to over 120 employees between the two speaking engagements). June, Pride Month, as you can imagine was a busy month for us. Not only did we speak a record 16 times, but

we had booths at 3 pride events,” says president Lynn Discenza.

How to help: Donate. “We also invite anyone who is part of the LGBTQ+ community and are open to sharing their story to contact us if they are interested in becoming a Stonewall Speaker,” says Discenza.

Contact: stonewallspeakers.org

Triangle Community Center—Norwalk

This organization provides a wide variety of services and support. It offers counseling and case management for medical and mental health, housing, employment and addiction. It provides workshops, speakers and training to students statewide. It has a service line people can call 24/7 for help. The center has one very booked calendar, with more than 25 groups including social, peer support, wellness, youth and recovery.

It also organizes Pride in the Park and is the umbrella organizer of Bethel Pride, Darien Pride, Easton Pride and Westport Pride.

It works closely with Care Circle Center and Mid Fairfield AIDS Project (both also on this list.)

“Triangle Community Center is Fairfield County’s leading provider of programming and resources to nurture growth and connection within the LGBTQ+ community. Our team of highly trained client advocates assists community members with social service navigation, food, drop-in services, document updates, healthcare navigation, and housing navigation. TCC also offers counselling and case management offered on site for all in the LGBTQ+ community,” says Sydney Henck, director of programming.

How to help: Donate so that programming remains free and open to the community. Attend events and programs. Contact: ctpridecenter.org

The Wheeler Clinic—Bristol, New Hartford, New Britain, Plainville and Waterbury

“Wheeler offers LGBTQIA + responsive, affirming, integrated primary and behavioral health care services. Programs are guided by an LGBTQIA+ Advisory Board and include Walk With Me, a specialized outpatient treatment track for LGBTQ+-identifying people of all ages who are seeking therapeutic and/or peer support to address their specific needs; LGBTQ+ support groups for parents, family members, young adults, and adolescents; and medical screening and treatment.

Wheeler also is a statewide leader in foster care and welcomes the LGBTQIA+ community’s commitment to providing safe, loving households for youth in the foster care system,” says Joanne Janes, associate director of communications

How to help: Donate. Become a foster parent. Contact: wheelerclinic.org

Youth Continuum New Haven

Youth Continuum provides shelter, basic needs and support services to neglected, at-risk, abused, runaway and homeless youth. In Connecticut, comparable to national numbers, an astonishing 25-30 percent of homeless young adults are LGBTQ+. In fact, queer young adults are the sole exception to Connecticut’s otherwise consistently declining rate of homelessness.

Youth Continuum is the largest provider to homeless youth and runs New Haven’s only drop-in center for young homeless adults. The organization also provides many services designed to help gain self-sufficiency.

“Over the last year, YC has obtained two new federal grants to serve homeless youth. One is

a street outreach program which allows us to expand our outreach efforts to identify homeless or trafficked youth. The other is a transitional living program, creating 12 new beds for literally homeless youth ages 18-24, as well as youth who are fleeing intimate partner violence or at imminent risk is homelessness,” reports CEO Paul Kosowsky.

It works with Health Care Advocates International (also on this list) to train its staff to work in the best way with LGBTQ youth.

How to help: Donate. Contact: youthcontinuum.org

YWCA New Britain House of Teens (HOT)

This after school program offers a safe, comfortable, and positive place for female identifying and nonbinary youths ages 13-19. Each month features an advocacy focus based on the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. Every June features a Rainbow Fest.

HOT includes a variety of activities focusing on healthy lifestyles, accomplishing personal goals, gaining self-confidence, and exploring future careers.

The Y’s Sexual Assault Crisis Services also has a dedicated LBGTQ+ advocate on staff for support and services.

How to help: Donate items for their main fundraiser in November (gift cards, gift baskets, etc.) They need a printer (gently used or new). Donate healthy snacks and beverages, art supplies, and toiletries like deodorant, soap and shampoo. Contact: ywcanb.org

These organizations, and many more, contribute to the quality of life for all LGBTQ+ people in Connecticut. We applaud them.



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MIDDLESEX HEALTH SEES GROWING ANXIETY IN TRANSGENDER PATIENTS AROUND THE COUNTRY, BUT CONNECTICUT HAS THEIR BACKS

By JANE LATUS

Taking direct aim at their hate-saturated bullseyes, red state after red state has enacted laws preventing transgender youths from playing sports, using the appropriate bathroom, and even using accurate vocabulary to describe themselves.

Now, these states are implementing practices that can negatively affect trans kids' physical and mental well-being by criminalizing gender-affirming health care. The trend is, unfortunately, continuing. Some of the restrictions now codified into law at this writing follow. Texas wants to charge parents and providers of gender-affirming health care with child abuse. This ruling is mired in litigation, and the outcome is anything but clear. Alabama has banned gender-affirming surgery for anyone under 18 and is charging providers to patients under age 19 with a felony, punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a \$15,000 fine, despite the fact that such care is extremely rare. All gender-affirming care for minors is banned in Alabama, although there is a temporary injunction regarding hormone blockers. A provision in the law requires school officials to out transgender children to their parents. Florida is advising against any gender-affirming care for youth, and Florida announced plans to become the 11th state to deny Medicaid coverage for patients of all ages, including for puberty blockers and cross hormone therapy.

The daily effects of these bans are in flux as they proceed through lawsuits and appeals. Meanwhile, trans children and their parents are justifiably living in fear.

Here in Connecticut, this year the legislature famously passed

and Governor Ned Lamont signed the Reproductive Freedom Defense Act, which expands access to abortion and legally protects medical providers and patients traveling to Connecticut for abortions.

But getting much less attention was what else Connecticut did this spring: enact a law that provides refugee status and protection from prosecution in other states, for anyone coming from out-of-state to receive, and for in-state providers who perform, gender affirming health care.

Even though Connecticut residents don't need to worry about having their medical care taken away, this support from state government is a much-needed reassurance, says Kathryn Tierney, medical director of Middlesex Health's Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness. The program has about 1,200 patients and includes primary care providers and a full array of other providers.

"It's a huge concern to the community. We're in a good spot in Connecticut, but the difficulty is these laws give voice to people who are on the opposite end of the [political] spectrum. They become louder and more forceful. There's a whole population that thinks we shouldn't have this care," says Tierney.

Tierney wants to remind Connecticut's trans and nonbinary residents that Middlesex is, without question, committed to them.

"We see the general level of anxiety going up in our patients. The attack is very pointed. It's directed right at them. The thing I hear most frequently is some version of 'They're coming for us.'" Even for Connecticut residents, states like Texas, Alabama

"Even though Connecticut residents don't need to worry about having their medical care taken away, this support from state government is a much-needed reassurance."

—Kathryn Tierney



Kathryn Tierney, medical director of Middlesex Health's Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness
 Photo by Stan Godlewski

and Florida are nearby in terms of who we communicate with, she adds. And people in those states are more emboldened to be disrespectful.

In proposing the ban on Medicaid funding for gender-affirming care, Florida's Agency for Healthcare Administration dismissed studies citing this care's positive outcomes as following a political agenda. The agency called standards of care in states that permit and fund it "experimental and investigational", and the supporting studies "weak to very weak."

Tierney couldn't believe what she was hearing from Florida. It was the same argument that the federal Medicare program used years ago to justify not covering gender-affirming care.

This especially angers her because, she explains, "the trans community has the poorest, most marginalized, in it, and the most-likely to access state health care."

The people behind the bans in other states say they are trying to save people from these treatments. But, Tierney insists, "Trans-affirming care is lifesaving." A large and growing volume of studies confirm it, she says.

Tierney has patients who live in 10 different states who return to Middlesex at their own expense for treatment. "Not necessarily because of prohibitions but because they don't want to risk their important care [to the hands of unknown]," she says.

Still, all the kids in Alabama, whose law Tierney calls "the worst," won't have the money or time to travel here. There, youths on puberty blockers have to stop mid-treatment, allowing the incorrect puberty to start. This situation is when trans youths have the highest rate of suicidal thinking. Those who are forced to stop taking cross hormones will see a return of their natal sex organs and secondary sex characteristics that are the opposite of their identity.

Last year, Middlesex expanded its gender program to include adolescents. "It's very busy – it's been phenomenal," says Tierney. The new program opened the bottleneck that had been making Connecticut patients wait for a year for a first appointment; now they are seen in a month or two.

Middlesex continues—and doubles down on—its commitment to supporting all their patients in being their authentic selves. 

STUDIES CONFIRM EFFECTIVENESS OF CARE

A rapidly growing volume of studies confirms the fact that gender-affirming health care saves lives.

This February, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a University of Washington study on mental health outcomes of gender-affirming care for transgender and nonbinary youths.

The conclusion: such care "was associated with 60 percent lower odds of moderate or severe depression and 73 percent lower odds of suicidality over a 12-month follow-up."

The study's authors warn, "Our findings have important policy implications, suggesting that the recent wave of legislation restricting access to gender-affirming care may have significant negative outcomes in the well-being of TNB [transgender and nonbinary] youths. Beyond the need to address antitransgender legislation, there is an additional need for medical systems and insurance providers to decrease barriers and expand access to gender-affirming care."

Another recent study, published in the December issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, is a peer-reviewed study by researchers at The Trevor Project. It found that "gender-affirming hormone therapy is significantly related to lower rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts among transgender and nonbinary youth."

Some highlights:

- For people under age 18, receiving hormone therapy was associated with nearly 40 percent lower odds of recent depression and of a past-year suicide attempt.
- Half of all transgender and nonbinary young people said they were not using hormone therapy but would like to.
- Youth of color had lower rates of access hormone therapy when they wanted it compared with white youth.

"These data should serve as a call to action to resist blanket bans on gender-affirming medical care and to invest in more research on this topic so that youth and their families can make evidence-informed decisions regarding care," says Dr. Amy Green, vice president of research at The Trevor Project.

In The Trevor Project's annual survey of LGBTQ+ youth, it found that in 2021, 45 percent of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered suicide, nearly 20 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth *attempted* suicide, and that suicide rates were higher for youth of color.

"Transgender and nonbinary youth, who already report the highest rates of anxiety and depression, are worried about anti-transgender legislation," the survey found.

- 93 percent worried about being denied access to gender-affirming health care.
- 91 percent worried about being denied access to the bathroom.
- 83 percent worried about being denied the ability to play sports.

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MiddlesexHealth.org/LGBTQ




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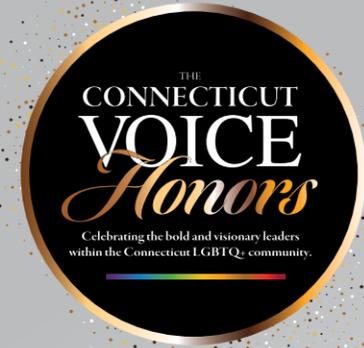
We are thrilled to present our
 first annual Connecticut Voice Honors.

The people in these pages represent outstanding commitment to the LGBTQ+ communities in the state, passionate activism, and lives dedicated to service.

Whether in the arts, politics, of different ages and identities, these are the people who bring their authentic selves to the work they do and in turn inspire us—and serve as model for excellence in all they do.

Our diverse, engaged, and productive LGBTQ+ communities make Connecticut a leading state in acceptance and inclusion, and each of these people embody those values, improving the quality of life for everyone they and their work touches.

*Congratulations to all,
 and our heartfelt thanks!*



AWARD FOR
 ADVOCACY:

**KAMORA
 HARRINGTON**

Kamora Herrington of Kamora's Cultural Corner is being honored with The Connecticut Voice Honors 2022 Award for Advocacy.

Kamora's tireless work to advance cultural humility, to address inequity and advocate from a Black, queer and Afrocentric perspective is manifested in her creation of Kamora's Cultural Corner and the programs it offers.

If we could examine Kamora's DNA, we'd surely find the gene for what makes someone an advocate. This granddaughter of sharecroppers, whose family followed The Great Migration from Alabama to Bristol, Connecticut, is the daughter of a Black social worker who met a white, WASP, human rights advocate from West Hartford. They found each other through their calling, to make the world a better place, and not just for themselves as a mixed-race couple wanting to marry, but also for Kamora and her siblings, pushing for schools to be desegregated.

Her brother, Benjamin, once said of his sister "Kammie:" "You could throw her into a den of hungry lions, and she would come out with pet lions."



Kamora has worked as a teacher for the City of Hartford's Early Learning Centers. She's also been an instrumental leader for organizations and groups committed to marginalized communities, such as the Director of Youth Programming and Mentoring at True Colors, where she ran a mentoring program for Queer youth for 15 years.

She is a member of the National Black Justice Coalition's Leadership Advisory Council and a founding member of CT Black Women. But Kamora is first and always a mother, and she is a lesbian who proudly calls herself queer.

Kamora believes wholeheartedly in the idea of cultural humility, which she said means that as she speaks about who she is, and who she sees herself to be, everything stems from a "lifetime of service."

We recognize that service by awarding Kamora Herrington and Kamora's Cultural Corner the first-ever Connecticut Voice Honors Award for Advocacy.



AWARD FOR
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT:

JACOB G. PADRÓN
LONG WHARF THEATER

Awarded to an individual or organization that makes the arts and entertainment equitable and accessible to our LGBTQ+ community. Jacob G. Padrón is being honored with The Connecticut Voice Honor 2022 in the field of Arts and Entertainment

Before arriving to head New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre in 2019, this California native and Yale School of Drama graduate held positions at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and New York's Public Theatre. He is also founder and still current artistic director of The Sol Project, a national theater initiative that works in partnership with leading theater companies to amplify the voices of Latinx playwrights. He is also a co-founder of the Artist Anti-Racism Coalition, a grassroots movement committed to dismantling structural racism within the Off-Broadway community. He is an alumnus of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, a volunteer program committed to social justice around the world.

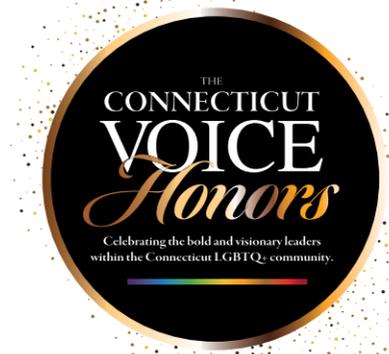
At the Tony Award-winning Long Wharf Theatre,



Jacob G. Padrón has demonstrated his commitment to providing a safe harbor for the LGBTQ+ community, and giving it access both onstage and off.

When Jacob arrived at Long Wharf Theatre he envisioned a new kind of theater deeply connected to all stories of the diverse New Haven. With the challenges of the pandemic and longtime financial struggles of the theater, Jacob and his Long Wharf team announced earlier this year that it will be even more deeply embedded in the many communities of New Haven as it leaves its longtime home at the New Haven Food Terminal after 57 years for a journey of discovery among the performing spaces around the city.

Jacob's dramatic vision for the theater and his search for new audiences is one entwined with his commitment to the principals of diversity, inclusion and equity. This award honors Jacob, his Long Wharf team but also other progressive leaders around the country as they shape a new and inclusive American theater, accessible to everyone, telling the stories of all of our lives.



AWARD FOR
CORPORATE COMMITMENT:

STANLEY BLACK & DECKER, INC.

Stanley Black & Decker has been—and continues to be—a model for celebrating diversity and creating a positive working experience for nearly 60,000 employees worldwide. To succeed in the long term, it's imperative to build a company that reflects and responds to the contemporary world, which means in addition to social, environmental, and governmental responsibility, creating a corporate identity and culture where diversity and inclusion (D&I) is a core value—authentically built into every aspect of an enterprise.

These values are central to the New Britain-based company. Under the guidance and advocacy of former CEO Jim Loree, efforts to promote awareness and inclusion resulted in multiple citations of Stanley Black & Decker as an exceptional place to work, earning a perfect score in the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, which evaluates companies based on their practices and benefits directly related to LGBTQ+ communities.

Among their many employee resource groups, their Pride and Allies group stands out both in supporting LGBTQ+ employees and education for all employees. From identifying and addressing things

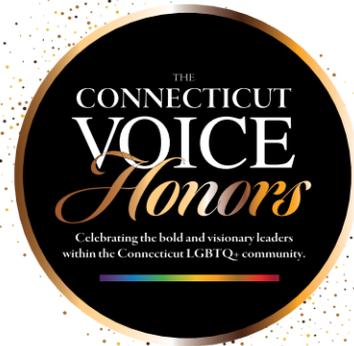
like unconscious bias to talking about all aspects of LGBTQ+ experience, the company invests in fostering understanding, supporting everyone, raising awareness and breaking down barriers.

The result has been a culture of allyship that permeates every part of the company. Their goal has been to create a company where every employee is an ally to every individual, however they define and express themselves. It's working at all levels of the

company from the C-Suite and throughout every division and department. Moreover, this is a global effort through a workplace social communication and collaboration platform that amplifies these important messages, spreads the culture of inclusion and shares it in local languages around the world.

The commitment to diversity and allowing everyone to come to work as their authentic selves has proven good for the company as a whole. Stanley Black & Decker continues to experience exceptional growth, groundbreaking innovation, and responsible corporate citizenship. Mutual appreciation, respect, and support is the essence of pride, and Stanley Black & Decker is a beacon for every corporation, manager, and employee in this dynamic world.





AWARD FOR
FUTURES:

**PROUD
ACADEMY**

When will it ever be safe for LGBTQ+ kids in school? If Patty Nicolari, founder and president of Proud Academy achieves her vision, it will be soon. After her own experiences, and observing the current experiences of LGBTQ+ children in traditional schools, she knew that neither kids nor teachers could perform well in an unfriendly environment.

As she says, "On a personal level, I am an "out" member of the LGBTQ family. She came out in 1997 alongside Ellen DeGeneres big TV coming out moment. I had an article in the New Haven Register headlined "ELLEN'S OUT and so is MS NIC"....my 'coming out as a teacher story' is in a book by Kevin Jennings (GLSEN founder) titled *One Teacher in 10*. I was on the GLSEN Board for 5 years and presented workshops around the country on creating a safe space for all students. I was also a Stonewall Speaker, a recipient of a Dorothy Award for LGBTQ community involvement, and was the first OUT teacher in my district, and started the first GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) at our high school as a teacher.

As an "in" teacher I had "LEZ" scratched into my car, kids shouting we have a dyke for a teacher, whispers, notes left on my desk asking about my sexual orientation... It was such an unsafe space as a teacher. After 16 years of this stress, from 1981-1997, I came out. Best decision despite everyone telling me not to do so. All the harassment stopped because I empowered myself to be 'authentic.' This is what we hope to encourage youth to do at Proud Academy, with support systems in place."

The wheels are in motion. Proud Academy became incorporated as a nonprofit in June 2021, and they plan to open a private school for grades 7-12. They have assembled an impressive board of directors and advisors, including Attorney John Rose (former Corporation Council for Mayor Toni Harp in New Haven, Dr

Christian Brockenberry, head of dentistry at Cornell Scott; Arturo "Franco" Camacho, owner/chef Shell and Bones, Geronimos, Camacho's Garage; teachers Michael Fiorello GSA advisor, Stratford, Jessyca Giannetta Stamford) Ebony McCleave GSA advisor Wilbur Cross New Haven, Peter Solomon, SAGA advisor, Sound School, New Haven; Henrietta Small, LCSW and grant writer; Jason Bartlett, (first out/black legislator in CT; and Brandon Iovene SCSU senior involved in the SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Alliance at SCSU. It's an impressive and diverse list of people committed to education and creating an environment where students are free to be their authentic selves.

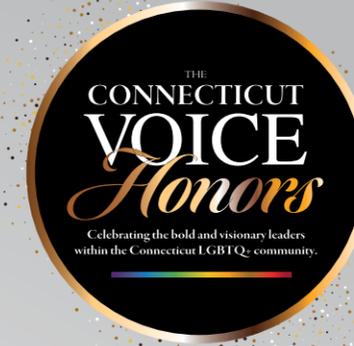
According to its mission statement, Proud Academy will be a school where LGBTQ+ youth will be able to live as their true, authentic selves in an educational environment that encourages self-discovery and affirmation. A team of dedicated individuals and fierce LGBTQ+ advocates have rallied together to make the dream of Proud

Academy a reality for LGBTQ+ youth. Proud Academy will be the fourth school in the nation specifically for LGBTQ+ students!

Allies, of course will be welcome, and Nicolari says this will be another choice and opportunity for parents and students. She hopes that about 60 percent of students will be able to attend with a full scholarship, while the remaining 40 percent will play on a sliding school.

Proud Academy is in the process of getting academic accreditation, a process that takes two years. The first classes, therefore, will be in the seventh and eighth grades so that by the time the students finish high school that process will be complete.

Once again, visionary leaders in Connecticut are devoting themselves to equity, diversity, and inclusion—and are devoting themselves to making the best life possible for LGBTQ+ people in the state.



AWARD FOR
GOVERNMENT & SERVICE:

**U.S. REPRESENTATIVE
ROSA DELAURO**

Since 1991, Rosa DeLauro has represented Connecticut's third congressional district. She has been a tireless fighter for her district, focusing on health, veterans affairs, quality of life, and employment. She has been an advocate for LGBTQ+ communities, working diligently to ensure that they have equal representation under the law.

She is a co-sponsor of the Respect for Marriage Act that would codify same-sex marriage under the law and is a co-sponsor of the Equality Act that prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, credit, and more.

Her sensitivity to and advocacy for the needs of LGBTQ+ communities—and all civil rights—has been the hallmark of more than 30 years of service to the state. She is keenly aware of the



PHOTO BY FRANK RIZZO

role of government in ensuring that all Americans get what they need to stay healthy and safe as they continue to contribute to society and the economy and has consistently asserted the need for laws to protect LGBTQ+ individuals as part of the society as a whole.

Representative DeLauro is a Connecticut native who was born in New Haven and is a beloved member of her community. Now in her amazing 16th term in the House of Representatives, Rosa continues to be one of the people who helps to make Connecticut a forward-looking, diverse, and accepting place to work and live. She is tireless, dedicated, and proud to serve, and the result of her work—past and ongoing—has benefited everyone in her district and the state.



AWARD FOR HEALTH EQUALITY:

MIDDLESEX HEALTH

Middlesex Health's Center for Gender Medicine and Wellness serves more than 1,200 patients who are transgender, gender nonconforming or gender expansive. To call it a welcome oasis for patients is an understatement. A reported 25 percent of this community avoids medical appointments for well-documented, legitimate fears of being mocked, refused treatment, or treated ineptly.

At Middlesex, it is a systemwide belief that every person deserves the right to live their life. Every staff member, from receptionist to doctor, is trained in treating every patient respectfully and is educated in the unique concerns of the trans and nonbinary community.

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

The center provides more than gender-affirming care. Doctors in 12 locations are experts in providing primary care to trans and nonbinary individuals. Unlike many doctors, they know how central a patient's gender identity is to their care.

A navigator helps patients access a full array of care, including hormonal therapy, behavioral health services, continence and public health, gender transition surgery, physical therapy, infectious disease testing and treatment, and voice therapy. The center also offers several support groups.

For patients who bind their chests, physical therapists teach how to do so safely and comfortably, recognizing that a binder is an essential part of their wardrobe. Medical assistants battle with pharmacists who call to say, constantly advocating for their patients when they get pushback on such issues as prescribing

testosterone to someone assigned female at birth. They describe their passion for care as "being in beast mode for every patient every day."

In 2021, the program expanded to treating adolescents. This unblocked a statewide bottleneck that had kept youths waiting a year or more for a first appointment, now allowing them to be seen in a month or two.

Even in specialties outside the Gender Center, staff knows how to treat transgender patients. For instance, for cancer screening, the motto is "If you have it, screen it." Elsewhere, screenings are highly gendered, but staff



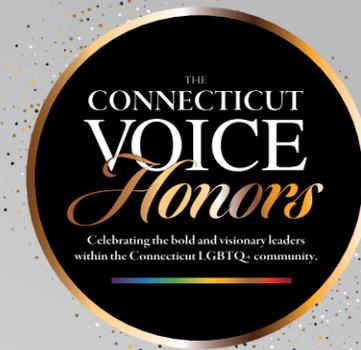
at Middlesex know that a trans man needs a pap smear.

Kathryn Tierney MSN, APRN, FNP-BC, is the center's medical director. She is a tireless advocate for the community, and spends considerable time speaking at conferences, support groups or anywhere she can educate other professionals and help patients.

The Human Resources Campaign award is based on Middlesex's policies and practices dedicated to equitable treatment and inclusion of not only LGBTQ+ patients, but also employees. One of those, CT Technologist and trans man Kelly Merrill, shared with CT Voice their experience transitioning on the job: "I have nothing but respect and support."

The Middlesex commitment extends to all staff as well. Their employee resource group, MH+Pride, is dedicated to fostering a welcoming community for LGBTQ+ employees.

Middlesex is a leader and a model in respecting individuals, providing care, and supporting the needs of every community they serve, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ+.



AWARD FOR PEOPLE'S CHOICE:

DAYNE BACHMANN

For a transgender person, finding a good therapist who is knowledgeable about their issues is like striking gold. Finding an excellent one? That's hitting a whole 24 karat vein.

That's what Dayne Bachmann's clients say they have found in him. They say that Bachmann, a licensed clinical social worker and a gender therapist, and founder of Twin Peaks Counseling in Derby, is priceless.

Surveys and anecdotes show that many trans people who want mental health care are unable to access it, that their fear of inept therapists is frequently justified, and that ignorant and even ill-intentioned practitioners cause harm. The therapists who "get it" are, in much of the country, few and far between.

To Bachmann, who was born in Derby and returned there after earning his master's degree in social work from Fordham University, the Naugatuck Valley was one of those care deserts. That's why he chose to open his practice there in 2018. It is the fulfillment of his dream: to help members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Bachmann, a trans man, transitioned in his late 40s with the enthusiastic support of his spouse Shane Bachmann, his chosen family, and friends. His biological family is not part of his life.

Ninety-five percent of his clients are LGBTQ+ and of these, 90 percent are trans. He hears from them about a lot of bullying, family rejection, anxiety, and depression. He understands what they're going through. "I know what the heck I'm talking about. I've been through it."

His practice has grown, now employing 12 clinicians. They offer individual and group therapy and provide training to others. Bachmann himself has trained hundreds of mental health professionals, as well as hundreds of staff members at local schools and businesses, including medical staff at Griffin Hospital. His most pressing message to them: respect people's names and pronouns. And to medical people: educate yourselves; don't expect your patients to educate you.

Bachmann is also author of *She He Me*, published in 2021.

Many of those who nominated Bachmann for this honor praised his work in spreading knowledge and respect for trans people within his profession and the community.

But most touching are the words from his clients.

"He cares deeply for the people he assists, as well as the LGBTQ community as a whole. I wouldn't be where I am today without him."

"Dayne is a remarkable human being and has helped me throughout the most difficult time of my life." "He has helped me overcome many personal struggles. He's my personal hero."

"Dayne is an incredible individual. He truly cares about his community and



the clients he works with."

There are more, but you get the idea.



AWARD FOR PRIDE IN EDUCATION:

SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

Embracing, celebrating, empowering, and promoting diversity and inclusion, have been defining elements of the institutional and student experience at Southern Connecticut State University (Southern).

With its wide range of students, many of whom are the first in their families to pursue higher education, Southern has consistently demonstrated its commitment to helping students achieve goals.

Under the direction of President Joe Bertolino, Southern has emerged as a model for what a “social justice university” can be. Particularly during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Southern stayed engaged with students and the communities it serves to ensure that students are educated, enlightened, and prepared for the world they will encounter on graduation.

Their landmark efforts including acknowledging the systemic biases that exist within the Southern community as well and to create a safe and nurturing environment for the diverse range of intersectional identities reflect in the student body. Bertolino and the entire staff at Southern acknowledge the need for

strategic leadership, and they put this into practice throughout the institution.

By embracing social justice, Southern has built—and continues to expand upon—an environment where equity, diversion, and inclusion are part of everyday campus life. Every student is respected, and critical thinking about societal issues that affect the campus and the world are encouraged, and this awareness helps students to be fully prepared to be

positive forces for their communities while in school and in later life.

College is more than just classes, and Southern continues to encourage dialogues where everyone is treated with dignity, kindness, compassion, and respect. The work extends beyond campus,

as Southern has developed and initiated partnerships that improve health, cultural, engagement, and opportunities throughout the Greater New Haven community and beyond.

Southern has demonstrated the success, effectiveness and positive outcomes of this systemic commitment and practice, becoming a model of universities—and organizations of all types—everywhere.



AWARD FOR SMALL BUSINESS:

CT GAY & LESBIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The Connecticut Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce is a wild success at achieving its main purpose: helping its members thrive. But it is a powerful organization that does so much more.

It is a valuable resource for those who prefer to give their business to an LGBTQ+ business owner, or who want to hire someone who is knowledgeable about issues unique to the community, whether legal advice, health care, wedding planning, personal training and much more.

It also has a non-profit arm, the CTGLC Foundation, that annually funds scholarships to empower young LGBTQ+ and allied leaders. Always eager to do more, the Chamber hopes to identify benefactors who will allow the foundation to fund four-year scholarships.

The Chamber has also just started a young professionals’ group, which is currently at work on becoming an additional non-profit arm of the organization.

Membership is advantageous as well to ally-owned businesses, who can learn how to be good employers. After all, productivity improves when people want to be at their jobs.

But most of all, Executive Director John Pica-Sneeden takes pride in this fact: 95 percent of member businesses survived the pandemic.

That statistic so impressed U.S. Small Business Administration Administrator Isabella Casillas Guzman during her visit to Connecticut this spring, that she asked Pica-Sneeden how they managed it.

His reply: “We’re fighters.” He explains that, literally, early in life LGBTQ+ people necessarily become accustomed to fighting for themselves.

During quarantine, the Chamber worked to help its members survive both financially and personally. At Zoom meetings, members learned how and where to get financial help, and how to take care of the mental health effects of stress and isolation. Governor Ned Lamont attended to discuss obtaining financial aid and PPE.

“Everybody that remained in business the last two years is a success story,” says Pica-Sneeden.

“We were a catalyst, but they did it.” Pica-Sneeden himself is a floral designer who has owned Surroundings Floral in Broad Brook for 35 years. The Board of Directors includes a diverse group of professionals. Its membership directory

ranges from A-to almost-Z (“Accommodations” to “Weddings.”)

The Chamber has 168 members, about 10 of which are corporate partners. They meet every first Thursday, at rotating members’ locations. Pica-Sneeden likens members to a tapestry, woven of people who meet at Chamber events, that is strong because members support each other.

Another thing about the Chamber, says Pica-Sneeden: it’s a good time. “Other chambers are boring as all hell.” Instead, he says, people leave saying, “This meeting was so good, I feel I can conquer the world!”





AWARD FOR UNSUNG HERO:

JACKIE THURSTON

Jackie Thurston is the type of person you notice. She is usually the one rounding everyone up to do an ice breaker, scurrying around during an event she is running or standing on a table to get everyone's attention to talk about the cause being supported. Playfully known as the "lesbian mayor", she is the type of person who never stops coming up with new, creative ways to help the community. Her work with nonprofits and event planning over the years has left a mark on the community in ways she does not even realize.

Jackie has been sitting on the board of the CTGLC Foundation (formally the CABO Foundation) for more than 9 years, acting as the Board President for the last six. The CTGLC Foundation is a nonprofit whose mission is to celebrate and empower courageous young LGBT or Allied leaders in Connecticut who impact their community and school by acting as a catalyst for positive change thereby inspiring others to create a more compassionate and inclusive environment. The foundation has given leaders and advocates in the Connecticut community more than \$19,000 in college scholarships to empower them to continue their work. Each June, the foundation runs their major fundraiser, the CTGLC Cabaret at the Square Foot Theatre in Wallingford in order to get people together to celebrate the scholarship winners and raise money for future leaders. You won't want to miss it!

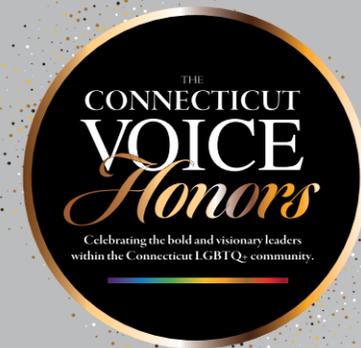
Over the years, Jackie has also volunteered her time with other LGBTQ+ networks, nonprofits, and events.



She assisted in running the Stonewall Speakers Anniversary event at The Space Ballroom. She spent time gathering information and calling schools around the state encouraging them to sign up for GLSEN's Rainbow Library. She has continued to go to events across the state supporting numerous other LGBTQ causes.

Her passion lies in bringing people together and helping people find a community of their own. She has been running events in the LGBTQ community for over 15 years including her longest run group called Ladies in Action (LIA), a network of queer women and nonbinary folks who come together to play sports, hike, climb, and meet other like-minded people. "Having a presence, being a support group, showing folks they're not alone, and just to hang out, have fun and meet people. CT wouldn't be the same without this group," Amanda from LIA stated. Ashley said, "I loved this event and group so much I drove all the way from Springfield, MA to attend. Good thing I did because I met my wife at LIA."

Jackie has seen the need for gathering people together, the need for a support system, and the need for community. She has seen the importance of uplifting the youth in our state by celebrating and empowering them to continue their advocacy journey. She does all of this because of her love of the community and that is why we are awarding her with the Unsung Hero Award for all she has accomplished and done for our state.



AWARD FOR YOUTH:

JULIA GORDON

Avon resident Julia Gordon wanted to do something to support diversity, equity and inclusion in her town. She had seen how people could come together around these ideas, particularly in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. Although they were just high school students, she and her friends wanted to do something to support a more caring, inclusive community. Julia's initial idea was to paint an inclusive mural at the Avon library and create a Pride crosswalk as a visual reminder of how essential equity and inclusion are to a strong society.

But the town council shot her down, saying that the town didn't allow political statements on public property. Julia's response was to make "a human statement that we should all embrace. I don't think it's political. I made a very clear statement between love and acceptance and hate."

Despite being turned down for the mural and crosswalk, Julia still believed that the town needed to make a visible statement about compassion and acceptance. Not able to make that statement on public property, she worked with councilman Don Polhamus who was immediately taken with Julia's commitment and passion. The result: Avon Cares, a

program that built awareness through yard signs. It was a hit. Virtually anyone who drove through Avon could not help but see—and hopefully be moved by—the bold, signs with the words "Avon Cares" emblazoned over the progressive flag.

Then it went viral. Julia's signs were adapted for Avon, Simsbury, Farmington, Canton, Burlington, Granby, Harwinton, and New Hartford—11 towns in all—each town proclaiming their commitment to equity and inclusion one yard at a time. The program raised more than \$7,000 in just a few months. But Julia wasn't done. The following year, she kept the program going, moving beyond just yard signs to car magnets and stickers, and these efforts have raised more than \$6,000 for the Gay Straight Alliance and Voices for Equity Groups.

Julia has never been one to seek the spotlight, but her commitment to equity and inclusion for all has been an inspiration to her friends, her community and to young people everywhere. Her commitment, vision, and dedication have made her virtually unstoppable

and a reminder that young people can be powerful individuals, changing attitudes, and working for social justice that lifts everyone in society.





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ctpublic.org/vote

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22

Connecticut Orchards to Visit in '22

By AMY S. WHITE



The history of apples in Connecticut is about as old as the state itself, with the earliest record of cultivated apples in New England appearing in 1623. During colonial times, most farmers had apple orchards and cider mills since apples kept well, stored in their cool, dirt-floored cellars or turned into mildly alcoholic hard cider.

The number of apple varieties grew, and the best were propagated and shipped widely as transportation technology improved. By the 19th century, Connecticut was considered a top apple-producing state.

This history can still be experienced today in autumn, when orchards across the state open their grounds and farm stands to apple lovers from near and far. According to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, over 60 varieties of apples are grown in the state. Take a visit to one of our favorite orchards listed here to buy or pick your own to taste one of the state's most enduring and treasured crops. Don't forget to get some extra cider to use in one of our favorite apple cider recipes.

Note: This list was crowd-sourced and does not follow any particular order. We strongly suggest you call or check websites and/or social media pages for up-to-date information including hours of operation, pick-your-own (PYO) guidelines and availability.

Bishop's Orchards
1355 Boston Post Rd., Guilford
bishopsorchards.com

What started as a dairy and vegetable farm in 1871 now operates as a huge farm market, bakery, creamery, winery and, of course, orchard. PYO (pick your own) includes berries, peaches, pears, apples, and pumpkins. The winery features award-winning fruit wines and hard ciders, both of which are available for tasting and purchase. With outdoor movie nights, trivia and live music events, there is always something fun happening at this popular destination.



According to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, more than 60 varieties of apples are grown in the state.

Applebrook Farm and Cider Mill

216 East Rd., East Windsor
applebrookfarm.com

Nearly 1,500 apple trees produce 35 different varieties of apples at this local favorite where the Muska family grows everything they sell and sells everything they grow. Grampa Tony's Apple Cider is especially popular with its optimal tasting blend of apples and excellent ratios of sugar, acid, and aromatics. Don't forget to pick up some cider donuts, made for the farm by West Springfield's Donut Dip Bakery.

Easy Pickin's Orchard

46 Bailey Rd., Enfield
easypickinsorchard.com

This farm has been growing some of the state's best produce for more than 50 years. They open both their apple orchards as well as some of their vegetable fields and flower/herb patches for picking. Their fruits and vegetables can be found at local farmers markets. They also run their own community-supported agriculture (CSA) program with full and half shares available.

Holmberg Orchards

12 Orchard Ln., Gales Ferry
holmbergorchards.com

Holmberg is a fourth-generation, family-run farm. Their market is stocked and open year-round with produce, baked goods and specialty foods. You can visit their orchards seasonally for PYO or go to their tasting room to try one of their grape or fruit wines, or hard apple ciders.

Belltown Hill Orchards

483 Mattson Hill Rd.,
South Glastonbury
belltownhillorchards.com

Belltown Hill is a working, fourth-generation orchard growing berries, sweet cherries, 24 varieties of apples, pumpkins, and Christmas trees. The on-site farm market sells fruits and veggies, baked goods including cider donuts, and jams and jellies in a corner called Grandma's Pantry.

Rogers Orchards

336 Longbottom Rd.,
Southington
rogersorchards.com

Established in 1809 and now a Connecticut landmark, eight generations of family have grown fruit here. In addition to 20 varieties of apples, they also grow peaches, nectarines, plums, apricots and pears. The bakery sells fruit pies, cider donuts and apple cakes, along with other locally made products. PYO is available on weekends starting in mid-September.

Johnny Appleseed's

185 West Rd. (Rte. 83), Ellington
johnnyappleseedfarmct.com

This aptly named orchard has 60 acres of dwarf apple trees producing 14 varieties, as well as 35 acres of peach trees bearing 11 varieties, both of which are available for picking. The retail stand sells native produce, Connecticut-made baked goods, apple cider, and hardy mums in every color imaginable.

Beardsley Cider Mill and Orchard

278 Leavenworth Rd., Shelton
beardsleyscidermill.com

Hay, turkeys, and dairy cows have all been farmed and raised on this family-owned plot of land. Since the 1920s, however, the primary crops grown here are apples (more than 10,000 trees), peaches, plums, and nectarines. Highlights here include small-batch cider, PYO, farm-baked pies and fruit breads, and a starter kit for making hard cider at home.

Silverman's Farm

451 Sport Hill Rd., Easton
silvermansfarm.com

For 100 years and counting, Silverman's has been open daily from April to December. This popular destination for family fun boasts a sweeping PYO orchard, scenic tractor rides, a country market, and an animal farm. Berries, peaches and 22 apple varieties are available throughout the picking season.

Buell's Orchard

108 Crystal Pond Rd., Eastford
buellsorchard.com

Started in 1889 by Henry Buell, this family-owned-and-operated orchard in the "Quiet Corner" is still thriving four generations later. Apples, peaches, berries, and pumpkins are all PYO. All types of produce, local corn, and meat from neighboring farms, and other local products are sold at the farm stand. They also host an annual Harvest Festival on Columbus Day weekend.



Wright's Orchard and Fresh Farm Stand

271 South River Rd., Tolland
wrightsorchar.com

What was once only 250 semi-dwarf apple trees is now more than 2,000. The farm also offers stone fruits, berries, and pumpkins. You can PYO or purchase already picked produce from the quaint store that also carries mums, winter squash, gourds, delicious frozen pies, apple cider donuts, and more.

Blue Hills Orchard

141 Blue Hill Rd., Wallingford
bluehillsorchard.com

For six generations, this orchard has been owned and operated by the Henry family. Located on the northern slope of Sleeping Giant Mountain, it covers

more than 300 acres with 250 acres in apple production and the rest in peaches, plums, and nectarines. They partner with Massachusetts-based Stormalong Cider to produce an unfiltered hard cider sold in cans. PYO is on weekends only.

Clark Farms at Bushy Hill Orchards

29 Bushy Hill Rd., Granby
clarkfarmsct.com

A fall destination indeed, Clark Farms has it all: PYO apples, a café with pub-style fare and ice cream, a bakery, and a cidery with four different varieties. They are available for catering and can host special events at the farm. While you're in the area, visit their greenhouse in Suffield for plants, vegetables, flowers, and more.

Averill Farm
250 Calhoun St.,
Washington Depot
averillfarm.com

This family farm has been operated continuously since it was purchased in 1746 from the holdings of Chief Waramaug. Today, the 260-acre property is primarily a fruit orchard, but it also produces hay and Christmas trees. They grow more than 100 varieties of apples and pears, about 20 of which are available for PYO. The rest are sold on-site or at local farmers markets. They also carry their own cider, cider donuts, flowers, jams, jellies, locally sourced pies, mums, honey, and more.

Hickory Hill Orchards
351 South Meriden Rd. (Rte. 70),
Cheshire
hickoryhillorchards.com

In 1977, Doctor Fred Kudish and his wife Lynn purchased Hickory Hill as the future home for their family. With no agricultural experience or intention of being the farmers, they leased the property to outside fruit growers for their first year. Shortly thereafter, they turned the orchards into their passion project, with Fred as the farmer and Lynn managing the business. With more than 33 acres and an on-site country store, the orchard produces over 20 varieties of apples, peaches, pears, plums, and nectarines. PYO is open daily.

Rose Orchards Farm
33 Branford Rd., North Branford
roseorchardsfarm.com

Robert Rose sailed to the New World from England in 1634 and made his way to North Branford. The 11th and 12th generations of the Rose family still live on the grounds and maintain 50 acres of farmland that includes apple orchards, a creamery, a bakery, a market, farm animals, PYO, and Buck's Grill, which is open for breakfast and lunch daily.

Irish Bend Orchard
90 Pioneer Heights Rd., Somers
irishbendorchard.com

This fourth-generation family orchard starts their harvest in August with peaches and continues into September and October with 11 varieties of apples and 6 varieties of Asian pears. Open on weekends, they offer pre-picked fruits and vegetables at the farm stand or PYO. You can often find them at local farmers markets.

Drazen Orchards
251 Wallingford Rd., Cheshire
drazenorchards.com

Originally started as a farm, orchard and wood mill in the 1800s, this property was purchased by the Drazen family and replanted using a trellis support system, which allows for maximum sunshine and optimal flavor. Besides many apple varieties, they also grow peaches, plums, pears, blueberries, and quince for purchase at the farm stand (open daily) or for PYO.

Woodstock Orchards
494 Rte. 169, Woodstock
woodstockorchardsllc.com

This is a family-owned-and-operated fruit and vegetable retail stand that also offers PYO apples and blueberries in season. Guests can enjoy watching the "donut robot" create made-to-order apple cider donuts that are sold in the bakery alongside pies, turnovers, crisps, and other items made with farm-fresh ingredients. The store is open daily.

Dondero Orchards
529 Woodland St., South
Glastonbury
donderoorchards.com

The Donderos have been farming in this location since 1911. They feature berries, apples, peaches, plums, nectarines, and pears for PYO or purchase. The on-site farm stand carries baked goods along with their award-winning jams, jellies, pickles, and pesto. They host monthly family-style farm dinners from June to September and offer a CSA.

Lyman Orchards
32 Reeds Gap Rd., Middlefield
lymanorchards.com

No list of Connecticut orchards would be complete without including this one. Ten generations of Lymans have been farming here since 1741. Today, this year-round destination has a huge farm market, a bakery featuring their award-winning pies, sunflower and corn mazes, plenty of family-friendly events, a golf course with an on-site restaurant called 1741 Pub and Grill, and a CSA as well as PYO apples, berries, peaches, pears, and pumpkins.

B. F. Clyde's Cider Mill
129 North Stonington Rd., Mystic
clydescidermill.com

The only location on the list that is not an orchard, Clyde's is the oldest steam-powered cider mill in the United States, and thus is a piece of living history. Every September 1, they open their doors and sell sweet cider, eight different hard ciders, cider donuts and other baked goods, more than a dozen types of apple wines, and a variety of local goods. Tastings and demonstrations are offered. They are open daily from September through December. 🍷



At-Home Cider Doughnuts

(makes 2 dozen)

Ingredients:

- Canola oil for frying**
- 1 egg**
- 1 ¼ cups sugar (divided)**
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon (divided)**
- ½ tsp nutmeg**
- 1 cup apple cider**
- 1 tsp vanilla extract**
- 1 cup all-purpose flour plus extra for surface and hands**
- 2 cups baking mix, such as Bisquick**

Directions:

Preheat the oil in a large pot, skillet or deep fryer to 375°F. Whisk together the egg, ¼ cup sugar, 1 tsp of cinnamon, nutmeg, cider and vanilla. Using a wooden spoon, stir in the flour and baking mix. Lightly flour a work surface and your hands, then knead the dough several times and roll it to about 1/2 -inch thickness. Use a donut or biscuit cutter, edge of a cup, or a knife to cut donuts and donut holes into desired shapes. Carefully drop the donuts into the heated oil, taking care not to crowd the pot. Working in batches, cook donuts until they are golden brown, then flip and continue to cook the other side. Adjust heat as needed to maintain the frying temperature of 375°F. After removing from the fryer, allow the donuts to rest on paper towels to soak up any extra oil. Combine the remaining cup of sugar and 1 tsp of cinnamon and coat the donuts with the cinnamon-sugar while they are still hot.

Apple Cider Risotto

(serves 2-4)

Ingredients:

- 2 cups apple cider**
- 2 cups water**
- 1 tbsp olive oil**
- 1 medium onion, diced**
- 4 oz diced pancetta**
- 1 cup arborio rice**
- Kosher salt, to taste**

Directions:

Pour the apple cider and water into a medium saucepan and set over medium heat. In a large skillet, heat the oil and sauté the onion and pancetta together until they start to brown. Add the rice and stir until it becomes golden brown. Slowly add the warm cider/water mixture, one ladle at a time, stirring constantly and adding more liquid only when the rice has soaked up most of what is already in the skillet. Continue this process until the liquid is gone and the rice is tender. Try it with seared scallops for a real treat!

Cider-Sage Gravy

Note: All the flavor of gravy comes from the "drippings" – the browned juices and fat that are left after you have roasted poultry or meat. This recipe works best with roast chicken, turkey or pork.

Ingredients:

- 3 tbsp drippings (see recipe note)**
- 4 fresh sage leaves**
- 1 cup apple cider**
- 3 tbsp all-purpose flour**
- 1 cup chicken stock**

Directions:

After you have removed your roast, set the roasting pan containing the drippings on top of two stovetop burners turned to low heat. Add the sage leaves and stir until everything starts to heat up and stick to the pan. Pour in the apple cider to deglaze the pan and continue to stir for 2-3 minutes. Whisk the flour into the chicken stock. Pour the flour/stock mixture into the pan to act as the thickener for the gravy. Continue to stir constantly until gravy is thickened to desired consistency.



Garden To Table



If you ask anyone here, they'll tell you that one of the best aspects of life at Seabury is the ability to continue doing what they've always loved. We have several master gardeners on campus who share their passion for growing. In fact, many of the herbs and vegetables cultivated by Residents and staff in their personal gardens find their way into the delicious seasonal dishes served in our dining room and bistro. That's as locally sourced as it gets, and it adds another unique flavor to life at Seabury.

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THE FINAL WORD //

EVERYBODY PLAYS:

New Toy and Game Company Celebrates Inclusivity

By David McGranaghan

Despite all our progress with gender inclusivity in recent years, kids' toys are still pretty black-and-white (or should I say pink or blue). In major toy shops today, children still have to pick a lane based primarily on gender. The models featured in Amazon product images are boys for trucks and girls for dolls. Children are still often forced to conform: first, in their clothing and second, in their toys.

The only exception to this rule is games. Board games, card games, party games; the images used to sell these products have always been mixed in terms of gender and age. Is gameplay the only play that's for all of us?

Games are fair; we all have to follow the same set of rules, regardless of gender. As a queer child, this is one of the very rare times you can feel truly equal: you have just as much chance of winning as your siblings; you can beat your parents; you can even play with the opposite sex without judgement or a raised eyebrow. Jenga, Clue, Monopoly, Twister—these games are top selling products decade after decade with little to no update required to the gameplay. How many gendered toys can say that? I believe good gameplay allows us to escape and go beyond ourselves, and interact with loved ones on a personal level, and that's why these games are still on our Christmas lists year after year.



Subconsciously, I think this is one reason my husband Julian and I started developing party games with our company McMiLLER. In what other environment would you get different generations and genders all laughing and participating in the same activity? To give that freedom, entertainment, and

inclusive feeling back to the world seemed something worthwhile. Whatever issues a family may be facing, they can let them all go and compete as equal—and hopefully entertained—people. Wits, luck, skill are great equalizers around the game table.

As we're about to release our fifth party game, Fire In The Hole (our pillagin'



David and Julian are committed to helping everyone find their authentic selves through play.

plastic-free pirate game), Julian and I are proud to put our queerness at the forefront of our company. We are all aware of the impact representation can have on society as a whole, and we believe it's the least we can do.

Being lucky enough to have finally found pride in our queerness, and to work side by side with each other every

day doing what we love, we know that us being vocal and present will not only let other queer people see themselves out there in the world, but also let the straight community know that we exist, we are successful, and they and their loved ones are being entertained by queer talent.

Having seen how successful this awareness has been with developing

games, we decided to take on one of the most difficult categories of the toy business: dolls and action figures. Traditionally, these have been all about promoting specific gender stereotypes, gender roles, behaviors, and even values. What, we wondered, would happen if we created a line of toys with characters who were appealing, had a great backstory, and looked cool... BUT were designed to be open-ended so that kids could create and reflect their own unique narratives through play? We think we've found it, but you're going to have to wait till 2023 to see it in "person."

There is no denying that the gender stereotypes seen in our toys growing up, and still in many toys today, have a long-lasting impact on gender and our relationship with our bodies. How much have these unachievable 'role models' held us back? What could we achieve or feel if there was less conforming and more exploring? As a company, we hope to give the next generation the tools to think bigger, freer, and weirder. And have fun doing it. 🍷



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