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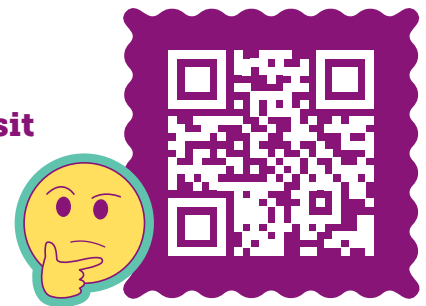
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# CONNECTICUT VOICE™

## EDITOR'S NOTE //



### Spring Has Finally Arrived

The winter may have seemed long, but the globe keeps turning, and the seasons change. There are few seasons as welcome in Connecticut as spring when the earth comes back to life, the birds return, and the light lingers longer in the day.

I have wonderful childhood memories of the first visits to Elizabeth Park in Hartford and some—sometimes windy—early picnics at Hammonasset as well as trips to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford with my grandfather who indulged my youthful fascination with all things Egyptian.

All these pleasures, and so many more, are available to us in the state as the season changes, but this is also a time of great concern. The recent election and new federal administration is already threatening advances made by our LGBTQ+ communities. At this writing, the military has banned transgender people and ceased all gender-affirming care. Legal challenge may follow, but this is tragic and will undoubtedly have implications for some who serve in Connecticut.

We are, however, fortunate to have legislators at the state level who are committed to fighting to ensure that our hard-won rights and opportunities. The “small but mighty” LGBTQ+ caucus in the state house is just one example. In this issue, we profile Rep. Dominique Johnson who along with Raghieb Allie-Brennan, co-chairs that caucus. Rep. Johnson is passionate in her commitment to service and knows the necessity and power of having a seat at the table. As she explains, she—and all of us—are fortunate that in addition to the caucus, there is strong allyship in the house and that the issues are being raised and addressed.

Connecticut is also a state with a rich LGBTQ+ history, and Frank Rizzo takes us on a walking tour of New Haven with events stretching back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century that have helped shape the state as a place of tolerance, for the most part.

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

The Leonard Litz Foundation is celebrating five years of supporting LGBTQ+ organizations with grants, many of which acknowledge that they had nowhere else to turn. Similarly, our Last Word focuses on the work of the Connecticut LGBTQ+ Justice and Opportunity Network, a program funded by the legislature to address the health needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. Along those lines, Mental Health Connecticut (MHC) is celebrating the fourth year of their “Let’s Face It” Campaign, a powerful program that celebrates May as Mental Health Month and puts a human face on individuals who are confronting and dealing with mental health challenges. The dedication and hard work of all the individuals involved in these programs inspire us every day.

In entertainment, Brian Scott Lipton celebrates the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Yale School of Drama and the ongoing influence of the Yale Rep. Frank Rizzo talks with Tony Winner Matt Doyle about the new play *Conversations with Mother* by Connecticut-born playwright Matthew Lombardo.

There is much more in these pages as well, including a visit to The Laurel in West Hartford to sample their menu—and cocktails. And, our regular columnists Kim Adamski and Meghan Crutchley share timely and frank information on healthy sex practices and coping with challenging times, respectively.

Please also visit us online at [ctvoice.com](http://ctvoice.com) for expanded coverage of arts and news. We wish you joy this spring, and thank you for being part of the *Connecticut Voice* family.

*Chris*

Christopher Byrne, Editor  
[chris@ctvoice.com](mailto:chris@ctvoice.com)

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**Editor**  
Christopher Byrne

**Creative Director**  
Stacy Murray

**Sales & Marketing Executive**  
Doreen Chudoba

**Cover Photo**

Stan Godlewski



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LOVE ONE ANOTHER, I  
REALLY DON'T SEE WHAT  
USE THERE WOULD BE IN  
HAVING ANY SPRING.”

—Victor Hugo



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CT VOICE's Christopher Byrne, editor, with Dominique Johnson at the Legislative Office Building, Hartford





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# CONTRIBUTORS //



## FRANK RIZZO

Frank Rizzo profiled Tony-winner Matt Doyle (page 26) and introduced historic Gay New Haven (page 48). He has written about the arts in Connecticut and nationally for more than 40 years; for the *The New York Times*, *American Theatre Magazine* and dozens of other outlets. He is also a theater critic for *Variety*. Follow Frank's work at ShowRiz.com and on Twitter@ShowRiz.



## KIM ADAMSKI

Kim Adamski continues her frank columns on sex. In this issue, she talks about engaging in sex for trans folks. She is a Hartford-based sexual educator. Kim loves answering the questions people are afraid to ask, and that's what motivated her to go into sex education. If you have questions about sex, contact her at [adamski.kimberly@gmail.com](mailto:adamski.kimberly@gmail.com).



## RANDY B. YOUNG

Randy wrote about the Methodist Church responding to LGBTQ+ issues (page 62). He is the author of *And the Stars Flew with Us*, a series of essays and meditations on the classic family road trip. He's won multiple awards as a journalist and advertising copywriter, and has been a regular contributor to regional lifestyle and sports publications.



## BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

Brian visited The Abner Hotel (page 31) and profiled Yale School of Drama (page 16). He has been a nationally renowned journalist for more than 30 years. He has been editor-in-chief of TheaterManiacom and Resident Publications, Managing Editor of men's fashion magazines DNR and MR, and his byline has appeared in *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal*.



## DAWN ENNIS

Dawn Dawn writes about a camp serving transgender youth (page 18). Dawn is also a member of the CT Voice advisory board and an award-winning journalist, professor at University of Hartford, and a producer at WTIC in Hartford. Dawn was America's first transgender journalist in a TV network newsroom when she came out more than nine years ago. Follow her @lifeafterdawn on X, Facebook, and Instagram. Dawn and her family reside in West Hartford, Connecticut.



## JANE LATUS

Jane covers MHC's "Let's Face It" campaign promoting mental health in Connecticut (page 24). She also shares her personal experience of Hurricane Hellene (page 54). She and her wife live in Canton with an escalating number of cats. They have three grown children: two sons (one trans and one gay) and a foster daughter.



## MEGHAN CRUTCHLEY

Meghan Crutchley (they/them) is a National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach, speaker, educator, and CEO/ Founder of Wisdom Body Health. With over a decade of experience helping individuals create lasting change through mindfulness- based strategies. Meghan believes in the transcendent potential of the human experience, and their work with both individuals and groups combines expertise in Buddhist philosophy with nutrition, sleep, stress management and recovery, and movement to offer a unique approach to cultivating sustainable health.



## ALEX DUEBEN

Alex contributed this issue's Delicious piece (page 58) and profiled trans comic artist KC Councilor (page 43). Alex is a freelance writer who specializes in comics, poetry, books, and art.



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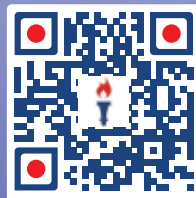
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## From Humble Beginnings...

**H**umble beginnings, parental loss, and even a stint in a childhood orphanage defined our early lives. Success at that time meant escaping these circumstances and attempting to rebuild our lives. On top of that, being members of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly at that time, meant hiding or denying who we were. We both realized, individually and then together, that we had to take charge of our own destiny.

Fast forward to today, we have obviously succeeded beyond our own expectations. But success has never been something we took for granted. We always needed

to pay that success forward. We've been active participants in community organizations that serve teenagers and other clients by helping them to find like-minded peers in safe, welcoming environments for the first time. We've seen firsthand how desperately underfunded these organizations tend to be, with no steady or recurring income streams. There are national LGBTQ+ organizations who perform very valuable services for our community, but we knew we wanted to help fund these smaller community groups more directly.

In November 2019, the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation was officially incorporated. Even then we did not fully

recognize the impact we could make.

Think back to November 2019: the world was on the brink of a global pandemic, and the then U.S. President seemed intent only on making things worse. Systemic inequity continued to widen the chasm between the haves and the have-nots, and world conflicts continued to claim too many innocent lives.

*Plus ça change...*

But while negative headlines have seemed to dominate recent history, the work of this Foundation has filled us with unlikely hope and optimism. Whenever we're invited to speak at various organizations, we emphasize

that the joy of giving can be a life changing experience, particularly when careers and other pursuits start to feel empty.

We've had the opportunity to engage with inspiring people working day and night to make a meaningful difference in the lives of LGBTQ+ people. These are often folks working for very little, sacrificing their own livelihoods for the benefit of their community. It has been an honor to partner with them through our Community Grants program, which has awarded grants to approximately 100 nonprofit organizations, touching thousands of lives both directly and indirectly.

But grants alone aren't







From left to right: Elliot Leonard, Roger Litz, Colin Hosten, Robyn Schlesinger, Andrew Mitchell-Namdar, and Anthony Crisci at the Lambda Literary Awards in 2024

enough. Knowing that Pride is an important opportunity for LGBTQ+ people to connect with one another, especially outside of large urban centers, we collaborated with Circle Care Center to create a Pride Coalition throughout Connecticut and New York, which has expanded to over 40 towns and continues to be an outlet for organizers of all sizes to network with one another, learn from each other, and offer support and encouragement in an increasingly challenging socio-political climate.

We are especially proud of our role in helping to establish the first ever LGBTQ+ Community Center in Bridgeport, CT, which was incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization in 2024 and is led by a devoted and energetic Board of Directors, which includes two of our very own trustees.

We recently launched two programs centered around some of the more vulnerable members of our community. The TransPLUS Resource Center seeks to support the transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and intersex voices that have historically been relegated to the margins of our movement. And SilverConnect is intended to celebrate a fast-growing segment of our community as we enter our golden years. Keep an eye on this space for much more to come on these initiatives.

Our fellow trustees—Andrew Mitchell-Namdar, Robyn Schlesinger, Anthony Crisci, and Colin Hosten—have become a second family in our shared mission of protecting and expanding LGBTQ+ equality. And we've recently added a familiar face to our roster, whose name you might recognize from her decade-plus at the helm

of The Loft LGBTQ+ Center in Westchester: Judy Troilo will now act as Executive Consultant to the Foundation, helping us to implement all of the above, and more.

What a difference five years can make. In total, including sponsorships for Pride and fundraising galas, we have awarded or committed over \$5 million in charitable donations.

That sounds like a lot, and we're proud of it, but it's the individual stories that stick with us most. Like when the Milwaukee LGBTQ Community Center was on the brink of collapse, and our friends at CenterLink connected them with us for emergency funding. With some of our help, they have continued to serve their community without interruption. Denise Spivak at CenterLink said she literally couldn't think of any other place they could turn to.

That's why we do what we do. That's the joy of giving.

Make no mistake: we know that we are heading into some dark times. Our biggest single grant to date has been to Lambda Legal, an organization that has often served as the litigation backstop against threats to LGBTQ+ equality. While we don't know exactly what 2025 will bring for our community, we know that Lambda is prepared for the fight—as are all the courageous individuals and organizations we've been privileged to support these past five years.

And we know that the Leonard Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation will be right at their side, fighting along with them.



—Elliot Leonard and Roger Litz

## Playing a Leading Role for A Century

### YALE SCHOOL OF DRAMA

In some minds, New Haven may be most famous for its wide variety of delicious pizzas, but its true claim to fame in many circles is the David Geffen Yale School of Drama, which officially turns 100 this year. This famed institution offers master's degrees in a variety of theatrical disciplines, including playwriting and directing, but may be best known for its astounding list of acting alumni including Meryl Streep, Paul Newman, Sigourney Weaver, Liev Schreiber and real-life spouses Angela Bassett and Courtney B. Vance to name just a few.

"We are truly the only graduate theater program that trains every discipline of theater," says James Bundy, a former student who has served as the school's dean since 2002. (He also teaches acting at the school and at Yale University, as well as being the artistic director of Yale Repertory Theatre). "Typically, about 70 people graduate from our programs each year, with nearly 50 of them being in the acting program."

Choosing who those students are—and who they are learning from—is Bundy's most important priority. "Our most important decisions are who comes to teach and who comes to learn," he says. "The number one job is to attract the most interesting people to faculty and student body. I think, when



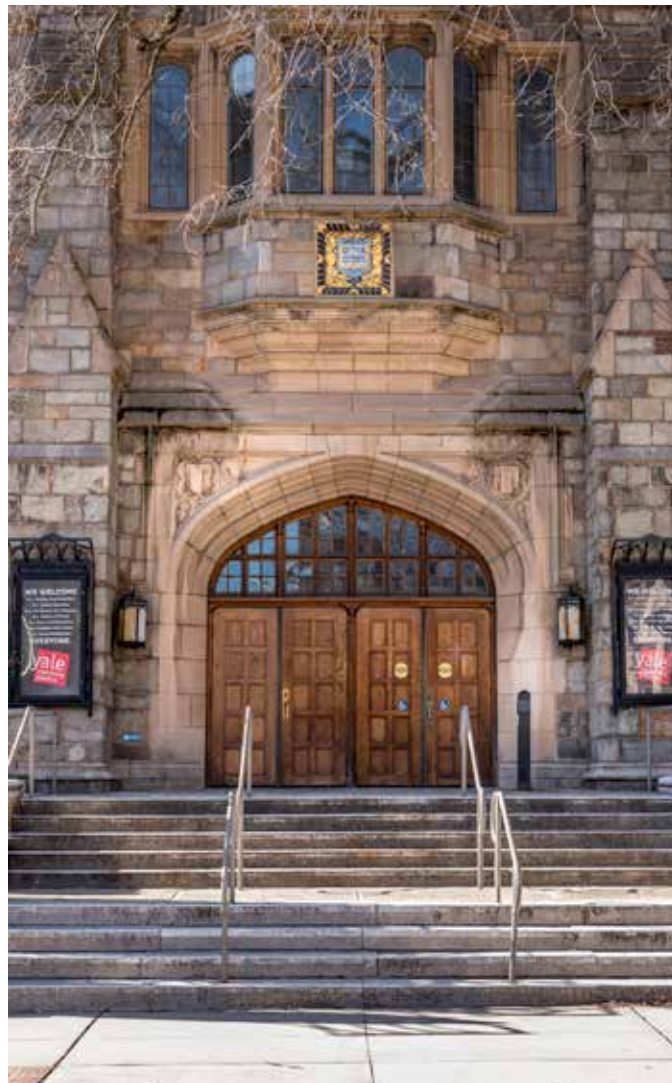
James Bundy

considering applications for students you need to bring an appreciation for individuality and difference; if everyone looked or sounded the same, that would be boring. There is no such thing as cookie cutter artistry. You need the imagination to project how a student will do in this environment and what they will bring to this profession at their greatest potential."

Bundy takes equal care in choosing the school's faculty. "We must give the people who study here—and work here—the resources they

need to work at the high level," he says. "The task of teaching the skills students need never changes; in fact, the building blocks haven't changed in a couple of thousands of years. Still, many of the premises of theater making are being reexamined, from who is doing it, who is seeing it, to how we make

theater organizations more responsible to the community they are serving. The context of our work keeps changing, as do the technologies—often in ways that influence the art form's aesthetic direction. One of the most fun things about this place is the chance to engage with the most compelling artists of this art form."



Yale University Theater



As Bundy notes, the program is very hands-on and involves a great deal more than academic exercises. “We put on about 15 of our own productions, another 12 or 15 at the Yale Cabaret, and students participate in the five or so productions every year at Yale Rep.” he says. “About half the plays we produce are written by playwrights in the program, and directors can propose one project for each year. Other students have less agency to set their own agenda—although the cabaret is entirely student-run. All of this is such important training.”

Luckily, as of now, this training is free to all students. “In recent years, we’ve been able to reduce student indebtedness upon graduation, and in 2021, the Geffen Foundation made a gift of \$150 million has made the school tuition free in perpetuity,” notes Bundy. “I find it incredibly impressive that a philanthropist would do this for a graduate arts program. But I believe Mr. Geffen hoped his generosity would spur new ways of thinking about the arts.”

**“We are truly the only graduate theater program that trains every discipline of theater.”**

JAMES BUNDY

As for instilling thinking in the school’s students, Bundy sums up the institution’s mission this way: “One of our biggest jobs here is to impress on our students to stay in the moment, work with the people you want to work with, and focus on today,” he says. “We constantly remind people that careers in the arts rarely follow a predictable path, so what’s become more and more important is to help our students identify their value system. That will position them for lifelong growth. Ultimately, we’re trying to graduate people who can be influential not just in theater, but in all media, in philanthropy and other fields.”

—Brian Scott Lipton



Yale Repertory Theater

## Honoring Yale Rep

Another of New Haven’s invaluable contributions to the theatrical landscape is the Yale Repertory Theatre, which was founded in 1966 by the great Robert Brustein and has hosted many of the world’s finest playwrights, directors and actors on its stage.

Last fall, Yale University Press published *The Play’s the Thing*, in which award-winning dramaturg, playwright, and novelist James Magruder chronicles the first 50 years of Yale Rep. Each of his four chapters is dedicated to one of Yale Rep’s artistic directors: Robert Brustein, Lloyd Richards, Stan Wojewodski Jr., and James Bundy.

The book is illustrated with amazing photographs from historic productions, features interviews with more than 100 notable people, including Oscar winners Dianne Wiest and Frances McDormand, and covers the Rep’s performance spaces, the playwrights produced most often, casting, set design, the prop shop, the costume shop, artist housing, and other topics.

Putting the book together was both a “labor of love” and a true learning experience for Magruder. “Since it took eight years, I call it my third grader,” he says. “I had no idea it

would be so gigantic. I had only written fiction before.”

Adds Magruder: “Since I didn’t know what I was doing, I learned so much as I went along. For one thing, the more people I interviewed, the more I ended up interviewing other people. I was lucky that I was able to meet many of them in person and most of them were so nice. I learned that theater people are very gregarious. I also learned some people wanted to talk so they could settle scores. And actors love it if you can offer them a free meal.”

Magruder, who worked at the Rep for many years, is proudest of the book’s comprehensive production history as well as being able to give readers a new perspective on this institution. “I think now readers, as well as myself, will have a better sense of what the Rep was trying to do back then and is still trying to do. It’s scholarly, but it’s not a compilation of hard research. It’s learned but it’s also lively. In the end, it’s my *magnus opus* about what I feel about theatre, and I am so pleased that I was allowed to keep my voice through all 125,000 words.”

—Brian Scott Lipton



## 'Resilience Retreat' Supports Transgender Youth

**F**or the fourth summer in a row, Chrissy Guiriba soon will be flying transgender children from across the United States—but especially from the Deep South—to a safe haven in the Blue Ridge Mountains for a week-long summer camp experience unlike any other.

Sure, there's archery, swimming, field games, rock-climbing, zip-lining, gaga, kayaking, music, drama and creative writing experiences. But unlike at most summer camps, everyone attending her Transcending Adolescence Resilience Retreat for Trans Youth, even the counselors, are transgender or gender diverse.

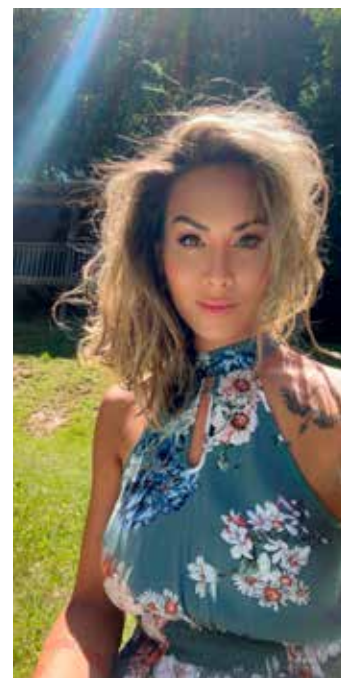
Guiriba and her fiancé, Jacob Hofheimer, run the camp together. He's a trans man and registered nurse at Yale New Haven Health; Guiriba is an out trans woman pursuing a degree in organizational leadership in Connecticut after two decades of activism in the Deep South. They now live in Greater New Haven.

"He and I met as volunteers at another camp for trans kids," Guiriba told *CT Voice*. "We were lifeguards there, and that's where I first got the idea to start a camp down South."

Guiriba is a native of Jacksonville, FL, now in her late 30s, who started her transition through drag performance at age 18. "Faith Taylor" was her drag persona.

"I think that that was a huge catalyst for me to be able to find myself after spending 18 years forced to be something that I wasn't," she said. "I was finally given not just an opportunity, but a platform to showcase my femininity."

Together, Guiriba and Hofheimer have created a place providing what her flyers call "intentional outdoor spaces" where trans youth between the ages of 10 and 17 can "develop the habits, skills and support structures" that she said are proven to increase resilience, based on feedback from 2024's campers. "Our program evaluation showed a 50 percent decrease in suicidal ideation among our participants," Guiriba said.



Chrissy Guiriba



That's especially important these days. A study from 2024 by The Trevor Project that found suicide attempts among trans and nonbinary youth—ages 13 through 17—had increased 72 percent in the aftermath of Republican-led states enacting anti-transgender laws. One such state is Florida, which is where Guiriba started organizing summer retreats for this vulnerable population of tweens and teens.

"For me, as a founder, and as a trans woman of color from the South, it is important for me to keep this program as accessible as possible to people in the South," she said. "I stand by that firmly. You know, my goal has always been to empower trans young people from the South, especially. But we accept kids from all over the U.S., and we welcome everybody."

Last year, Guiriba launched a junior counselor program for children who age out. "When they become 18 and they can no longer be a camper, many of them are still in need of the community and the support that we provide. And so, we want to keep them with us. It's been beautiful to see it come full-circle," she said. "We have now our second year JCs that have been with us since year one. Now, they're teaching the very same workshops that helped bring them out of their shells."

The cost for the week is \$1,480," said Guiriba. That includes room and board, as well as free round-trip transportation by air. Every child flies to and from the camp for free, and the timing is intentionally set during Pride Month.

"It is scheduled to be June



**"My goal has always been to empower trans young people from the South... But we accept kids from all over the U.S., and we welcome everybody."**

CHRISSEY GUIRIBA

24th through the 29<sup>th</sup>," Guiriba told *CT Voice* back in January, when registration opened for this year's session. "We have the capacity for 62 kids."

To supervise the more than five dozen youngsters, the

couple is looking to hire more counselors. But cisgender people need not apply.

"As counselors? No," she said, "because of the intentional staffing model that we have. It is so important, because our


counselors are face to face with the campers 24/7. Those are the ones that they need to identify with. Representation matters."

Guiriba developed her camp curriculum around the acronym, S.P.E.A.R. with five pillars: Support. Physical Recreation. Empowerment. Advocacy. Reflection.

The first two years, the camp operated in Florida, and last year moved to just outside Atlanta, an arrangement which Guiriba said ended abruptly: "We were kicked out a day early," she said. Most of the children were forced to leave their cabins for what she called a "slumber party" in the only building left to them. "And then all of our other kids slept outside in tents," said Guiriba. "That was the moment for me when I realized I got to get out of the South. I can't take this anymore. I could never let them know that we were kicked out of yet another space."

She feels confident the new location in the Blue Ridge Mountains will be the best yet, and this year's session will follow two personal milestones for Guiriba and Hofheimer: His graduation from the Yale School of Nursing, and their wedding on May 26.

"Jacob proposed over a long weekend in the Catskills just before camp this past year," said Guiriba. "Beautiful story, right?"

Find out more and apply at [www.transcendingadolescence.org](http://www.transcendingadolescence.org). 

By Dawn Ennis

### TRANSFORMING SEXUALITY:

# Handling Sexual Changes for Trans Folks

**Y**ou know what we don't talk about enough? Sex when you're trans. I mean, we don't talk much about queer sex at all, but trans sex comes with its own special considerations and challenges. A lot of time, folks who transition are unprepared for the changes in sexual desire and interest that can come with gender-affirming medical interventions, which can be frustrating. Even more rarely do they receive guidance on how to work around these changes and maintain a satisfying, pleasurable sex life. This is a huge disservice to trans folks and their partners! Other people experiencing sexual changes, like women in menopause and people who are pregnant, have readily available information on the subject. Why not trans folks?

More than half of trans adults use gender-affirming hormones. The purpose of this treatment is to develop secondary sex characteristics associated with their gender identities, like increased or decreased body hair and changes in body fat distribution. Taking estrogen or testosterone (T) also affects sexual anatomy and function. People assigned female at birth who take testosterone may see growth in their clitoris, where it enlarges to resemble a small phallus; physiologically, T can also increase sex drive, sometimes by quite a lot. Estrogen on the other hand may initially cause changes in mood and decreased sex drive. Both types of hormones can bring about changes in sexual interests when it comes to gender preference, type of sex, and even kinks.

Bottom surgery—the general term

for vaginoplasty and phalloplasty—creates big sexual changes, too. Reconstruction of the genital area is a major adjustment. The healing process is long, and afterward the person will have to relearn how to use their new parts. It can be difficult to find information on sex with a neophallus or neovagina, since they function differently than their biologically occurring counterparts. A constructed vagina does not self-lubricate in the same way as a vagina a person is born with, and a constructed penis may not

**If you are a trans person dealing with changes in sexuality, it may be alarming at first, but it doesn't have to be a bad thing. It's a great time for sexual exploration and creativity!**

be able to become erect, or includes an internal pump to simulate an erection.

If you are a trans person dealing with changes in sexuality, it may be alarming at first, but it doesn't have to be a bad thing. It's a great time for sexual exploration and creativity! For example, a person whose estrogen makes it difficult to maintain an erection may explore bottoming for anal sex, or pegging (penetrating another person with a dildo harnessed around their groin). A surgically

constructed vagina may not stretch enough to accommodate a penis, but that doesn't mean they can't explore penetration. They may find that a finger or small dildo is more comfortable, or only be interested in clitoral stimulation.

Psychologically, changes in sexual function and desire can be difficult to process. While people who access gender-affirming care overwhelmingly report better quality of life, there are still challenges. Finding sexual partners






can be harder. Trans people are unfortunately still heavily discriminated against. The majority of people are interested in cisgender partners only and may have never even entertained the idea of dating a trans person. Once they do find a partner, trans folks may experience frustration when their partner is unsure what to do in the face of differences in sexual function and having to teach each new partner about their body can be tiresome.

This can take a toll on mental health, which, in turn, can affect sexual health and satisfaction. It can negatively impact sex drive and sexual function, but even more dangerously, it can lead to reduced healthcare seeking, like STI testing. This is a safety issue for both the affected individual and their partner(s). That doesn't have to be the case, though. If you are a trans person navigating transitioning, lean on your support network of friends and family, and seek care from a trans-competent mental healthcare provider as needed. Having a background of support can give you the strength you need to process changes and cope.

Equally as important is education. Read everything you can get your hands on about the changes you can expect when transitioning. Be sure to brush up on safer sex basics like condoms, birth control, and PrEP, and then move on to more advanced topics like the physiological challenges (and benefits!) you may experience when it comes to sex. One of the books I recommend is *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*. It's an informational book written by and for trans people, and loosely based on the format of the famous book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

Talk to other trans people. Not everyone will want to be open about

their experiences, but folks who do will be a wealth of information. Plus, it can help you realize that you aren't alone! Lots of other people are willing to share their similar experiences and provide advice. And of course, please bring up any serious sexual health concerns or questions to your healthcare provider. A good provider will be able to give you with a comprehensive answer or direct you to someone who can.

Culturally, sexuality is not celebrated the way it should be, and when it comes to trans sex, things are very hush-hush. This is not the world I want to live in. I want to see a world where information about sexuality for everyone, no matter their gender, orientation, or sexual practices, is readily available and freely distributed. This is why I became a sex educator. My hope is that by providing you with information and resources on trans sexuality, I can provide you with the knowledge you need to help others around you and educate your community. 

—Kim Adamski



## We Turn Towards Each Other

**W**hen I sat down to write this in late December,

I asked some folk in the queer community how they were feeling about the impending regime change and what they needed right now. The common threads were ones of feeling heartbroken, betrayed, let down, angry, anxious, and that those in our country, including politicians who once had our backs, had turned away from us, ignoring the serious implications of their actions on the safety of our community.

Trans people specifically have also experienced this betrayal since the inception of the “gay rights” movement where they were sidelined and othered from the very movement for which they were catalysts.

What resounded in my conversations was that this can't happen now. We need to turn inwards and reconcile whatever forms of bigotry, racism, anti-trans sentiment, classism, and any other isms and schisms we've ingested from a culture hell bent on dividing and conquering for the sake of consolidating power among rich white men—and be honest about how that conditioning has worked on us too. That's the power of propaganda, and that's what we've seen over and over within and without our community.

The heartbreak and betrayal so many of us are feeling is rooted in watching others behave as though our safety is not important and only something to be bargained with. Just look at the erasure



Meghan Crutchley

of trans characters in media and anti-trans bills passed right after the election with the support of Democrats, a party many of us voted for.

We can't have this same type of ignorance continue in our own community, since right now we're all we have! Yes,

**“We need to look to the right of us and to the left of us and understand that we're all in this together.”**

allies and co-conspirators are with us, but as many of us have found out in the wake of the election, friends, and loved ones aren't in the same boat as us. They can sympathize and support, and yet when it comes down to it, their rights and safety will not be affected in the same way that ours in the queer community will...and already have been.

So this is a rallying cry! We must take this opportunity to bring our own light to the darkness, as we always have in times where our survival was at stake. We must turn towards each other. We have

to make deliberate efforts to understand that our survival as a community relies on all of us being safe and supported. We need to meet each other in our common humanity, with the wisdom of knowing that we all have the same basic needs: to be seen, to feel heard, to feel loved and accepted, to have peace and experience more happiness and less pain. Aren't these universal human needs? Don't we suffer when we experience the opposite?

In my conversations, there was also the enduring hope in our community of coming together as an act of resistance against the real threat of persecution. Common threads of hope were about community aid and support, of those with more wealth helping to ensure those with less

had what they needed by supporting LGBTQ+ centers and mutual aid funds online. This is where we stand together and don't back down or hide just because the bigotry towards all of us is being targeted at trans people first.


As my wise friend and elder Karleigh said when I asked her what she thought we needed to do as a community: “We need to get back to intergenerational exchange and relationship and learn about each other. We need to look to the right of us and to the left of us and

understand that we're all in this together. And what our history has told us time and time again: we've been all we've ever needed.”

We all need each other to feel supported to sustain our mental, physical, and emotional health to endure the road ahead. Strong social connectivity is health promoting, while being or feeling isolated or alone, isn't. So, what do we do?

Do what's in your heart. We all have our own unique passions, gifts, abilities, and skills, so use them. Here are some ways you can stay connected, help where you can, and work to maintain a balance in your own life:

- Connect with local LGBTQ+ centers and see what they need and where you can help
- Join or start a group in our community around a hobby
- Take time each day to do something for yourself that brings you joy
- Educate yourself on the different people and experiences in our community
- Speak up when someone uses anti-trans or racist rhetoric
- Think about what you need right now to be supported and ask for help
- Subscribe to my free newsletter on Substack, *Wisdom Body Health*, to

get weekly support and stay connected. Use this QR Code. 



—Meghan Crutchley



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# MHC's "Let's Face It" Program Expands Mental Health Awareness

The absolute last thing someone with a mental health condition needs is to feel ashamed. It only exacerbates the problem and can prevent you from seeking help.

And for those comfortable acknowledging they need professional help, the last thing *they* need is trouble accessing it.

Given the current perilous political reality, a growing number of LGBTQ+ people will certainly find themselves in either of the above situations.

Thus is the impetus for the Let's Face It campaign, the Mental Health Connecticut (MHC) annual initiative in celebration of Mental Health Awareness Month, to eradicate stigma, increase awareness, and provide mental health resources.

Every May since 2022, MHC publicizes the stories of Connecticut individuals overcoming and addressing mental health challenges, blankets the state with Mental Health Awareness Month lawn signs, shares essential information via social media and a newsletter, and supports the Mental Health America "Light It Up Green" campaign by partnering with businesses to light their buildings green—the international symbolic color for mental



health. Importantly, the campaign also focuses on fundraising so that MHC can perform its work: providing mental health services, education and advocacy.

The five people to be featured in the 2025 campaign were announced after *CT Voice's* press time, but you can find them in May on MHC's website and social media pages.

### How you, too, can "face it"

Anyone interested in taking part can help in several ways: share an MHC post, donate, host a fundraiser, put out a lawn sign, or ask

local businesses to display lawn signs and light their buildings green.

Organizations and businesses can do the same. Public buildings, Stamford Hospital, The Bushnell, and The Hartford, are among the many that have participated in "Light It Up Green."

Past fundraisers have been fun and varied, like the axe-throwing party one person hosted last year, says Bethany Simmonds, senior director of development for MHC. Or like the workout-for-charity class held by LIFT Performance gym.

If you're ready for a major commitment, consider joining the Cross-Connecticut Run for Mental Health. Participants run all 57 miles of the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail from West Suffield to New Haven! Visit [mhconn.org](http://mhconn.org) or email [development@mhconn.org](mailto:development@mhconn.org) to learn more and get started.

### More important than ever

Given the current climate, the "Let's Face It" campaign is more important than ever. MHC Public Policy Manager Christian Damiana issued this statement:

President Trump's second term could have far-reaching consequences for mental health care access nationwide, especially for vulnerable populations like LGBTQ+ individuals. While the full scope of the administration's planned policy reforms are uncertain, we must be prepared to defend against actions that reduce access to essential services, reduce patient protections, and create discriminatory barriers to care," said Damiana.

"With Connecticut's behavioral health crisis at an all-time high, access to quality health care is crucial. Actions like weakening health protections enshrined in federal law and restricting access to care for certain populations like transgender



youth could exacerbate these changes. Federal changes may also make it harder for LGBTQ+ people to find affirming behavioral health providers,” he continued.

“In response, Connecticut’s government is working to safeguard access to mental health care and uphold state-level protections regardless of federal policy shifts. Now more than ever, we must ensure that every person, regardless of gender identity, can receive the mental health care they need,” Damiana concluded.

### Every story could change lives

The campaign literally gives a face—or five—to the ways mental health issues impact individuals. MHC President and CEO Luis B. Perez says, “At Mental Health Connecticut, we believe that every story told, and every conversation started, has the power to change lives. Now in its fourth year, the Let’s Face It campaign continues to shine a light on the real faces behind mental health, breaking down stigma and building a community where everyone feels seen, heard, and supported. Whether it’s displaying a lawn sign, lighting up green, or starting a conversation, every action counts in creating a safer and kinder Connecticut. Together, let’s face stigma head-on.”

In May 2024, the campaign raised more than \$85,000 and reached 28 times more individuals than in past years. MHC held four events and attended more than ten. Lawn sign requests tripled. Three times as many

buildings were lit up green.

Funds raised are also shared with partner organizations. For example, donations from the last two campaigns funded the new Art of Wellbeing studio at the Hispanic Health Council’s Family Wellness Center in Hartford. The studio offers free visual art, music, dance and writing workshops, and provides an open studio.

One of the campaign’s enthusiasts and presenting sponsor is ConnectiCare. President Mark Meador says, “At ConnectiCare, our commitment to the well-being of Connecticut residents extends beyond health coverage. We are dedicated to creating healthier communities. The Let’s Face It campaign has a profound impact on the health and well-being of residents. Each year this initiative results in mental health resources being more accessible, helping individuals and families across the state have the tools they need to feel supported as they navigate their mental health journeys. ConnectiCare is proud to partner with Mental Health Connecticut and of the impact this campaign continues to have.”

### This year’s faces

Look for this year’s Connecticut residents’ stories in May on MHC’s website ([mhconn.org/education/](http://mhconn.org/education/)). Also look for informative daily content under the handle @mentalhealthCT on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. You can also sign up for the Let’s Face It newsletter by using the QR

code accompanying this article.

Topics are different each day and include: information and resources specific to particular populations and topics (such as maternal health, loneliness, and different age groups); advocacy, including how to get involved in this legislative session; story-sharing, and resources.

MHC’s mission is to partner with individuals, families and communities to create environments that support long-term health and wellness. Its goal, in simple terms, is for people to be happy, healthy and independent. 

—Jane Latus

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MORE ABOUT  
LET’S FACE IT



Conversations  
with  
Mother

MATT DOYLE:

# In Familiar Company

In Matthew Lombardo's 'Conversations with Mother' and a Special Gay Bond

By FRANK RIZZO

Caroline Aaron and Matt Doyle on the first day of rehearsal.



**Y**es, it's a stereotype, but do mothers and their gay sons really have a special relationship like no other?  
Matt Doyle

believes so. The Tony Award-winning actor from the gender-switching production of the musical *Company* is now starring with Caroline Aaron (TV's *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*) in off-Broadway's *Conversations with Mother*.

It's a new play that follows an Italian-American matriarch and her gay son over five decades of emotional ups and downs. The two-actor, semi-autobiographical work is by Connecticut's Matthew Lombardo (Broadway's *High, Looped* and Off-Broadway's *Tea at Five*) and continues at Theatre 555 in New York through May 7.

"I was so drawn to this really beautiful thing that isn't discussed much, especially in gay media, and that is the relationship between a mother and a gay son," said Doyle in a Zoom interview.

It's also a theme in which the 37-year-old Doyle personally relates, reminding him of his own family, especially the Italian side, he says, and his relationship with his mother.

"I've been so close to my mother my entire life," he said. "She has been my rock, my support system and really my best friend. I wanted to do this play because I wanted to pay tribute to what mothers can do for their [gay] sons and especially what mine has done for me."

Part of the play deals with the mother, named Maria Collavechio, learning that her son Bobby is gay.

"It's scary to come out," said Doyle relating the scene to his own experience, "but I knew that if there was anyone who was going to be by my side and lift me up, it was going to be my mother."

Like Maria in the play, Doyle's mother initiated the challenging conversation. For Doyle, it was when he was 16.

"One night she came to me when I was upstairs in my bedroom. She said, 'We need to talk.' She was the one that asked the question. A mother knows her son, and she knew I was holding something back from her, something she knew I was dying to express and under-

"Bruce Willis for me was a huge sexual awakening, especially in the *Die Hard* movies and in *The Fifth Element* where he is wearing this orange tank top and just giving this amazing performance. Yeah, Bruce Willis was a big part of that journey for me." —Matt Doyle



Matt and his real-life mom.

stand and wanting to start the conversation. And so I did. I told her—and I was terrified. But I also told her that I was sure [that I was gay], and I felt that way every single day—and it wasn't changing," Doyle said.

It wasn't a shock to her, he added.

"She said she kind of knew I was gay because I would walk down a hallway and see beautiful girl after beautiful girl and not react. But seeing me walking down the same hallway and seeing a beautiful guy, well..."

But it was a journey for her, too.

"She had a process ahead of her as well," says Doyle. "That's something a lot of gay men don't understand when they're coming out. It's hard enough for many of us to accept it about ourselves that to expect the world, and especially the people closest to you—like your parents—to immediately accept, isn't fair."

Mother and son made a pact to keep the information from Doyle's conservative father until Doyle felt his father could handle the information.

"I also knew that I had a very, very long journey ahead of me in terms of everyone understanding," he said. "It wouldn't be until I was 21 when I would ever discuss it openly with my father—and that [coming out to him] was a long process, just step one."

### Growing up

Doyle's earliest years were spent in Manchester-By-the-Sea, MA before his family moved to Westin, Connecticut when he was eight. After spending two years there, Doyle's family then moved to northern California.

Did he have any gay crushes during his formative years?

"Bruce Willis for me was a huge sexual awakening, especially in the *Die Hard* movies and in *The Fifth Element* where



Playwright Matthew Lombardo with director Noah Himmelstein.  
All Photos: Tricia Brown



he is wearing this orange tank top and just giving this amazing performance. Yeah, Bruce Willis was a big part of that journey for me.”

After graduating Redwood High School, Doyle trained for a year at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. Doyle made his Broadway debut in 2007 when he was just 20 as a replacement in *Spring Awakening*, which was followed by a revival of *Bye Bye Birdie*, and then *War Horse*. In 2012, he joined Broadway’s *The Book of Mormon* in the starring role of Elder Price for a two-year run. Off-Broadway roles included Anthony in *Sweeney Todd*, a stage adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*, and most recently *Little Shop of Horrors*, playing Seymour. He is also a singer-songwriter who has released several early EPs and an album, “Uncontrolled.”

But *Conversations With Mother* shows Doyle’s talents in a non-singing role, one that has a number of parallels with his own life.

Bobby’s journey is similar to Doyle’s own as an artist, moving to New York in his late teens, but also having a mother who supported him — and would also call him out on everything.”

The echoes don’t end there. In the show, the character of Maria, the mother, swoops into Bobby’s life multiple times during her son’s many crises “and essentially saves him,” said Doyle.

“I struggle with mental health and my mom on multiple occasions has shown up unannounced, just like Maria does in the play,” he said. “My mother flew out to Seattle once just showing up at my door. She just knew I was at my lowest. I wasn’t willing to admit it to her because I usually close off and shut down when I’m in crisis, But she knew.”

Recently, he said, she did it again, unexpectedly showing up at his Jersey City home. His parents now live in Newtown, Connecticut.

Doyle says he is now completely revealing to his mother about himself, “probably more things than most sons would share with their mothers. I tell my mom everything. Probably too much. But she knows it all.”



Doyle at the first reading of the play.

### Frank understandings

After his *Company* success and his joyous acceptance speech at the Tony Awards (“I’m the next bride!”), Doyle played Frank Sinatra in a new bi-musical, directed by Kathleen Marshall, which premiered in England.

“There’s definitely a future for the show,” he says. “We presented a reading at the Apollo Theatre with a full orchestra [in November] and it went great. I would imagine it would be coming to Broadway in the fall of ’25, at least that’s the goal.”

Following his role in *Company* as Jamie—who stops the show with the pre-wedding-jitters song “Not Getting Married”—Doyle said, “I’m not sure anyone was expecting me to take on [Sinatra]. But I felt I knew this man. My father’s side of the family is Italian, very Italian, like VERY Italian, so I grew up around Frank and all those guys. My natural center walking around in the world might not be like Frank, but I certainly understand him. I love him. He is so flawed but also so human and relatable.”

### Significant markers

Doyle sports several tattoos that reflect the ups and downs of his emotional life.

“Boundless as the sea” on his bicep references *Romeo and Juliet*. “I was 27 and was going through a terrible breakup, so I was ready to change my life—and get my first tattoo.”

Another marking is “Play On,” an upbeat Shakespearean line inked when he was recording his first EP. Still another is an elegant feather which lines his forearm and references “rebirth and the idea that the further you get pulled back the further you are launched forward, so the feather represents taking off again.”

“I do have a lot of darkness in me, but I also have one right here that says, ‘Hope.’ It’s very, very small and I try to hold on to it, especially right now because, my god, what a scary time are we living in.”

What would a tattoo stemming from *Conversations with Mother* be like?

“Hmmm.” Doyle said, “Maybe a picture of Caroline Aaron,” he says laughing. “Or at least something coming from a place of joy. 🍷”

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# SALT OF THE EARTH

By **Brian Scott Lipton**

**I**f you've visited Litchfield in the past few months, you may have noticed a new addition to this charming, historic city: The Abner Hotel. This 20-room luxury boutique property is operated and co-owned by Salt Hotels,

which was founded more than 15 years ago by life partners David Bowd (the company's CEO) and Kevin O'Brien (the company's chief creative officer.) A splendid addition to this beautiful town, the Abner features a unique mixture of historical details and artifacts extracted from its rich history as a public court building

with a host of modern comforts and thoughtful amenities, all curated by O'Brien.

The hotel also offers a host of first-rate dining and event spaces, including the Courtroom Restaurant, which is helmed by Chef Michael Alfeld and offers modern tavern fare with continental influences; Verdict, a seasonal rooftop bar that offers sweeping views of the surrounding countryside; the Lock Up, a rustic stone-lined room that once housed the courthouse's jail cells; and The Clock Tower, a cozy space which (like the Lock Up) is available for small events and private dinners.





O'Brien (l) and Bowd

**CV: How did Salt Hotels come about?**

KO: We were together for two years when we took a trip to Provincetown for the first time, and then we looked at real estate there. For some reason, we had a hare-brained idea to run an inn, and we found this property called the Salt House Inn. The concept of us working together was organic. It wasn't really planned.

**CV: After so many years working for big companies, this must have been quite the learning curve!**

DB: It was a real challenge. I was used to running big hotels, like the Standard and the Chateau Marmont, and having a large team to work with.

I was not used to doing everything myself. I even had to do revenue management and accounting. Kevin did all the design work. We realized quickly the only way to make money in a seasonal market like Provincetown is having a small staff.

KO: We vastly underestimated the amount of work it took to run a 15-room B&B, with no restaurant. But I loved the idea that we were not working for someone.

*Connecticut Voice* recently spoke with Bowd and O'Brien about their unusual company and its equally unusual beginnings; the challenges and triumphs of transforming an historic building into a modern-day hotel; and Salt Hotels' big plans for the future.

**CV: How did your partnership, both professional and personal, begin?**

DB: It's been 18 years now. I was working for Ian Schrager and ended up being asked to open the Mondrian Hotel in Scottsdale, Arizona. Kevin came in later to head up the design team. We got together personally while we were there, and we thought no one knew. We were wrong. Eventually I went to work in London, and Kevin went to work in New York City. We had a long-distance relationship for eight months.





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**DB:** There were a lot of restrictions due to the building's heritage. For example, the courtroom on the second floor had to legally remain open to the public, so it had to become a restaurant. But the second floor is not where you ideally want a restaurant. We had to deal

**CV: They also probably love to eat also! Tell me about the restaurant!**

**DB:** We had a firm idea of what we wanted: a place that is affordable, acceptable, and approachable. We didn't want a Michelin star kind of place. So, we created a modern brasserie with great food and value where people can—and do—come multiple times in one month. And ultimately, we love that the design is very dramatic. It's an unusual space to dine in, and people appreciate that!

**CV: So how did the opportunity to operate and co-own The Abner come about?**

**KO:** The opportunity came through Lexington Partners, who do commercial and residential real estate development. But they have no hospitality in their portfolio. The building, which was owned by Greater Litchfield Preservation Trust, had a prominent place in the town's history. It had been the county courthouse over the centuries, but it was decommissioned in 2017. There had been an effort to have it become the Town Hall, but that got kiboshed by local voters. So, despite a lot of cost and compliance issues, Lexington decided to turn it into a boutique hotel.

**CV: Did that decision make sense to you then? Does it now?**

**KO:** We feel it's been successful! The community has embraced us with open arms. The market is definitely underserved; people are booking weddings nearby. We've had interest from boarding schools; we even did a partnership with the Mohonk Mountain House, which is only 20 minutes away.

**DB:** It's been a great place for people who want a Connecticut staycation, and the restaurant is within a 40-minute drive of so many places. Connecticut is a driving culture. Everyone drives to go to dinner—except in the winter.

**CV: What turned out to be the biggest challenges—and triumphs—of the transformation?**



**CV: What's next on your plate?**

**DB:** We've got a few projects in the works! Minneapolis is likely next; we've been working on it since pre-Covid. It's a historic building in the north loop, which is an up-and-coming area. We are also working on a project near Washington, DC. We're never focused on lots and lots of hotels, just really good ones. 

with some odd-shaped bedrooms which are only 225 square feet but have 16-foot ceilings. We had to be clever in making them feel comfortable. And we created a separate rooftop bar, which we hope to reopen by April with better heating. This year, it stayed open until Halloween. I have to say this area is full of hearty people, and they do love to drink.





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# ENSURING A SEAT AT THE TABLE

**State Rep. Dominique Johnson is  
Proud to Serve LGBTQ+ Communities**

*By* CHRISTOPHER BYRNE

**T**he LGBTQ+ Caucus at the Capitol in Hartford has been described as “small but mighty” by many, as the work to have the voices of our diverse communities heard at the state level—and to ensure representation.

Dominique Johnson, Representative for Norwalk and Westport, is co-chair of the LGBTQ+ caucus with Representative Raghib Allie-Brennan (Bethel, Danbury). Other members include Representative Marcus Brown (Bridgeport) and MJ Shannon (Milford, Orange, West Haven).

The LGBTQ+ Caucus was formed in 2019. Allie-Brennan, says that he was one of only two LGBTQ+ members of the general assembly, along with then Representative Jeff Currey. As Allie-Brennan says, “We were the cacucus—just Jeff and me making sure we needed to get work done in the community. Now, there are five of us, and we’re a stronger, more diverse voice representing the community.

He adds that while Connecticut has strong anti-discrimination laws for employment, housing and education, part of the role of the caucus is to keep an eye on bills that might be making their way through the legislative process. One of the major successes Allie-Brennan points to is the LGBTQ+ Justice and Opportunity Network, which was the first bill Brennan brought to the floor. It was designed to fill any statewide gaps and ensure “we’re catching everyone.” (See the Last Word on page 64 for a full description of this important initiative.)

Members of the caucus wear many hats in Hartford and their communities. Johnson also serves as Deputy Majority Caucus Chair and Assistant Majority Leader. Additionally, they are in the Education, Higher Education & Employment Advancement and Judiciary Committees. She’s busy.





Rep. Dominique Johnson  
Photo Credit: Stan Godlewski



Rep. Raghib Allie-Brennan at his swearing in. Photo courtesy Connecticut Democrats

Johnson is motivated by a passion for service, and she says that one of the most important things the LGBTQ+ Caucus can do is provide a seat at the table and serve as an example of people in the state—and especially younger people—that their concerns are heard, acknowledged and addressed seriously. The question, she says is “will somebody at the table be able to speak for you in a way that really, truly represents the community, especially one as diverse as ours?”

Johnson is clear-eyed about the need for expanding that representation. “We’re a very under-represented community when you look at the number of LGBTQ+ people elected to office. But we are lucky that we do have a group of people who take very seriously the fact that kids around the state can see themselves in us and that we’re here to do this work so that their generation, hopefully, has their lives at least a bit better, if not much better, than we did coming up.

“I think one of the things that unites us is that we are proud of who we are, and certainly we are multidimensional people. We’re at the table, and we’re ready to pull the chair out to ensure other people can come behind us, especially, LGBTQ+ people who are thinking about running for office. Your time is now.”

### **Standing on Shoulders**

Johnson is keenly aware that they and other members of the LGBTQ+ Caucus are indebted to work of those who have gone before who have helped make the current state possible. In particular, she cites the groundbreaking coming out of Joseph Grabarz in 1990. Grabarz represented parts of Bridgeport in the Connecticut House from 1989-1993, and he famously came out at a press conference when a Republican member questioned the need for a gay rights bill since he had never met a gay person. In coming out so publicly, Grabarz became instrumental in passing a landmark

anti-discrimination bill in Connecticut in 1991.

Johnson also cites the leading work of Beth Bye and Jeff Currey for their work while in the House of Representatives. Bye is currently the state’s commissioner of Early Childhood Education and Currey is chief of staff to House Majority Leader Representative Jason Rojas.

In a large sense, though, Johnson “draws strength” from the history of the LGBTQ+ movement in the state and nationwide. “...from the people I know who were involved in Stonewall, who were involved in the very early parts of our movement, who laid that groundwork, who loved me by changing the world for me so I could [come out] before I could love myself, or even knowing what a gay person was...and be proud of that.

I have a lot of pride in being a part of this community. It’s feeling the freedom to be who you are and understanding when they say, ‘love is love.’ It’s because I think we do





Johnson in her seat on the floor.  
Photo Credit: Stan Godlewski

that really well as a community. We, look out for each other, and we do a lot of things out of love and love for a future that we can't yet conceive but we want our next generation to experience. I know it's possible because I'm living it. We stand on other people's shoulders, and we want other people to stand on ours because that's how we understand intergenerational change happens for the better.

Allie-Brennan would agree saying that what they want to deliver to young people especially is a message of hope, resilience and empowerment. "Progress may be slow," he says, "but your identity, voice, and future matter." He notes that there may be challenges currently, but "the fight for equality and justice is bigger than any one moment."

### **The Essential Role of Allyship**

As Johnson says, it takes cooperation, relationships, and shared vision to succeed. "We have LGBTQ+ folks obviously working in our state government, the executive branch, commissioners all the way down to the staff. It takes all of us together to keep moving our state forward in positive ways. We have allies in this chamber, allies in the Senate Chamber, and I think that that allyship is demonstrated through action in multiple ways, and so much of this is building relationships. That's, to me the most important part of this.

"And so when you can build relationships as an LGBTQ+ person, I speak for myself, and that's where people really do want to show up for you and ask, 'How can I help?' A lot of our allies I think are ready and willing because they have family members who are LGBTQ+. We're all in families, and we come from all corners of society. I think that's reflected here, too. A lot of our allies understand that their constituents are LGBTQ+, and literally everybody sitting in a seat in this chamber

and up in the Senate has LGBTQ+ constituents. And I think there's a growing awareness of that among people beyond even our allies.

"Right now, I think we are really lucky to live in a state like Connecticut, where we have some very strong civil rights protections that were hard fought for and won by people I mentioned earlier. And it's especially important to us as a caucus to hold the line and make sure we don't lose our rights and freedoms and protections in this state.

"Given the fact that the incoming federal administration might seek to roll back some of these rights is concerning to us. And we are very much aware of the effect that has on our communities, and especially the most vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth and seniors among them. We have an opportunity right now to propose legislation to strengthen our protections even further, which I think is one of the beautiful things about being in a state house where we as people from our districts can come with ideas and bring them forward and have allies to kind of have these conversations about what that might look like.

"At the same time, we know that whatever comes with the federal administration, we're here to make sure that people feel heard and seen and valued, and that there are people fighting for them here to make sure that they do not get left behind."

### **"You Never Know the Path Your Life is Going to Take"**


When asked about her career and her personal journey, Johnson says, that statement "is my headline."

She says, "I started as a young person thinking I was going to be a musician. Then I thought, 'Well, I'm going to be a college professor.' I did that for a while as well. I started becoming active in politics when I was in graduate school, and I volunteered for Barack Obama's first

presidential campaign. I had been a campus advocate and had worked in our LGBTQ+ coalition, but I think that, that show me that there's, there's something to this politics thing."

Johnson said that while she was teaching during the 2016 campaign, she felt compelled to reach out to her local political party and become involved locally. "It was a very fast track from there. I was appointed to my local city council, the common council in Norwalk. And then a seat very unexpectedly became available in the State House. And neighbors were saying, 'we would like you to represent us. You're doing great. We support you.' And so, it's only because that Secretary of the State and won that this seat to represent my community became available."

Johnson lives with her partner of more than 20 years in the Cranbury neighborhood of Norwalk, and says, "I'm living my American dream in my Connecticut farmhouse. I'm living every dream my grandmother had for me, which seem able to come true in a place like Norwalk in a state like Connecticut. I'm really grateful to this state for that, for home ownership, contributing to my community, contributing to my state now here. It's so empowering to feel like you're a part of the American fabric and live that every day. And I think that's what keeps me going is to make sure everybody has that chance too."

Johnson concludes saying that she is fighting for people to have that chance who in the past might have been denied it just by virtue of who they were. "I'm Gen-X, but technically a Zillennial, and I've lived through a few iterations of our civil rights movement since I was a teenager and have just seen the progress. So, it gets me excited about what we can do even further for the next generation. Their dream is out there, and I want them to take it because now more than ever, things are getting even more possible." 





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## DRAWING ON EXPERIENCE:

# KC Councilor

By ALEX DUEBEN

**K**C Councilor makes comics about a lot of subjects, from the legacy of Stonewall to access to hormones, to how transitioning has changed his experiences of the world to, more recently, parenting. He doesn't make many comics that are explicitly about being trans, but a trans and queer lens is at the heart of so much of his work. Some of that is because transitioning forced him to see the world in new and different ways and to convey that experience in his comics.

Some of it is because making comics and transitioning are tied together for him because he only started drawing and making comics in his thirties. Now a professor at Southern Connecticut State University, Councilor was getting his PhD at the University of Wisconsin when he took a class with the artist Lynda Barry.

"She loves working with people who have not drawn since they were kids," Councilor said. "The way that I describe it is like finding your fluent language. Discovering a way that I could express myself—especially at that particular moment of realizing I was trans and wanted to transition. That's a really complex thing to do, practically and emotionally and socially. I had a hard time expressing a lot of those nuances in language, but I could draw comics about them to really convey what that experience was like."

"It became a way to both deal with difficult stuff myself, but then to connect with others," Councilor said. For him, drawing isn't just about the work he creates, but it's a process and a way to process

information, which he tries to convey in different workshops and in different kinds of projects.

"Basically, if I'm coming in to work with a group, I talk with the person who's organizing it about what the group's about, what the history has been, and then we sort of co-create it together," Councilor said. "I always

build in some warm-ups that get people comfortable with drawing because so many people are so uncomfortable drawing. I do things that I've learned from Lynda, like drawing with your eyes closed, drawing monsters, different things to just get people moving."

"A friend of mine studies the rhetoric of homelessness, and how it impacts policy. We came up with something together, which was to have all the students in the class draw a picture of a homeless person. So, everybody does on a piece of paper with a marker. And then you can put them all up on the wall. And then you can visually see like, oh, we all have this idea in our head of

what a 'homeless person' looks like. "That leads to a lot of interesting ways of unpacking where does that image come from? What's the actual picture of homelessness? What's the impact that we all had this image in our minds without even talking about it? So, there are a lot of different ways that you can use drawings to kind of get at collective unconsciousness or assumptions."

This work is part of what he does in the Department of Communication, Media, & Screen Studies at Southern Connecticut State University. "I've had my students do the same thing. Draw images you associate



KC Councilor



with femininity or masculinity. What does a trans person look like? And many of them are drawing the same things,” Councilor continued. “It’s a way that they can discover something, where we can collectively discover something; where the point is not, ‘let’s make beautiful pictures,’ but ‘let’s learn something we didn’t already know.’”

Councilor has been a participant in Graphic Medicine, where people have been using comics to talk about medical issues and public health, something that has only gained momentum in the past decade. “I like to connect with people who are doing interesting

His current book project is centered around parenting. And like his earlier book, *Between You and Me: Transitional Comics*, the new book is about the experience of being a parent who happens to be trans.

health and public health research and to think about how we could use drawing either as part of a research process or to disseminate the research that they’re doing. So, I visit people’s classes and do little drawing workshops all the time to spread the good word of comics,” Councilor said with a laugh.

His current book project is centered around parenting. And like his earlier book, *Between You and Me: Transitional Comics*, the new book is about the experience of being a parent who happens to be trans. “We were navigating the fertility and pregnancy process,” Councilor said of the couple’s lengthy journey first at Yale and



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OH, THE SURGERY?

NO, WHAT? MY BACK

BUT IN THE MEANTIME, IT'S AN EXERCISE IN HUMILITY



THE PARADOX IS THAT NOT EVERYTHING ABOUT OUR BODIES & HEALTH IS ABOUT OUR SEX HORMONES AND SURGERIES

I LOVE THE EYE DOCTOR BECAUSE I JUST GET TO BE A PERSON

SAME! AND THE DENTIST. JUST GET TO BE HUMAN!

BUT OUR LIVES, OUR WELL-BEING, OUR SELVES CAN'T BE SEPARATED FROM OUR TRANSNESS

SO YOU'VE JUST BEEN COUCH-SURFING FOR THE LAST 6 MONTHS?

PARENTS KICKED ME OUT

WHEN I CAME OUT.

then at UConn. “Another thing, too, that I think is not talked about often enough is pregnancy difficulties. Unless you’re in a forum on the internet, the mainstream is like ‘yay, pregnancy and babies.’ Only now are we starting to talk about miscarriage and menopause and all this sort of taboo things.”

This is precisely the kind of work that graphic medicine has tried to promote and share. “And then of course what it’s like to have a baby and now a toddler. And wanting to do that for a couple of different reasons. I’m a cartoonist, and, my God, it’s very complicated to have children. There’s just a lot of material to work with,” Councilor

said smiling. “But also, just wanting my daughter to have a really strong narrative about who she is and where she comes from. To make it for her—and also sharing that book with other people who may have similar or somehow intersecting journeys.”

Councilor was very introspective when we spoke, and it’s clear that his recent work has caused him to think differently about his work. “One thing I have found very interesting about becoming a parent is that I have much more in common with straight people than I did before. There are some queer people who have kids, but the biggest thing in my life, we no longer have in

common [with many other queer people]. Ironically, it’s been a way to connect with way more people as a shared human experience. And that’s a conflict for me when I also feel particularly vulnerable with some of those same people,” he said talking about the recent election.

“Truly, I am struggling with this at this very moment. I mean, I’m going to make the book,” Councilor said. “I believe in documenting life as an essayist. I’ve come to realize that more recently. I think about both my first book and even more so the one I’m working on now as a collection of essays—not how to parent, but observations from a parent—from a particular trans lens.”



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“Parenting is really hard, and it brings up a lot of stuff. I think it’s helpful to read a lot of different ways that people deal with these common things,” Councilor said. “Comics that are about my family in this moment feel different after the election than before. I had a sense—maybe this is naïve—but I do believe stories are really important. I think we need more stories about families that are not the straight, nuclear family. Which most families are not! There are stepparents, divorces, single parents, adoptive families, all kinds of stuff going on. I want to contribute to a bigger narrative about fatherhood and what that can look like.”

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# We Already Own Green Land

# TAKE A TOUR OF *Gay New Haven*

John Allen leads a revealing walk into LGBTQ+ history

By FRANK RIZZO

Sometimes gay history is all around you, and you don't even know it. John D. Allen, Ed.D, is seeking to change that by bringing decades—even centuries—of the joys and fears, triumphs and tragedies, both the romantic love and the steamy sex, of being gay in New Haven to his walking tour: "New Haven's Closet: 400 years of Queer History in the Elm City."

Allen tells stories of the state's first public gay execution, when Oscar Wilde visited the city, where Judy and Lisa performed, Thornton Wilder hung out, and Cole Porter frolicked. He talks about New Haven's "Stonewall" moment in the '90s and of Jodi Foster's theatrical bow at Yale and of Larry Kramer's angst at the university, where Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas's colorful furniture resides along with the papers of Langsford Hughes—and so much more.

Allen, a case manager at the Connecticut Department of Developmental Services and a long-time LGBTQ+ advocate, said the tour keeps New Haven's queer community visible, as well as informing it of

its past, which he says is especially important for younger generations.

His tour indirectly began about 25 years ago when Allen reached out to the city's long-running International Festival of Arts & Ideas, the annual two-week gathering in June, noting a lack of LGBTQ+ programming. A modest grant allowed Allen to bring in such speakers as Stonewall pioneer Sylvia Rae Rivera, writer-author-activist Urvashi Vaid, journalist Jonathan Capehart, gay advocate and Boy Scout David Knapp, and gay marketer Michael Wilke.

In 2015, Allen further proposed that the LGBTQ+ community be represented among the many walking tours the festival offered—and he's been leading the popular strolls ever since. Allen has also spun the tour into informative and entertaining talks elsewhere throughout the year, such as one he presented last fall at the New Haven Museum. (That lecture is available in digital form on YouTube.)

Allen's tour includes scores of historic markers of people, events and sites: from old cruising spots, to early gay bars; from gravesites to visits by queer figures, celebs and

icons; from political struggles to the triumphs

Allen himself is a witness to much of that history, along with his husband Keith Hyatte, who worked at Long Wharf Theatre from 1975 to 2015. (The couple met in 1982 and married in 2009.) Allen founded what is now the New Haven Pride Center in 1996 (now located on 50 Orange St.) with attorney Jane Griffith and Tom Jackson, as well as the Rainbow Support Group, the first organization for LGBTQ+ people with intellectual disabilities.

## 'Our Stonewall Moment'

Gay history didn't just begin after New York City's Stonewall Riots in 1969, said Allen. "We've been a part of gay history since New Haven was founded," he said. "People just don't know it."

Allen noted the city's own "Stonewall moment" came in 1993 when queer activists sought a domestic partnership registry from the aldermen—which put front and center a face on New Haven's queer community. The proposal brought out fierce and frightening opposition from Catholic and Evangelical



Christians, some of which was aggressive and threatening, said Allen. “It was a mob scene.”

As an aside, Allen notes that Howard Nash, the Catholic priest who led the opposition, was later posthumously accused of sexual abuse of minors.

Though the measure failed at first by a single vote, it resulted, with the help of then-Mayor and active LGBTQ+ ally John DeStefano, in the formation in 1996 of the New Haven Gay and Lesbian Community Center—now the New Haven Pride Center. “We wouldn’t have the Pride Center if it wasn’t for John De Stefano,” says Allen.

The creation of the center was a result of Allen’s first-ever LGBTQ+ needs assessment during his graduate work in education at Southern Connecticut State University, which found there were more than 40 groups in the region with no central gathering place.

The center became an organizing hub, a meeting and event space and a physical and mental health resource organization for Southern Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ community.

### “Gay Ivy”

Some of the highlights of Allen’s tour and talks is centered on the New Haven Green, which was the site of New England’s first public execution in 1646 when George Spencer was charged with sodomy, one of three executions to take place in the state, Allen said, also noting that in 2015, Spencer was given a posthumous pardon.

Going beyond the Green and walking throughout the campus, Allen tells how Yale and the LGBTQ+ community have been intertwined for decades.

Allen said Yale alum Julie V. Iovine, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1987, branded the university as “Gay Ivy,” claiming that one in four students was gay, which later resulted



Keith Hyatte as The Green Cat, Halloween 1975 at The Pub on Chapel Street.





playwright Thornton Wilder (*Our Town*), who had a regular booth at the Anchor bar.

Artist Paul Cadmus, whose works are hung at Yale Art Gallery and throughout the world, has his archives at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where a host of other LGBTQ+ figures’ archives are also housed. They include Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, David Sedaris, David Rakoff, George Platt Lynes, Oscar Wilde, Langsford Hughes, photographer and gay chronicler Samuel Steward, and National Coming Out Day founder Jean O’Leary.

Allen notes that Cadmus and Boswell are buried in New Haven’s

in the slogan “One in four—and maybe more.”

Yale certainly has its share of gay figures, and Allen points out their histories here, including those of composer Cole Porter, non-binary African-American writer Pauli Murray; one of Yale’s two new colleges is named after her, AIDS activist, author and ACT UP founder Larry Kramer, medieval historian John Boswell, filmmaker Jennie Livingston (*Paris Is Burning*) and





Grove Street Cemetery, the oldest cemetery in the nation. “Keith and I recently bought a plot there, and we want to be buried in ‘the gay section,’” says Allen.

When John Hinkley attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to impress Jodi Foster who was a Yale undergraduate at the time, the actress was about to be featured in Marsha Norman’s play, *Getting Out* at the Educational Center for the Arts.

Foster, who came out publicly in 2013, went on to play an FBI agent in *Silence of the Lambs*. Ironically, down the street from the ECA is the FBI regional center. The building was built on the site of the former New Haven Arena and where bisexual rocker Jim Morrison was arrested by New Haven Police in 1967 for exposing himself during a concert—and later wrote a song about it, “Peace Frog”. There is a plaque commemorating the arrest

in the FBI building’s basement, said Allen. Gay icon Elton John was the venue’s last attraction in 1972.

As a further aside, Allen noted former longtime FBI director J. Edgar Hoover created the “lavender scare”—the infamous surveillance, arrest and persecution of many from the LGBTQ+ community, including Civil Rights leader Bayard Rustin. Allen pointed out Hoover’s own intimate relationship with associate FBI Director Clyde Tolson.

### Cruising and Gay Icons

No tour would be complete without mention of the city’s gay social and clandestine gathering spots over the decades, including The Pub, Kurt’s, the Neuter Rooster, Partners, Gotham Citi and 168 York Street Café, as well as adult bookstores on both York and lower Chapel Streets, with stalls to view porn privately.

Then there was the basement bathroom at Woolsey Hall and its tall stalls, which in 1971 were included in Bob Damron’s LGBTQ-friendly Address Book and described as relatively safe cruising spots for gay men. Also mentioned in the guide were the Farmington Canal Trail, the Long Wharf waterfront and nearby rest stops. (The nearest gay bathhouse was in East Hartford.)

“These cruise spots and bars were necessary because these were the only places where gay men could meet,” said Allen.

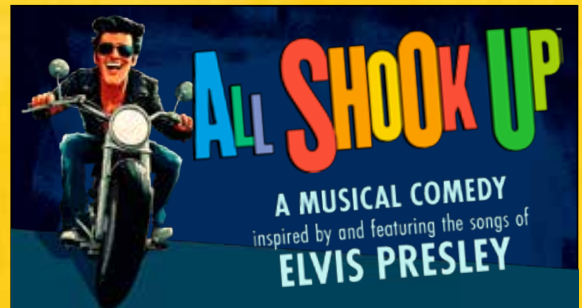
The Shubert Theatre on College Street was featured in many films beloved by the gay community, including, *All About Eve*, *Valley of the Dolls*, *Auntie Mame*. It is also where many Broadway musicals had their world premieres, including *Flora the Red Menace* starring Liza Minnelli. Liza also returned with

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her own concerts at the Schubert and across the street at The Palace, now the College Street Music Hall. At the former Loew's Poli Theatre on 23 Church St. a young Judy Garland—along with Mickey Rooney—performed in 1939, just days before *The Wizard of Oz* was released.

Not far from New Haven's entertainment district is the world headquarters of the Catholic organization, the Knights of Columbus, which is a longtime supporter of anti-LGBTQ+ measures. Allen makes it a point to note the organization was the largest donor supporting California's Proposition 8, which called for the elimination of the right to same-sex marriage.

### Gay Haven

But as a whole, New Haven is a gay haven, said Allen.

Even Ned Lamont and his family

took his tour and since becoming governor has passed legislation strengthening LGBTQ+ rights, including the Connecticut Parentage Act and a ban on "gay panic" defense.


Allen said he is proud of the progressive approach the state and the city has had towards the LGBTQ+ community, noting that in 1971 Connecticut repealed a law criminalizing sodomy and that it was the second state in the country to do so. It was the first state capitol to fly the rainbow flag; the second state to offer civil unions in 2005; and one of the first states to offer same-sex marriage in 2008 through the legislature (and not the courts)—seven years before it was legalized by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The state legislature, he said, added civil rights protections for LGBTQ+ youth and adults, and later added protections for transgender people who are incarcerated, as well as giving state

residents the option of a non-binary designation through the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. New Haven's board of education passed measures meant to recognize and protect trans and nonbinary youth. In the early 1990s, New Haven also had one of a handful of openly gay publicly elected officials at the time. (Michael J. Morand, as alder).

"It's not by chance that these things occurred," said Allen. "We are a small, progressive state, and the things that we do reverberate around the world."

It's all part of the important LGBTQ+ history that should be remembered, he said.

In further support of LGBTQ+ causes, the couple has established the John D. Allen and Keith E. Hyatte for LGBTQ+ Interests Fund, the first LGBTQ+ fund at the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, one of the state's largest foundations. 

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# Hellene on Earth

By JANE LATUS

**B**efore Helene hit on September 27, Asheville was considered a climate haven. People moved there because of it. Of all things, hurricanes weren't a worry there, 300 miles inland and 2,000 feet above sea level.

I'd been in Asheville since September 12, when I flew in to help my son Elliott with a medical emergency. The first few days were frenetic with MRIs and blood tests, and the fiasco that is the medical system there. It took 48 hours to get a critical prescription, thanks partly to the lack of a 24-hour pharmacy—unless you drive 3 hours roundtrip to the closest one in Tennessee.

Two weeks later, I couldn't have driven to Tennessee if I tried. The roads were gone. And the kind pharmacist I'd spent several hours with my first Sunday in town, waiting for the doctor to phone in the right prescription to the right, and only open, drugstore, was dead.

You'd expect a disaster to be disastrous. But until you're in one, you won't get just how bad, and in what ways.

Most surprisingly harrowing were the sounds. The actual storm was the

least of it. Worse were the constant drone of helicopters, circling low all day for weeks, searching for survivors and bodies. There were emergency sirens and fire alarms, nonstop night and day for over a month—and no

drowning, burial by mudslide, or lack of essential care like oxygen machines and insulin refrigeration. The water destroyed the homes and businesses of thousands, including many of my son's friends and devastated the

infrastructure. Water came home in my backpack, on foot, until power returned, a gas station opened, and I dared spare the gas to drive.

Some images will never fade. I'd expected overturned vehicles, but not cars in trees. Harder to forget are the trailers of FEMA rescue boats driving past me, the stunned looks on people's faces and the faces of the dead in the news, as well as the weary bearing of the firefighters who told me of their previous 48 hours rescuing people from cars and trees, and how they couldn't save them all.

The initial relief that only our basement was flooded was short lived.

The most terrifying period was the first few days, when we gradually learned of the extent and

horror of the devastation, and of our complete isolation.

When the storm passed, I walked to the fire and police station, along with others eager for news. The last contact



People (including the author, in foreground with backpack and ponytail,) wait in line with their own containers at a brewery giving away its stockpile of water. Photo Credit: Tema Stauffer

airplanes since the airport was closed.

Water ruled our days. It had swept away the pharmacist, who was found 13 days later, miles downstream and killed more than 100 others locally by



we'd had before cell service went out was from Elliott's friend Alex, who texted that a tree was in his bedroom. News, it turned out, would for a couple of weeks come in the form of notices posted on the fence outside the station. The first news was shockingly bad: there was no way in or out of the county, by any means. Cell service and internet were out over a huge territory.

Cell service was out for three days, until I was able to tell my wife that yes, we were okay.

The isolation was worse for Elliott, stuck in bed, with the letters "SOS" on his phone where bars should be.

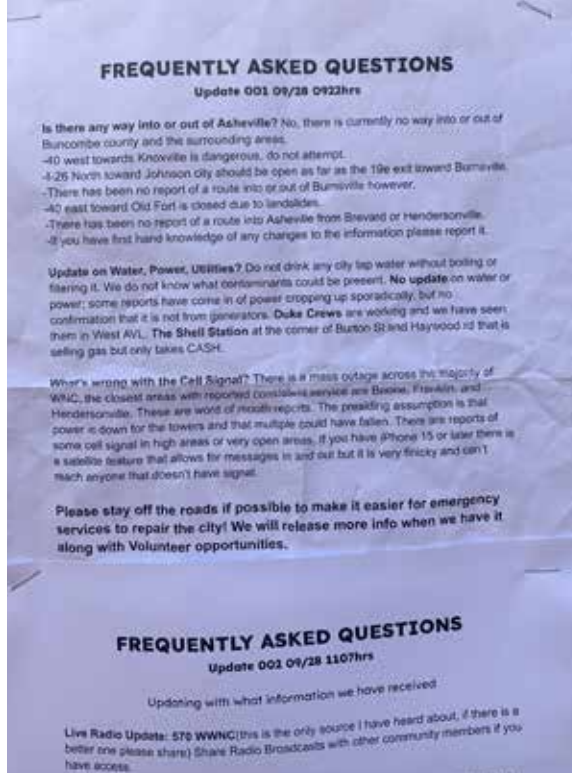
I was thankful to be fit, especially with Elliott out of commission physically. I was able to squat-walk across the flooded basement on upside-down-buckets to turn off the circuit breaker. I could hold heavy buckets high to flush. I could carry essentials home.

Every day, I'd tell Elliott, we're a day closer to getting power and water back.

I can't say I held it together. Only adrenaline and lack of time to think kept me going. A week post-storm, Elliott wasn't any better. There was no indication of when help might arrive, or even when a guess could be made about when service restoration could begin.

That was the worst day, because things started to turn around. Local professionals started offering free services, usually outside because they didn't have power or even a building. Elliott took up the offer of free acupuncture, and it immediately helped.

That night, a week after Helene, the power came on. Two



Water was cleared for drinking on Nov. 18, almost two months after the storm.

hopeful signs in this double disaster. It would be another couple of weeks before federal aid reached us, but meanwhile, things got better because people helped each other.

Community is the only reason anyone made it.

If you anticipate a disaster, besides stockpiling the usual stuff, do what I neglected: take out lots of cash. Without power or internet, it's all businesses can accept.

Unless you're lucky enough to be in Asheville, where the West Village Market let people shop, in the darkness by phone flashlight, with credit card IOUs. I ate thawed frozen pizzas from there for two days.

Asheville has a lot of community spirit anyway, with a large LGBTQ+ population, lots of musicians and artists, and tons of local events and action. There were active mutual aid groups before the storm. People simply geared up and pivoted to disaster relief.

People shared information, such as where an ATM was open. The community came together to help one another from restaurants to high school kids to neighbors helping each other with water. The first cold day, the owner of an all-queer artists' shop insisted I take, free, a gorgeous handmade rainbow beanie. It came with a hug.

Then the circle of helpers expanded. I started to seriously worry about money. I was on unpaid leave, and Elliott's employer was closed, and he wasn't physically ready to return anyway. Friends, family and total strangers chipped in, to my immense relief and gratitude, more than enough to



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ease my mind. Friends in my wife’s online trans women community helped too.

We survived, literally, for over a month on free and delicious meals cooked by local nonprofit Grassroots Aids Partnership and World Central Kitchen. I’d donated to WCK, never expecting to be a recipient.

A couple months post-storm, Elliott’s friend Jonathan summed it up: “It was a nightmare. It’s still a nightmare.” People described themselves as feeling “otherworldly” and that seemed about right.

Elsewhere now, people’s attention is off Western North Carolina, but it has years of recovery ahead and will never be the same.


The economy is extremely fragile. Many of Elliott’s friends are among the unknown but certainly substantial number of people who have left permanently because they can’t find

new jobs. The storm exacerbated homelessness. In December, the governor reported 670 residences in the county were damaged, and of these 294 destroyed.

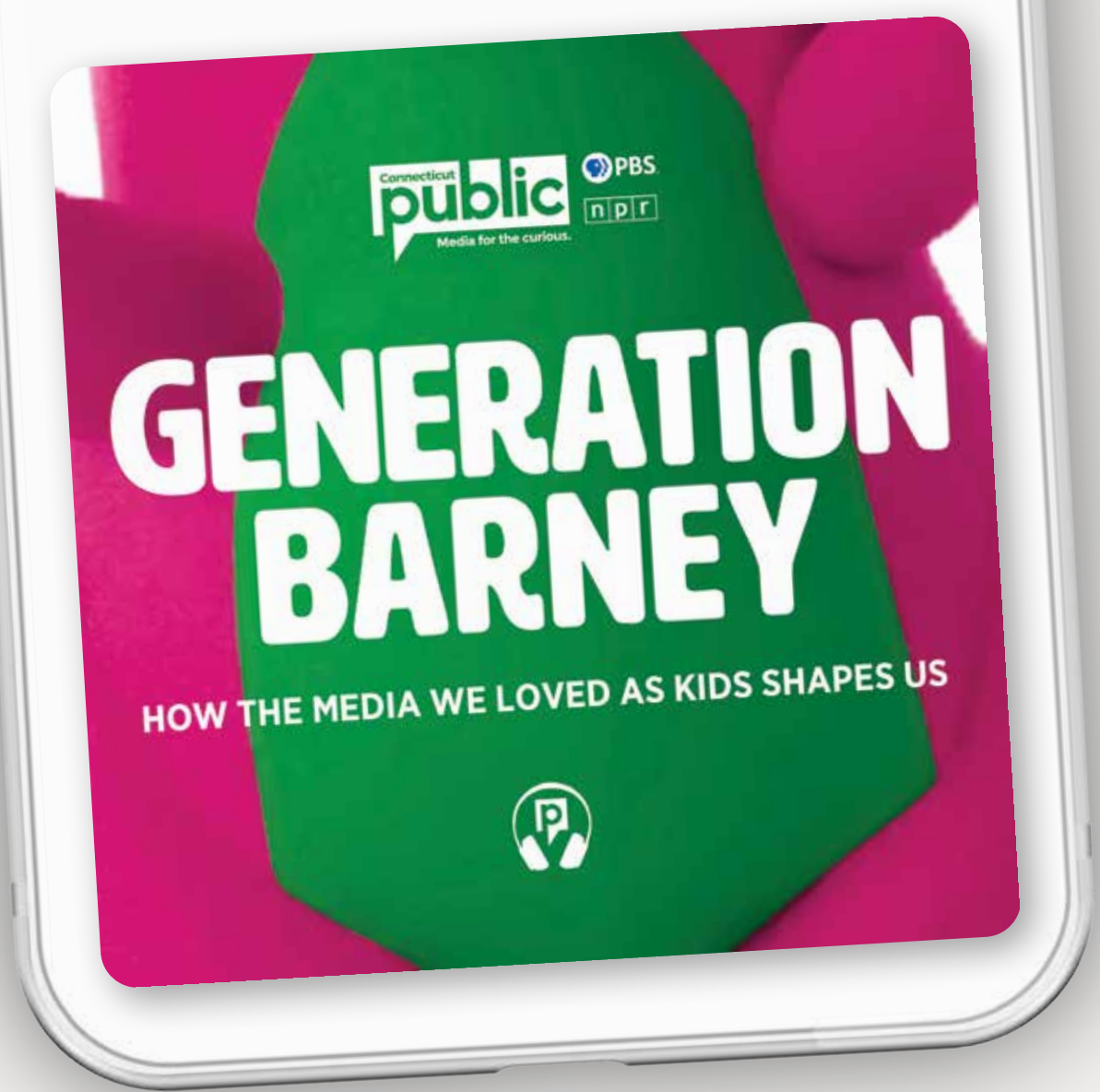
The ground itself is unstable, with highways collapsing—and confounding engineers—three months later as I write this.

It will take months or years for the muddy reservoir to return to its once pristine state. When the pipes were reconnected and (dirty) water returned to our toilet tanks, everyone rejoiced. I texted family, “I can’t wait to poop again!” When the city deemed the water clean enough for showering, it was so heavily chlorinated it burned people’s skin. But they appreciated the progress, even if they didn’t all shower in it. After two months, the water was cleared for drinking. But it still smells strongly of chlorine, and Elliott says,

“Not a single person I’ve talked to is comfortable drinking it.”

After two and a half months, I was eager to return home but heartbroken to leave Elliott and Asheville. Additionally, I was worried that when I got home, with no one around who’d shared the experience, I’d feel like it was a hallucination. I needed a safe and permanent place to keep it. I needed a tattoo, and it had to be of water. Not a wave, not a drop, not a glass—a splash. A splash of beautiful, delicious, essential, fun, scary, deadly water. And I’d only get one if someone local, who’d gone through it, could do it. Chris Westhanded, who’d indeed been through it, met me at Divination Tattoo a few days before I left for home. It had been sunny since Helene, with only a few minor sprinkles. That day, fittingly, it rained hard. 





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DELICIOUS //

Ashley Flagg:

# The Laurel

By ALEX DUEBEN





**T**he Laurel is a new restaurant, but the chef behind it has been working at restaurants in Connecticut and Massachusetts for the past decade including stints at Grant’s in West Hartford, Millwright’s in Simsbury, and Hamilton Park and High George at the Blake Hotel in New Haven. This year, Ashley Flagg and her wife are opening their West Hartford restaurant focused on “shareable plates, globally inspired, locally sourced.”

“It’s a nice way of saying that I just want to cook whatever I want to cook,” Flagg said with a smile when we sat down at the restaurant during renovations. “When I first started cooking, I was living on my own for the first time, and I was reaching out to family members for recipes that I missed. My grandmother’s from Spain, but she grew up in Mexico and Nicaragua. My stepdad’s British. My mom’s French Canadian. And then I started learning about my friends’ food and their culture.

“I just kept evolving. And it helped me in terms of my techniques, because every culture has a different technique for doing something. It broadened my horizons as a chef. In this restaurant, I want to recreate that. And I want my staff, who’s from all different cultures, to have input on the menu in that way, too.”

Two themes that kept coming up in my long conversation with Flagg were consistency and change. Consistency in terms of food and work, and quality, and change. “What we saw during the pandemic is people just want good food. And if you’re consistently providing good food, people will find you and come to you. That’s all you can really do,” Flagg said. “You just have to stay consistent.”

The other big idea that Flagg kept returning to was change. Whether talking about how the menu shifts seasonally to how she works has changed to the changes she’s seen in the industry and the culture at large since she started working in kitchens.

“I’ve seen a lot of change in the restaurant industry. I still think it has a very long way to go,” Flagg said. “I see a lot of women and people of color in this industry who have to work harder. My wife, Rebekkah, and I knew that our plan would have to be a cut above because women in this industry face a little bit more scrutiny. As women in this industry, we know that we have to work a little bit harder,” Flagg said, adding “I think the industry needs to meet us at our standards where we’re working. I think that the people that are getting the advantages right now are working a bit below where they should be, and they can come and meet us at our standards and our level where we’re working.”

Some of that change centered on how she worked. “When I first started cooking, I really thought I had to be this bully chef. That was how I was trained,” Flagg said. “But no amount of me yelling at [the staff] is going to give them a positive work experience.”

“We really want to create a culture, a positive work environment, where everybody’s supporting each other and growing with each other—where we can be a part of our



Photo Credit: Lisa Nichols



# Ashley Flagg



Photo Credit: Michael Chiovitti





Rebekkah and Ashley Flagg  
Photo Credit: Michael Chiovitti

cooks' and our servers' lives in a positive way—help them get to the next step in their lives or their career, whatever it may be, whether it's with us or somebody else,” Flagg said. “There’s been a lot of people in this industry that have been a very positive impact for me. And I want to be that for other people.”

One way is making sure employees have two days in a row off, something not the norm. “While it’s a tough decision to make as a business manager, at Millwright’s for a long period of time, we had two days off in a row, and I found that my staff was in much better shape when they had those two days to just completely forget about this place. It’s a good thing. It’s a good thing for your mental health.”

While the restaurant will be very different from the Corner Pug, which it replaces, Flagg admits that it won’t be wildly different in some ways. “We want to be the place that the community comes to and wants to bring people to. Is the food going to be different? Yes. But at the end of the day, I think the overall feeling is going to be the same. We want a sense of community.”

As for why it’s called The Laurel, it goes back to Flagg’s grandmother. “My grandmother’s road was Laurel Grove Road. I’m very close with my grandmother. She’s 101 right now. And I know—despite her telling me that she’s going to live forever—that might not in fact be true. So, I want her to still be a part of this restaurant even when she’s not here,” Flagg said.

“I think like the biggest influence you’ll see from my grandmother on my menu is my general curiosity about different cultures. She provided that to me, whether she knows it or meant to or not,” Flagg said. “She’s a huge part of who I am as a chef.”

## Pork Belly with BBQ Beans & Herb Salsa

Pork Belly:

**1 boneless skinless belly**  
**Juice of two limes**  
**Salt and pepper**  
**Tabasco**

Rub the belly generously with tabasco (or hot sauce of your choice), lime juice and then season thoroughly with salt and pepper and let this sit in the fridge for at least 6 hours but preferably overnight. You won’t be rinsing the pork belly so make sure the amount of seasoning you are using is the amount you want on your final product. Roast at 350 until fork tender, meaning you can easily push a fork through it without resistance. Allow the pork belly to cool completely and then cut into desired size (I recommend about one-inch pieces). Slicing it hot will cause the juices to run and we want to avoid this.

For the beans:

One quart gigante beans (soaked overnight) you can sub for any dry bean you like or if you don’t have time just use canned beans and add it to the cooking liquid after you reduce it.

**1 large white onion small diced**  
**1/4 lb bacon diced**  
**2 ea bay leaves**  
**1/2 lb dark brown sugar**  
**1 pt ketchup**  
**2 oz sherry vinegar**  
**Hot sauce, S and p to taste**

Soak beans overnight and then cook on low heat in water until soft all the way through. Season the water when beans are almost cooked. While beans cook, sweat onions and bacon in a large pot until bacon is rendered. Add sugar and stir constantly until caramelized, and then deglaze with vinegar. Allow the vinegar to cook out a bit, and then add the ketchup, bay leaves and fully cooked beans. Simmer until the liquid is reduced and the flavor is absorbed into the beans. It’s important that the beans are cooked all the way before adding to the liquid. Don’t rush this. Right before removing from the stove, season with salt, pepper and hot sauce to taste.

For the herb salsa:

**2 oz parsley chopped**  
**2 oz cilantro chopped**  
**2 oz scallions sliced**  
**2 cloves garlic chopped**  
**1 jalapeno minced (seeds removed)**  
**Zest and juice of 1 lemon**  
**Salt and hot sauce to taste**  
**Olive oil to coat herbs (mucho take it easy)**  
**1 tb sherry vinegar**

Cut all herbs accordingly and then add all ingredients to a bowl and mix, season to taste with salt and hot sauce.

For the plate up:

Reheat your pork belly in the oven or if desired you can reheat them in a pan with a little bit of butter, herbs and garlic for added flavor. An air fryer would also work. Serve the pork belly over the hot beans and top with your herb salsa. We recommend eating this with corn bread or a good sour dough (we love Small State Provisions out of West Hartford and Avon).



# The Climate Change in Connecticut Churches

By Randy B. Young

Sometimes it seems like change moves at a glacial pace, unwavering in its direction but frustratingly slow in its pace, and given to fits, starts...or even fractures. Some glaciers move as fast as a half mile a month; some move a few inches a day. But even a slow change can reshape a landscape.

It's easy to be pleased with the steady progress of Christian churches toward inclusion; it's just as easy to be frustrated with churches' reluctance to minister to LGBTQ+ communities—a reluctance that has caused an ideological rift in one of the more prominent churches in Connecticut and in the U.S.: the United Methodist Church (UMC).

Until recently, the Methodists were still led by the same restrictions codified into its Social Principles in 1972. Even after much debate, Methodists doubled down in 2019 on a plan to strengthen those same restrictions, led by the European and African bloc. In May 2024, however, Methodists voted to abandon those Social Principles emblematic of a guarded approach to homosexuality, prompting a split in the Church.

As a result, a full quarter of U.S. United Methodist churches left the denomination for new theologically conservative “Global Methodist Church” which upheld the bans, Heather Hahn wrote in *USA Today* for the United Methodist News Agency. In the wake

of disaffiliations, the remaining United Methodist Churches have adopted new progressive stances on “Social Community.”

“The United Methodist Church’s condemnation of homosexuality—which sparked a half-century of conflict—is now no more,” Hahn proclaimed.

While this all reflects an inexorable procession toward decency for LGBTQ+ parishioners in Connecticut, it’s still hard to pinpoint the Church’s position at any given time or in any given chapel.

## A Method(ist) to the Madness

The Nashville, Tennessee-based UMC is currently the largest Mainline Protestant denomination in the United States with 9 million members in nearly 30,000 U.S. churches, divided into 53 regions, or “Conferences.” 70 percent of the Connecticut population identifies as Christian, with Catholics representing 33 percent and Mainline Protestant (Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc.) totaling nearly 20 percent. Yet only 35 percent in Connecticut attend church regularly, according to Pew Research.

Reverend Martha Vink, an LGBTQ+ community member and Pastor of Yalesville UMC, noted that Connecticut’s Methodist churches are in either the New York Conference or the New England Conference.

“We’re in the New York conference, like the western half of Connecticut,” she said, explaining that the eastern and

northern Connecticut UMC churches belong to the New England Conference.

“More than any other denomination, the Methodist Church has historically been the core of Mainline Protestantism in the U.S.,” Southern Methodist University associate professor Matthew Wilson told *USA Today*, “so what happens in Methodism is significant for American Protestantism.”

## Whatever Floats your Vote

At the Methodist General Conference in May 2024, delegates voted for policy changes that do away with longtime restrictions against LGBTQ+ people, Hahn wrote, including the abolition of penalties for clergy officiating at same-sex unions, the encouragement of inclusion of LGBTQ+ people on denominational boards, and normalization of gay clergy in good standing. But for conservative Methodists, gay marriage was an obstacle. As a result, Hahn wrote that 25 percent of the 30,000 Methodist congregations in the U.S. left the UMC.

“A lot of the ones leaving are in Africa,” said Gene Ott, Pastor at Simsbury United Methodist Church, “and we see it again in here in more culturally conservative places, like Texas.”

The rate of disaffiliation has varied regionally, per the Lewis Center for Church Leadership. For example, UMC Conferences in Texas saw more than 42 percent of UMC churches



disaffiliate; Georgia saw 45 percent leave. In Connecticut and in California, only around one percent of Methodist churches have disaffiliated.

“On a local or regional level—in the New York Annual Conference including Long Island, New York and Connecticut west of the Connecticut River—we’ve only had five that chose to leave,” Ott added. “That’s hardly a ripple.”

“I’ve been part of the movement to change the Book of Discipline for a long, long time, said Vink. “2019 was just so terrible. But in 2024, most conservatives had left, and we passed everything... when it came to floor. It was surreal, and for a lot of LGBTQ people and allies there, and at the break, we were all crying.”

Disaffiliations also caused a 43 percent reduction in the UMC’s overall budget as of 2023, and the funding of both seminaries and Methodist-affiliated universities like Southern Methodist and Emory is up in the air.

### The More Things Change...

In short, the 2024 Conference in Charlotte, NC took action to remove from their Book of Discipline all language that restricts or singles out non-heterosexual people for disparate treatment, said Reverend Taylor W. Burton Edwards of the United Methodist Press Center.

Further, clergy who were once required to surrender credentials because they were a self-avowed practicing homosexual or because they presided at a same-sex union can now apply for readmission,” Edwards added.

Just because the United Methodist Church has now officially banned homophobic language in its Social Principles, new language set forth in guidelines is less specific on overarching standards.

“UMC clergy are now free to preside at same-sex unions, but they are equally free not to do so,” Edwards said.

So while many prohibitions are no more, “discretion remains,” Edwards added. “UMC doesn’t actively approve homosexual relations, nor does it *require* pastors to preside at same-sex weddings

or unions (or) to create new resources that support homosexuality.”

“Methodist churches who have stayed are able to include queer clergy and tolerate gay marriage,” said Vicki Flippin, Associate Dean of Student Affairs for Yale Divinity School, “but it still doesn’t mean they’re affirming—that doesn’t necessarily change with some proclamation ‘from on high.’”

### Late to the Party

While the United Methodist Church was still guided by the 1972 restrictions until recently, other progressive denominations like Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians have weathered their respective rifts and progressed.

“Methodists have been behind,” said Vink. “Of course, the United Church of Christ is always ahead. Unitarians... are way ahead. Even the Presbyterians and Episcopalians: they’ve all already done this work years ago. Methodists are probably the last major church [to change].”

“With Catholicism, [decisions] come from the top down,” Ott pointed out. If Methodists are going to be proud of anything, it’s that the opinion of clergy and laity are of equal value.”

Still, Ott felt the delay was a “black eye” for the UMC. “You can say we’ve been really deliberative, but I think we’ve been really delayed.”

“It’s bittersweet,” Vink said, “because we’ve lost a lot of people along the way... because they’ve left the United Methodist Church, or they just couldn’t take it anymore. There are people who will never, ever darken the door of a United Methodist Church, no matter how many rainbow flags we display.”

### Gone Fish-ing?

During the period of Roman persecution of Christians over the first centuries C.E., a fish symbol (ichthys) was used to denote meeting places for safe worship. Two-thousand years later, many in Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ community are seeking the same reassurances. But with churches espousing different views all

under the banner of inclusion, it’s hard to know where to turn for acceptance, unless it’s under a banner that’s rainbow colored.

“Even before any of this, there have been places that are safe for LGBTQIA worship and places that are not,” Ott said, “but that’s just as true for people of color. So, I think that needs to be a level of due diligence.

“The official position of the Methodist Church that, as a person of color, as a woman, as an LGBTQIA person, we’ve assumed an official position of non-discrimination at UMC... but the clergy also has a responsibility to communicate that.”


Vink noted that her church is beginning the process to become a Reconciling Ministry, which, over and above UMC Social Principles, celebrates that LGBTQ+ persons “are a good expression of God’s diverse creation...” according to its Reconciling Ministries Network website (“rmnetwork.org”).

“Most United Methodist churches in western Connecticut would welcome LGBTQ people,” Vink said, “but look for Reconciling congregations if you want to be sure.”

“On our best days, a faith community should be a place where you can be safe and begin to explore your spirituality... and friendships,” Ott stressed, “but you can’t do that if you don’t feel safe.”

### Climate Change

While it’s undeniable that there is a move toward the inclusivity, both in society and its microcosm the church, there are those who will never feel comfortable with any organized religion. For those who are searching for a supportive community of faith without sacrificing LGBTQ+ community principles however, changes within the Methodist Church and other churches seem to signify that the jagged ice of religious judgment and distrust in maybe be melting away.

Cracks may form and deepen, but the landscape is still moving in the right direction. 



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QUEER JOY AND QUEER RESILIENCE:

# Connecticut's LGBTQ+ Justice & Opportunity Network in Focus

By WILLIAM B. OLLAYOS

In a vibrant room adorned with rainbow flags, conversation filled the air as young people gathered for Southington Activity Nights, a youth-led space where queer youth could finally breathe easy and be themselves. Across the state, at Anchor Health, artists and writers celebrated their identity in the pages of a Pride Zine, a publication made possible by the LGBTQ+ Justice and Opportunity Network. These moments of queer joy are not just fleeting—they represent the transformative work of the LGBTQ+ Justice & Opportunity Network, a beacon of hope and resilience in Connecticut.

## A Network Born of Advocacy and Vision

Connecticut's LGBTQ+ Justice and Opportunity Network is a landmark organization in our state. Established by legislation in 2017 and co-sponsored by Rep. Jeff Currey and Rep. Raghib Allie-Brennan, it marked a historic first: a

legislatively funded network dedicated to the health and human services needs of LGBTQ+ residents. This bold initiative allocated \$250,000 annually to support data-driven programs and services, symbolizing the state's commitment to a more inclusive future.

The Network's first major accomplishment was commissioning Connecticut's inaugural statewide LGBTQ+ needs assessment in collaboration with the Consultation Center at Yale. Despite pandemic challenges, nearly 3,000 residents participated, sharing critical insights into

their experiences with discrimination, mental health, and housing insecurity. These findings laid the groundwork for the Network's initiatives and underscored the urgent need for tailored support systems.

## Funding Joy and Empowering Communities

Over the past fiscal year, the Network approved approximately \$300,000 in grant funding, empowering grassroots organizations and fostering resilience. Among the initiatives funded:

- **Southington Activity Nights** by QPlus CT: A youth-led space for queer kids and teens to connect and thrive.
- **Divinely You** by Nadine Ruff: A resource center offering trans and gender-diverse individuals—predominantly Black and Brown trans women—support in transitioning, including assistance with name changes, housing, and therapeutic counseling.

- **CREC Pride Prom:** An affirming event for LGBTQIA+ high school students and allies to celebrate their identities.
- **Anchor Health’s Pride Zine:** A publication showcasing queer culture, art, and community.

Each project reflects the Network’s mission to uplift marginalized voices, foster community, and create spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can experience joy without fear.

### Leadership Rooted in Community

At the helm of the Network are leaders deeply embedded in Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ advocacy landscape. Co-Chair David Grant (Executive Director of the Health Collective), Treasurer John Merz (CEO of Advancing Connecticut Together), and Secretary Robin McHaelen (Founder of True Colors SOGIEcon, a relaunch of the True Colors annual conference), bring decades of experience and passion to their roles. Together, they guide the Network toward its ambitious goals, ensuring that every dollar spent supports programs that resonate with the community’s needs.

### Resilience in Challenging Times

The Network’s work takes on heightened significance in today’s political climate. With the second Trump administration’s looming, many fear a rollback of hard-won rights for LGBTQ+ individuals. Yet, Connecticut remains steadfast in its commitment to equity and justice. As Co-Chair David Grant explains, “Resilience isn’t just about surviving—it’s about thriving. The Network isn’t here to maintain the status quo; it’s here to push for a better future.”

Events like Pride Day at the Capitol exemplify this resilience. In June 2024, the Network collaborated with the Connecticut Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity (CWCEO) to host a celebration of queer joy. The event featured drag performances by Kiki Lucia, BLEACH!, and Natalia Fierce and a panel of community leaders sharing stories of strength and solidarity. As Representative



Pride Day at the Capitol in Hartford, CT on June 3, 2024. (l to r) William B. Ollayos, Kiki Lucia, Brett Bordonaro, Natalia Fierce, Chevelle Moss-Savage, Jessimar Ewart, Denise Drummond, Jennifer X. Lopez, Teddy Shusterman, Taylor Edelmann, Luis A. Irizarry. Photo Credit: Chris Siharath

Sarah Keitt reminded attendees, the Capitol is “your house”—a place where queer individuals should feel at home.


### A Call to Action

The Network’s vision extends far beyond its current achievements. With plans to expand membership, increase grant funding, and deepen its outreach to marginalized communities, the Network is poised to lead Connecticut into a new era of LGBTQ+ advocacy. But its success depends on collective action. Residents can contribute by volunteering, donating, or simply attending Network-sponsored events to show their support.

In a world often hostile to queer identities, the Network stands as a testament to the power of joy and resilience. By funding programs that celebrate diversity, amplify marginalized voices, and foster connection, it ensures that queer individuals across Connecticut can not only survive but

thrive. As drag performer Kiki Lucia said during Pride Day at the Capitol, “The only people we can truly rely on are our queer siblings.” Through the Network’s work, those connections grow stronger every day, building a future where joy is not just possible but abundant.

Queer joy and resilience are more than ideals—they are the lifeblood of Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ Justice and Opportunity Network. In the face of political uncertainty, the Network represents hope, action, and a commitment to building a state where everyone can live with dignity and pride.

For more information about the Network, please visit the following website: [https://wp.cga.ct.gov/cwceo/sub\\_commission/lgbtq-justice-opportunity-network/](https://wp.cga.ct.gov/cwceo/sub_commission/lgbtq-justice-opportunity-network/). Please email [william.ollayos@cga.ct.gov](mailto:william.ollayos@cga.ct.gov) with any questions. 



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A photograph of a young Black couple sitting on a couch. The woman is holding a pink smartphone and looking at it, while the man is looking at a laptop screen. The scene is set in a modern living room with a green plant and a framed abstract painting in the background.

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