

# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## WE ARE FAMILY

READERS SHARE THEIR HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

### “WICKED” GOOD

AUTHOR GREGORY MAGUIRE  
ON HIS NEWEST PROJECT

### SPIRIT OF GIVING

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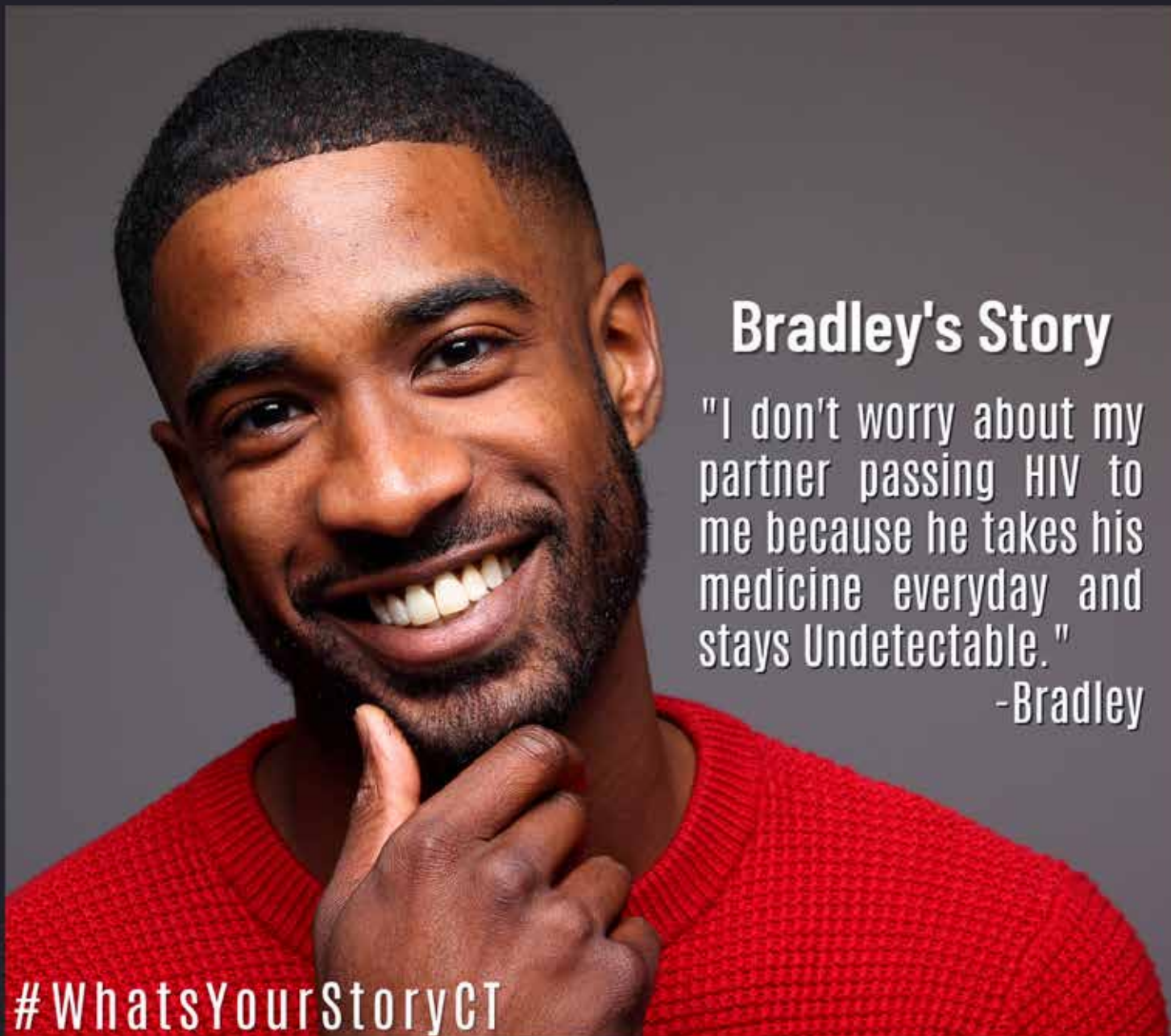
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# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## EDITOR'S NOTE //



Welcome to the winter issue of *Connecticut VOICE!*

For many of us, this time of year is all about family. For this issue we turned to you, our readers, and asked you to show off your families – and we're proud to share your families' faces, stories and holiday traditions on these pages.

The holiday season can be stressful for everyone, but brings a particular set of challenges for many within the LGBTQ community. What's the best way to respond when someone – a relative, a friend, or a mall Santa, for instance – misgenders or otherwise

misidentifies you or a loved one? We're offering some tips for how to handle this tricky and hurtful situation.

Looking for alternatives to giving material gifts this year? We've got you covered, with a comprehensive list of organizations with LGBTQ-focused missions that would benefit from donations. Whether you're looking to donate on behalf of friends and family this holiday season, or looking for somewhere to make your own year-end contributions, there are so many worthy groups who could use your help – especially this year, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a toll on many nonprofits.

We also sit down with "Wicked" author Gregory Maguire and Broadway actor and performing artist Douglas Lyons to find out what inspires their attention-grabbing work, and what they've got their sights set on next.

As always, I invite you to join the conversation by connecting with *Connecticut VOICE* on social media.

Happy reading,

*Cara*

Cara Rosner, Editor  
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THE WORLD BY  
BEING YOURSELF."

*-Yoko Ono*



## IN THIS ISSUE //

**56**

### **COVER STORY**

Readers share how they celebrate the holidays with food, fun and - most importantly - family.



Photo by Todd Fairchild





78  
FOOD

This winter, indulge in recipes that don't only taste great but boost immunity as well.

8  
ARTS & CULTURE

Think a pandemic is slowing down artist - and New Haven native - Douglas Lyons? Think again.

15  
SPIRIT

This holiday season, many organizations that support the LGBTQ community would be grateful for a spot on your gift-giving list.

22  
FEATURE

For a growing number of people, bullying is a matter of life or death.

30  
DELICIOUS

When life threw them a curveball, the restaurateurs behind Middletown's Herd brought something new to the table.

39  
PERSPECTIVES

How to handle those awkward and hurtful situations when someone uses the wrong pronoun or makes harmful assumptions.

42  
INKTOBER

By Sarah Tully

48  
HEALTH AND WELLNESS

At Middlesex Health, feminizing hormone therapy helps trans women feel like themselves.

67  
MEET

Gregory Maguire, author of "Wicked," delves into his latest works and inspirations.

74  
TRENDS

Physically distanced by the pandemic, a growing number of seniors are staying digitally connected to family and friends.

94  
OP-ED

Susan Bigelow reflects on what makes Connecticut so great, especially for members of the LGBTQ community.

88

PETS

For Paul Shipman and Thomas Lee, home is where their animals are.



# Breaking Through

A pandemic can't hold back queer artist Douglas Lyons

By FRANK RIZZO

**T**hough the pandemic may have thrown a wrench into the complex gears of the arts and entertainment industry, there's one creative artist who is going full-out from his apartment in Queens, New York, where a chalkboard that dominates an entire wall is filled with all the projects he is maintaining, developing, or just beginning.

Douglas Lyons, 33, who was born and raised in the Fairhaven section of New Haven, is what they call in show biz terms "a multi-hyphenate" – in his case, that would be actor-composer-lyricist-writer-recording artist – whose positive and inexhaustible energy has propelled his life and career on Broadway, on tour, and at regional theaters across the country. Now his projects are on the verge of connecting to the film, television, and music industries, too.

Right out of the Hartt School at the University of Hartford 11 years ago, he landed in a touring revival of "Dreamgirls" and then in the Broadway production of the just-opened "The Book of Mormon." Later he was in the original cast, and did a six-year stint, in "Beautiful: The Carole King Musical."

For many young artists starting out, that would be enough to feel your career is off and running, with prospects for even more performing gigs.

But Lyons soon envisioned himself doing more.

His composing interest began after "a bad romantic breakup in the start of 2012," when his parents bought him a guitar. While touring with "The Book of Mormon," he collaborated with pit musician Ethan Pakchar and together they created an 11-song album, "#LOVE," which Lyons

describes as "a milkshake of theater, pop and R&B music."

That was just the beginning of his multi-layered career. In recent years, some of his projects have tapped into his sensibility as a queer artist.

"I like to shed light on the underdog," he says in a Zoom interview from his New York apartment, "and that includes people in society who are not represented or embraced with the same privileges as others. I feel like the stage and the screen are opportunities to put light on these people."

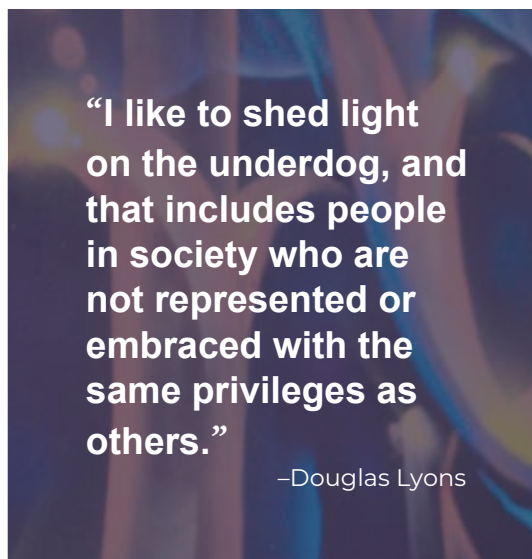
That includes a new musical "Beau," a collaboration with Pakchar, which centers on a queer singer-songwriter who uses his music to find his voice and identity. The

show received a production late last year in upstate New York (directed by former Hartford Stage artistic director Michael Wilson). There's also "Sunshine," which Lyons wrote for Long Wharf Theatre's "Black Trans Women at the Center: An Evening of Short Plays," which was presented as livestream readings this past summer.

But he is most excited about his new work, the family comedy "Chicken and Biscuits," a play whose production was running in Queens right before the pandemic closed theaters. A film company has acquired the

right to the play, which is inspired by the loss of his uncle and the family conflicts that followed during his funeral.

In the play, "there's an interracial gay relationship that is not exactly embraced by the majority of the family. It is truth. It may be uncomfortable but the stage is the place where we are allowed to discuss the things we try to run away from in real life."







The musical writing team of Douglas Lyons and Ethan Pakchar. Photo by Michael Kushner

Lyons says telling these stories on stage is one way to deal with issues that many prefer to repress.

“Sometimes the fear of ‘not wanting to know’ can be put at ease in the theater,” he says.

Lyons says the play was also written “to amplify and to celebrate black women who are so often in mainstream media reduced to pain and suffering and taking care of everyone else. My goal was to open up what blackness looks like, and for us to be the center of the story. There is so much joy and beauty that I’ve grown up [with] among the Black women in my life. I want to show the layers and the varieties and the laughter of that world that the American theatre has missed out on.”

Laughter, he says, is an important

ingredient in this storytelling.

“The tone [of the play] would be ‘The Book of Mormon’ meets Tyler Perry,” he says with a big smile “Or, if you saw the film ‘Soul Food,’ it’s more like that; like a homecooked meal with a familiar family.”

### FAMILY INSPIRATION

Part of that inspiration comes from his own family and his need to share that feeling he felt growing up, including “the joy of my parents, the beauty of the jest, the laughter. For some, ‘Chicken and Biscuits’ might be seen as offensive or a stereotype. But like, no, y’all, that’s the recipe of our joy.”

Lyons is the only child of his parents: his father owns a transportation business and his mother is the first female paster

of the Thomas Chapel Church of Christ in New Haven. He attended the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School and Hill Career Regional High School.

In high school, he discovered theater when he was cast in a production of “West Side Story” that turned the Jets and the Sharks into Black and Latinx rival gangs. The makeup of the school was highly segregated, and this gave students a platform to talk about it. Lyons played the lead, Tony.

“My experience growing up in New Haven was as an artist in school plays and dancing and choreographing, but also as an athlete because I played baseball and basketball and soccer. New Haven was a multicultural experience of art and sports and growth,” Lyons says. “In high school, there were not just the





Douglas Lyons as Coalhouse Walker Jr. in a production of the musical "Ragtime" at 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle. Photo by **Mark Kitaoka**

'jocks' and the 'freaks.' There was none of that. We were all trying to get the best GPA. I feel like I got a taste of all the great appetizers of life growing up in New Haven."

### **MORE PROJECTS**

His previous projects are now in limbo because of the pandemic.

His musical "Five Points" – for which he co-wrote the music and wrote the lyrics – had a staged reading at Goodspeed Musicals two years ago, a production in Minneapolis, and a reading at Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey last winter. But the future of that show is on hold right now, he says. Set

amid the draft riots of the Civil War, the musical centers on communities of Blacks and Irish immigrants in Lower Manhattan, and the inspired-by-real-life dance battles between the two groups. Think Scorsese's "Gangs of New York," mixed with Riverdance and The Tap Dance Kid. The choreographer of "Hamilton," Andy Blankenbuehler, is now attached to the project

Also on hold is his award-winning children's musical "Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical," which he created five years ago – and which premiered at the Ivoryton Playhouse in Essex and later played at West Hartford's Playhouse on Park, and in theaters

across the country and as far as Guam. The same stationary status goes for the future life of "Beau."

But there's still activity in his role as a writer.

Lyons has just been hired to join the writing team for the new reboot of the "Fraggle Rock" '80s television series for Apple TV.

In the meantime, he is also pitching a television pilot which he describes as "Friends" meets "Insecure" – but with a queer character at its center. There's also a new Lyons and Pakchar musical short, "Fatigue," with author Jodi Picoult and Tim McDonald. Oh yes, there's yet another musical that





A scene from the production of Lyons' comedy "Chicken and Biscuits," which received a production in New York before the pandemic closed theaters. Photo by **Dominick Totino**



Max Sangerman and Matt Rodin in a scene from the Lyons-Pakchar musical “Beau,” which received a production last year at the Adirondack Theatre Festival. Photo by **Shani Hadjian**. (Insert) Douglas Lyons at Goodspeed Opera House for reading of the Lyons-Pakchar musical “Five Points.” Photo by **Frank Rizzo**



he’s been attached to called “Hamlet Remix.”

Lyons also founded the Next Wave Initiative – a developmental branch of the award-winning, not-for-profit theater company The Directors Company. According to its mission statement, the Next Wave Initiative is “committed to amplifying future Black voices in the American theater.”

“There’s a lot of movements happening about race relations in this country but I’m always focused on the action,” Lyons says. “What is the action being taken? What is the tangible investment being taken for the next generation of Black theater artists? I believe you can effect change through art.”

The Next Wave, he says, will begin


by offering four scholarships that will be given out in the beginning of 2021 to African-American artists.

“The Black Lives Matter movement is nothing new. Being a Black artist, I’m living in two parts: I’m living in what it is to be Black and walking around the world every day – and what it is to be an artist while Black and navigating that space, trying to make a way that diversity and inclusion is part of the conversation. But because of COVID, a lot of things froze and people no longer had an excuse to ignore the realities of institutionalized racism in our profession. I’m interested to see how this will all manifest when we are allowed to gather again. This movement is making us break down barriers of fear, of feeling like an

outsider, that we’re voiceless. It’s leveling the conversation. But I beg everyone to focus on the action. Not just the mouthpieces.”

As for relationships, Lyons simply says, “I’m focusing on my future to make room for love.”

He’s not in a hurry for romance when so many other things are percolating unexpectedly right now.

“You know, last year my father, in the sweetest and most strange way, said to me, ‘Douglas, I think things are about to be big for you. I can just feel it.’ And I’m thinking, ‘What are you talking about?’ But he was right. He saw something that I couldn’t see. Everything that is happening in my life now is destined and happening at the proper time.” 



Frank Rizzo 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](http://ShowRiz.com) and on Twitter @ShowRiz.





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# Giving Back



## 12 pro-LGBTQ causes to consider this holiday season

By DAWN ENNIS

If you thought it was hard to find the right present for the LGBTQ person in your life who has everything, brace yourself for Holiday Season 2020. The COVID-19 era has made exchanging holiday gifts more complicated than ever.

Sure, there are countless, contactless ways to show your affection for lovers, family, friends, and their pets. But watching them tear open a cardboard box on FaceTime or Zoom? It's just not the same.

Instead, send that special someone a generous gift that won't require a visit from UPS, and one that benefits and advances the efforts of our community's better angels.

The people working to support the LGBTQ community and to protect and advance our rights say they need to be on our holiday gift-giving lists. Your donation in the names of your loved ones will show you care in a way that a new doodad never will.

Here are a dozen options for charitable giving to LGBTQ-supporting organizations, far and near:

### PFLAG

The pandemic has mutated, into The Grinch, it seems. Mark Pixley, the new president of PFLAG Hartford, concedes that his view of the organization's coffers is grim.

"That has changed, with COVID. We have seen a decrease in donations," he says. Pixley and his wife have a 22-year-old transgender son who came out in his early teens.

"PFLAG was a key part of that, actually, and that's why I'm still involved with the organization," Pixley says. "When he came out to my wife and to me as trans, we're like, 'Well, what does that even mean?' And so we went to PFLAG and we were able to meet people who are trans, because we didn't know any openly trans people. And we met people who had already gone through it as parents, and it really was a huge help, just knowing that there are others out there, that we're not going through it alone."

The national organization has 400 chapters in communities across the U.S., including Hartford, Norwalk, Waterbury, and Southeastern Connecticut. PFLAG Hartford is a 501(c)

(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization, but its financial data is hidden behind a paywall. The national PFLAG has a rating of 3 out of 4 stars from Charity Navigator and a liabilities-to-assets ratio of 9.6%. According to GuideStar, PFLAG National's balance sheet shows net assets of \$2.8 million, and its revenue of almost \$5 million – including \$2.2 million from contributions, grants and gifts – far outpace its expenses.

**Tax-deductible donations can be made at [pflaghartford.org/donate](https://pflaghartford.org/donate).**

## TRUE COLORS

“Adapting to the current moment for us takes resources,” True Colors executive director Patrick Comerford says.

“Technology, time, staffing, advertising – they are all in demand, as we work to make sure we’re able to deliver on our mission in new and creative ways. We’re relying on our community to be the heroes and help us make sure that LGBTQ+ youth know that they matter.”

Comerford says donations to True Colors helps ensure the creation of “learning and training spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and the people entrusted to care and support them across Connecticut, including young people in GSAs, teachers in development trainings, and professionals who work with LGBTQ+ youth.”

Donations support the True Colors mentoring program and ensure there’s sufficient staff to answer the more than 1,000 calls True Colors gets every year from youth, adults, and





professionals looking for support, information, and resources.

“Last year, we reached over 12,000 people in communities across Connecticut and New England through our programming,” says Comerford.

True Colors is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization based in Hartford and has a Charity Navigator Encompass rating of 100 out of 100, with a liabilities-to-assets ratio of 5.74%. According to GuideStar, its 2019 balance sheet shows net assets of \$233,000 but its expenses outpace its revenue from contributions, grants, and gifts by almost \$20,000.

**Tax-deductible donations can be made at [ourtruecolors.org/donate](https://ourtruecolors.org/donate).**

## GLSEN

GLSEN Connecticut works to champion LGBTQ issues in K-12 education and support LGBTQ youth in our region so that they can thrive in school and in their communities.

GLSEN Connecticut is part of a network of 43 chapters across 30 states and is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit

organization. This chapter’s financial information is hidden behind a paywall. The national organization has a Charity Navigator rating of 3 out of 4 stars and a liabilities-to-assets ratio of 28%. According to GuideStar, the balance sheet for GLSEN’s national office shows net assets of \$4.7 million; its revenue of \$6.8 million including contributions, grants and gifts outpaces its expenses by a cushion of \$230,000.

**Tax-deductible donations, starting at \$3, can be made by visiting [glsen.org/chapter/connecticut](https://glsen.org/chapter/connecticut) and clicking “Donate to our chapter.”**

## AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION (ACLU)

The Connecticut chapter of the ACLU calls itself “the premier advocate for civil rights and individual liberty in the Constitution State,” and receives no federal funding to operate. “To defend the Constitution and keep America safe and free, we need the support of every Connecticut resident who cares about protecting civil liberties,” according to the ACLU of Connecticut’s website.



The ACLU of Connecticut is both a 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) tax-exempt nonprofit organization. The organization has a Charity Navigator Encompass rating of 75 out of 100, and a liabilities-to-assets ratio of just 1.11%.

**Tax-deductible donations, starting at \$5, as well as gifts of stock and tribute gifts, can be made at [acluct.org/en/about/donate](https://acluct.org/en/about/donate).**

## CABO FOUNDATION AKA CTGLC FOUNDATION

The CABO Foundation has awarded more than \$12,000 in scholarships over six years to Connecticut high school seniors who are LGBTQ as well as allied youth making a difference in our community. According to its website, 100% of donations goes to the scholarship fund.

The CABO Foundation, based in Wallingford, is undergoing a name change to CTGLC Foundation, in its partnership with the CTGLC, the Connecticut Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce. As of press time, the organization was in the process of registering to become a 501(c)(3) under its new name. It is currently accepting donations through the Community Foundation, so tax deductions are tax deductible.

**To learn more, visit [cabofoundation.org/donate](https://cabofoundation.org/donate).**

## KAMORA'S CULTURAL CORNER

Kamora Herrington of Hartford founded and operates Kamora's Cultural Corner. The organization's mission statement describes it as a "physical and metaphorical" space created to "approach cultural humility through a Black queer and Afrocentric perspective."

However, as The Advocate magazine reported in August, the KCC lost its location in downtown Hartford because of the pandemic. Herrington's focus has been to support the work of queer Black artists to build community, and support advocacy as well as activism at the intersections of being Black and queer. She also offers something she calls "cultural humility training" on Zoom, to unpack difficult issues of race and privilege.

The KCC is decidedly and openly not a nonprofit. "We actively solicit sponsorships and donations," Herrington explains on her website.

Those donations can be made through Patreon. "I just gave six artists \$40 each," Herrington says. "We also paid for a local queer artist, whose income has been greatly reduced due to COVID, to move to a more affordable apartment (U-HAUL, movers and pizza). Last month, we bought art supplies (canvases, paint, brushes) for artists who then created art that they've sold at our weekly bazaar, allowing them to make money from their craft."

**Non-deductible donations, starting at \$3 a month, can be made at [patreon.com/KCC1023](https://patreon.com/KCC1023)**

## PRIDE FUND TO END GUN VIOLENCE

"I served in the Army for 14 years as a gay man," Iraq war veteran and Pride Fund founder Jason Lindsay says. "I have carried weapons; I've shot all kinds of them. And I carried an assault weapon on the streets of Baghdad."

Four months after the Pulse massacre in Orlando, Fla. in June 2016, he decided he needed to do something.

"I stand firmly in my belief that the type and lethality of the weapon carried in Baghdad does not belong on the streets of America," says Lindsay. He created this Political Action Committee because, "up until that point, there was no organization that was truly focusing on the LGBTQ community."

Lindsay's Pride Fund is dedicated to mobilizing the LGBTQ community and our allies, fundraising for pro-LGBTQ candidates who support gun policy reforms, and speaking out against senseless gun tragedies.

Pride Fund to End Gun Violence is a Political Action Committee, or PAC, based in Washington, D.C. According to public records, Lindsay raised \$70,000 and had operating expenditures of \$67,000 from January 2019 until June of 2020, the four-year-anniversary of the murders at the Pulse nightclub.

**Donations can be made online at [bit.ly/3iFvQiK](https://bit.ly/3iFvQiK) or [secure.actblue.com/donate/pf-legalactionlcm](https://secure.actblue.com/donate/pf-legalactionlcm)**

## TRANS LIFELINE

More than a suicide hotline, Trans Lifeline bills itself as a trans-led national organization dedicated to improving the quality of transgender individuals' lives, by responding to their critical needs with direct service, material support, advocacy, and education.

Trans Lifeline, based in Oakland, Calif., is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Charity Navigator is withholding a rating because Trans Lifeline's founders misspent funds from the organization from 2016-2017; those leaders subsequently were removed from the organization. An independent audit now shows all funds accounted for. At press time, Trans Lifeline leaders were finalizing their 2019 IRS form 990 to show no other misappropriation of funds. A spokesperson for Charity Navigator said it will reissue a positive rating for the organization once that form is filed. GuideStar's report shows net assets exceeding \$246,000 and revenue of more than \$1.1 million from contributions, grants and gifts, exceeding liabilities by more than \$300,000.

**Donations can be made at [translifeline.org/donate](https://translifeline.org/donate).**

## LGBTQ VICTORY INSTITUTE

"When LGBTQ elected officials are in the room, it changes hearts and minds, influences policy debates, and leads to more inclusive legislation," says Elliot Imse, senior director of communications for the LGBTQ Victory Fund. "That is why Victory Institute is building and supporting a pipeline of LGBTQ public leaders through its comprehensive programs. We train



hundreds of LGBTQ people to run for office each year, support dozens of leadership interns and fellows, and provide elected officials with the resources and development training they need to succeed.”

So where does a gift to this organization go? “Your contribution determines the number of LGBTQ leaders we can support,” says Imse, “which will directly influence the number of LGBTQ elected officials in public office.”

And although it’s a national organization, Imse points out there is a Connecticut connection. “We have 10 out LGBTQ elected officials in Connecticut,” he says, most of whom work with the Victory Fund and its institute.

The LGBTQ Victory Institute, based in Washington, D.C., is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit and has a rating of 3 out of 4 stars from Charity Navigator. Its liabilities-to-assets ratio is 80.5%. Net assets of \$151,000 are just one example of The LGBTQ Victory Institute’s extraordinary need; its total revenue of \$2.4 million, including \$2.3 million in contributions, grants and gifts, is overshadowed by expenses of \$2.6 million.

**Donations can be made online at [bit.ly/3c6Kxxs](https://bit.ly/3c6Kxxs).**

## GLAAD

The national organization founded in 1985 does not have chapters, but its work on behalf of the LGBTQ community stretches far beyond its New York City headquarters to Washington, Hollywood, and all around the world. Its mission is to promote and ensure fair, accurate, and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means to build a culture that embraces full acceptance.

So where does your money go if you donate to GLAAD? “It goes directly into our programs,” says spokesperson Barbara Simon, “to accelerate acceptance, and stand up for marginalized people, and be a voice for the community that’s loud and proud.”

Those programs include working with reporters on accuracy when it comes to telling the stories of the community, especially when lifting up voices of LGBTQ and queer people of color. “Representation is so important to understanding and acceptance,” Simon says.

This year, GLAAD’s Nick Adams produced and was featured in the groundbreaking documentary on Netflix, “Disclosure,” about trans representation in Hollywood. Last year, GLAAD’s Alex Schmitter co-produced the documentary “Changing the Game,” which featured two trans female student athletes from Connecticut, Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller.

GLAAD is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization based in New York. Its financial disclosure for 2019 shows net assets of \$19.6 million and revenue, including \$7 million in contributions outpacing expenses by just under \$4 million. Charity Navigator gave GLAAD a stellar 4 out of 4 stars based on 2018 data (the most recent available) and a liabilities-to-assets ratio of 5.4%.

**Donations can be made at [glaad.org/support](https://glaad.org/support).**



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Formerly known as the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, the AVP is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit, with a Charity Navigator rating of 89.1 out of 100. GuideStar shows revenue of \$3.2 million, more than \$1 million of which is from contributions, grants and gifts, and assets of more than \$894,000. Expenses exceed \$2.9 million, with liabilities totaling \$574,000, leaving net assets of \$321,000.

**Donations can be made online at [avp.org/donate](https://avp.org/donate).**



Dawn Ennis is an award-winning journalist who hosts the talk show “RiseUP with Dawn Ennis” and co-hosts the “Before the War” podcast. Ennis was America’s first transgender journalist in a TV network newsroom when she came out six years ago. Follow her @lifeafterdawn on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Ennis and her family reside in West Hartford, Connecticut.







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FEATURE //





# STAYING SAFE

Many young people, especially LGBTQ youth, face regular bullying – but help is at hand

By CAROL LATTER

**I**n 2011, five teenaged boys attending a West Hartford high school harassed a female student for weeks, made threats against her, and then showed up at her house. When the girl's 19-year-old cousin went outside to confront them, one of the bullies shot him in the neck.

In 2016, a seventh-grade student at a New Haven magnet school was punched and knocked unconscious during class, the culmination of five years of abuse by his classmates. His mother sued the school district and city, saying she had repeatedly notified school authorities, but nothing was done.

In 2018, an elementary student who had moved to Cheshire from New Mexico five months earlier – and was constantly bullied in her new school because she was Hispanic – committed suicide at home two days before Christmas. She was 11 years old.

These are just some of the disturbing bullying cases that have taken place throughout Connecticut in the past decade. While bullying is not limited to schools or school-aged children, educational settings have been a hotbed of this type of activity for many years – and it seems to be getting worse. A poll of more than 160,000 students by nonprofit YouthTruth revealed that about 30% of middle-school and high school students had been bullied in school in 2017, up from 25 percent two years earlier.

According to the Tyler Clementi Foundation, bullying is “widespread in schools and on campuses across the United States” but is often underreported because the victim is afraid that telling someone will only make things worse. The New Jersey-based foundation is named for Tyler Clementi, a college freshman who killed himself by jumping off a bridge after his roommate secretly videotaped him being intimate with another male student, and then posted it on Twitter.

In fact, studies have found that bullying is an even more prevalent problem for LGBTQ, non-binary and transgender youth than for straight or cisgender young people – and the problem is often amplified when it's a young person of color.

Following a 2016 national symposium on the subject of LGBTQ bullying – sponsored in part by Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital – a research team led by Dr. Valerie A. Earnshaw authored an article in the journal *Pediatrics*. Dr. Earnshaw noted that “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, in particular, experience significant verbal bullying, physical bullying, and cyberbullying leading to physical injury, psychological distress, and even suicide ... yet successful efforts to address LGBTQ bullying are lagging.”

She went on to say that “greater dialogue among pediatricians and other types of clinicians, medical and public health students, interdisciplinary researchers, government

## CONNECTICUT PARENTS RESPONDING TO A PATCH.COM SURVEY SAID OF THEIR CHILDREN ...

**24.4%**  
HAVE BEEN  
TEASED OR  
CALLED  
NAMES

**24.7%**  
HAVE BEEN  
INTENTIONALLY  
EXCLUDED FROM  
ACTIVITIES OR  
GROUPS

**28%**  
HAVE BEEN  
PHYSICALLY BULLIED,  
HIT, KICKED OR  
PUNCHED

**12.5%**  
HAVE BEEN  
BULLIED BY PHONE,  
TEXT OR ONLINE

**ONLY 8.3%**  
HAVE NEVER  
BEEN BULLIED

officials, school leaders, community members, parents, and youth is needed to generate strategies to prevent LGBTQ bullying and meet the needs of LGBTQ youth experiencing bullying.”

In 2018, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation and the University of Connecticut released the results of a nationwide survey of LGBTQ youth aged 13 to 17. Of the more than 12,000 young people who responded:

- 73% reported experiencing verbal threats because of their actual or perceived LGBTQ identity
- 70% had been bullied at school because of their sexual orientation
- 43% had been bullied on school property in the past 12 months
- 30% of LGBTQ students and 50% of transgender girls had been physically threatened
- Just 5% of students said that all of their teachers and school staff were supportive of LGBTQ people.

### THE STATE OF THE STATE

Some recent statistics suggest that bullying is in a much bigger problem in other states than in Connecticut. For instance, a 2018 WalletHub report ranked our state 37th in the nation – far better than Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri, which garnered 1st, 2nd and 3rd spots, respectively, for the highest incidence of bullying behavior in the U.S.

But many Nutmeg state parents would argue that the prevalence of bullying here is still far too high. Responding to a survey that was conducted by Patch.com and published in October 2019 as part of a multi-year reporting project, more than 330 Connecticut parents said they were extremely concerned about the severity and extent of bullying their kids had been subjected to, both in school and online. Nearly 90 percent of these parents said that one of their children had been bullied at least once, and more than 50 percent said their kids had been bullied frequently.

Moreover, parents reported that the impact had often been severe – including significantly lower grades, fear of going to school, anxiety, depression, and physical harm. Some children were forced to change schools; some teens dropped out of school altogether.

One Connecticut parent wrote that her daughter “cried every day, her entire school career. She went to a private [counselor] and still has no self-esteem. She was a happy little girl until the bullying began in second grade.”

Another parent wrote: “It’s had lasting effects on my son. He doesn’t trust any of his male peers, is afraid to even approach them, and he won’t participate in any social event where they may be present, which is most.”

Alex Agostini can relate. Now a graduate student intern about to complete his Master’s degree in Marriage and





Family Therapy and working with Nancy Martin, LMFT, at Wellness Counseling in Farmington, Agostini was bullied growing up.

“I have distinct memories from back in elementary school. I still remember the bully by name. I think he bullied me because it was easy and fun, but it really stung. The fact that he didn’t leave me alone all the way to middle school was atrocious. I don’t think I made as big a deal out of it as some other people [who were bullied] did. I thought, ‘I need to roll with him as long as I can.’ I took a very passive role,” he says. “Knowing what I know now, I wonder what his home life was like. I didn’t think about that then.”

Multiple studies have shown that bullies are often bullied or mistreated in childhood themselves, encountering mistreatment by peers at school, or

domestic violence or sibling aggression at home.

Experts also say that parents who are quick to take issue with other people, instead of teaching children to be kind and respectful, may be unintentionally modeling behavior that children will emulate.

As Nancy Martin notes, “When we see this type of behavior or the repercussions of it, we ask, “Where is the bully getting the bullying behavior from?” It often starts in the family of origin.”

Sometimes that’s not the case, but kids see poor behavior modeled regardless. “In a wider, systemic view,” says Agostino, “our culture is one where bullying is almost pervasive. People not only have to win; you also have to make sure your opponent loses. In many ways, as a society, I feel we’ve lost our spirit of cooperation.”

## FROM COMMON OCCURRENCE TO CRISIS

Bullying has been going on for years. Many of today’s parents and grandparents were bullied themselves at one point or another, or witnessed it happening in school. But things have escalated dramatically, and many kids’ physical and emotional wellbeing – and even their lives – may be hanging in the balance.

For anyone tempted to dismiss bullying as a common, if unfortunate, part of growing up, it’s important to remember that for victims, bullying is not only painful but potentially deadly. Researchers have identified a strong correlation between bullying and suicide, and studies by Yale University show that young people who are bullied are two to nine times more likely to consider suicide than their non-bullied peers.

Marie Osmond, whose son committed suicide by jumping from the balcony of his apartment building in 2010, said he had called her a few days beforehand and told her he was depressed and had no friends. Osmond, who was away at the time, told him she would be there on Monday, and that things were going to be okay. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey eight months after his death, Osmond said, “depression doesn’t wait ‘til Monday.” In October 2019, she revealed for the first time that her son was not only dealing with multiple other issues in his life at the time, such as his parents’ divorce, but had been repeatedly targeted by three bullies. “I’ve got the texts – I mean they’re horrendous, and ... I believe that that was a high component in him just feeling overwhelmed and that he didn’t fit in,” she said.

Alarming, a report released last June showed that suicide among teenagers and young adults has hit a 20-year high. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the suicide rate among 14-to-17 year olds rose by 70 percent for Caucasian teens and 77 percent for African American teens between 2006 to 2016. And numbers continue to rise, by roughly 8 to 10 percent a year.

Why the increase? Social media may have something to do with it. The advent of online social platforms now means that bullying can take place anywhere, at any time. And that means for victims, there is almost no escape. Even worse, what once was a relatively private source of embarrassment and angst now has the potential to go public – on YouTube, Facebook, or another social platform. When a humiliating video goes viral, for example, it can seem like the whole world is laughing at you.

Quite justifiably, young people often perceive that the public embarrassment heaped on them by their tormentors via social media will haunt them for the rest of their lives. In an age where negative

videos, photos and commentary can be revived and shared by virtually anyone, even years after they were initially posted, the hurt and shame can seem endless.

Speaking at the Connecticut state capitol in 2017 following the loss of three Connecticut transgender teens to suicide in just three months, Tony Ferraiolo, an activist and transgender man, said he has visited youths after suicide attempts many times, and found it incredibly distressing to “sit in front of a child who looks you in the eye and says, ‘I just want to die. Why should I live? The bullying is not going to stop.’ It is heartbreaking,” he said.

Connecticut has had anti-bullying laws on the books for almost 20 years, defining what bullying specifically entails and setting out both remedies and penalties. As part of the original 2002 legislation, all school districts were required to create and implement a bullying policy, train their staff to address all of incidences of bullying, and report these incidents to the state.

Unfortunately, follow-through in identifying and effectively dealing with bullying behavior has varied greatly from one school – and school district – to another, according to published reports. In the Patch survey, many Connecticut parents said anti-bullying school policies are “poorly enforced, if they are enforced at all.” Some said the policies were inadequate, ineffective, or “a joke.”

Rather than try to get to the root of the problem, Agostini says, some well-meaning teachers or school officials may tell students who complain of being bullied that they’ll just have to learn to live with it. “Faculty may take a stance of telling a student who complains, ‘You’re too sensitive,’ or ‘It’s just part of life. If you don’t learn to deal with it, what are you going to do when you grow up?’ That may be objectively true,” he says, “but it makes victims feel they have even fewer allies to trust in the school system.”

Parents may send their kids a similar message, and school friends or acquaintances who witness bullying may be too afraid to step in, worried that they’ll become the bully’s next target. While one survey found that more than 70 percent of staff had seen bullying at school, and 41 percent said they saw it once a week or more, other studies show that just 1 in 10 of the victim’s peers will intervene, and only 1 in four adults will do so.

That can leave a child or teen feeling totally isolated, and even hopeless, says Martin.

## FINDING SOLUTIONS

Past efforts to curb school-based bullying and its devastating effects have not been very successful. The problem continues even in Connecticut, where the state’s anti-bullying law has been updated and strengthened several times, and people engaging in threatening or intimidating behavior can be charged with either a felony or a misdemeanor, depending on the nature of the behavior and the circumstances.

A dramatically different approach is required. But what?

The answer seems to be a proactive effort to get at the root of the problem, and to stop bullying before it starts.

In 2019, Gov. Ned Lamont signed into state law a bill that was passed unanimously by both the House and the Senate. The law requires boards of education to develop safe school climate policies, establish a “social and emotional learning and school climate council” in place of the existing safe school climate committee, and provide training on the prevention of, and intervention in, discrimination against and targeted harassment of students. The Department of Education was tasked with developing a “social and emotional learning assessment instrument” and a model safe school climate policy, and schools will have to assess their school climate and ensure they provide a safe environment for students.



Unlike the state's previous legislation, which described bullying actions as behavior "repeated over time," this law also includes severe single acts of aggression. Rep. Liz Linehan (D-Cheshire), who advocated for the new law, recounted how a group of high school girls once broke into her parents' home and went from room to room, looking for her, while she hid in a closet.

A new school climate collaborative, meanwhile, will identify evidence-based best practices to deal with bullying and conduct a statewide survey of schools every two years – with input from school officials, teachers, parents and mental health professionals.

Connecticut's revised approach seems to be in line with recommendations from two leading experts on the topic of bullying prevention. Writing for the American Psychological Association, Dr. Dewey G. Cornell and Dr. Susan P. Limber, both psychologists and professors, said that students and parents should be educated about bullying, and should be given access to anonymous reporting methods to make it easier to get help. (Several school districts in Connecticut, including West Hartford and Glastonbury, already encourage students to report bullying anonymously, using phones apps dedicated to that purpose.)

Drs. Cornell and Limber also say that when bullying does happen, schools should conduct "a prompt and thorough investigation," and intervene immediately to protect the victim from additional bullying or retaliation. Parents of both the victim and bully – and the police, if appropriate – should be notified. Schools should mete out "graduated consequences" for bullying and offer academic support and mental health referrals for both victims and bullies, they say.

Also showing a lot of promise is an innovative national campaign launched by the Tyler Clementi Foundation. Dubbed #Day1, the campaign seeks to turn bystanders into "Upstanders" who

promise to identify and intervene in bullying on the first day they witness it. (One study showed that when bystanders intervene, bullying stops within 10 seconds, 57 percent of the time.)

So far, hundreds of private and public schools, teams, colleges, organizations, workplaces, and individuals across the country – almost 1 million people so far – have taken the #Day1 pledge.

## SIGNS OF SUICIDAL RISK

Signs that someone may be at risk for suicide include:

- talking or writing about wanting to hurt or kill themselves
- indirect verbal indications, like, "I wish I could disappear"
- trying to gain access to pills, guns, knives or other ways to end their lives
- saying they have no reason to live or purpose in life
- showing anxiety or hopelessness
- insomnia or sleeping excessively
- withdrawal from family or friends
- giving away possessions

Meanwhile, in Connecticut, award-winning songwriter and producer Jill Nesi has teamed up with Christopher Zullo of the Spotlight Stage Company to produce an anti-bullying musical "showcase" that last year toured the state's middle schools. They hope to license this play to every middle school in the state and, eventually, the country,

with local children performing in their own schools.

A longer, more complex version that is geared to teens and adults, called "Stand Up: The Musical," was scheduled to have its world debut in May in North Haven. Due to COVID-19, the play is on hold until it is safe for live theater. However, the first episode of a filmed version is now available online. Visit [standupspeakoutct.com](http://standupspeakoutct.com) for details on how to view it.

## GETTING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

While the problem of in-school bullying may have been paused by some towns' hybrid approach to learning during the pandemic, parents are advised not to let their guard down. Even students who are attending school for just a few days a week may continue to encounter bullying behavior – and bullying can also occur online.

Fortunately, there are things that parents can do at home to ensure their own kids aren't being bullied – or being a bully, for that matter.

Experts recommend being proactive, instead of waiting for signs of a problem.

One of the best things parents can do is have regular conversations with their children about how things are going at school, what they're worried about, and if there's anyone at school they don't like or don't get along with. In addition to emphasizing the importance of treating other people well, and modeling that behavior, parents can explain to their children that bullying is a big problem, talk about the consequences, and reassure their kids that if they are being bullied, they are not alone. They can also explain to their children the importance of sharing any problems with trusted adults and peers who can advocate for them.

If your children or teens show signs of depression or suicidal thoughts, get help immediately. Talk with teachers and school officials – even in

confidence, if your kids beg you not to intervene. One useful resource is an organization called STOMP Out Bullying; it offers resources for parents, teachers and young people, including a free and confidential chat line for youth who are being bullied and may be at risk of suicide as a result.

One-on-one private therapy can also be a lifesaver, especially if reaching out to the school has not resolved the problem. “Once children establish a connection and trust level with us, we help them to feel heard and teach them to problem-solve the immediate issue,” says Martin.

She adds, “We can also give them concrete suggestions. For instance, a lot of times, bullying happens in the cafeteria. For one person, we recommended bringing their lunch down to the counselor’s office and then using the time until the next class doing something else. When kids are bullied, they don’t have to sit there and take it.”

Also, says Agostini, “We try to encourage them to play into the strengths and qualities that they have, rather than what they perceive they lack. If you can encourage them to be all that they can be, they begin to see that they are special and that they can succeed. We give the victim a sense of power and strength about what they can do by pointing out the things they excel in.”

Dr. Joelle Santiago, a chiropractor in Avon, found that type of counseling extremely helpful when she was bullied in college, after people who had previously been friendly began treating her poorly.

“It made me feel very nervous, uncomfortable, panicked, and unsafe. Bullying really can happen to anyone, anywhere,” she says. “One of the things that I can’t stress enough is the importance of being able to talk to someone outside

## CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES:

**2018 LGBTQ Youth Report:**  
<https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/2018-YouthReport-NoVid.pdf?mtime=20200713131634&focal=none>

**Connecticut Children’s:**  
[connecticutchildrens.org/health-library/en/parents/bullying](http://connecticutchildrens.org/health-library/en/parents/bullying)

**Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center:**  
[cpacinc.org/school-climate.aspx](http://cpacinc.org/school-climate.aspx)

**Cyberbullying Research Center:**  
[cyberbullying.org](http://cyberbullying.org)

**Megan Meier Foundation:**  
[meganmeierfoundation.org/resources](http://meganmeierfoundation.org/resources)

**National Bullying Prevention Center:**  
[pacer.org/bullying/resources/cyberbullying](http://pacer.org/bullying/resources/cyberbullying)

[nobully.org](http://nobully.org)

**State of Connecticut:**  
[portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Parents-Guide-to-Bullying-and-Harassment-in-Connecticut/About-the-Law](http://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Parents-Guide-to-Bullying-and-Harassment-in-Connecticut/About-the-Law)

**STOMP Out Bullying:**  
[stompoutbullying.org](http://stompoutbullying.org)

**STOPit Solutions:**  
[stopitsolutions.com/blog/look-at-the-year-ahead](http://stopitsolutions.com/blog/look-at-the-year-ahead)

**U.S. bullying prevention site:**  
[stopbullying.gov](http://stopbullying.gov)


of the situation. I saw a therapist, which was the best thing I could do.”

Also, rather than allow the bullies to make her feel isolated and afraid, she limited her exposure to them. “I had friends who made me feel safe and appreciated, and my mom was very, very proactive about it. She would drive to campus and take me out to lunch. Her priority was continual communication.”

Santiago also expanded her circle of supporters by explaining the situation to her teachers and by taking part in a variety of activities on campus. “I was equipped with all the right things and people in my life to help me,” she says. Coping with it on her own, she adds, “would have been way too difficult.”

She also credits the Avon school system for raising awareness about bullying while she was a student there. This helped her identify bullying when she saw it and realize that “maybe this isn’t about me.”

Today, she leads a happy and fulfilling life, and tries to help others whenever she can, both personally and professionally. “It really makes me feel good to give my friends advice, whatever the topic is,” she says. “I think some of my experiences have helped to shape me into a more compassionate person and given me a deeper understanding of the difficult things people can go through.”

And as someone coming from a long line of chiropractors – her grandparents, two uncles and her mother are also in the profession – “I’ve always had a huge interest in treating the entire person. Nothing feels as good as helping people. It’s rewarding and terrific.” 

*Carol Latter is a writer and editor of Seasons Magazines. She lives in Simsbury.*



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# A New Recipe *for* Success

**‘Herd’ restaurateurs  
adapt to changing times**

By **TERESA M. PELHAM**

Photography by **WINTER CAPLANSON**

Pivot!

If you’re a “Friends” fan, this word likely brings to mind a hilarious scene with Ross repeatedly shouting at Chandler and Rachel as they attempt to carry a sofa up a tight stairwell. But if you’re a restaurateur, pivot is something you’ve probably had to do several times over the past year, just to stay in business.

As owners of the popular restaurant Herd in Middletown, brothers David and Jonathan Shapiro worked hard to keep their restaurant alive during the first months of the pandemic, but ultimately had to embrace a whole new way of doing things – and it just might prove to be a brilliant move.

The business partners are now sharing space with a fellow restaurant owner at 102 Court St. in Middletown. While Sabrina Cortes’ Cafe 56 serves breakfast and lunch, Herd serves dinner – all from the same cozy kitchen. The resulting, rebranded Herd 56 is essentially two restaurants operating from one address but at different times of the day.

For four-and-a-half years, Herd on Main enjoyed a loyal following of customers who loved its eclectic mix of American fare with an Italian accent. The restaurant’s name, as “word nerd” David points out, is both a noun and a verb.







Chef Pete Ruske and owners David Shapiro and Jonathan Shapiro (left to right) sample some of Herd restaurant's menu items. Ruske describes his cuisine as elevated comfort food.





**“The Shapiros have owned some sort of business in Middletown since 1900. Family business is in the blood.”**

—Jonathan Shapiro





A new partnership with Cafe 56 in Middletown may be the brothers David and Jonathan Shapiro's key to weathering the pandemic.

“A herd is a group of creatures who eat together,” David says. “And when we ‘herd’ people, we care for them, we provide for them.”

Now Herd’s loyal customers are both ordering takeout for the big game and signing up for private dining experiences. The takeout and catering option – ‘Herd at Home’ – includes minimal-contact pickup of its menu offerings.

For the private dining option, chef Pete Ruske works directly with patrons ahead of time, choosing foods compatible with preferences and allergies. Accommodating up to 20 guests at a time, the private dining experience – known as ‘Home at Herd’ – came in response to friends and family who wanted to dine out but still felt uncomfortable in a space with other people.

A reservation for private dining means you and your family and friends will have the restaurant to yourselves. Pricing depends on the menu and hours selected. Groups can range from two to 20 people, and reservations must be made at least two days in advance.

The restaurant is currently BYOB (Ruske will even help with wine pairing suggestions) but the Shapiros expect to apply for a beer and wine license in the coming year.

Life isn’t expected to go back to the pre-COVID normal anytime soon, they predict. For the time being, restaurant guests will need to follow protocols such as wearing masks until seated. But a successful restaurant business is possible, the Shapiros say, albeit on a smaller scale.

“We think this business is sustainable,” David says. “Takeout is going to continue to be big. We won’t be seeing crowded dining rooms a year from now, but if everyone is a good citizen, we can figure out this new normal.”



**“A herd is a group of creatures who eat together. And when we ‘herd’ people, we care for them, we provide for them.”**

–David Shapiro







David Shapiro and his brother come from a long line of family members who have owned businesses in Middletown.

Ruske's menu is described as "comfort food elevated." His experience working in both Italian and French restaurants, combined with an Asian flair and time spent in his Italian grandmother's kitchen, brings dishes such as the Herd steak sandwich and Dr. Dave's meatball grinder to a new level of "new American" cuisine.

### **ALL IN THE FAMILY**

The Shapiro brothers come from a long line of Middletown business owners. As many in the area recall, Shapiro's in downtown Middletown was the place to shop for many decades. What began at the start of the twentieth century as a men's clothing store evolved to become a department store selling everything from women's clothing to appliances. The business closed in the 1980s, when shopping malls began gaining popularity and cities became a less popular shopping destina-

tion. David and Jonathan's aunt and uncle operated a law practice in the city for many years, and now Jonathan's law firm is based there.

"The Shapiros have owned some sort of business in Middletown since 1900," Jonathan says. "Family business is in the blood."

David, a general surgeon in the trauma and critical care unit at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, and Jonathan, an attorney, poke fun at one another like typical brothers while chatting within the red painted tin walls of the old Brownstone building.

"A lot of people who own restaurants aren't restaurateurs to begin with," says Jonathan, who lives in Middletown with his wife and two children. "I was a business advisor and have been a business advisor for several restaurants and represent a lot of restaurants. As an attorney, you've

got to understand your client's business."

David, who's gay, is "in a monogamous relationship with an awesome guy," and the restaurant is a member of the Connecticut Gay & Lesbian Chamber (CTGLC).

He says the LGBTQ community has been extremely supportive of Herd. "In our four-and-a-half years of being open, among our top three nights of attendance and fun was when we hosted a post-PRIDE party, including drag performances, after Middletown's first PRIDE celebration in 2019," he says. "It was amazing. We had a celebrity chef work with our team, had an incredible time, and even had a great Herd PRIDE T shirt we gave away that day!"

### **PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**

The two restaurant businesses will eventually collaborate, something Ruske is excited about. Cortes' cuisine is described





Until the tables at Herd can safely be filled again, the restaurant is focusing on takeout and offering private dining experiences.

as the food of the people and the food of the Americas.

“Sabrina spent 20 years working on cruise ships,” Ruske says. “I’m looking forward to learning from her. There will definitely be some overlap.”

One of the innovative ideas Herd is offering is the Triple Play, which provides families of four with three separate meals to enjoy during the week for \$100. Diners will have a choice of three entrees (lasagna, penne à la vodka, meatloaf, or chicken marsala, for example), along with sides of salad, vegetables, and potatoes.

“There are opportunities to pivot in every industry,” David says. “We’re taking baby steps and pivoting into a world we don’t know.”

*For Herd 56’s menus, hours and contact information, visit [herdonmain.com](http://herdonmain.com).*



Teresa M. Pelham is a writer living in Farmington. She is the author of three children’s books, the profits of which benefit dog rescue. For information or to purchase books, go to [roxysforeverhome.com](http://roxysforeverhome.com).





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Even though the 7-year-old transgender daughter of Julie H. started her social transition four years ago, her grandpa kept calling her a boy.

# MIS-PRONOUN-CIATION

## Tips for handling uncomfortable misgendering situations

By **DAWN ENNIS** / *Photography by* **JULIE H.**

**T**here are many terrible, terrible things that transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals endure every day. But the two most terrible – the most gut-wrenching, humiliating and heinous things anyone can do in conversation with such a person – is to use the name or pronoun associated with their birth.

Using the name someone was assigned at birth and abandoned upon transition is often called “deadnaming.” It’s not universally embraced, however. While some feel the term is appropriate, others complain it feeds a false narrative adopted by family and friends who reject gender transitioners, those who say that these people are now “dead to them.” Using “deadnaming” instead of “birth name” also paints a very dark picture, suggesting that the person who lived in a binary gender before coming out had to die in order for that individual to live authentically.

So, if that’s among the worst things someone cisgender can do to a trans or non-binary person, how does mixing up their pronouns rank? Is it really that big a deal?

Trans man Elisio Acosta of West Hartford, 22, uses he/him pronouns, and recalls there was a time when being misgendered was a good thing.

“I do remember a couple of instances before I had come out as trans where people thought that I was a male, and that would feel so good,” he says. “There was this one time where I was in the bathroom, and somebody came in, and they’re like, ‘Is this the women’s room?’ And I’m like, ‘Yes.’ And then she just kind of looked at me weird. And I was like, ‘Oh, my God, cool. She thinks I’m a guy. That’s great.’ And it was like the best day.”

But ironically, Elisio says it was right after he came out that he was misgendered, many times.

“It was really frustrating, because I was doing as much as I could to pass,” he recalls. “And I feel like a lot of what hindered me from passing was just my voice. Now, I’m six months on testosterone, so my voice has deepened a lot since the beginning of my transition, and I kind of have a peach fuzz around my cheek.”

J.E. is a retired elementary school teacher in Southern California who came out publicly as a transgender

woman in March. Her pronouns are she/her, but J.E. says, “Sometimes I say, ‘Her/she, like the candy bar.’”

When someone refers to her as “he” or “him,” she says, “I do cringe when I am misgendered. For me, I am fortunate that here in my SoCal bubble, it’s always felt to be accidental, based on a misreading of who I am.”

How does J.E. respond? Sometimes, you only have a split-second, she notes. “Sometimes I choose to gently, but clearly and firmly, correct the person (‘Actually, I’m ma’am, not sir’), and other times, it seems best to just let it go, without a response,” she says. “I will add that I am always gratified when staff at my fave store, Target, (pronounced Targét), get it right! Maybe they can’t tell, but beneath my face mask, I’m grinning a mile-wide smile!”

Willow Woycke lives with her wife in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., and in addition to concerns over COVID-19, was apprehensive about how their child’s school will communicate with her.

“I’ve been misgendered by my kid’s teacher a couple of times over the years,” Willow wrote on our post in the Transgender Parenting Facebook group. “Still waiting on this year’s teacher information forms, whether this year we will get another ‘Mother’s Name, Father’s Name’ form.”

Another parent, who asked us to not report their name, shared this story about contending with how strangers deal with their newly-out transgender teenager.

“My girlfriend and I live together, and her teen recently came out to us,” they wrote. “We haven’t told family members about her yet. In my opinion, most assumptions by outsiders are pretty innocent. As long as they’re not being outright disrespectful, it’s nice to see someone taking the time to interact with my little family.”

With the winter comes other complications, like meeting the mall Santa. What do parents of trans or non-binary youth do when the jolly ol’ elf gets their kid’s gender wrong?

“I hadn’t considered this, thank you,” wrote a mom in the same group on Facebook, who asked not to be identified. “My son is autistic, so last year we booked an appointment with the sensory Santa; I had planned to do the same this year, and the opportunity for misgendering him never even crossed my mind. I’ll be sure to include his pronouns when we book our appointment!”

“We lived on a small island off the British Columbia coast, where a local man would play Santa every year at the community hall,” wrote Monica, a librarian from California now living in Canada, who identifies as queer and cisgender. She shared this “fave family anecdote” about a visit to Santa that shows this dilemma isn’t limited to families with trans and non-binary members.

“We took our four-year-old, B, and a best friend, L,

while her mother worked,” Monica wrote. “I don’t know if this Santa was new or what, but he asked B if they’d been ‘good for Mommy and Daddy.’ Our child replied, ‘I don’t have a daddy. I have two moms!’ Santa was caught off guard but plowed on.”

She continues, “Then it was L’s turn to visit with Santa. I thought that surely Santa would have caught the mistake of assuming every child has a mother and father, but listened in horror as he said the exact same thing to L, whose father had been lost at sea when she was an infant. She replied, ‘My daddy is dead!’ Poor Santa. We didn’t stick around to make sure, but I hope he learned to be a little more inclusive after that.”

Often, the most hurtful episodes involve not a stranger, but a relative. Julie is a photographer in Idaho, and is the married, enby and queer mom of a 7-year-old trans girl who socially transitioned in 2016. Two years ago, Julie and her spouse moved in with her parents, a decision many couples across the country have made to save money.

“I knew there would be issues with my father respecting her pronouns,” says Julie. “Even my mother was of the opinion that we somehow made our child be trans, but she still respected us enough to use the proper pronouns and not air her opinion to our children. One day, a few months after the move, my daughter cried to me that it made her feel awful that Grandpa kept calling her a boy.”

She adds, “I went Mama Bear mode and had a serious private conversation with my parents. I told them exactly how he was making her feel and shared with them statistics about trans suicide when not accepted by family, studies on trans brain activity being more similar to their chosen gender, and about just how angry I was that he thought her life and happiness was worth less than her gender assignment at birth.”

Julie says after their talk her father “still goofed every now and then” but has made a good-faith effort to get the girl’s pronouns right. “The only opinion that should matter to her in regard to herself is her own,” Julie told her daughter.

Of course, misgendering is hardly a problem limited to trans youth. But a common thread seems to be that when it happens, more often than not, it’s someone of an elder







## What do parents of trans or non-binary youth do when the mall Santa gets their kid's gender wrong? Or presumes the parents are straight?

generation who has the most trouble. Be forgiving, advises rocket scientist, metagenetic algorithm researchers and trans scholar Zoe Ellen Brain of Canberra, Australia. Zoe is intersex but did transition.

“When my frail elderly in-laws did it, I shrugged it off,” Zoe says. “It wasn’t done to be hurtful, and towards the end, they often mistook their daughters for their sisters, or asked how the cows were doing – when they hadn’t had cattle since 1944.”

Zoe adds that she and her wife miss their relatives and suggest that the best reaction to being inadvertently misgendered is to “be kind.” And when someone does it deliberately: “Life’s too short to do more than just completely ignore them.”


Elisio, however, has a different view.

“My advice would be to correct them,” he says. “That’s like the biggest hurdle to overcome, especially early on in your transition.” Elisio says he’s talked with a lot of female-to-male transgender individuals about this.

“When you initially come out and you’re trans, and either you’ve just started hormones or you haven’t even, you’re

in a crisis where you’re like, ‘Am I trans enough to warrant a correction? Because maybe it makes sense that they are misgendering me.’”

Elisio says self-doubt is common. “You get into this mind battle with yourself,” he says, but he offers this advice: “No: you are a man and you deserve to have the right pronouns used for yourself. And so as hard as it is to form the words and to think about how you’re going to correct them... you just have to do it. And it’s so empowering to have that conversation, to say, ‘No, that’s not what I go by. I go by he,’ or whatever.”

The one thing I will add to the advice from our readers: don’t ever ask what someone’s “preferred” pronouns are; their pronouns are their pronouns. “Preferred” makes it sound like you have an option to not respect them. And everyone should. 

*GLAAD offers Tips for Transgender Allies, including proper pronoun usage, at its website: [www.glaad.org/transgender/allies](http://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies).*

# Inktober

## Drawing a line at 2020

By SARAH TULLY

As we all know, 2020 has been a whirlwind of a year. COVID-19, social injustices, financial struggles, and many more events have taken a toll on all of us.

This year, I wanted to participate in Inktober, a month-long event in which artists who primarily use pen draw every day in October. Inktober started posting official prompt lists in 2016. Prior to that, people just came up with their own ideas for each day.

I wanted to create my own prompt to follow. I wanted to commemorate the bad and the good that came from 2020. Not only would I practice my penwork, but I would also highlight all of the news from January until the end of October.





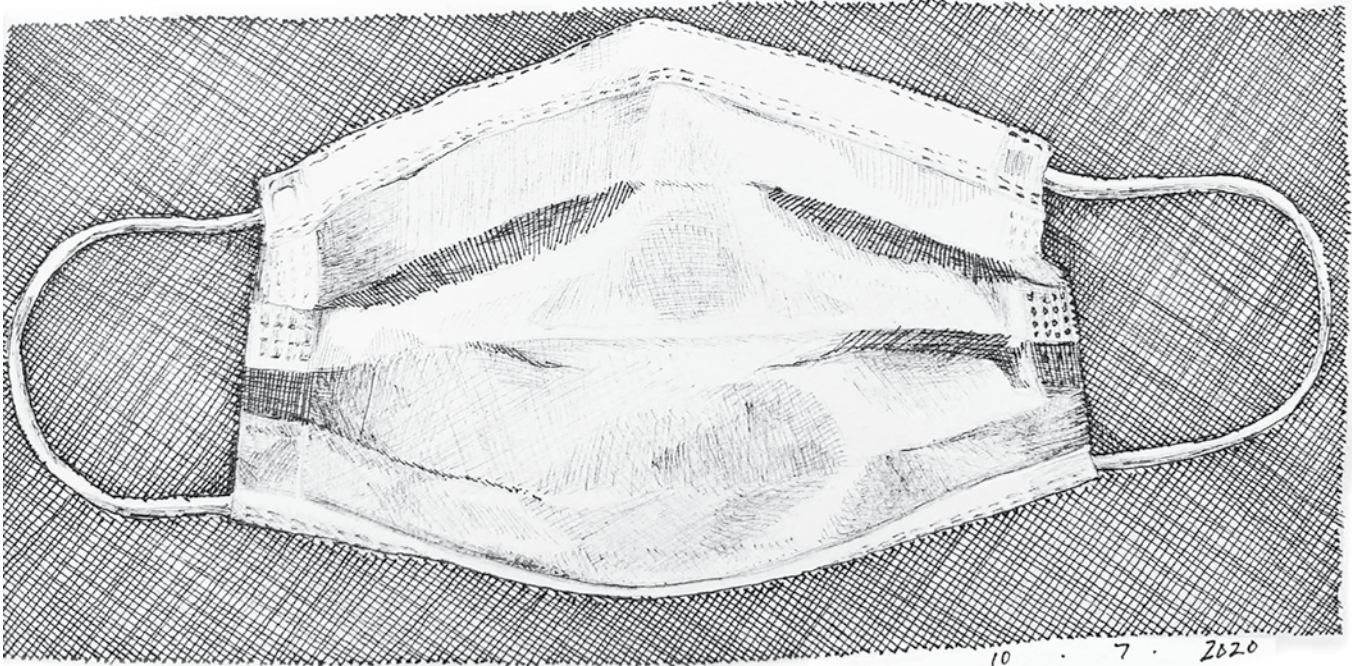


**Match** (10/1/2020)  
“Burn” (Australian  
Bush Fires, West Coast  
Fires, USA)



**Stamp** (10/5/2020) “USPS” (Postal Service Controversy)



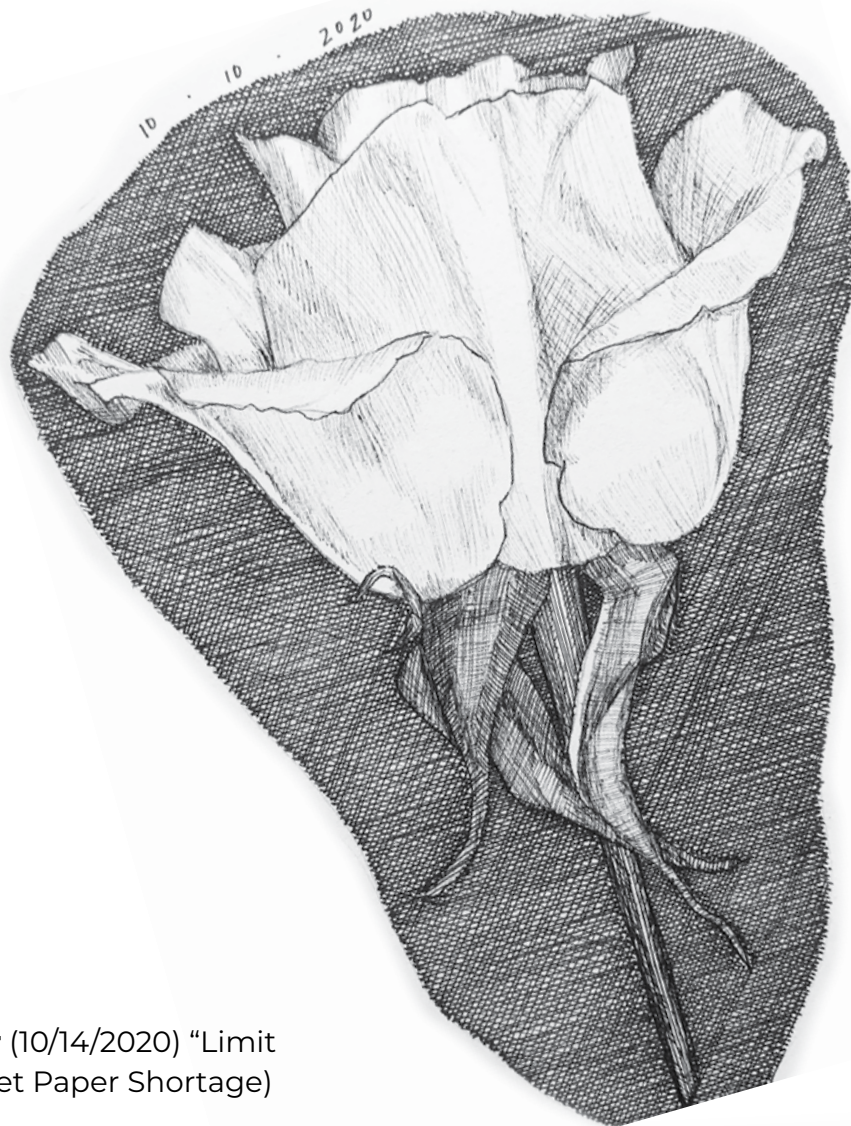


**Mask** (10/7/2020) "Cover Up" (The Importance of Masks)



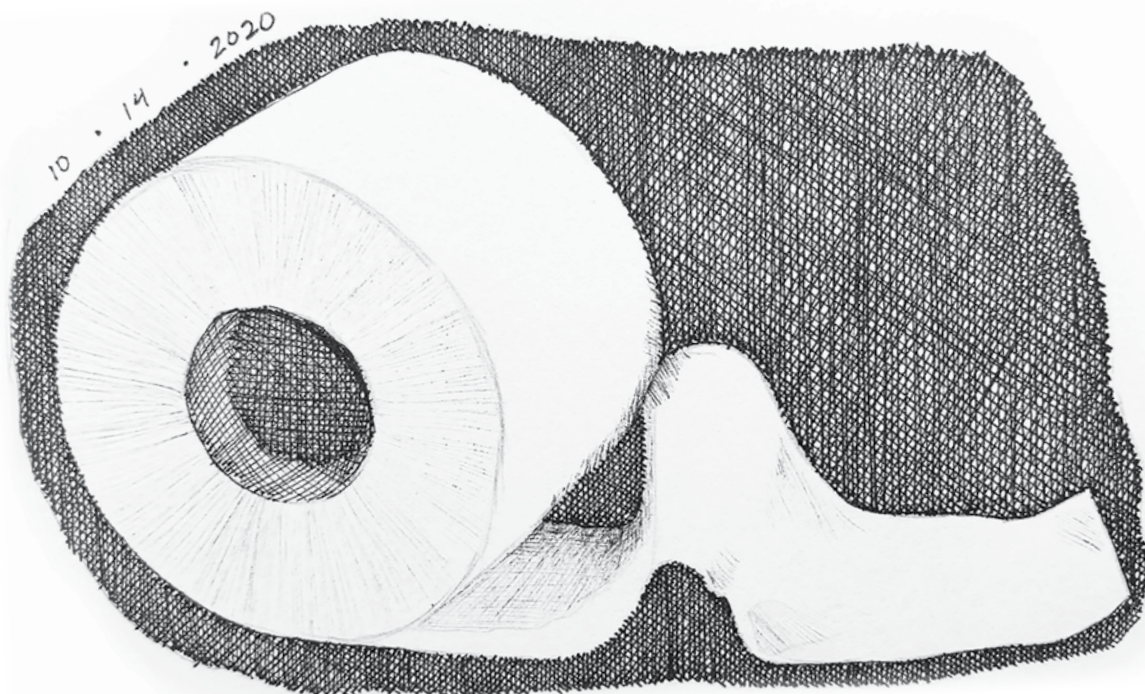
**BLM Pin** (10/9/2020)  
"BLM: (Black Lives Matter)"



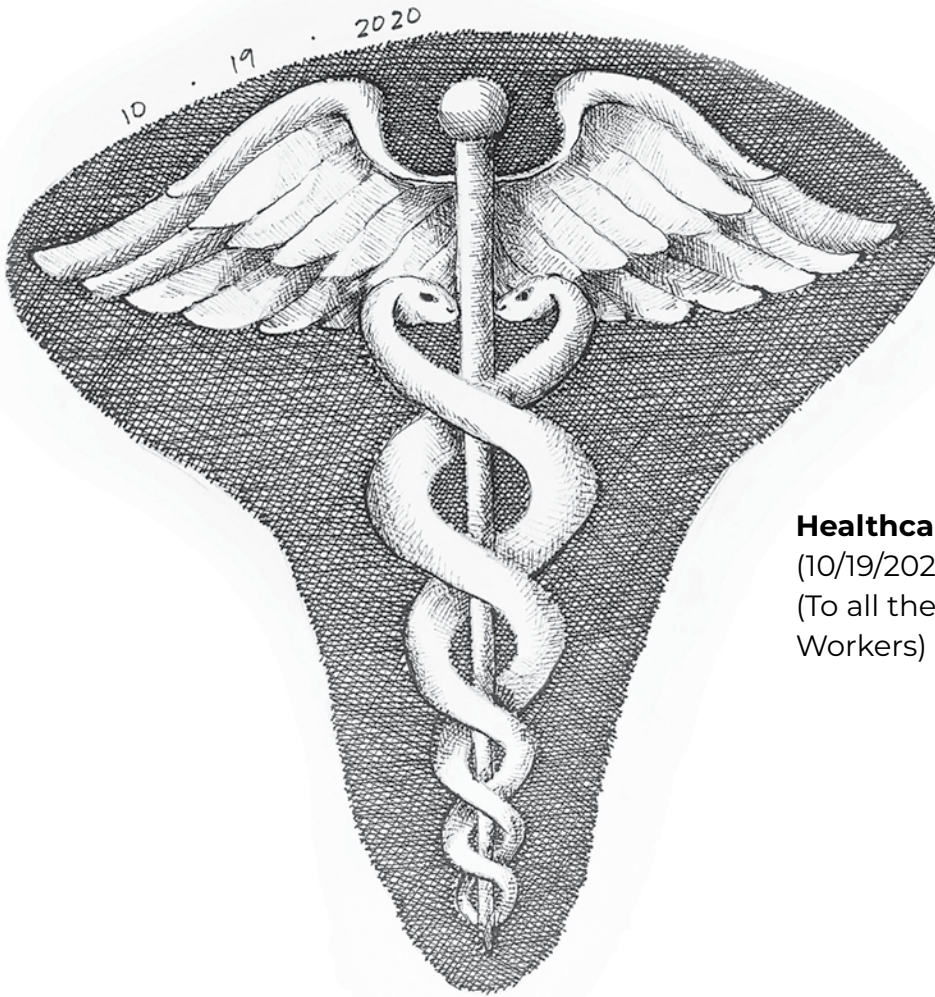


**White Rose**  
(10/10/2020) "White Rose" (Surpassing 1.07 million COVID deaths)

**Toilet Paper** (10/14/2020) "Limit to One" (Toilet Paper Shortage)







**Healthcare Symbol**  
(10/19/2020) "Thank You"  
(To all the Healthcare  
Workers)



**Vote Sticker** (10/20/2020) "I Voted"  
(2020 Presidential Election)





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# COMFORTABLE IN THEIR OWN SKIN

## Feminizing Hormone Therapy Helps Many Trans Women Feel Like Themselves

By JANE LATUS

**P**roverbially dissatisfied with their looks, cisgender women have no idea how lucky they are. For many transgender women, appearing as they envision themselves is essential to avoiding emotionally paralyzing dysphoria. And for many, especially trans women of color, looking “like a woman” may literally save their lives.

Trans women likely won’t find a fiercer advocate for their needs, or greater fan of their beauty, than Kathryn Tierney, medical director of the Transgender Medicine Program at Middlesex Health. “In our culture we do not do a very good job of celebrating the beauty of trans women. They are stunningly beautiful,” she says. “I hope in the future that trans women don’t have to look a certain way in order to be celebrated.”

Tierney is driven to ease the distress of the trans patients who come to her, and continually refueled by their life-changing – and sometimes lifesaving – successes.

“Success” in this field of medicine is helping trans patients “to feel like themselves for the first time. Or, even, to be seen by others as themselves,” says Tierney.

Success also is what Tierney’s patient Karleigh Webb, of New Britain, sees in the mirror. “What I saw in my head, I wanted to see reflected in my body,” says Webb, 49. “Now I look in the mirror and I like what I see.”

But appearing more feminine was just a start, says Webb. “The results of this process have really unlocked me as a person. I have confidence.”

Webb is one of approximately 1,200 trans patients at Middlesex Health, which offers a comprehensive range of care including primary care, hormonal therapy, behavioral health services, continence and pelvic health, gender transition surgery, physical rehabilitation, infectious disease testing and treatment, and voice therapy.

Webb sees Middlesex’s Emily Mellor, a nurse practitioner specializing in endocrinology, and primary care physician Kristen Donato. Webb also is contemplating obtaining the services of Middlesex’s nutritionist; Webb is an athlete who is continually looking to boost her health and performance.

Webb calls her providers at Middlesex an integral part of “Team Karleigh” and says she chose Middlesex because “their reputation preceded them. You have people who are well-versed in health care, but also in what trans people go through. And they listen to you. That’s one of the greatest things about them. With

them, I’m more empowered to be an active participant in my own health care.”

### “THEY NEED TO BE THEMSELVES”

Feminizing hormone therapy is just one component of the care Middlesex provides, but it is crucial for the women who receive it.

“The gist is that they need to be themselves,” says Tierney. Most patients receiving feminizing hormone therapy are between the ages of 18 and 30, she says, but “I’ve seen patients as young as 16 and as old as 80 begin hormones. The older you are, we’re looking at multiple complications, but sometimes gender dysphoria outweighs the other risks.”

Not all trans women want to take feminizing hormones, and some may go on and off them for personal reasons, including changing circumstances and identity fluctuations. For those who take them, feminizing hormones can reduce gender dysphoria and emotional distress, and improve social functioning, sexual satisfaction and quality of life.

As of press time in late October, at least 28 trans women had been murdered so far in 2020. According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), advocates have never seen such a high number at this point in the year since it began tracking this data in 2013. At least 20 transgender women were murdered in 2019.

Tierney is motivated by the determination, desperation and bravery of the trans women she sees. “A lot of my older patients have been waiting for their parents to die, or their kids to grow old, or to retire” before beginning estrogen,” she says. “It’s incredible to see the lengths they will go to protect others,” she says, before taking care of their own needs.

She also sees patients who are eager to begin hormones, but who live or work in unsafe situations. Patients’ entire circumstances – not just their medical ones – have to be factored into their care, says Tierney.

Before starting a patient on hormone therapy, says Tierney, “The most important thing to know is safety – physical and emotional. We need to know that beginning hormones is safe in the situation they’re in, and that they have the support they need.”

The next step is determining how to proceed. “We have so many different ways to approach feminization. It can be tailored to desired changes, and you can assure you aren’t causing negative side effects or medication interactions,” says Tierney.





Transgender Medicine Program Medical Director Kathryn Tierney, photographed here prior to the pandemic, and her team stand ready to meet the unique challenges faced by the transgender and nonbinary community amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by **Tony Bacewicz**.



“What I saw in my head, I wanted to see reflected in my body,” says Karleigh Webb of New Britain. “Now I look in the mirror and I like what I see.”

“I always say to patients, coming in to see me is like walking into a candy store and being told you can have everything,” she says. “I engage them in a conversation about what parts of their body create the most dysphoria.” She and the patient put that list (frequently, unwanted body hair, unwanted erections, and the desire for breasts) in priority order to help determine which hormones to take.

They then decide which form the hormones (typically, estrogen and spironolactone) will take: pill, patch or injection.

Because estrogen is associated with deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism, says Tierney, much of the treatment focuses on risk-reductions like smoking cessation, weight loss and increasing physical activity.

After starting feminizing hormones, “For the first year, patients come in every three months to make sure side effects aren’t happening, and we

can adjust the dose if necessary,” Tierney says. From then on, they are typically seen twice a year.

“The first change for sure is an internal change,” says Tierney of patients who begin hormones. “That can’t be minimized. Most people feel like themselves for the first time. There’s an internal sense of calm.”

Physical changes usually start with softening of skin and facial and body hair, and later, development of breast tissue. “When someone genders you, they’re gendering you off your face and breasts, primarily,” says Tierney.

She loves hearing patients share their how they feel when others, especially strangers, accept them as women. “It’s that feeling that what you’ve been seeing in yourself is real. You are validated in a way you may not have felt before.”

Partly because Tierney sees so many patients starting out in unhappy and unhealthy situations, she savors seeing them thrive, and is especially delighted for patients who begin with a bang in the form of full-throttle family support. “My favorite visits are when moms come in with young adults, and the mom is just grilling me. I love to see that happen. If the kid had any other diagnosis, it’s what you would expect them to do.”

## SACRIFICES WORTH THE REWARDS

“One thing I think about a lot is that trans women of color bear the brunt of this. They get the most harassment, physical violence and the most murders. And that’s just what we see. They face violence at home, and poverty, and are more unable to access care,” says Tierney

You don’t need to tell any of this to Webb, who says, “As a black trans woman, every time I walk out the door, my head is on swivel.”

When she began hormone therapy in January 2018, Webb wanted to start with a conservative approach of estrogen via a patch. “The first thing I noticed was my skin got softer.” She told her endocrinologist that she was ready for more aggressive treatment and was prescribed injectable estrogen and shown how to inject herself weekly.

Webb says that starting on injectable estrogen is when “the changes became a rocket ride, and people started noticing.” She continues to see welcome changes in her body.

As an athlete, Webb has learned how to cope with estrogen’s negative effects on her performance. “It’s been an adjustment. I’ve lost some muscle mass. I’ve lost some VO2 max (aerobic capacity). My mile time has gotten slower. My recovery time is slower. But at the same time, I’ve never stopped trying. I push harder.”

Before she started taking it, Webb thought that estrogen’s emotional impacts were overhyped, but now says, “I have a greater range of emotion. Crying comes easier, but laughing does, too. I smile a lot more. I am happy. Emotionally, mentally, spiritually, it’s beautiful. I’m comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my life.”

Middlesex Health recently earned its fourth “LGBTQ Healthcare Equality Leader” designation from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation. The Human Rights Campaign Foundation is the nation’s largest LGBTQ civil rights organization.

Middlesex Health offers a comprehensive Transgender Medicine Program. Its network of medical providers work with transgender persons to meet specific needs, and services are coordinated throughout the health system.

*For more information about Middlesex Health services specifically designed to help LGBTQ patients, visit [middlesexhealth.org/lgbtq](http://middlesexhealth.org/lgbtq).*



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Foxwoods Resort Casino prides itself on welcoming the LGBTQ+ community. Its “Live Out Loud” program offers a 15% discount on hotel rooms with the code “Spirit”; wedding packages; and an eclectic mix of events for the LGBTQ+ community and their allies throughout the year, including virtual drag show happy hours and more. There also are gender-neutral restrooms throughout the property.

“Foxwoods Resort Casino is very proud to be an inclusive and diverse destination where everyone can be themselves regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or gender,” says Monique Sebastian, vice president of entertainment and entertainment marketing. “At Foxwoods, our ‘Live Out Loud’ mantra means celebrating the differences that make each and every person unique – and we proudly stand beside everyone. Each day should be a celebration of who you are and we’re here to offer those unforgettable experiences that help make life amazing.”

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of resort operations. “The resort continues to see positive feedback and adherence from guests and team members on its extensive safety measures, including non-invasive temperature checks, mandatory face masks, plexiglass installations, social distancing measures and 24/7 sanitization of the property.”

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One of Foxwoods Resort Casino’s most popular draws has long been its eclectic array of dining options. Enjoy the timeless steakhouse settings of Cedars Steak & Oysters and David Burke Prime, savor the flavors of coastal Italy at Caputo Trattoria, or satisfy a sweet tooth at Sugar Factory. From high-end eateries to quick-service restaurants, there are enough choices to keep diners coming back for more.

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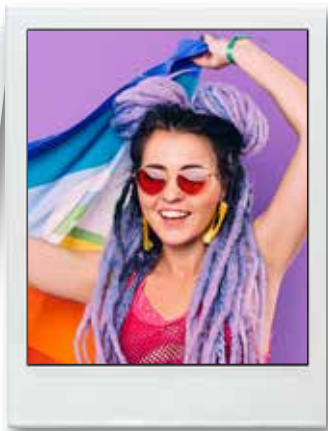
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**Beginning Dec. 5, CT VOICE Out Loud will air on WTNH every Saturday at 11:30 p.m. Each show brings to life stories from an upcoming issue of CT VOICE.**

During the pandemic, staying healthy is even more important than usual. Middlesex Health professionals provide updates on various health issues that impact the LGBTQ community.

What do you do when a family member, friend, or a mall Santa misgenders a child or makes incorrect assumptions about a family? Our own Dawn Ennis offers tips for how to handle these awkward, hurtful situations with grace.

As its name suggests, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven continually invests in the community. Find out what the foundation is doing this holiday season, and throughout the year.

Looking for somewhere to get festive? Ashley Kohl gives the scoop on everything happening at Foxwoods Resort Casino for the holidays.

Check out these stories, celebrity interviews and much more on CT VOICE Out Loud!

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# 'TIS THE SEASON

**For these families, holidays focus on family, food, and traditions**

*By* JANE LATUS

**Ho, ho, ho and snow. Synagogue and solstice. Song and games. Families and feasts. It's a wonderful – and diverse – life, and we asked these Connecticut folks to tell us about their favorite winter holidays and how they spend them.**

## **HEATHER AND MICHELLE SHARP SOMERS**

"We're a Christmas family," says Heather Sharp, smiling at her wife Michelle, while they take advantage of their 3-year-old twins' naptime to talk via Zoom.

Daughter Jordan and son Jacob remember back when they were two, seeing Santa and Mrs. Claus on the Essex Steam Train's Polar Express, and sledding out to cut a fresh tree. "The sled, the snow, the hot chocolate – I love the vibe," says Michelle.

Except for one parent who lives in the state of Washington, both their families live nearby and are close in every way. Christmas Eves are spent with Michelle's family, and Christmas Day with Heather's.

"Christmas means family, and having time for each other. We put the phones away, and play board games like Pictionary. We jokingly call it FFF – Forced Family Fun. We laugh so much on those two days," says Heather.

Heather is a high school math teacher and Michelle is a property manager for an apartment building. Last year was the first time the couple, who married in 2015, hosted Thanksgiving. "I always looked forward to hosting a big holiday," says Michelle. That won't happen this year, and they may not be able to get together with everyone for Christmas unless there are days warm enough to get together outside, bundled up.

However, at the very least, Heather's mother – who

watches the twins twice a week while their moms work – will still come over for their very important day of cookie baking. "Heather's mom and nieces come over, and we order pizza and the kids decorate cookies and the adults drink wine," says Michelle. The mess – sprinkles all over – is part of the fun.

Decorating their tree is a big deal to the couple. They collect ornaments when they travel, and collect personalized ones for each other and their kids. "Our tree is just one massive pile of memories," Heather says. "We kind of fall in love again" every time they decorate it, Michelle adds.

Heather says the other best part of Christmas now as parents is "the priceless looks on their faces" as their children wonder how those toys suddenly appeared in their house. "It's magical."

## **CURTIS AND LUIS RODRIGUEZ-PORTER HARTFORD**

Forget the pandemic; this Christmas is shaping up to be the best ever for this couple. They will be newly wedded, with newly hyphenated last names, and – to top it off – will be new parents.

Those are big deals, but the little things have them elated. "To know that this year, when we do Christmas cards, we can put our new last names on them – it means a lot. Those are societal things that may not seem like a big deal, but for a gay couple to legally be able to marry and change our last





Heather (left) and Michelle Sharp with twins Jordan and Jacob





Christmas is always a festive time of year for Curtis and Luis Rodriguez-Porter.

names, this is huge,” says Curtis.

Both work for the Capital Region Education Council (CREC) – Luis as the Head Start family support manager and Curtis as the School Choice program manager. They met 13 years ago at a mutual friend’s house.

They married Sept. 25 at their favorite happy place, Provincetown, Mass. In October, they completed an adoption approval process through the state Department of Children and Families. “The ink is not even dry before you get a call, is what we are told,” says Curtis.

So, this won’t be their “usual” Christmas. “We’ll be buying gifts for a kid! Oh my gosh, we’ll be buying gifts for a kid,” Curtis gushed in September, before knowing who their child will be. “And we’ll start to bring them into our traditions. But of course, depending on their age, we’ll ask about their traditions and want to include those, too.”

The couple’s traditions combine Luis’ Puerto Rican and Curtis’ southern ones. Food-wise, that means (for both Christmas and New Year’s Eve) coquito, a Puerto Rican coconut punch, and a sweet potato pie recipe from Curtis’s late uncle.

The Three Kings and a Black Santa will be on the fireplace

mantel, and a Black angel will sit atop a real tree, decorated with old-fashioned themed ornaments that include green and red plaid, and white lights.

They get together with both families, each eager to enjoy the other’s southern comfort foods and Puerto Rican specialties. COVID-19 will change that this year, but it’s parenthood that’s most likely to enhance one tradition: “I have to watch ‘The Christmas Story’ and ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ every Christmas morning,” says Curtis. “Luis is used to it. He’s like, ‘Here we go, let’s cuddle.’ Then we go visit my parents. Then at night I watch them both again!”

They do expect to be able to take their new child along to a Vermont cabin for New Year’s, however, to enjoy skiing and snow tubing.

## DAMIEN DROBINSKI AND GEOFF JOHNSON HAMDEN

Family, lots of it – that’s what the holidays are about to this couple. “Normally,” as we say in pandemic times, they alternate hosting Thanksgiving and Christmas for their families, including Geoff’s ex-wife and their grown children, and 11 grandchildren.

Geoff and Damien couldn’t



The Rodriguez and Porter families at Thanksgiving 2019: they love each other AND their recipes.





Curtis and Luis Rodriguez-Porter have much to toast about this year: this holiday season they'll be newlyweds and new parents.



For the Damien Drobinski and Geoff Johnson, the holidays include much more than their cat, Gary - the couple usually hosts a group of more than 20 people.

legally marry when they first met but did at last in 2016. Geoff's divorce was so amicable that his ex-wife "even helped us address the invites for our wedding," he says.

The couple has one Christmas tradition just for them, says Damien. "We wake up and go out back and sit in the hot tub for a little bit. Sometimes we get a little winter snow flurry. We enjoy each other's company for a little while, and then come in and exchange gifts before it gets crazy."

Damien starts cooking. "Christmas is ham. Obviously a ham, because it's Christmas!" Geoff's job is setting the table and cleaning up.

"When I say we get together, I mean all of them - 22 people. There's not one room big enough for all them. We have tables set up in three rooms," says Geoff. Before dinner, they exchange gifts and the grandkids open their stockings - and only the grandkids, because "at one point there were 17 stockings by the fire-





Bringing their family together, especially the kids, is what's most important to Damien Drobinski and Geoff Johnson.



Drobinski and Johnson

place. It got to be crazy," he says.

The grandchildren also all come over the first weekend in December to decorate the tree. Even the kids in California take part virtually.

"It's those special memories we get to make that we enjoy every year, and remember," says Damien. "One of the younger grandkids – he's an absolutely adorable, sweet little kid, got a toy microwave. He came up to me with those sweet chubby cheeks you want to pinch, and said, 'Do you have any battowies foe my micwowave?'"

There's one, pipe-organ-sized, hole in Geoff's heart at Christmas. The New Haven church he attended for 54 years, and where they married (Church of the Redeemer) closed in 2018 and sold its pipe organ. "It's really left quite a void for me."

For a change, New Year's Eve "is more a good time with friends," says Damien. "There's a bunch of snacks, and champagne when the ball drops, then everyone goes home."





Mark Slitt (left), seen here raising the Pride flag in May with members of Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford, typically celebrates the holidays with friends.

Geoff is a realtor and a retired IT professional. Damien is principal chemist for the state Department of Public Health's Chemical Terrorism Lab.

## **MARK SLITT** **BLOOMFIELD**

Mark calls himself “religious to a point – I don’t go to synagogue all the time. I don’t observe all the rituals. I try to be kosher-ish in my home; I don’t have any pork or shellfish. But I do believe in God and am spiritual.”

Having grown up in West Hartford with partially observant parents, he says, “There are many things I

observe mainly because of tradition. But I do believe in the power of prayer, going to services on the High Holy Days, and respecting the importance of those days. To me, it’s a time of spiritual cleansing, to reflect on how I have been as a person and how I may improve. It’s important for anyone, even if you aren’t religious.”

Mark’s family is “not at all observant” now, he says, and he celebrates with friends, and attends services via Zoom at Congregation Beth Israel in West Hartford. “It’s a blending of traditional and reform. It’s a comfortable place for people like me who grew up in a more traditional background,” he says.

It’s also comfortable for him as a gay man, he says. He lived in Texas for many years, where he attended a



primarily LGBT reform synagogue. “Reform at the time was the most welcoming toward LGBT people.” He has been active in every synagogue he’s attended during his adult life (“I’m older than I look!” he says). A public relations professional for a large insurance company, he was president and board member of his Dallas synagogue for many years, and was its representative to the Jewish Community Relations Council. “I thought it was important we [LGBT Jews] had a voice, that we were represented to mainstream Jews. It was very important for us to be visible to the orthodox community.”

Mark can’t choose a favorite holy day. “They all for me have a special place in my life.” For instance, “Passover is all about liberation, going from bondage to freedom, so it has a lot of meaning to LGBT Jews.” And although Hanukkah isn’t “one of the biggies in religious importance, it’s also about liberty and freedom,” he says. “I love lighting the candles. You’re bringing light at the darkest time of year.”

## DR. AJ ECKERT GLASTONBURY

“My family has always been my chosen family. My family of birth was never going to support or love me unconditionally,” says AJ. “I’ve also been in a perpetual state of singledom,” they add. Good thing, then, for their best friend, Aurora LaRosa: “She’s the main reason I live in Connecticut again.”

Also, good thing for brother Alex, who lives in Prague but visits regularly. “We’ve always had a shared bond,” says AJ. Alex came out as trans several years ago, and AJ is a trans, non-binary person.

“Family put a bad taste in my mouth about religion,” says AJ. “As a pagan, I do celebrate winter solstice, with little decorations like a wreath and a tree to get in the spirit of the season. But the only holiday I take seriously is Halloween.”

Do they ever. “I start planning my costumes in July. I’ve already got a few decorations out on my front porch,” they said in September. “I call the month of October ‘Shocktober’ and try to watch a



Mark Slitt

horror movie every day.”

AJ is a doctor of osteopathic medicine and medical director of the Gender Affirming Program at Anchor Health Initiative. This will be the first time in 20 years they won’t be traveling to a horror convention (they’ll attend, but online.)

AJ also celebrates Christmas with friend Aurora and her family. They combine traditions from AJ’s mother (a first-generation Czech immigrant), pagan-based Christian traditions like fortune-telling games, with traditions from Aurora’s Costa Rican heritage.

A few years ago, AJ decided to go to Mexico by themselves for Christmas. “It took years to figure this out. Spend time with who you want to and do



For Dr. AJ Eckert, the holiday season kicks off with Halloween.





Food, family and music: that's what the holidays are all about for Rob Brandt and Jim Keating.

what you want to do. That takes the pressure off the holidays. That was a great revelation,” AJ says.

### **ROB BRANDT AND JIM KEATING MANCHESTER AND SOMERVILLE, MA**

Clichéd love at first sight became reality one day in the Crown & Anchor’s swimming pool in Provincetown, Massachusetts. “I was having fun with friends,” says Rob. “I was in the middle of a sentence, talking to someone I knew, and I saw Jim, and swam across the pool. I said, ‘Hi, what’s your name?’ He said, ‘Jim.’ I said, ‘I’m Rob.’ And I gave him a hug.”

They’ve been together four years, living apart during weekdays due to their jobs (both are IT professionals). Because both their mothers live near Jim, Rob does most of the driving. With extended families living from Torrington to Cape Cod, one can guess what happens during the holidays. “Drive, drive, drive. There’s always been a ton of driving on our holidays,” says Rob.

Food, family and music: that’s what the holidays mean to this couple. They’re steeling themselves for missing get-togethers this year, though, and say their mothers’ health is their top priority. Usually, they’d be at Rob’s aunt’s Italian “extravaganza” on the Cape. “It’s all about the food!” he says: fish stew on Christmas





Brian Ballou and Kevin Cox are self-described “Christmas people.”

Eve and stuffed squid on Christmas Day.

The traveling and family meals may not happen, at least not to the normal extent, but guaranteed there will be music, even if it’s just the two of them. “Music is central to our lives,” says Jim. Rob is co-founder of the Hartford Gay Men’s Chorus, a trained singer, and a keyboard player. Jim was in the Boston Gay Men’s Chorus for about 25 years and is president of the Boston Association of Cabaret Artists.

They’ve spent each of their New Year’s Eves together at a little inn in Provincetown, watching fireworks and enjoying the lighting of the Lobster Pot Tree. They plan to go this year, too.

## **BRIAN BALLOU AND KEVIN COX MIDDLETOWN**

“Both of us are Christmas people,” Brian says, and he and Kevin also hope to be husbands by the end of 2021. “COVID has been messing with all of our planning.”

Brian owns The Ballou Companies, an umbrella firm for Ballou College Planning & Insurance and an Abrakadoodle franchise in which Kevin is involved. Kevin is also an artist.

Both holidays and their everyday lives have evolved during their four years together, after some initial ripples following Brian’s divorce. “Smooth is never what happens when you’re



Kevin Cox and Brian Ballou with Brian’s daughters, Madeline (left) and Hailey.



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Amanda Rostkowski (left), holding Silas, and Lauren Tagliatela, holding Oliver, incorporate Unitarian and Jewish traditions into their holiday celebrations. Photo by **HK Photography**.

married to a woman for 17 years and you have to come out to your partner. It was messy, but it wasn't ugly," he says. "But we got to this point where we're settled down."

One tradition Brian and his ex agreed on was the importance of spending Christmas Day together with their two teenage girls.

Christmas Day comes in two stages for Brian and Kevin. It begins with Brian spending the morning and Christmas lunch with his ex-wife and daughters, while Kevin – not a morning person – gladly sleeps in.

"It's an enjoyable day. The awkwardness is not there anymore," says Brian. They end their day at home, exchanging gifts, sometimes with friends.

Their preferred New Year's Eve is quiet. "We've found out we like staying in even better. We have some people over, maybe play a game, hang out, and when it's midnight, give each other a kiss."

## **LAUREN TAGLIATELA AND DR. AMANDA ROSTKOWSKI**

### **NORTH HAVEN**

Forget however this couple spent past holidays. Everything has changed, and not just because of COVID. Two factors now dictate how they celebrate, and their names are Silas and Oliver.

The 3-year-old twins may not influence how their mothers observe their religions (Tagliatela is Unitarian and Rostkowski is Jewish), but they have everything to say about holiday décor and traditions in the house.

"We haven't had a Christmas tree for a few years. When they're four we might be able to do it. Right now, they're into destruction!" says Lauren.

"We're going to try to light menorahs this year," says Tagliatela, emphasizing "try."


COVID derailed what is their favorite holiday, when they invite 30 to 40 friends for "Friendsgiving." Says Rostkowski: "There are so many kids running around and it feels so free." Tagliatela loves it because "we have really close friends who've become our family."

Also not happening this year is their annual drop-in day of Christmas cookie baking.

Both are close to their families, and because Tagliatela's is local, they spend (in normal years) Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with them.

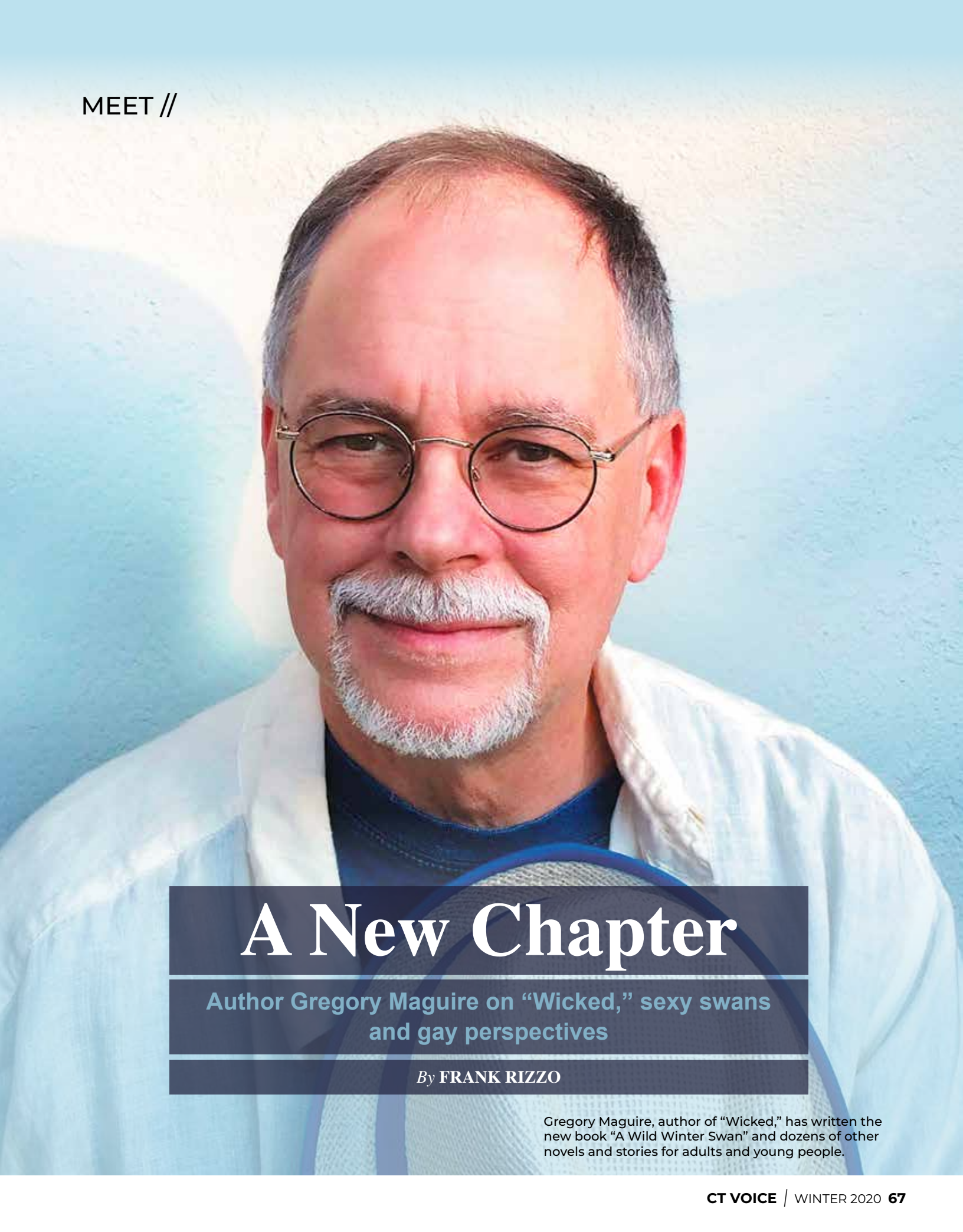
Tagliatela is property manager for her family's business, and Rostkowski is a gynecologist. Before meeting, both took similar paths: coming out to their parents as teens, both sets of parents slowly but eventually fully supporting them (both fathers walked them down the aisle at their wedding), and both converting from Catholicism to religions of their choosing.

"I sort of feel like I'm trans-religioned," says Rostkowski. "I felt Jewish my whole life." She went to Catholic schools all the way through college. "I went to synagogue my first time in high school and it felt right." In college, she discovered an LGBT-friendly synagogue. "I went and I was like, 'This is me.'"

At age 15, the night before her confirmation, Tagliatela cried and told her parents she couldn't go through with it because she didn't believe in it. "The Catholic church was telling me homosexuals would go to hell. That's not a religion I want to be part of." When she discovered the Unitarian church, she felt at home. "Being gay was not an issue. It was embraced." 



MEET //



# A New Chapter

Author Gregory Maguire on “Wicked,” sexy swans  
and gay perspectives

By FRANK RIZZO

Gregory Maguire, author of “Wicked,” has written the new book “A Wild Winter Swan” and dozens of other novels and stories for adults and young people.



Original poster for Broadway's "Wicked," which opened in 2003.





Idina Menzel played the original Elphaba in "Wicked," a performance which earned her a Tony Award.

“Can there possibly be a more beautiful bird?” asks author Gregory Maguire about one of his characters in his latest book, “A Wild Winter Swan,” the story of a stunning, one-winged swan-boy who disrupts the life of a 15-year-old girl in New York City in the ‘60s.

“There’s the purity of the whiteness that makes them stand out against whatever background you see them in, whether it’s the sky or a lake,” says Maguire from his home in Concord, Mass. “There’s something about their size, too, as well as their elegance that make their descending presence seem like a visitation. They’re sort of like angels.”

But there’s a bit of a dangerous mystery to them, too, he says.

“Did you ever come across a turkey or quail while out in the woods and suddenly it explodes and rises before you? It’s arresting and terrifying but also awesome.”

Give Maguire a subject, idea, or image and listen to him expound in elegant and imaginative ways as one might expect from the author of such

richly fantastical novels – many that take different perspectives of tales by Hans Christian Andersen, The Brothers Grimm, L. Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll, and Charles Dickens, among others. His books include “Mirror, Mirror,” “After Alice,” “Lost,” “Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister” and “Wicked,” which was the basis for the blockbuster Broadway musical.

Maguire says he was drawn to doing his own modern version of the Hans Christian Andersen story that tells of a group of brothers who were turned into swans by a witch, but were rescued by a devoted sister and magically returned to their rightful figures – except one brother who was only half-saved and who retained a single large wing.

Maguire is not the only one who found the tale compelling, he would later discover. His friend Brian Selznick, who wrote “The Invention of Hugo Cabret” that became the Martin Scorsese movie “Hugo,” and who is also gay, was transfixed by the tale when he was a boy.

“When we were both about 10, we wanted the swan-boy to be our friend,”

says Maguire. “We didn’t have the word for ‘boyfriend’ yet, but we were so smitten with the romantic idea of having this friend who had this beautiful way about him and how cool that would be. I didn’t know anybody who came across that story in childhood who didn’t fall in love with that boy and want him to be their best friend. I was sure that if I had met him, we would be ‘BFF’ and that I would understand him and accept him for who he was – and then he would like me.”

He also learned that the writer Michael Cunningham, who is also gay, had written a short story about Andersen’s swan-boy, re-envisioning him as another lone outsider in contemporary New York City who “kind of just lives there.”

“I guess I’m building a little argument for the fact that there is something about the beauty in brokenness that is attractive to gay writers,” says Maguire, “or at least as it’s understood by young people, who don’t yet see that the ways in which they think of themselves as broken are really the ways that they are whole. It just takes a while to learn that

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

# Wicked



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## GREGORY MAGUIRE

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The cover of Gregory Maguire's latest book "A Wild Winter Swan," a modern take on a Hans Christian Andersen tale.



for a young person.”

Maguire says he doesn't set out to write on gay themes or gay characters, but rather the imaginative novel-writing is “a series of 100,000 lessons, told one at a time, about how being an individual matters. So, in that way, every single novel that relishes the individual has a way to speak to gay and lesbian readers, and readers of any stripe or identity, whether they can name it or not.”

That being said, several of Maguire's stories have gay elements or characters.

“Not so much in this one – though I was tempted at first – but then I thought, no, that would distract from other things I wanted to do in this book. Though I have not shied away from it, I have never made it the central part of any book. It's there, just as it is in the world, just like devotion and justice and beauty are there in the world.”

But in his previous book “Hiddensee: A Tale of the Once and Future Nutcracker,” which is his own expansive take on “The Nutcracker,” the reader eventually discovers that the re-imagined character of Dr. Drosselmeier – a peripheral character in the famed ballet – is a closeted gay toymaker from 19th century Germany “whose creativity is a kind of salvation.”

There's a beautiful and sustained ache in that book that is sad but also oddly comforting.

“What is it in fairytales that gives them the capacity to highlight our loneliness and at the same time be consoling, too? I have asked myself this question since I was 10 and I'm not sure I know the answer, but I relish the effect,” Maguire says. “Fairytales insist we have a foot in each world. They don't work if we can't hear resonances and chimes in our own lives.”

### FROM “MARY POPPINS” AUTHOR

After writing books for young readers and adults for 42 years, the Albany-born-and-raised author says he now thinks every book is going to be his last.

“I decided that I'm only going to do something if I really feel like it right now,” says Maguire, 66.

He expected to take last year off from writing to spend more time in Massachusetts and at his family's other home in Vermont with his husband of 16 years, painter Andy Newman, and with his three adult children Alex, Luke and Helen. But the Hans Christian Andersen story – which isn't one of the Danish writer's most famous – kept speaking to him. He also got a bit of push 25 years ago by P. L. Travers, author of “Mary Poppins,” who suggested he take a crack at the tale. She told him: “There's a story – the sixth brother. Give him something to do. The boy with the wing. You know the one I mean?”

But Maguire didn't want to write it in a way that reflected his young sexual yearnings.

“That wasn't the kind of story I wanted to write right now. I wanted it to be more innocent and I also wanted to draw on something cozy about childhood that predates the revolutions of the '60s. I wanted to set it in the last possible year when people were not sensing the great schisms that we were about to discover,” he explains.

“The swan-boy breaks into that world in my story the same way



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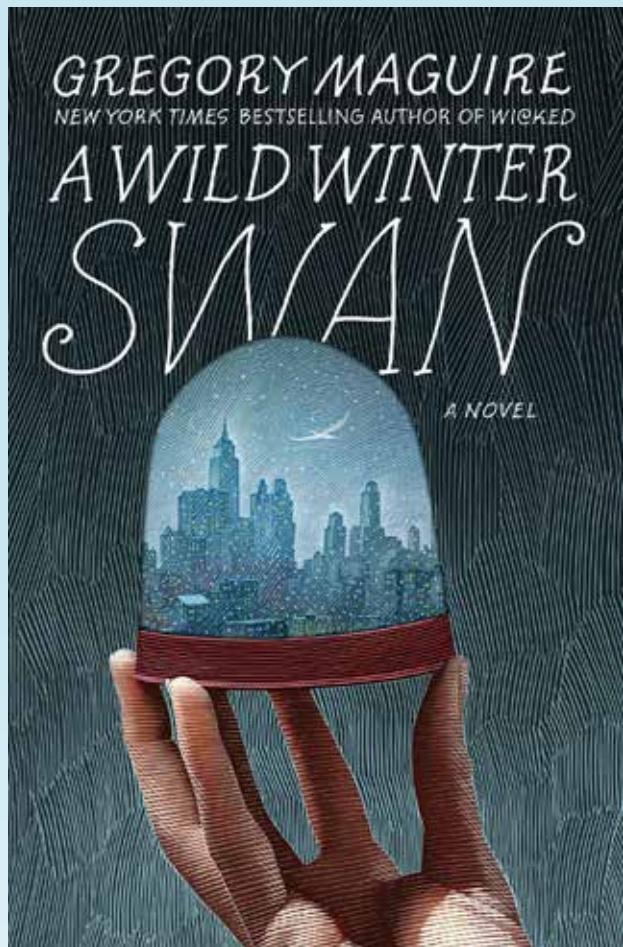


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that stories and novels broke into my life and opened my windows and lifted me out of the safe and loving environment that nonetheless was too small for me, as most children find in their lives. That's why we grow up."



**“THE SWAN-BOY BREAKS INTO THAT WORLD IN MY STORY THE SAME WAY THAT STORIES AND NOVELS BROKE INTO MY LIFE AND OPENED MY WINDOWS AND LIFTED ME OUT OF THE SAFE AND LOVING ENVIRONMENT THAT NONETHELESS WAS TOO SMALL FOR ME, AS MOST CHILDREN FIND IN THEIR LIVES. THAT’S WHY WE GROW UP.”**

The book is set for the most part in the confines of an aging townhouse on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where the heroine Laura has lived with her Italian-American immigrant grandparents since her mother became institutionalized. A large section of the book focuses on Laura's efforts to hide the swan-boy named Hans in the uppermost floor of the house.

"It's a cozy and housebound book, and how interesting to me that it happens to come out during the COVID period, where we are all housebound and we are looking out our windows to see what might come in – in a

good way – what kind of grace and challenging idea that is going to be blown in where we're sheltering in order to keep ourselves alive and healthy that allows us to move forward into a new way of being."

### FUTURE PROJECTS

So, will Maguire finally get that year off? Maybe not. Next year, he has a children's illustrated book coming out, "Cress Watercress." It's a rare book of his that features all anthropomorphic animal characters, centering on "a small rabbit family that has to leave the warren when its father doesn't come home one night."

Yes, another tale whose main character is missing a parent, a familiar trope in most of his writings.

"Unless there is a dead parent, I don't see it as a story," he says. "I see it as wallpaper or Muzak. Nothing starts until a child is thrown

on his or her own devices, usually begun through grief."

For parents who seek to protect their impressionable children by shielding them from such tales that might be viewed as traumatic, Maguire says the opposite is true. Maguire points them to the life lessons supplied by fairytales and folk stories.

"They gave us the chance to grapple with the inevitable horror of loss by telling us about it early and by saying, 'You can survive loss. It takes a lot of work and some help, luck, and grace but one can survive.'"


Most of Maguire's books, he says, can be boiled down to this thesis that is elegantly presented in a scene from "Cress Watercress," in which the mother likens the experience to the weeping child – who is finally dealing with the fact that the father is never going to come back – to the phases of the moon.

"The mother says, 'You will feel this over and over again, and the feeling will lift over and over again. That's just how it works. That's what feelings are. They come and they go, and the one thing that you can be sure of is that they do not stay the same.' Why do books for the younger readers not tell us about the cycle of emotions? Why is it something we have to wait until we're grownups to learn? This is an important thing for children to understand. Someone should tell them. 'Yes, you will feel this, and it will go away – and it will come back, too, and that's OK. That's normal.'"

When asked about the much-anticipated film version of the long-running "Wicked" musical that opened on Broadway 17 years ago, he says he understands it's still being developed, and echoes reports that there is finally a script that everyone feels can work as a movie.

Speaking about the book that has become a phenomenon, he says: "Isn't it amazing? I felt when I wrote it that it might be considered simplistic and, in a lot of ways, I think it's more important now than it was 25 years ago."

Does he still think about what it is to be "good?"

"I do," he says. "I don't claim ever to be able to settle on the right course of action – and I will pay the price before the courts of everlasting justice – but I do think it's important to try." 



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# Staying Connected

Technology helps seniors keep in touch, active during pandemic

By TERESA M. PELHAM

**F**or the first seven years of her grandson's life, Marye Gail Harrison would visit him in New Hampshire for a weekend once a month. When COVID-19 hit, she figured her visits with him would be put on hold, at least temporarily. Now several months later, her relationship with him is stronger than ever, and they "visit" with each other for an hour, five days a week.

Thanks to Zoom, Harrison and her grandson, Ron, enter a world of make-believe, complete with costumes and props. It's a part of his at-home schooling that will most definitely stay with him long after 2020 is in our rearview.

Harrison begins each Zoom call by asking, "What's going on in the neighborhood today?" Ron then comes up with a scenario involving a few of his stuffed animals, and the two take it from there. They both have plenty of dress-up clothes, hats, and masks, and the hour goes by in a flash.

"We're basically doing extemporaneous theater," says the 79-year old resident of Seabury, an active life plan community in Bloomfield. "It's a little like 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,' a neighborhood of all of his buddies and allies, along with other nefarious characters."

The pair has been at this since his elementary school closed in mid-March, with no summer break.

"For someone my age, COVID is

very scary," she says. "To have this intense experience with this child who I want to live for, and who I want to see grow up, it's blown my mind, frankly. In this time of great angst, this [visiting virtually] has been a source of great joy."

Harrison has learned quite a few computer skills that are helping her stay engaged. She learned how to set up an email listserv for an art group based at Seabury and is now its administrator. And she learned some pretty complicated computer skills in order to incorporate artwork into an online service for the Unitarian Society of Hartford.

"I thought I was really hot because I could email an attachment, I could text, and I have a Facebook account," she says. "I'm not a pro now, but give me enough time and I can figure it out."

We can officially stop making fun of senior adults' inability to use computers and handheld devices. It's estimated that more than 70 percent of seniors are online, and since that segment of the population has been especially hard-hit by the virus, it shouldn't be surprising to learn that many older Americans are not only keeping up with technology but embracing it. Many seniors are also coming up with new ways to stay busy and pursue hobbies they enjoyed before 2020.

A recent report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine states that isolated and lonely adults have a 50% higher chance of developing dementia, a 29% higher

chance of coronary heart disease, and a 32% higher chance of having a stroke – and are at a higher risk of hospitalization.

Singers like Priscilla Hurley, who lives at McLean senior living community in Simsbury, have had to temporarily give up that hobby, since singing is one of the highest-risk activities people can do, in terms of spreading the coronavirus.

But Hurley belongs to the Hartford Chorale, which meets virtually every month. Along with some 25 other members, she recently played Jukebox Bingo online, and is proud to announce that she won the first game. The organization also figured out how to do virtual group singing, with members recording two sections of Handel's Messiah on their cellphones and editing them to perfection.

Hurley, who declines to give her age, says she was surprised at how much entertainment is available through your computer. She has been hearing a different opera or musical every night, streamed by the Metropolitan Opera and the Goodspeed Opera House. And she's preparing to participate in a virtual murder mystery with the Theatre Guild of Simsbury.

"Singing is going to be one of the last things to come back," she says. "Singers are spitting all over the place. But we're doing what we can to stay busy and active."

Just down the road at Duncaster in Bloomfield, Susan Aller is busy run-





Amid the pandemic, Marye Gail Harrison has gotten creative when it comes to spending time with her grandson. The two chat and play games, via Zoom, complete with costumes and props.



Susan Aller, who lives at Duncaster in Bloomfield, enjoys a Zoom gathering with friends and family.

ning a memoir writing club that used to meet in person every Monday morning to read each other's writing around a big table and share feedback.

All but one of the 20 club members have stayed involved through email. Aller regularly provides the group with a prompt to get the creative juices flowing. She recently read a New York Times article about six-word stories. In addition to printing some of residents' own six-word stories in "Thistle," Duncaster's monthly literary magazine, we've shared some here (see box.)

Aller, 86, has worked as a professional writer for many years, having written more than a dozen books.

"I've been computer literate for a long time but I'm still learning, and as

I learn, I teach other people to get up to speed," she says.

Duncaster employs two full-time IT professionals who are available to help residents with any tech-related issues.

"When you've got a computer problem, you just call Walter or Eric," Aller says. "It's worth living at Duncaster just for that."


Aller also is active in a children's book writers' group in West Hartford, which meets via Zoom twice monthly, in addition to meeting with Duncaster's board of directors as a resident representative once a month.

She has family living in Paris and New York City, and she regularly catches up online with them.

"We all complain about and criticize

young people with their faces buried in their phones," Aller says. "Suddenly we are that generation. We have to be."

While Aller has decided she's not a fan of telehealth appointments, she has embraced getting items from Whole Foods delivered through Amazon Prime, and she found a distant cousin during lockdown through Ancestry.com.

"Boredom sets in when you don't have a goal," she says. "The people who thought they could get through life without adapting to technology are really suffering now from the inability to connect with others. We're making lemonade out of lemons." 



# SIX-WORD STORIES

By the Duncaster Memoir Writers

I believe this too shall pass!

Youth joins elders happy  
being alive.

New baby coming. Another  
family generation.

Missing my life companion madly.  
Memories!!

Heart full, arms empty.  
Hugging tears.

Once upon a long loong time ...

COVID family visits: Skype,  
Facetime, Zooom

Holocaust deniers, racism deniers,  
COVID deniers

Writing cleanses the brain  
and soul.

Strawberries, cukes, tomatoes,  
rich harvest.

Sweet baby – wish to hold you.

Embraces and kisses,  
long time ago.

Eyes only – don't touch.  
Solo dinners.

Take a walk. Call a friend.

How long will this go on?

Joy – weekly Zoom meeting  
with daughters

Family faces, good friends,  
God's blessings.

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**POTENT MIX:** This “Sweet Rice Bowl” combines brown rice, dates, chopped walnuts, orange pieces, chopped spinach, turmeric, and honey.



# Healthy from the Inside Out

Try these immune-boosting bowls and bevs

By AMY S. WHITE / Photography by MARY QUINN

**W**ash your hands. Keep your distance. Don't touch your face. Wear a mask. Whether it's COVID-19, the flu, or just the common cold, recently we have all become more aware of the most important behaviors that can help us ward off illness. Building the body's natural defenses, or immunity, against viruses and bacteria is key to preventing sickness and maintaining good overall health.

However, when it comes to immunity, not all foods are created equal. Antioxidants make the best immune-builders, and our bodies absorb them better through foods rather than supplements. While no diet can cure or prevent any disease, read on to learn which vitamins and nutrients contain antioxidants. Then turn the page to find four recipes – two bowls and two beverages – that feature ingredients known for these immune-boosting properties.

We have all heard that taking vitamin C can help stave off a cold. That's because this essential vitamin, which is also an antioxidant, encourages the production of white blood cells that aid in fighting infections. Our bodies don't produce or store vitamin C, so it's important to try to include some in your daily diet. Most people think of citrus fruits when they think of vitamin C, but it is plentiful in many other foods as well, such as red bell peppers, pineapple, broccoli, and leafy greens like spinach or kale.

Vitamin E is another antioxidant that is vital to helping immunity. In addition to being a key player in the formation of red blood cells, this powerful nutrient helps the body fight infection by protecting

cells from damage. Nuts, dates, seeds, and green leafy vegetables are some foods that are rich in vitamin E.

Known for giving yellow and orange vegetables their bright color, beta carotene is another antioxidant that has been shown to help bolster the immune system. Foods high in beta carotene include carrots, red and orange peppers, broccoli, and leafy greens.


Flavonoids are plant chemicals that serve as antioxidants and therefore can help your body function more efficiently and protect it against toxins. Flavonoids are found in berries, tree fruits like bananas and apples, nuts, and tea.

Other foods that have been shown to have a variety of immunity-building capabilities are: brown rice, ginger, garlic, onions, spices like turmeric and cinnamon, and yogurt.

You will notice the recipes here specifically use the immune-boosting ingredients mentioned above. The "sweet" rice bowl makes a great breakfast or a snack, while the "savory" rice bowl is meant as a snack, lunch, or dinner. Connecticut mixologist Mary Quinn created a smoothie that you can try as a meal replacement or snack, as well as a delicious fall mocktail that tastes so good you won't miss the alcohol.

So, continue to wash your hands, keep your distance, avoid touching your face, and wear your mask. But while you're at it, incorporate these immune-boosting bowls and bevs into your meal rotation, and stay safe and healthy out there. 🍷

*Amy S. White is a Connecticut teacher, writer, and line cook.*



*Known for giving yellow and orange vegetables their bright color, beta carotene is another antioxidant that has been shown to help bolster the immune system.*

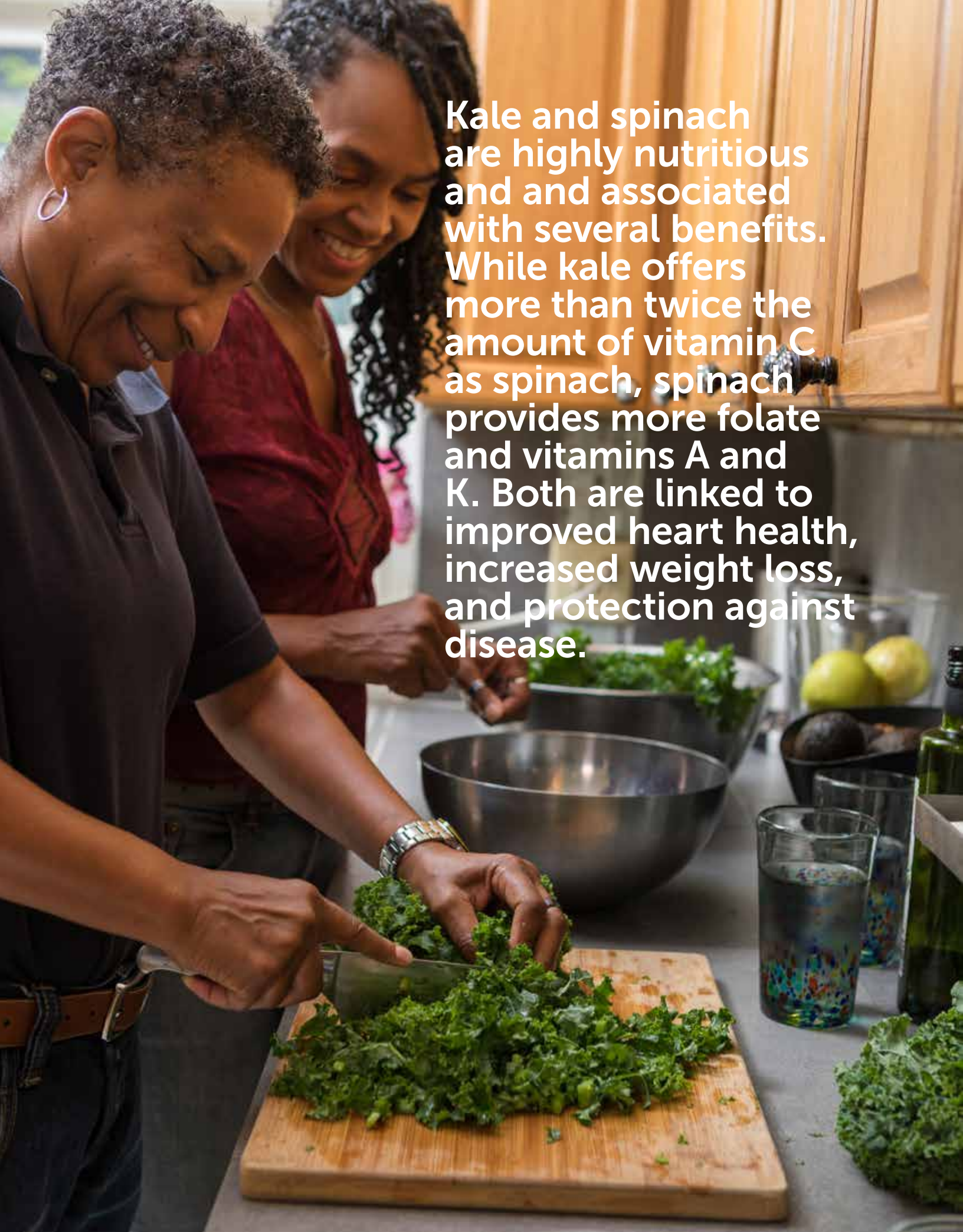
*Foods high in beta carotene include carrots, red and orange peppers, broccoli, and leafy greens.*





**HEALTHY CHOICES:** Foods like garlic, walnuts, and a variety of fruits and vegetables have proven immunity-building capabilities.



A photograph of two women in a kitchen. The woman in the foreground, wearing a dark polo shirt and a watch, is smiling and chopping leafy greens on a wooden cutting board with a large knife. The woman behind her, wearing a red top, is also smiling and looking at the greens. On the counter, there are several stainless steel bowls, one containing more greens, and a glass of water. In the background, there are wooden kitchen cabinets and a bowl of lemons. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Kale and spinach are highly nutritious and associated with several benefits. While kale offers more than twice the amount of vitamin C as spinach, spinach provides more folate and vitamins A and K. Both are linked to improved heart health, increased weight loss, and protection against disease.**





## **KICK-START SMOOTHIE**

(Recipe courtesy of Mary Quinn, mixologist)

Ingredients:

**1 5-oz. container Greek-style key  
lime yogurt**

**1/2 cup pineapple chunks**

**1/2 cup almond milk**

**1/4 cup green tea**

**1/2 cup spinach or other leafy  
green**

**Cinnamon, to taste**

Place all ingredients except cinnamon in a blender and blend until well incorporated. Garnish with a light sprinkle of cinnamon.



### **CRANAPPLE SHRUB (A MOCKTAIL)**

(Recipe courtesy of Mary Quinn, Mixologist)

**Note: Shrub must be prepared two days in advance**

**Ingredients:**

**1 cup cranberries**

**1 cup apple cider vinegar**

**1/2 cup turbinado sugar**

**2-3 apples, shredded (use the shredding side of a cheese grater)**

**1 cinnamon stick**

**Peel from 2 oranges**

**1 can or bottle of ginger beer**

**Additional cinnamon stick and/or apple slices for garnish**

**To make the shrub:**

Puree together the cranberries, apple cider vinegar, and turbinado sugar. Add the shredded apples, cinnamon stick, and orange peels. Pour into an airtight container such as a canning jar. Allow to sit for two days in a cool, dry place.

**To make the mocktail:**

Fill a glass with ice. Mix 1 part shrub with 1 part ginger beer. Garnish with apple slices and a cinnamon stick if desired.





**MAKING EVERY BITE COUNT:**

This "Savory Rice Bowl" combines a mix of immunity-boosting foods - brown rice, garlic, green onion, broccoli, red pepper, carrot, pineapple chunks, and almonds.



**IF IT SMELLS  
GOOD, THEN  
IT'LL PROBABLY  
TASTE GOOD!**





## "SAVORY" RICE BOWL

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup prepared brown rice**
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil**
- 1 Tbsp. fresh ginger, peeled and grated**
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and chopped**
- 1 green onion, chopped**
- 1/2 cup chopped broccoli**
- 1/2 red pepper, chopped**
- 1 carrot, peeled and julienned**
- 1/2 cup pineapple chunks**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- 1/4 cup slivered almonds**

Heat vegetable oil in a large frying pan. Add grated ginger, garlic, green onion, broccoli, red pepper, carrot, and pineapple. Cook over medium-high heat, stirring often, until fragrant and hot, 5-6 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Remove from heat and stir in prepared rice and almonds.

## "SWEET" RICE BOWL

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup prepared brown rice**
- 2-3 dates, chopped**
- 1/4 cup chopped walnuts**
- 1/2 orange, peeled and cut into pieces**
- 1/4 cup chopped spinach or other leafy greens**
- Turmeric, to taste**
- Honey, to taste**

Stir together or layer rice, dates, walnuts, orange, and spinach in a bowl. Sprinkle with turmeric and drizzle with honey.

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# PETS //



Thomas Lee (left) and Paul Shipman celebrated their first anniversary this past June. They chose for their wedding date June 21, the longest day of the year. Photo by **T.R. Laz Photography**





# Full House

This home is filled with  
love ... and pets

By RENEE DININO



ABOVE: Oliver ("Ollie") the cat, shares the home not only with Shipman and Lee but with two guppies named Palamon and Arcite and a snail named Doug. BELOW: The happy couple on their wedding day. Photo by **T.R. Laz Photography**

**P**aul Shipman, who is senior director of marketing, communications, and government relations at Connecticut Food Bank, met Thomas Lee, a professional storyteller and arts educator, a little more than 10 years ago.

"Ours is a love story," says Shipman. "We met on Match. However, we told our parents we met at a party, because they don't know what the internet was."

He adds, "Like the movies, I knew right away, even before I met him in person, because I heard him whistling and I love a good whistler."

Today, they make their happy home with their pets: Oliver ("Ollie") the cat; two guppies, Palamon and Arcite, named after Shakespeare's "The Two Noble Kinsmen"; and a snail named Doug.

When Shipman was a young boy of 6, he got his first dog, then a cat, and ever since has never been without a pet. "All of my pets have either wandered into the house or we got them from a shelter," he says.

Lee grew up in a one-dog family. His father went to the local pound and rescued Sam the mutt. As an adult, Lee was





adopted by a street cat. “One night in the rain, he showed up, came in, and that was it.” He called the cat Mr. Kitty, or Mac, and viewed them as just two bachelors sharing a space.

Soon after Lee and Shipman began dating, there came a time when it was time to introduce everyone involved. “When I met Thomas, he and my cat, Bob, took to each other instantly,” says Shipman. The initial encounter actually consisted of Bob just standing on Lee’s chest and having a staring contest. One thing to note: Lee is allergic to cats. As it turns out, Bob had allergies too – they both had asthma and both needed inhalers and anti-asthma pills. A deal-breaker for some when starting a relationship, but not for this crew.

“We had Bob until April of 2018, when he died,” Shipman recalls. “He was an amazing cat, so I didn’t really consider him ‘replaceable.’ But in July of 2019, my friend, who volunteers at the Humane Society in Newington and had been after us for a while about adopting a cat, said she’d seen a great candidate there. We went in on a Saturday and were immediately taken by Oliver. I’d never had an orange tabby before, but the stories about them are true. Oliver is a classic, easygoing, playful companion. He is no-fuss and pure fun. We love having him with us and it’s been especially nice recently, as we find ourselves home so much.”

They adopted Oliver when he was 5 years old and celebrated his sixth birthday on June 18, a few days before their wedding anniversary. I mean, doesn’t everyone throw their beloved furry family members birthday parties?

These two decided to do their wedding in their own way. The loving couple didn’t need a high-priced, over-the-top, fancy wedding; they just needed each other and a sunrise. They settled on June 21, the longest day of the year and a treasured tradition for both.

“We always go to the beach to watch the sunrise on that day and then we go to the other side of Cape Cod and watch it set. We couldn’t decide how many people to invite, or where to hold it, so we decided to obviously head to the Gay Capital of Marriages – Cooperstown, you know, in New York, Baseball Hall of Fame,” says Shipman.



Ollie gets cozy with Shipman.

Actually, for those who don’t know, it is also home to the Glimmerglass Opera Festival. Lee had been attending that festival for more than 20 years; Shipman had only been once before and has learned to love opera because of his husband.

So off they went, just the two of them, to Cooperstown to be married at Otesaga Resort Hotel by Otsego Lake at sunrise – sort of. Lee wanted an early morning wedding, because of all the English novels he’d enjoyed over the years. However, the judge couldn’t arrive until 8 a.m. They celebrated their first anniversary this past June.

Shipman’s career has been centered in community and charitable organizations, and Lee is a true intellectual. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Shipman has never stopped working as the number of food-insecure people in Connecticut rises.





**“Ugh, you are not getting a fish; as a child, I had fish; my cat ate one, very traumatic.”**


Their unique blend of personal and professional accomplishments always makes for great conversation. They moved to their current home in December of 2019 and Lee, a devoted gardener, is all about planting and laying out gardens on the land here.

“We have almost two acres, and between what he’s growing in pots indoors and what’s already transplanted to an outdoor seedling garden, we’re quickly getting a nursery full of plants to use,” said Shipman earlier this year.

The couple shares lots of interests but come at them from different angles. For example, says Shipman: “Thomas likes to joke that we both like ‘mid-century’ design; just different centuries.”

He adds: “We love to check out museums, we love spending time on Cape Cod, where I grew up, and we continue to find different music, books, art, and destinations to introduce to each other.”

And just as Bob the cat and Lee had to overcome an allergy issue, Shipman had to overcome an issue of his own. He remembers telling Lee, “ugh, you are not getting a fish; as a child, I had fish; my cat ate one, very traumatic.”

But Lee has faithfully taken care of their water friends, Shipman has grown to love them, and Ollie has not attempted to go fishing. This family is united in kindness, literature, philanthropy and, most importantly, love. 



Shipman and Lee adopted Ollie last year.



Renee DiNino is the director of community affairs for iHeartMedia in Connecticut, the midday host on The River 105.9 and host of an hour-long syndicated talk show on all Connecticut iHeartRadio stations. She also appears weekly on WFSB Channel 3’s “Better Connecticut.” An avid animal lover and advocate, she and her husband Sal have a German Shepherd, Luke, they rescued in Hartford. [instagram @reeneedinino](https://www.instagram.com/reeneedinino).





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# The Land of Steady Progress

How do we determine what represents a community?

By SUSAN BIGELOW

One of the favorite pastimes of people who live in Connecticut is complaining about Connecticut. The traffic. The weather. The cities. The suburbs. The taxes. The politics. The lack of anything to do. Did I mention the traffic?

We love complaining. It's part of our official state inferiority complex, brought to us in part by being sandwiched between Boston and New York. How often have you heard someone you know say that they'd leave if they could? How many "We're leaving the state" op-eds have you read in the newspapers?

And how many times have you thought, with a sigh and a shake of your head, Would life be better somewhere else?

I think queer people feel this especially hard, sometimes. We don't really have a town like Northampton or a Provincetown here, nor do we have a huge, bustling megacity with a satisfyingly big, rainbow-festooned gayborhood. LGBTQIA people absolutely exist everywhere in Connecticut, but sometimes it feels like we're not as visible as in other places. Plus, if you live in a more conservative suburb, like I do, sometimes it can get a little lonely.

And, if you're around my age, you probably know a lot of people who did leave. How many of our old friends moved to Boston, New York, Portland, or San Francisco?

But I decided to stay. And I'll stay in Connecticut until they turn the lights off.

I have so many reasons. But I think something that helps me sum up why I stay, and something even Connecticut haters can agree on, is the stunning beauty of nature that lies seemingly just around every corner,

even in our densest urban areas.

And that matters, because it wasn't always this way.

Long ago, the forests of Connecticut, like much of the rest of southern New England, were cleared for cropland. But as farming moved from Connecticut's rocks and stones to the fertile plains of the Midwest, something amazing happened: the forests returned.

Go for a walk in the woods, and I guarantee you'll come across old stone walls that once marked the boundaries of pastureland or industry, but now are the domain of the birds, the foxes, and the deer. So many wild creatures have come back, including bears and moose. When I was very young, it was rare to see a hawk in our skies, but lately I've seen bald eagles nesting along the Connecticut River, just a mile or so from downtown Hartford.

That didn't just happen out of the blue. We've been careful custodians of nature these past decades, too, cleaning up rivers that once ran with sewage, and turning old industrial sites into verdant parks. There are big, protected state forests within easy driving distance, no matter where you are.

To me, that speaks to our endless capacity for self-renewal. And, believe it or not, it has a lot to do with why complaining is something we can never get enough of.

We're never satisfied. Connecticut is never good enough. For some people, that means giving up and going somewhere else. But for those of us who remain, we turn that restless dissatisfaction into a drive to make this place better.

When I was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s in Newington, being gay was something that would get you ostracized, beat up, or worse. Trans people were all but invisible. But that's not true now. If I drive past





One of the top reasons why Susan Bigelow chooses to stay in Connecticut is "the stunning beauty of nature that lies seemingly just around every corner."



the Congregational Church in Newington, where we went for services every Sunday, there's a rainbow flag hung up next to the door.

Marriage equality was a reality in Connecticut long before much of the rest of the country. Trans rights and protections were signed into law in 2011, nearly a decade ago, well ahead of even liberal bastions like Massachusetts. It's not surprising now that there are LGBTQ people at all levels of government.


Yes, there's still an awful lot that divides us here, but we've never let it paralyze us. Our constitutional democracy predates the founding of the United States by a century and a half, and what started out as a narrow, Puritan near-theocracy has grown, over the long and frustrating centuries, into a much more open, tolerant, and inclusive place.

No, it's not perfect. We have a long way to go, especially when it comes to treating people of color in every community with the fairness, decency, and respect that

should be the right of anyone who lives here. But because we can't ever accept that Connecticut is good enough, I have faith that we're going to keep fighting to make this place better and better.

Connecticut is called the Land of Steady Habits, but I've never found that to be so. Ironically, that name comes from the state's habit of voting for the Federalist Party in the early 1800s, during a time when the state had been clear-cut for farms.

The Federalist Party is long gone, and the hills and valleys of this land are covered with forests. We are the Land of Steady Progress, a place where we are driven to make tomorrow better than today.

That's why I stay. 

*Susan Bigelow is a writer and librarian. Her political columns have appeared on CTNewsJunkie.com since 2010. She lives in Enfield with her wife and their cats.*



Marriage equality was a reality in Connecticut long before much of the rest of the country.





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