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EDITOR'S NOTE //



A Time for Celebration

Winter in Connecticut is always a special time. The brilliance of summer gives way to the muted, but no less beautiful, colors of the colder season. It's a time to turn to friends, family, and chosen family to share a different kind of warmth—the warmth of connection and celebration.

Here at Connecticut Voice, we've devoted the bulk of our coverage in this issue to a special kind of celebration—our inaugural list of the Voice 30. There a many people working tirelessly throughout the year to improve quality of life of LGBTQ+ people in our state, and in these pages, we celebrate 30 outstanding individuals who are leaders in their fields and inspirations to all of us about how much their commitment and good works do to improve life for everyone. We encourage you to meet these extraordinary individuals—and to find out more about the impact of the passionate dedication to service. It would take several magazines to begin to cover the range and scope of their work and how we have all been helped in ways big and small by these incredible people.

Our focus on community and collaboration continues with coverage of the new PRIDE Giving Circle from Greater Hartford Gives (page 53), an initiative launching next year that will being together members of communities from all over the state to identify and provide financial support for organizations that support LGBTQ+ issues.

Mental Health Connecticut provides tips for maintaining mental health in this stressful season and times (page 14), Pullman & Comley provides important insights on how social media can be a pitfall in a divorce (page 12), and we look at all that Anchor Health is doing to ensure exceptional care for LGBTQ+ patients (page 18).

As always, though, you'll find some great fun in our pages as well. We catch up with Stratford artist-turned-author Fraver and lift the curtain on his charming series of "Retro Broadway Mysteries," a great gift for theater and mystery lovers.

Frank Rizzo takes us behind the scenes of the pop culture hit *Heated Rivalry*—the books, the TV series, and the Off-Broadway parody that's packing houses, and delighting all kinds of audiences (page 31). Frank also profiles performer and gay dad Cheyenne Jackson and his family (page 24) and holiday traditions.

And, as always, you'll find much more within these pages and online at ctvoice.com.

We can never know what's ahead, though we know we're in the midst of change. I suppose there's nothing new about that, but, this year, as we gather with our biological and chosen families, let us take joy in the present and celebrate.

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

Chris

Christopher Byrne, Editor
chris@ctvoice.com

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Connecticut VOICE™
is published by Seasons Media

Publisher /Owner
James Tully

Editor
Christopher Byrne

Creative Director
Stacy Murray

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"WINTER, A LINGERING SEASON, IS A TIME TO GATHER GOLDEN MOMENTS, EMBARK UPON A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY, AND ENJOY EVERY IDLE HOUR."

—John Boswell

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Jay Armstrong Johnson and Jimin Moon in *Heated Rivalry: The Unauthorized Parody Musical*. Photo Credit; Matthew Murphy

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COVER STORY

The VOICE 30
OF CONNECTICUT
THIRTY LGBTQ+ LEADERS. LIMITLESS IMPACT.

The Sense of Beauty

SIX CENTURIES OF PAINTING FROM MUSEO DE ARTE DE PONCE

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Frederic, Lord Leighton (British, 1830-1896), *Flaming June* (detail), ca. 1895. Oil on canvas. Museo de Arte de Ponce. The Luis A. Ferré Foundation, Inc., 63.0106

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THINK BEFORE YOU POST

How Social Media and AI Can Complicate Your Divorce



Kelly A. Scott
Photo Credit: Gary Lewis

Susan has just been served with divorce papers. In them, her spouse seeks primary physical custody of their children. Susan immediately logs into her social media accounts and removes her spouse, along with all of her spouse's family members and friends, from her connections so that they cannot see her posts. She then launches into a tirade about her soon-to-be ex, both in multiple posts on her own account and in comments on various public groups she belongs to. Within hours, her spouse sends her screenshots of every negative post. Susan is confused—she thought she had cut off every connection to her spouse. She panics and deletes the negative posts, or at least the ones she can still find. What Susan forgot is that she was still connected to her spouse's college roommate's sister, who saw everything...and took screenshots.

Social media is where many of us share milestones and vent frustrations, and artificial intelligence (AI) has become a go-to research tool, editor, and parenting resource. But when a marriage dissolves, what you post and what you ask AI can become powerful evidence in court. Here is what to know before you post, share, or type a prompt.

Social Media: Assume Everything Is Evidence

High-profile celebrity divorces have shown how social media can fuel custody disputes and legal battles. A vacation photo can undercut a claim of financial hardship, and a late-night post can be used to question your judgment. Privacy settings offer little protection, because mutual friends and screenshots routinely bring "private" content to the other side's attention. To reduce the risk, consider the following:

Stay off social media. If you are going through a divorce or custody case, this is the No. 1 rule–and it applies to browsing for information about your situation, not just posting.

Preserve, don't delete. Removing your own posts during litigation may be treated as destruction of evidence, so speak with your attorney first. Do screenshot any useful posts or messages by your spouse, including those on friends' or family members' pages.

Never discuss your case, your spouse, or your children online. Even vague or indirect posts can be read as disparaging and may affect custody decisions.

Do not access your spouse's accounts. Logging into another person's account without permission can carry civil and criminal consequences and can damage your credibility.

AI: Use at Your Own Risk

How can you remove the emotion from an email to your soon-to-be ex-spouse? How should you interpret a provision in your parenting plan? It is tempting to ask AI. But AI can "hallucinate"–presenting false or misleading responses as fact–and your AI history could become a treasure trove for the opposing party.

Even mundane queries can matter. Asking AI how to discuss a child's medical issue, for example, could prompt the other parent to question your judgment–including your decision to share confidential medical information with a non-confidential platform—and affect legal custody decisions.

Be especially cautious about using AI for case strategy or advice. In *United States v. Heppner*, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York held that AI communications are not protected by the attorney-client privilege or the work product doctrine because AI platforms are not attorneys and do not maintain confidentiality. Assume anything you ask AI about your case may be disclosed to the opposing party or the court.

If you use AI during family law proceedings:

Keep it general. Do not enter confidential information, personal identifying information, or sensitive case details into AI platforms.

Be especially cautious about using AI for case strategy or advice.



Protect privileged communications. Do not input communications from your attorney, therapist, or other professional advisors.

Use your own voice. Rewrite any AI-generated content in your own words.

Verify everything. Independently confirm all information and advice provided by AI before relying on it.

Preserve your history. Keep your complete AI search and conversation history if you are involved in, or anticipate, litigation.

The Bottom Line: The familiar warning "anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law" applies equally to your social media posts and your AI prompts. When in doubt, don't post and don't prompt. Instead, bring your questions to your attorney, where the conversation is protected and the advice is tailored to your circumstances.

Kelly A. Scott is chair of the Family Law practice at Pullman & Comley, LLC.

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Five Signs It May Be Time to Reach Out for Support

In our last column, we talked about how seasonal changes can influence our mental health. Winter can be a beautiful season, but for many people it also brings shorter days, holiday stress, financial pressures, and changes in routine that can make existing challenges feel even heavier. For many LGBTQ+ individuals, these seasonal challenges may also intersect with navigating affirming relationships, maintaining community connection, or coping with broader social and political uncertainty.

Additionally, seasonal changes can worsen existing mental health conditions or contribute to symptoms for the first time. Individuals living with Major Depressive Disorder are at greater risk of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), and approximately one in four people with Bipolar Disorder experience seasonal mood changes. Physical health conditions can also take a toll. For example, arthritis may limit a person's ability to prepare meals or host family gatherings, increasing stress, isolation, and symptoms of seasonal depression.

Everyone has difficult days, and experiencing stress, sadness, or anxiety from time to time is natural. However, if these feelings progress or begin to interfere with your daily routine, it may be time to reach out for support. You don't have to wait until you're in crisis. Recognizing the early signs of a mental health challenge can help you get the support you need sooner.

Five Signs It May Be Time to Reach Out

1. Your Sleep Has Changed

Have you noticed changes in how well you're sleeping? Whether you're struggling to fall asleep, waking frequently throughout the night, sleeping much more than usual, or waking up feeling exhausted, changes in sleep are often one of the earliest signs that stress or a mental health challenge may be affecting your well-being.

2. You're Withdrawing from Others

Have you been avoiding the people or activities that usually help you feel connected? You may find yourself declining invitations, ignoring texts, or isolating from loved ones. While taking time for yourself can be healthy, prolonged isolation can make feelings of loneliness and stress even more difficult. Staying connected to supportive people is one of the strongest protective factors for mental health.

3. You're Feeling Hopeless

Does it feel difficult to imagine things getting better? Feeling discouraged after a challenging day is natural, but persistent feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or believing that nothing will improve deserve attention. You don't have to carry those feelings alone, and support is available.

4. You've Lost Interest in Things You Usually Enjoy

Have activities that once brought you joy started to feel like a chore? Whether it's spending time with friends, participating in community events, exercising, creating art, or enjoying hobbies, losing interest in the things that usually make you feel good can be a sign that your mental health needs additional care.

5. Anxiety Is Affecting Your Daily Life

Has worry become difficult to manage? Anxiety can show up in many ways, including racing thoughts, trouble concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, stomach discomfort, or constantly expecting the worst. If anxiety is making it difficult to work, maintain relationships, or enjoy daily life, it may be time to seek support.

Reaching Out Is a Sign of Strength

Begin with talking to someone you trust, taking a mental health screening, scheduling an appointment with your primary care provider, or connecting with a therapist or support group. The earlier you reach out, the easier it can be to address challenges before they become overwhelming.

No matter the season, you deserve to feel supported. Paying attention to the early signs of a mental health challenge, and asking for help when you need it, is one of the most important ways you can care for yourself.

Because Winter can be a challenging season for so many, Mental Health Connecticut releases a Winter Wellness Toolkit each December. Visit www.mhconn.org/winter-wellness-with-mhc/

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact 988. Additional resources include the Trans Lifeline (877-565-8860), SAGE, and the Trevor Project (Text 'START' to 678-678).

LIBERTY BANK: Dedicated to Service



For more than 200 years, Liberty Bank has put their mission of "improving the lives of our customers, teammates, and communities for generations to come" into action, striving to improve the lives of the communities they serve and never straying away from this commitment.

Both internally and externally, they have worked to create inclusive spaces for conversation and community for LGBTQ+ employees or teammates and customers. From hosting internal lunch-and-learn sessions to supporting LGBTQ+ initiatives through their Pride Committee and partnerships with Anchor Health and the Hartford Gay & Lesbian Health Collective (HGLHC), Liberty Bank continues to promote inclusion and support LGBTQ+ communities across Connecticut.

Marisol Rodriguez, VP, Head of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion at Liberty Bank, says the bank is always looking for ways to better address the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and create inclusive spaces.

"We recognize some of the barriers and the challenges that some community members can face, and it happens on different levels. And so we are always thinking about how we can create more access to opportunities and products and services for the community?" Rodriguez said.

One of the ways Liberty Bank does this is through its Pride Committee, which originally started during COVID-19 to support Middletown Pride. From there, it continued to evolve, and its impact was so significant that the bank formalized the committees and created additional ones including those dedicated to the military and veterans, Black History Month, and Hispanic Heritage Month.

The Pride Committee's efforts extend to supporting Pride events across Connecticut, including North Haven Pride and Hartford Pride and Middletown Pride. The committee also creates lunch-and-learns and educational opportunities for teammates to learn about LGBTQ+ topics and engage in open conversations in a safe space, such as a recent lunch-and-learn for Domestic Violence Awareness Month in partnership with Prudence Crandall Center (PCC). These educational efforts also include reference guides on inclusive language, LGBTQ+ films and conversations, and spotlights highlighting notable LGBTQ+ figures throughout history.



Liberty Bank continues to show its support for the LGBTQ+ community by partnering with different organizations, such as Anchor Health and the Hartford Gay and Lesbian Health Collective (HGLHC). Liberty Bank has worked with Anchor Health to bring a financial health component to its wellness fair, helping improve the lives of the community. The bank also sponsors HGLHC annually, sending teammates to its Queer Prom and hosting dress-down days to support students who want to attend Queer Prom.

Liberty Bank has also provided education on pronouns, including what they are and why they matter, to both teammates and the community. The bank is also a member of the DEI Chamber of Commerce and joined the Massachusetts LGBTQ Chamber last year.

Additionally, Liberty Bank teammates are encouraged to volunteer with organizations throughout the year and are given four days off to do so. Rodriguez says Liberty Bank contributes $4 million annually in corporate giving for local sponsorships and grants, along with more than 16,500 hours annually of community service, putting its Community Kind slogan into action, showing up for the community and fulfilling a passion for helping others.

"Our customers are like family to us, so we want to ensure that we're able to support them as much as we can… We're going to be here because we want to be here and because we know that it's important for us to show up and let you know that banking is a place for everybody, and we can be doing better as a society, as a community. And this is our effort in showing support for everyone that's out in the community."

SEX TALK:
Update on PrEP

Big things are happening in the world of HIV prevention. Reducing—or even eliminating—HIV transmission is within reach, thanks to advances in Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). This is incredible news for not just at-risk populations, but everyone on the planet. Approximately 41 million people worldwide are living with HIV, but they're not the only ones affected. Their friends and family feel the effects. Healthcare staff and communities must bear the increased burden of disease, especially in countries where HIV treatment is not accessible. The cost of healthcare increases with each new HIV diagnosis. In 2026, HIV is very treatable for those with access to antiretroviral drugs, but it is still not curable. Prevention is by far the best way to alleviate the global impact of HIV.



For the unfamiliar, and for those who could use a review, PrEP is a medication that reduces the risk of HIV infection. When used as prescribed by an HIV-negative person, PrEP is more than 99% effective in preventing transmission. It uses a low dose of an antiretroviral drug (the same category of drug that, in higher doses, is used to treat HIV) to prevent viral replication. In simple terms, if there's an exposure, PrEP stops the virus before it can take hold in the body.

The first daily oral PrEP medication, Truvada, was approved by the FDA in 2012. That's more than 10 years ago. So why am I writing about this now?

Well, for one, PrEP use is astonishingly low among the folks most at risk. Men who have sex with men (MSM) are among the highest-risk groups. To be clear, this does not mean HIV is a "gay disease." Anyone can get HIV! However, it tends to show up most frequently in sexual minority populations. As such, it's important to target the communities most likely to be exposed to HIV when educating about PrEP. Unfortunately, these populations are often the most difficult to reach. They may have distrust in the medical system due to previous bad experiences and discrimination. They are more likely to be uninsured due to economic inequality. In some places, they are criminalized, making them reluctant to engage with healthcare professionals for fear of legal repercussions. Spreading the word about PrEP through channels outside of the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries can help reach new people and make education more accessible.

PrEP is also 100% covered by all insurance companies in Connecticut, as well as through state insurance. It's by prescription, so you'll have to see a doctor to get it. As with all medications, it's important to talk to your provider about whether it's a good fit for you

The other reason that a revisiting of PrEP is timely is because there are newer, more effective, and more convenient versions of PrEP available today! In addition to the daily pill, there is now an injectable form of PrEP that lasts six months and is nearly 100% effective. That means there is nothing to remember every single day. Twice a year, you set it and forget it. It's especially good news for people who are unstably housed, would prefer not to have a pill bottle at home where housemates might see it, or otherwise might have logistical difficulties maintaining PrEP in pill form.

PrEP is also 100% covered by all insurance companies in Connecticut, as well as through state insurance. It's by prescription, so you'll have to see a doctor to get it. As with all medications, it's important to talk to your provider about whether it's a good fit for you, so go to your appointment prepared with any questions you may have.

While these pharmaceutical advances are incredible news, it's still important to remember: PrEP only prevents HIV! Taking PrEP will not protect you from other STI's like chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, and it does not prevent pregnancy, either. I recommend using condoms for penetrative and oral sex, especially now as STI infections are on the rise. If you're having sex with anyone whose STI status you do not know, regular STI testing is also a good idea. The CDC recommends testing every 6-12 months for sexually active adults. However, if you are having higher-risk sexual interactions—for example, inconsistent condom use or anonymous partners—you may want to get tested more often. Getting tested is easy, and it protects you AND your partner(s). If you test positive for an STI, you can get treatment right away, and you can let any partners you've had since your last test know that they, too, should get tested.

While sexual safety isn't the most glamorous of topics, it is an important component of pleasurable sex. Safer sex reduces anxiety, which is the enemy of good sex! Using PrEP, condoms, regular testing, and other safer sex methods as appropriate means less worry about STI's. Plus, it shows you care about your partner's health and wellness, too.

If you have questions about PrEP or safer sex, I recommend talking with your primary care provider to start. They will be able to help you understand your options and refer you to further resources if needed.

Stay safe and have fun!

—Kimberly Adamski

Anchor Health Connecticut



Anchor Health began as a small, one-room operation. A decade later, the organization serves 5,000 patients and employs more than 60 people. As the need for LGBTQ+-inclusive health care has grown, Anchor Health has continued to adapt to patients' needs, expand its services and foster a welcoming environment.

Currently operating in Hamden and Stamford, Anchor Health plans to relocate its Hamden office to New Haven and open a new location in Hartford within the next six-to-nine months.

Most patients rely on Anchor Health for their primary care and mental health needs. The organization also provides gender-affirming care and other services such as HIV Care, and a trauma-informed approach to pelvic exams through their Queer Pelvis Project. Beyond medical treatment, Anchor Health works to support patients through their case management program who are facing challenges such as food insecurity and homelessness. The goal is to reduce financial barriers related to health care costs and insurance coverage, making sure patients can still get the care they need.

As Anchor Health expands, they are keeping accessibility and inclusivity at the forefront of their efforts. The move to New Haven will make care more accessible to patients who rely on public transportation, with the office located within walking distance of the train station and near major bus routes as well as a shuttle to Tweed New Haven Airport.

Bethany Cinque, director of donor engagement, says creating a safe space for patients is essential. She knows firsthand what it's like to be discriminated against in receiving health care, and as an employee and patient at Anchor Health has found a place to feel seen. "If we can be the one safe space they have in a day, the one good conversation they have on the phone where they don't have to worry about their pronouns being disrespected or being told no, or 'I'm not sure; I'll find out for you,'" Cinque said. "We can be that one positive in a sea of discrimination and hate and misunderstanding and misinformation."

Cinque says the organization's strength lies in its staff, including doctors, nurses, advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) and patient care associates. Many staff members identify as LGBTQ+ and understand the unique needs of the communities they serve, helping patients feel seen, understood and supported.

Anchor Health hosts a variety of community events and educational programs, including a monthly Name & ID Clinic to help transgender and gender-diverse individuals update their legal names and gender markers. CEO Patricia Chadwick says that as Anchor Health expands into its new office, the organization hopes to offer more after-hours programming. Chadwick and Bethany Cinque echo that 2027 is Anchor Health's year, with endless possibilities for expanding its services and community impact.

To commemorate Anchor Health's decade-long commitment to serving the LGBTQ+ community and its vision for the future, the organization held a gala on Oct. 24 at The Loading Dock in Stamford. The event brought together community members and allies to recognize the organization's impact and support its continued work.

For Cinque, planning the event was an opportunity to spread joy and create a brighter future for the LGBTQ+ Community.

"This event was imagining a future where things are brighter and supporting Anchor Health means investing in a future that is not as sad and difficult. We are looking to build a future where we can just celebrate queer joy and have accessible health care for everyone who needs it. An affirming place where your identity is respected and understood. And then that creates a better, healthier world," Cinque said.

–Morgan Shay

THE CT SPORTS PROUD JERSEY:
Embodying Unity in Connecticut

When the Hartford Gay Men's Chorus (HGMC) was double-booked to sing the national anthem at Pride Night games for both the Hartford Athletic and the Connecticut Sun in June of 2025, John Vincent Pica-Sneeden, executive director of the Connecticut Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (CTGLC) and a member of HGMC, knew he had to step in. With the chorus unable to perform at both games, Pica-Sneeden saw an opportunity to ensure Pride Night wasn't split in two, while also searching for a way to create a greater sense of unity across Connecticut's sports community.



The result was the CT Sports Proud jersey and T-shirt collection, a unifying symbol of what it means to come together regardless of which team they supported.

During the yearlong process of making the jersey and T-shirt, Connecticut's professional and minor league sports teams came together to support CT Sports Proud, a message Pica-Sneeden says is centered on being "proud of the teams, proud to live in Connecticut and proud of the state's sports history." The creation of this jersey brought together teams including Hartford Athletic, the Hartford Yard Goats, the Hartford Wolf Pack, the Bridgeport Islanders and the Connecticut Sun, along with the efforts of the CTGLC.

The jersey's design celebrates Connecticut's sports history, both past and present, while incorporating the state's colors and emblem, as well as the arenas and stadiums where they play. The jersey features a pattern reminiscent of Connecticut's quilting tradition, with "CT Sports Proud" across the center.

The three stars on the "T" in "CT" represent teams that are no longer active here in CT, including the Hartford Whalers (1974 to 1997) the Connecticut Defenders (2003 to 2019) and the New Haven Ravens (1994 to 2003). The jersey also features "1874," the year Connecticut's first professional sports team began playing, the CTGLC logo on the left sleeve, and an empty space where fans can add the patches of their favorite CT Teams.

The five additional stars in the logo represent Connecticut's active professional teams who collaborated on the Jersey: Hartford Athletic, Hartford Yard Goats, Hartford Wolf Pack, Bridgeport Islanders and the Connecticut Sun.

Additionally, this year, the teams successfully avoided double-booking Pride Night events this year, allowing each celebration to receive its full attention. Pica-Sneeden and the organizations involved hope that the same approach can extend to other cultural and heritage observances, ensuring each receives the attention it deserves.

Pica-Sneeden hopes the jersey and T-shirt will serve as a starting point for bringing people together, with the idea eventually inspiring other states in the U.S. to create similar ways to unite and build community. For now, he hopes to see a "wave of blue" in the stands at games across Connecticut. "If everyone is united by the jersey, it can prove everyone can get along," Pica-Sneeden said.



Rashad Hyacenth, Executive VP, Business Development Hartford Athletic and John Pica-Sneeden, Photo Credit: Kate Wickenheisser

Jerseys and T-shirt's can be purchased online directly through the CTGLC Store or the Hartford Athletic Apparel Shop.

–Morgan Shay

Artist Turns Author

FRAVER, BROADWAY'S LEGENDARY DESIGNER, TAKES A SHOT AT MURDER



Frank "Fraver" Verlizzo.
Photo Credit: Jon Bierman

Over five decades, artist Frank "Fraver" Verlizzo created some of the most iconic Broadway show posters for productions including *Sweeney Todd*, *Deathtrap*, *As Is*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Follies*, and countless more. Educated at Pratt Institute, he began work in theatrical advertising in 1974, starting as a production artist, eventually becoming an art director and working at J. Walter Thompson and Grey Entertainment before forming his own company so he could concentrate on design. His work has often been the first connection an audience has with a show and sets the visual stage for a production, often long before the first tickets are sold. As art, these posters—also known as "window cards"—can be prized collectibles for Broadway fans.

So, after such an illustrious career, what an artist can—or wants to—do next can be a mystery. In the case of Fraver, that's meant literally.

Prior to the pandemic Fraver had moved with his husband Joe Ligammari to Stratford, Connecticut, which he stresses still makes Broadway easily accessible. When the shutdown happened and Broadway went dark, Fraver started to write. "I've always been a big murder mystery fan," he says. So, he thought he'd try his hand at it. The result is a series of what Fraver calls "retro Broadway mysteries," set in the Broadway world in the mid-1970s, an exciting time on Broadway to be sure. The genre, he notes, is "cozy mysteries," which are tales set in small communities—think Cabot Cove from *Murder, She Wrote*. Fraver notes that the Broadway community is "intimate and insular," essentially a small village in the heart of the big city. Fraver says that Broadway is "essentially seven square blocks where everything happens," so it definitely qualifies as cozy.

The first two books in the series: *Scenery of the Crime* and *Sanity Claus* are charming page turners full of wonderful characters and hilarious situations, as well as exciting mystery stories that keep you guessing till the end. Perhaps not surprisingly, two of the main characters, Vic Senso and Bettie Balboa, work in a theatrical advertising agency and get drawn into the murder and mystery surrounding shows they're working on.

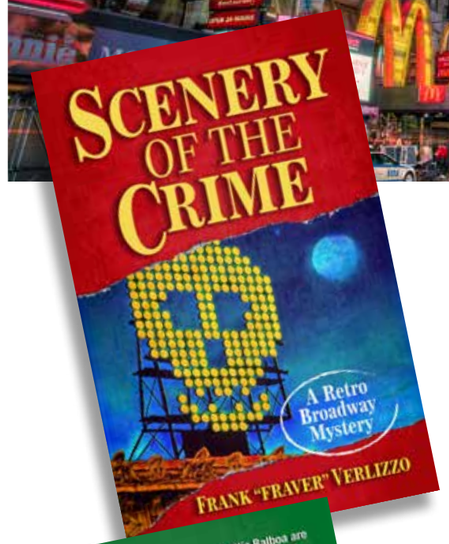
With decades working in the theater and so close to many famous productions, Fraver accumulated a wealth of inside stories about the shows and the people involved. In the mysteries, he brilliantly weaves those together with real stars and shows of the period. Theater fans or those in the business may want to hazard a guess at the

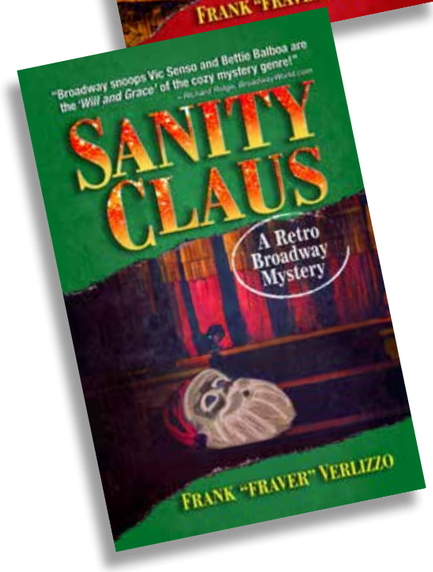












real-life inspirations for some of Fraver's fictional characters. The author, however, was diplomatically mum as I tried to figure them out, enjoying the insider's game he's created in his tales.

Fraver is, however, willing to admit that some of the anecdotes woven into the narrative are based on true stories. One of my favorites is the way nearly an entire production team was assembled to ensure that the size of a star's billing on a marquee was correct so as to mollify the actor. Fraver describes the scene so clearly, you just know it really happened, and it's hilarious.

Theater fans will also recognize many of the locations—Sardi's, The Dakota, the entire Times Square neighborhood. Yet it's the world of the 1970s. Theaters like the Morosco and the original Helen Hayes figure in both stories, before they were torn down in 1982 to make way for the Mariott Marquis.

As you would expect there is the potential for romance—gay and straight—and other allusions to New York of the period, all of which add to the richness of the settings. You may also laugh out loud, as I did, to see The Anvil, the notorious BDSM club on 14th Street from 1974-1985, described somewhat coyly as "an after-hours club," which is technically true, but...

Fraver's energy and sense of fun is infectious, and he clearly having a marvelous time with these books. He says that his publisher Camel Press has committed to six in the series, so far. With the first two set in 1975, the next ones will be in 1975 and 1977.

As an artist who drew us into the theater (literally and figuratively) for five decades, Fraver now offers two on the aisle for marvelous, mayhem, murder, and mystery. As *Variety* might say, "run, don't walk to grab your copies."

"Scenery of the Crime" and "Sanity Claus"
Published by Camel Press
$18.95

—Christopher Byrne

Celebrate the Season

AT SAYBROOK POINT RESORT & MARINA



Photos courtesy of Saybrook Point Resort & Marina

The Connecticut shoreline sparkles in a different way come winter—especially at Saybrook Point Resort and Marina. Holiday lights glow in the windows, festive celebrations unfold with every detail attended to, and an afternoon at the spa flows into an evening of waterfront dining. The holiday season offers plenty of reasons to get away—and just as many reasons to return when the calendar turns to January.

Located in Old Saybrook, the resort brings together waterfront accommodations, dining and wellness in one destination. During the holidays, it becomes a setting for celebrations, family traditions and overnight escapes. Through winter, it offers an opportunity to enjoy the shoreline at a different pace, with the comforts of a resort close at hand.

The Christmas Suite is a particularly festive place to begin. Available through December 31, this seasonal retreat starts booking in early fall, surrounding guests with a glowing Christmas tree, twinkling lights and festive garlands and wreaths. Against the backdrop of the Connecticut shoreline, the decorations create a storybook setting for a holiday stay.

Part of Connecticut's Christmas Movie Trail, the suite captures the charm of a Christmas film while giving guests a holiday experience of their own. It is an inviting choice for a couple's getaway, a surprise for a Christmas enthusiast or an overnight visit built around a new family tradition.

The appeal is in having the atmosphere ready upon arrival. Guests can settle in, enjoy the lights and make time for the pleasures that often get squeezed out of December: watching a favorite movie, sharing an unhurried evening or waking up somewhere special.

Beyond the suite, holiday celebrations give guests more ways to make the season special. Brunch with Santa pairs festive dining with a visit from Old Saint Nick—a treat for little ones and a chance for families to gather. Stay overnight to make a weekend of it, leaving time to enjoy the resort and explore the shops and streets of Old Saybrook.

The Christmas Day dinner buffet provides a welcoming alternative to hosting at home. With festive dining overlooking the marina, families and friends can focus on the celebration while the resort takes care of preparing and serving the meal.

The festivities continue with Time and Tide, Saybrook Point's New Year's Eve Gala. Dining, entertainment, and a waterfront setting make the evening an opportunity to dress up, gather with friends, and welcome 2027 in style. Guests can choose between gala-only tickets, available for purchase online, or a special overnight package that includes two gala tickets, overnight accommodations, and their signature brunch. Overnight packages can be reserved through the resort's Reservations Department.

New Year's Day brunch offers a leisurely start to the year and a fitting finish to a holiday getaway.

Throughout a visit, Fresh Salt gives guests a place to enjoy waterfront dining, whether the occasion is a celebratory dinner or a meal shared during an overnight stay. The Choo Choo Lounge adds another option for an evening out, with a current schedule of live music Tuesday through Thursday and Monday trivia. Together, they make it easy to plan an enjoyable evening without even leaving the property.





Old Saybrook provides additional reasons to extend a visit. The Saybrook Starlight Festival brings holiday festivities to town and makes that weekend an appealing choice for a seasonal escape. Guests can leave time to explore local shops, find gifts and experience the community alongside their resort stay.

When the holiday celebrations end, Saybrook Point remains a destination for winter travel. January and February invite a different kind of getaway, centered on relaxation, dining and time together.

The Spa at Saybrook Point offers treatments that can become the centerpiece of a visit. A massage or facial pairs naturally with an overnight stay, giving guests time to enjoy the experience without rushing back to their daily schedules.

The resort's heated indoor pool adds another dimension to a winter escape. Guests can pack a swimsuit along with their winter layers and enjoy a change from the usual cold-weather routine.

At Saybrook Point, the invitation doesn't end when the holiday lights come down. January brings time to recharge; February offers a reason to escape together. With waterfront dining, restorative spa treatments and cozy overnight stays, Saybrook Point Resort & Marina makes winter on the Connecticut shoreline a season to celebrate.

—Kerri Lee Maynard

Happy Holidays with Cheyenne Jackson and Family

By **FRANK RIZZO**

For Cheyenne Jackson, holidays mean family time, and to the actor-singer, family is everything.

"The holidays were always one of my favorite times growing up, so I really try to make it a big deal in my house," said Jackson in a Zoom conversation from his Los Angeles home where he lives with his husband of 12 years Jason Landau, and their twin 10-year-old children, Willow and Ethan.

"We celebrate all the holiday things and go nuts. We start playing Christmas music as soon as Thanksgiving's over. We get a big tree, which my daughter picks out. We do Santa. We also do Jason's Jewish side."

As far as doing anything LGBTQ+-centric, Jackson laughs: "Just being a gay family makes us it a gay Christmas."

"We have a great day with our family—Jason's an incredible cook—and then we go visit our extended family and friends. Last year we also went down to God's Love We Deliver (the non-sectarian charity that delivers medically tailored meals to people who cannot feed themselves due to illness). We try to do some sort of service during the holidays and try making that a tradition."

Jackson, the third of four children, fondly remembers growing up during the holidays in Oldtown, Idaho "when we'd get three or four feet of snow and it would be so cold. Before we'd go to church, I'd chop wood and, my brother would stack it and feed the animals. But inside it would be so cozy around the fire. Those were the times I felt the closest to my family. Those were the times I felt the most safe."

Jackson is doing a lot of looking back for his new concert/cabaret show, *That Guy from That Thing*, which he performed in October at The Bushnell in Hartford and will be touring the country in the coming year between acting gigs.

The title is in reference to what people would say when they recognize him—but are not exactly sure from where. It could be one of the 40-plus television programs (*American Horror Story, Descendants*) or more than 20 films (*United 93, Six Dance Lessons in Six Weeks*) or from one of his 10 Broadway shows (*All Shook Up, Oh, Mary!*).

But this new show is different from others he's performed over the years, he said, because its more personal and meaningful, both to him and to his audience. "I call it unzipping my gut. I think people can sometimes see themselves in my stories and hopefully feel like we're all in together.

"When I turned 50 a year ago, I honestly developed a case of the 'fuck-it's. For years, I cared so hard about what people thought or wrote about me or what their perception of me was."

What changed? "Having kids, having a parent die and friends die, and just being in the world. Now I'm being honest about everything: about having hair plugs, about growing older, whatever."

Even bad reviews. In the show Jackson sings a version of the Sinatra what-the-hell standard, "That's Life" and intersperses it with some of his worst reviews he's received "and taking that power back."

Taking honest stock of his life publicly included reconciling his relatively happy family childhood with the struggles of growing up isolated and queer in rural northern Idaho.

His youth and coming out story "was exacerbated by being in a really hyper religious and racist part of the state, near the [North American neo-Nazi group] Aryan Nation compound outside Coeur d'Alene."



Photos Credit: Vince Truspin





"I try to look at the good," he said of looking back at his youth. "I even went back to my 30th high school reunion where I had some come-to-Jesus moments with a couple of my high school bullies."

Jackson didn't make it to New York City until he was in his late 20s in the early 2000s but he also arrived as a fully out gay man. Understudy and other roles soon followed. When he got the lead in a new Broadway musical *All Shook Up* in which he played an Elvis-like pop star, he didn't hide his identity, rejecting the idea of being vague about his sexuality in promotional interviews.

"There is no other person I'm going to be other than myself, and I will let everything fall as it may. There weren't a lot of us [out gay actors] at the time and I'm sure I missed out on big things, but I was out and proud."

Now 51 and with more than two decades of credits as a high profile celebrity, Jackson takes his gay role model status seriously. "I know the decisions that I've made, the roles that I've played, and just the person I am have made an impact on people."

Jackson said that both their children last year have come out—as straight. "They were nine so things can change, but we were eating breakfast one day and my daughter said, 'Hey, Dads. I'm not gay.' And me and Jason were like, 'You know what, honey? We will love you no matter what.' And then my son, without even looking up from his eggs, said, 'Yeah, I'm not gay either—but I want to go to that parade."

Jackson was Grand Marshall in the Gay Pride Parade in Palm Springs. "They love a gay parade, so of course I said, 'Yeah, for sure."

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(bik-TAR-vee)

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LAUGHS ON ICE

All photos from *Heated Rivalry: The Unauthorized Parody Musical.* Photo Credit: Matthew Murphy

CONNECTICUT MAN SPOOFS 'HEATED RIVALRY' IN OFF-BROADWAY HIT

By **FRANK RIZZO**



A year ago, Dylan MarcAurele's friends kept urging him to watch what was quickly becoming a cultural phenom: the new HBO series *Heated Rivalry*, about two opposing—and very libidinous—hockey superstars who secretly hook up, only to discover that feelings were deeper than either realized.

More addicted to reality TV than scripted shows, MarcAurele—who grew up in East Granby—finally checked out what everyone was talking about.

Before the six-episode series concluded in December 2025, MarcAurele not only joined the fandom but also began envisioning an affectionate musical parody of the show. Within three weeks, he wrote the book, music, lyrics and orchestrations for *Heated Rivalry: The Unauthorized Parody Musical*.

"I only have an interest in parodying things that I love," he said from his Upper East Side home, "and this series was so brilliantly written, filmed, produced, edited—everything."

His goal was a one-off pop concert, but when that immediately sold out, producer-friend Alan Kliffer saw it as a fully staged production. An off-Broadway show, directed by Kliffer, was arranged in a matter of weeks and opened in May at The Culture Club in Chelsea.

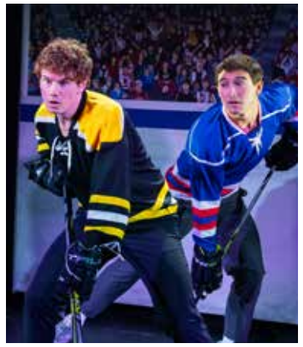
Jay Armstrong Johnson and Jimin Moon—both actors with many Broadway credits—were cast in the seven-actor show, which opened to critical praise.

The run has been extended several times and is now playing into January, and they've recorded a cast album. "It's been nuts," said MarcAurele, 31.

Like the Rachel Reid's best-selling, steamy book and Jacob Tierney's fleshy television adaptation, MarcAurele's version centers on Canadian player Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, his Russian rival, who begin a clandestine affair, navigating its complex sexual and emotional dynamics. (And no, the only nudity the show is a flash of butt at the show's end.)

MarcAurele said he understands those who can't imagine hockey lovers singing, "but when we sing, we're




expressing our inner-most thoughts and insecurities so now we can see what they're thinking—though when it's a parody musical the writer is taking some liberties." One highlight is when Ilya sings: "This Fuck Isn't Like the Last Fuck."

But his approach, MarcAurele said, isn't simply about jokes but a show with strong characters, memorable songs, and genuine emotional stakes.

Though he was fairly sure his parody fell within copyright laws, he was nevertheless anxious when HBO came to an early reading. "I was holding my breath the entire time, but they said they loved it and couldn't wait to see it Off-Broadway. Rachel Reid said she considers it to be a badge of honor."

FROM EAST GRANBY TO HARVARD TO NYC

Following high school graduation in East Granby, MarcAurele, went to Harvard where he soon switched majors from economics to music and composing works for student productions, honing his skills as an orchestrator and songwriter.

Writing blind to Broadway music director Alex Lacamoire, MarcAurele said he would take any unpaid position. Lacamoire said yes, and the fledgling composer arrived in New York as a music assistant on *Hamilton*. (He soon was upgraded to a salary.)

MarcAurele's early work circled around the comic genre with the musical parodies *The Real Housewives of NYC: The Unauthorized Parody Musical* and *MEG4N*, an unauthorized parody musical based on the horror film *M3GAN*.

MarcAurele's work earned him a position with the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop, a Jonathan Larson Grant, fellowships from the Dramatists Guild Foundation and the Richard Rodgers Award for MarcAurele's music for the show *Lewis Loves Clark* (with book and lyrics by Mike Ross.) That show is being further developed with director Robert O'Hara.

MarcAurele's shows echo the current popularity of loopy downtown shows, such as *Titanique*, and *Oh, Mary!*, both of which moved to Broadway.

MarcAurele said it's been a game changer year. "I wasn't sure whether I could make a living as a writer and I now feel so much more confident, with less of that 'imposter syndrome.' It's the coolest feeling."

Would there be second musical parody when the next season of the series comes out in late spring? "OMG," said MarcAurele. "I might have to be institutionalized."



The second season of the HBO series, dropping next summer, is based on the series' sixth book, *The Long Game,* which follows the Ilya-Shane romance. It will also includes elements of the fifth book in the series, *Role Model.*

***Unrivaled*, the third book centered on Ilya and Shane—and the seventh and final book of the Game Changers series will be out next summer and concludes the Shane and Illya trilogy.**





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The VOICE 30 OF CONNECTICUT

THIRTY LGBTQ+ LEADERS. LIMITLESS IMPACT.

Welcome to our first annual celebration of a group of amazing individuals in Connecticut whose lives and work have been serving LGBTQ+ communities in the state. From people in government, to entertainment, to health, to organizations dedicated to helping, these are people who have devoted their lives and their careers to helping—and who have changed lives for the better with their passion and dedication.

The people you'll meet in these pages are true heroes. We stand in awe and admiration of their accomplishments and are honored to celebrate them. These people were nominated by people from around the state and selected by our editorial team.

Writer Morgan Shay had the pleasure of interviewing all of them, and believe us when we tell you that each of these amazing folks has done—and continues to do—so much more than we could ever list in these pages.

We also want to acknowledge the founding sponsors who have made this program possible: Liberty Bank, Anchor Health, Greater Hartford Gives, as well as supporting sponsors The Saybrook Point Marina and Spa, Circle Care Center, and Ridgefield Playhouse.

We know you'll want to join them and us in celebrating our 2026 honorees.

READ ON!

The VOICE 30 celebrating our 2026 honorees.



Kim Adamski

Kim Adamski has amassed more than 1,000 followers on Instagram, a platform she uses to normalize conversations about sexual health and sex education. With 15 years of experience as a sexual health educator, she uses her platform to listen and respond to the needs of her community, while sharing information that is often left out of traditional sex education. Her work emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and representing LGBTQ+ identities and experiences in conversations about sexual education and health.

Adamski's journey into sex education began in high school after noticing the lack of sex education classes. During her undergraduate years at UConn, she became a "sexpert" in the university's sex education department before going on to teach sex education in New York state prisons.

Today, Adamski serves as Circle Care Center's sexual health educator, where she focuses on educational programming, including sex education panels, discussions, and trivia events. She also provides LGBTQ+ inclusivity training for organizations and companies and sexual wellness education programs for community groups.

Adamski's frank "Sex Talk" column in *Connecticut Voice* magazine often covers topics others avoid. She created QueerMunchCT, a monthly event that allows LGBTQ+ individuals to explore sexual pleasure and access resources in a nonsexualized setting.

Adamski hopes to remain a familiar and trusted resource for the community. "It's hard to figure out which resources are good. So I vet resources, help people figure out where to find them, and just be somebody who is willing to answer your questions, or at least to refer you to someone who can."



Laura Boccadoro

Laura Boccadoro has established herself as a reliable voice in the community, someone people can turn to for anything, and someone willing to speak up for issues that matter. Through her work at A Place to Nourish Your Health (APNH) and New Haven Pride, she says she has been privileged to use her visibility to support others.

Coming out of rehab and directly and personally experiencing homophobia, Boccadoro drew on her own personal narrative to help others in any way she could and make them feel seen and safe. One of the first places she turned to was the New Haven Pride Center, where she began her career as an intern and was a place that had helped her, inspiring her to return that same level of support to others.

Through her seven years with New Haven Pride, she produced the annual Pride event, starting in 2019, and is now a consultant for the 2027 event for the New Haven Pride Center.

Additionally, Boccadoro continues to be very much involved with APNH,, working with folks and helping with free STI, HIV, hep C and syphilis testing, and providing much-needed information about free services, a growing food pantry, and disease and substance abuse prevention. She took on the role of Development Director last September.

Laura's deep commitment to advocacy also extends to reproductive rights. Every Saturday morning from 9 a.m. to noon, she joins other advocates outside Planned Parenthood with signs supporting reproductive rights and the right to choose.



Patricia Chadwick

As co-founder and pro bono Chief Executive Officer of Anchor Health, **Patricia Chadwick** was instrumental in building the organization from its earliest days into one of Connecticut's leading health centers serving the LGBTQ+ community. Chadwick has demonstrated what it means to be a true ally, advocating for the community and working to ensure LGBTQ+ people have access to inclusive health care.

Chadwick says being part of Anchor Health has truly become a passion for her, and she has been able to help it adapt to the changing needs and demands of the community.

Prior to joining Anchor Health, Patricia had built a career on Wall Street during the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when few women held positions of influence in finance. Her experience helped shape her belief in recognizing potential in people who may not always be given a seat at the table.

One of Patricia's nominators, Bethany Cinque, says Patricia has committed herself fully to Anchor Health and supporting its mission.

"Patricia's leadership at Anchor Health reflects a commitment to something bigger than herself, a commitment to not speaking for a community, but listening to it, investing in it, and helping ensure it has the resources and infrastructure to thrive. She broke barriers in her own career and has spent years helping remove barriers for others. Her legacy can be seen in the organizations she has strengthened, the causes she has championed, the opportunities she has created and, perhaps most importantly, the people in whom she has chosen to believe," says Cinque.



Shelby C. Davis

Since founding City Youth Theater and City Stage Company in 2019, **Shelby C. Davis** has made it his goal to provide "theater for all," making theater accessible to every child, regardless of their background, gender identity, race, or financial circumstances. Davis supports his students, offering guidance and resources beyond theater, from providing transportation and meals to giving students the opportunity to see shows for free.

Davis has continued to bring theater to the community, producing 10 full-scale productions through City Youth Theater and City Stage Company. City Youth Theater is a nonprofit organization that provides classes and theater experiences, including a free summer theater program for young people in Connecticut, while City Stage Company provides theater opportunities for participants ages 16 and older. Davis also served three years on the Waterbury Arts and Tourism Commission, helping advocate for the arts in the Waterbury area.

By day, Davis is a school counselor in Waterbury Public Schools. In that role, he continues to use his voice to support others, serving as an integral part of his students' support systems by listening to them, encouraging them and motivating them to pursue their future goals.

Davis' nominator, Pedro Pagan, said, "As an openly LGBTQ+ leader, Shelby has worked to create welcoming and affirming environments where young people and artists of all backgrounds can express themselves authentically. His dedication to inclusion, service and community building has made a lasting impact across Connecticut, inspiring others to use the arts as a vehicle for empowerment, education and positive change."

The VOICE 30 celebrating our 2026 honorees.



Rebecca Degnan

Rebecca Degnan, LPC, Founder and Owner of Prism Counseling, has always used her voice to advocate for others. Throughout her career, she has continued to create spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals feel supported, heard and accepted.

During her work as a school counselor and chorus teacher, she became keenly aware of a lack of support and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students. As a result, she decided to keep her door open to students who needed someone to talk to and eventually started a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at her school.

In 2020, when her son came out as transgender, Degnan recognized the urgent need specifically for more LGBTQ+ resources and trans youth support in the Haddam/Killingworth area. That was the starting point for Prism Counseling, founded to support families navigating coming out and gender transition.

Since then, the organization has grown into a safe and supportive space where LGBTQ+ individuals of all ages can feel seen, accepted, and connected to the mental health resources they need as well as providing resources and support for their loved ones.

Degnan sees it as a privilege to be able to join people on their journeys as they transition or navigate their gender and sexual identities. For some, Prism is the first place people feel comfortable talking about these topics. "As allies, it makes sense for us to do the bulk of the heavy lifting in advocacy and making the world safer. We must be willing to hear the stories of the people that are struggling and celebrate the wins," said Degnan.



Shane Engstrom

Twenty-six years ago, after he came out, **Shane Engstrom**, now President and Festival Director, joined Out Film CT. What began as a search for community quickly grew into a commitment to leadership and helping others find the same sense of belonging he found and see their lives and experiences represented on the big screen.

For 39 years, Out Film has prided itself on staying true to its mission of entertaining and educating people through the display of LGBTQ films, providing an opportunity for the community to come together and learn about the art of filmmaking.

One of the ways Out Film builds community is through their monthly "Queer Thursday" screenings held at Cinestudio theater at Trinity College in Hartford, CT, as well as their annual film festival (one of the longest running LGBTQ+ film festivals in the US), which Engstrom says is a first introduction to the LGBTQ+ community for many in Connecticut.

The films shown during the monthly screenings and festival, encompass the diversity of the LGBTQ+ experience. "We do our best to provide programming for all parts of the LGBTQ community, so that everyone can see a bit of themselves on the big screen," Engstrom said.

Out Film has also been a nominating organization for the Iris Prize, the largest award for queer, short filmmakers. As the organization approaches it's 40th film festival to be held next June, Engstrom hopes to continue building community and highlighting LGBTQ+ stories.



Joseph Fazzino

"Be Community Kind" is both Liberty Bank's promise and a guiding philosophy of **Joseph Fazzino's** work. Fazzino has served as co-chair of Liberty Bank's Pride Committee for two years and has been with the company for more than 10 years.

Liberty Bank's Head of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Marisol Rodriguez, shared, "Joey exemplifies what it means to be a servant leader and community champion. His compassion, authenticity, and enthusiasm inspire those around him and embody Liberty Bank's values. Joey's leadership helps create environments where people feel 'seen, valued, respected, and empowered to thrive.'"

Throughout his work on the Pride Committee, Fazzino has had the opportunity to represent Liberty Bank at Pride celebrations throughout the state, chaperone Connecticut's Queer Prom through the Health Collective, participate in lunch-and-learns focused on LGBTQ+ topics, and take part in community service initiatives, including Foodshare, and a book drive he spearheaded that collected more than 2,000 books for Read to Grow in Branford.

Fazzino stresses the importance of coming together in communities such as at the lunch-and-learn events and others, hoping they inspire a chain of kindness throughout the community, whether among allies or LGBTQ+ community members. "Those people go out into the world making things better for everyone, which is also better for themselves, too. And it's important that we give back in whatever way we can, even if it's something small."



Anna Fossi

As a public historian and Historic Places Project Manager, **Anna Fossi** is working to preserve Connecticut's LGBTQ+ history through an interactive map that documents historical sites across the state as part of the nonprofit Preservation Connecticut. Through this project, she has identified more than 300 buildings, gathering places, and cultural landscapes that are significant to the LGBTQ+ community, both past and present. The map preserves this history and is a reminder that LGBTQ+ people have always been part of Connecticut's history.

Her current project "Connecticut's LGBTQ+ Historic Places" is designed to get some of these sites that have not yet been listed—or had their LGBTQ+ histories documented—added to or updated on the National Register. Doing so would make these places eligible for financial support.

Fossi stresses just how much of LGBTQ+ history is also an important part of Connecticut and U.S. history. She hopes the project will create more conversations about preserving this history for places recently added to the list, and that will help people feel seen in the context of their heritage.

"My hope is that this map gets published, so that it gets to be more well known and that when LGBTQ+ people look at it and they feel like their history mattered and that it jogs their memory, and maybe they reach out about more details. I think that the stories just matter. You have overlap with, obviously, the women's movement, and every single minority also has people who are LGBT," Fossi said.

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Alice Gabriele

At just 16 years old, **Alice Gabriele** noticed the lack of LGBTQ+ events for teenagers her age in the North Haven area and was inspired to make a change. Recognizing the work that needs to be done, she continues to use her voice to advocate for others who may not have one.

This was the inspiration behind "Neon Nights," a way to blend community and fun and create a safe space where teenagers could simply exist in community with one another at North Haven's Rec Center.

Gabriele played a central role in planning the event, from hiring photographers and vendors to coordinating the music and lighting, all while staying within budget.

"Alice stands out not only for her initiative and creativity but also for her commitment to making sure other young people feel seen, safe, and valued. Her work is already making a lasting impact in North Haven and reflects the kind of leadership that inspires others to build stronger, more inclusive communities," said Lauren Tagliatela, who nominated Gabriele.

Additionally, Alice plays a major role in using her voice to speak at events such as North Haven Pride meetings. She also successfully secured a $10,000 grant from the It Gets Better Project to help fund programming in North Haven.

She hopes her involvement in the community inspires others to get involved and use their voices. "It shows some of my friends that it's OK to talk about your feelings and to be queer, and that there is a community for people like us," Gabriele said.



Greg Gray

For the **Reverend Dr. Greg Gray**, one of the most important things is showing up and being a solid and supporting presence in his community. As pastor, he has helped create a welcoming and inclusive community at Enfield Congregational Church, a place where people can come together and feel safe and accepted, regardless of sexual orientation, ethnicity, background or religious beliefs.

Through the Open and Affirming Coalition, Gray has helped Enfield Congregational Church and other churches within the United Church of Christ denomination, achieve these important objectives for LGBTQ+ folks.

Gray was born in Monroe, Georgia, and began working in the church at age 15. He earned a Master of Divinity from Emory University before completing a Master of Sacred Theology at Boston University School of Theology. He later earned a Doctor of Ministry from Boston University School of Theology. During his doctoral studies, he met his husband, Rev. Dr. Jonathan Chapman.

Enfield Congregational Church hosts community events and services throughout the year to support the LGBTQ+ community. The church also holds book studies and movie discussions that explore the intersection of queer identity and faith.

"I hope that whenever we put up our ginromous rainbow banners or bisexual or trans banners, people know they are welcome here. I think that can cut through the problem of the big facade of the church. There's this huge steeple, and I've got to walk through these doors, and, I think, that's going to be awful. And then they see me, and I'm just goofy," said Gray.



Katherine A. Hermes

Dr. Katherine Hermes is a historian and advocate who works to preserve LGBTQ+ history and Indigenous history. As a professor at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) from 1997 to 2022, she helped students better understand LGBTQ+ history.

Hermes holds a JD from Duke University and a PhD from Yale University. Before joining CCSU in 1997, she taught for five years at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. At CCSU, she introduced courses in constitutional history and Native American history to the curriculum.

Hermes co-coordinated the university's Women's Studies program, expanding its title to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies when this was still a relatively new field of study. As chair of the History Department, she introduced a GLBTQ history course. Additionally, while teaching history methods, she dedicated sections of the course to the history of sexuality.

Since becoming Publisher and Executive Director of *Connecticut Explored,* a historical magazine, in 2022, Hermes has helped highlight LGBTQ+ history and stories in Connecticut. The magazine has covered LGBTQ+ subjects, including the Palmer-Warner House in East Haddam, and explored LGBTQ+ history through its podcast, *Grating the Nutmeg*. Stories have ranged from a profile of Maurice Sendak, the gay children's author and illustrator, to a look at the now-closed, Bridgeport lesbian feminist, vegan restaurant Bloodroot, and an in-depth story about a transgender man who was a physician and among the earliest people to transition.

Hermes is also working with Central Connecticut State University's public history program and Preservation Connecticut on an LGBTQ+ history trail.



Kamora Herrington

Kamora Herrington has created spaces for conversations that are often lacking, grounded in the principles of cultural humility. Approaching this through a Black, queer and Afrocentric perspective, the mission of Kamora's Cultural Corner (KCC), the organization she founded, is is to "create brave spaces with the intention of building and supporting organic community connections."

Herrington has ensured that the needs of Black queer youth are seen and centered, creating spaces where everyone is welcome and can come together.

At 4 years old, Herrington was already challenging perceptions of race, recognizing the power of language and seeking ways to make a difference despite others telling her she could not.

She began her career in education as a teacher for the City of Hartford's Early Learning Centers. In 2005, she began working with True Colors, where she ran a mentoring program for queer youth that primarily served Black and brown students, while many of their mentors were white and from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Through this work, Herrington was inspired to develop Kamora's Cultural Corner.

KCC programs encourage participants to examine how factors such as age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and region shape their experiences and perspectives. By introducing concepts such as intersectionality, KCC creates space for conversations that people may otherwise feel excluded from or lack the vocabulary to navigate.

Herrington encourages people to participate in KCC's workshops and training as a step toward building more inclusive communities, always emphasizing the importance of building "sustained, trusting relationships created over time" with people who share similar experiences.

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Joel Hicks-Rivera

Through his five years with the Greater Hartford Gives Foundation, **Joel Hicks-Rivera** and his team provide grants to LGBTQIA+ organizations serving the community. Hicks-Rivera says his work is about understanding communities' needs and ensuring organizations have the resources and support to make a meaningful impact.

Hicks-Rivera holds a bachelor's degree from Bradford College, an MS in organizational leadership from Mercy College and an MS in professional counseling from Central Connecticut State University. He worked for the Department of Rehabilitation Services before moving into the nonprofit sector. He co-chairs the Workforce Affinity Group with the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy and serves on the Governor's Workforce Council, the Connecticut Career Pathways Commission, and several Greater Hartford workforce initiatives, including the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative. Hicks-Rivera became a commissioner on the City of Hartford's LGBTQ+ Commission, where he supported moving Hartford Pride from September to June.

Hicks-Rivera has mentored future leaders through the Young Legends Youth Leadership Network with Hartford Working Cities and advocates for LGBTQ+ youth who may lack support systems.

"What I find is that when I offer, as a male of color, vulnerability and my true story to them, they're sort of able to see themselves in that story. I'm very out. I'm open, so I'll share that as part of my story. My parents kicked me out at 17 because of my queerness. I wish that I had had an older queer person of color when I was out and on the streets that I could talk to," Hicks-Rivera said.



Leonard-Litz Foundation

When Leonard-Litz Foundation founders and partners Elliot Leonard and Roger Litz moved back to Connecticut in the early 2010s, they immersed themselves in LGBTQ+ advocacy, including Leonard's involvement as a board member of the Triangle Community Center. Through their work in the community, they saw firsthand the lack of funding available to LGBTQ+ nonprofits across Connecticut. From this need, the Leonard-Litz Foundation was established in 2019, built on a mission to support the LGBTQ+ community and help individuals and organizations reach their highest potential.

Litz was a veterinarian and artist, while Leonard was an attorney. They shared a belief that the world should be an easier place for young LGBTQ+ people and wanted to provide the support system and chosen family that they had not had.

For seven years, the foundation has provided funding to organizations that advance the interests and well-being of LGBTQ+ people through advocacy, programs, and services that address the needs of the community. It has provided more than $5 million in grants to organizations across the Northeast. The foundation has also funded and helped establish the Bridgeport Pride Center.

The Leonard-Litz Foundation lost its beloved founder, Elliot, in June 2026. As Executive Director, **Judy Troilo** (pictured) will continue Elliot's legacy with the support of Roger and the foundation's trustees, building on Elliot's commitment to a culture rooted in kindness, empathy, and philanthropy. "We will remain focused on those that need it most, helping our transgender, nonbinary, youth, and Black and brown communities," Troilo said.



Tess Maxam

Since joining Circle Care in August of 2025 as a Family Nurse Practitioner, **Tess Maxam** has made it her goal to embody the phrase "good care takes time." Every day, she strives to meet her patients where they are and remind folks that they are in charge of their health and lives.

Maxam graduated from Yale School of Nursing in 2025. She earned her undergraduate degree in biology and gender and sexuality studies from St. Lawrence University.

At Circle Care, Maxam provides services including primary care, sexual health, STI testing, and HIV prevention. She is also developing a gynecology program that includes sexual and reproductive health services.

Early in her career, Maxam noticed how LGBTQ+ folks are underserved and underrepresented in health care and knew she wanted to advocate for the community. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community and having personally had some negative experiences in the health care system, she takes a consent-based, trauma-informed approach to sensitive exams, including speculum and pelvic exams.

Maxam hopes she can set an example for others in health care and encourage others to reassess their approach to care.

"I hope that it becomes much more expected for folks to be treated with compassion and to feel like they can ask for that. You are allowed to expect more and to ask for more. Ultimately, I want to just help people to feel it's okay to advocate for themselves and to acknowledge if something doesn't feel right that's completely real and valid," Maxam said.



Nicholas Mendoza & Chad Stier

What started as an idea for a way to connect during the pandemic transformed into a third space for recreational sports where community and friendships extend far beyond the field.

Pride Sports founders **Nicholas Mendoza & Chad Stier** had previously worked to build LGBTQ+ community sporting events in Connecticut through organizations such as OutLoud Sports, but it wasn't until 2025 that Mendoza and his husband, Stier, founded Pride Sports.

Through regular practices and games across sports such as kickball and volleyball, Mendoza and Stier have created an environment where people can build chosen families across generations. Those chosen families have grown into friendships, birthday celebrations, holiday gatherings, and even romantic relationships.

Mendoza and Stier say players involved in Pride Sports have taken their passion for community and activism and turned it into a way to give back, and find new ways to make the world a better place.

"It's really nice to see that the community that we're building is giving people confidence to step out of their shells. And then they're the ones that are noticing the shy person that's new and making sure they make them feel they belong here. You may not know anyone here, but we are your family. We're your chosen family," Mendoza said.

One nominator and player in the Pride Sports League, Samuel Worobel, says "It is clear their motivation comes from genuine care for the people and the community they serve. Nick and Chad have changed my life and the lives of many others."

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Patricia Nicolari

Patricia Nicolari has worked as a principal and teacher for more than 30 years, creating spaces for LGBTQ+ people to feel seen and advocating for safer environments. Her work inspired the creation of PROUD Academy, a tuition-free charter school. PROUD stands for "Proudly Respecting Our Unique Differences." The school is expected to open in fall 2027 and will be the first charter school in the Naugatuck Valley.

When Nicolari came out in 1997, she risked losing her job. Following her coming out, she led a support group at the New Haven Pride Center for five years and started the first Day of Silence at Ansonia High School, along with its Gay-Straight Alliance, which still exists today. She joined the Connecticut chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) as co-chair and facilitated workshops on creating safe spaces for all students.

Nicolari founded the National Alliance of LGBTQ Schools, a resource for families seeking schools that provide safe and supportive environments for their children. Four schools are currently established nationwide, with five more preparing to open.

"If students feel as though they truly belong, if they feel valued and accepted, and feel listened to, they will have learned so much more than reading and writing and arithmetic," Nicolari said. They'll learn how to be a good citizen and contribute in a positive way. For anyone allowed to be their authentic self in school, we hope to give them the confidence to believe in themselves."



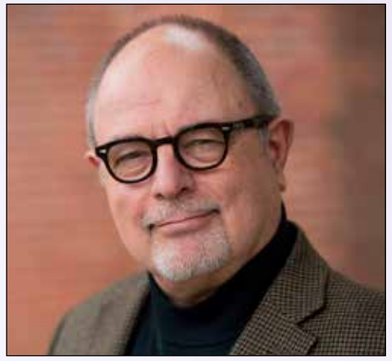
Robert Reader

The idea for the Hartford Gay Men's Chorus (HGMC) started 15 years ago as a conversation around a dinner table, sparked by **Robert Reader,** co-founder and now Executive Director. What started with just 24 members quickly grew into a community at the heart of Hartford, where members have found their chosen families and a safe space to be themselves.

At that time, Reader was the Education Programs Manager at Hartford Stage and a former member of the Boston Gay Men's Choir. Today, he works as an educator at New Britain High School by day and serves as the chorus' executive director by night. He does it all, from administrative and development work to making sure the chorus runs smoothly and personally acknowledging the support of the community with handwritten notes to donors.

The chorus performs multiple shows throughout the year. Beyond the stage, the HGMC has regularly performed the national anthem at major sporting events across Connecticut, including games for the Hartford Yard Goats and Hartford Athletic. They have also performed at the kickoff for Connecticut Foodshare's Walk Against Hunger.

"We've grown over the years and have really established ourselves as an arts organization in the greater Hartford area, in the arts community and in the community at large. I would say for a lot of folks, it's about seeing themselves up there on stage, both at concerts and even at our community outreach performances—opening hearts and changing minds," Reader said.



Frank Rizzo

Frank Rizzo has been covering Connecticut's arts and entertainment scene for nearly 50 years, focusing on theater, community and LGBTQ+ stories.

"One of my purposes is to bring these historic issues to the attention of younger readers who are benefiting from the pioneers in the gay community that led to the abolition of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' who helped create marriage equality and so many other issues that we now take for granted. It's important to know where we came from, especially in these dangerous political times," Rizzo said.

Throughout his career, Rizzo has interviewed playwrights and artists, including Tony Kushner, Edward Albee, Stephen Sondheim and Larry Kramer, as well as actor, singer, and gay icon Liza Minnelli. He has served as a theater writer and critic for *Connecticut Magazine* and *The Hartford Courant* and has regularly contributed to *Connecticut Voice*. Rizzo has also been a member of NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists for nearly 30 years.

Rizzo says he believes the arts are an important part of how we live our lives and can serve as a vehicle for conversations about larger issues.

"Whether it be a business story, whether it be a serious story about a Me Too, issue or a Black Lives Matter issue in the theater, I believe that art stories should be on page one just as much as a business story or a sports story. I think it's important to keep the arts and culture in the forefront of our American life," Rizzo said.



Curtis Rodriguez-Porter

Curtis Rodriguez-Porter embodies the Capitol Region Education Council's (CREC's) core values by advocating for equity and fostering a strong sense of community among his students. He has dedicated decades to advocating for marginalized communities that have been systemically impacted, especially in education. Rodriguez-Porter notes that visibility and using his voice are most important to him, allowing him to advocate for others who might not be able to advocate for themselves.

His work with CREC ensures that every queer youth has the support they need through Student Gay Alliances. Rodriguez-Porter has advocated for employee network groups such as the Pride and Allies Group, LGBTQIA+ Group, the Black Employee Network Group, and Juntos Amazonos, a Latino Employee Network Group.

Rodriguez-Porter is a Hartford resident who began his work in schools as a peer educator. Advancing into different roles, he leveraged his marketing background in project and program coordination, including community development to advance his work.. He also worked at other magnet schools, before transferring to CREC, where he is celebrating his ninth year this fall.

At CREC, he oversees the Hartford Region Open Choice Program, the first city-to-suburban program in Connecticut, which started in 1966. He now leads the Division of School Choice, overseeing the Welcome Center for magnet school enrollment, marketing strategy for magnet schools and Open Choice, working collaboratively with magnet schools across the region.

Rodriguez-Porter has also worked with the Greater Hartford Gives Foundation's giving circle initiative. During Pride Month, he led the effort to launch the Pride and Allies Giving Circle.

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Opal Rodriguez

Opal Rodriguez's fantasy-themed LGBTQ+ bookstore, Enchanted Violet, was born from two things: a love of books and a passion for creating community. After the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, they saw a need for third spaces where people could connect and feel safe. "There was a need for something bigger than just me, myself and I whether it be people of color, the LGBT community, disabled people, women, just anybody, I wanted to really home in on that need," Rodriguez said.

Today, Enchanted Violet is a close-knit community where the books are more than stories, they are guides for people navigating their own journeys of personal discovery.

"I've had people come in at the very beginning of their journey into the store, asking me for advice. So, like, 'Hey, I think I might be trans. Do you have any books that might help me figure that out?' And I say, 'Yes, I do.' And so it was just kind of helping people along their journey."

Rodriguez takes pride in the community they have built around the store. From speed-dating events to arm-wrestling fundraisers, there is no shortage of opportunities for people to connect and find community. The store's Discord community has become another way for people to stay connected.

Rodriguez leads with the philosophy that if you are in a position of privilege, you have a responsibility to support those who may not have the same opportunities or resources. "When it comes to helping other marginalized communities, it doesn't have to be about you."



Erick Russell

When **Erick Russell** was sworn in as Connecticut's 84th State Treasurer on January 4, 2023, he made history as the first Black, out LGBTQ+ person to win an election for statewide office in U.S. history. Today, Russell continues to advocate for the LGBTQ+ community, including through the creation of the Connecticut Safe Harbor Fund, which helps underserved populations, including women of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community, access reproductive health care and gender-affirming care.

Growing up, Russell worked in his family's convenience store in New Haven, where he began to recognize gaps in the systems and structures that weren't working for his community. After graduating from the University of Connecticut School of Law and seeing firsthand what was happening in the legislature, Russell realized that more voices were needed to represent a broader range of communities, ensuring that people had a seat at the table and being advocated for.

"I just hope that much like with my mentors paving a way for me, that my doing good work makes it possible for many others to come after me." He says he is deeply aware of the legacy and that the people who came before him did the difficult work that made it possible for him to run for office.

As Russell continues his work advocating for the LGBTQ+ community, he hopes to serve as a reminder that there is hope amid difficult times, while also acknowledging how much work remains to be done.



Rachel Simon

Rachel Simon is the Executive Director of Triangle Community Center (TCC), the region's largest nonprofit serving the queer and trans community. It's a role she had since September 2023. Under her leadership, the organization has continued creating spaces where LGBTQ+ people across Fairfield County can connect and find resources.

"It's powerful to create community for people in need, especially in this moment where the federal government is in full attack mode toward the community. It was very powerful to bring folks together," Simon said.

As needs evolve within the community, Simon has helped adapt TCC's services to provide support where it is needed most. That includes maintaining a food pantry that has seen demand nearly double over the past year and a half, according to Simon. TCC also supports people facing housing and financial challenges and those who may be concerned about immigration enforcement.

One of Rachel's nominators, Melissa Combs, says "Rachel has led TCC through a period of significant growth and expanded impact. Under her leadership, TCC has strengthened its role as a vital resource for Fairfield County and the broader Connecticut LGBTQ+ community. She has elevated TCC's role in legislative and policy advocacy in response to growing federal challenges."

Simon credits the development staff, care coordination team, and volunteers for helping TCC serve the community. She wants to continue advocating for and supporting the community's most vulnerable members, including protecting queer and trans youth in schools, expanding access to health care, supporting queer people of color and addressing the needs of older LGBTQ+ adults.



John F. Stafstrom Jr.

John F. Stafstrom Jr. has always believed politics and the law can make life better for the LGBTQ+ community. He has used his platform and voice through Pullman & Comley and Lambda Legal to advocate for equality here in Connecticut and beyond.

Stafstrom has held several key leadership roles with Lambda Legal. Most recently, he was co-chair of the organization's 50th anniversary campaign. He recently joined the board of Circle Care Center. For the past three years, Stafstrom and his husband have hosted the annual spring fundraiser for the Bridgeport Pride Center.

Stafstrom says, "I put a lot of time and effort into Lambda Legal because I think it is the organization that makes the greatest impact for the community, both in advancing the LGBTQ+ community's rights in the courts and through public policy. And then now in resisting the attempts to roll back that, in fighting off terrible, terrible laws."

Above all, Stafstrom says he has tried to point people in the right direction to resources and help they need. After the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion, people were concerned about whether their marriages would remain legally recognized and whether they should take additional steps to protect them.

"The thing I have learned over the years is that those of us who have a platform need to use that platform to empower others. I have an obligation to use that platform to blow the trumpet and say, 'Come out. You'll be fulfilled. You'll be inspired. You'll be welcomed,'" Stafstrom said.

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Christa Steiner

Christa Steiner, Miss Connecticut 2026, has been active in the pageant world since the age of 21, all the while teaching voice lessons—and encouraging people to find their voices. Steiner entered the Miss America Organization and found a new way to use her voice: to advocate for people struggling with mental health, informed by her own experiences with addiction and bipolar disorder.

Last May, she was crowned Miss Connecticut, making her the first openly queer titleholder in Connecticut's Miss America history.

Her Community Service Initiative Out of the Dark: Mental Health Recovery for Youth, focuses on breaking the stigma surrounding mental health and provides resources for young people entering mental health and sobriety recovery. Throughout this initiative, Steiner has worked with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to educate others through presentations to schools and has donated gender-affirming voice lessons to Prism, a CT-based LGBTQ+ Mental Health Organization.

Connecticut's LGBTQ+ community has rallied around Steiner, and she says that she wouldn't be able to serve without it's support. In turn, Steiner has continued to give back by being a vocal part and support system to the LGBTQ+ community.

"There is such a great population of LGBTQ folks who suffer from mental health and addiction struggles, but there's not as much talk of how their marginalized identity could have restricted them." She says she wants anyone looking for support for mental health, or gender identity to know, "you have a friend in Miss Connecticut, you have a supporter in Miss Connecticut."



Richard Stillson

Dr. Richard Stillson, known by their drag persona Mucha Mucha, has been involved in Connecticut's LGBTQ+ community and drag scene for decades. They attended Hartford's first Pride in 1982 and have since participated in 25 Pride celebrations across the state as Mucha Mucha, bringing love, and a sense of community wherever they go.

Stillson co-founded Connecticut Pride, an organization that brings together representatives from 50 towns and cities annually for a summit focused on collaboration, mutual support, and learning from one another. They previously served as co-chair of Hartford Pride.

Through drag, Stillson continues to use Pride as a form of protest while also building community. They founded the House of Pleasure, serving as a grandmother and mother and where drag queens, drag kings and others can connect and find support. They have worked with the Snow Ball, a fundraiser supporting AIDS service organizations and community centers. More recently, Stillson was crowned Queen Mother of the Connecticut chapter of Drag Story Hour.

Stillson has also been a political advocate, helping advance LGBTQ+ rights in Connecticut. They served as co-chair of the CT Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights and as a commissioner on Hartford's Commission on Lesbian and Gay Issues. Additionally, Stillson helped raise the rainbow flag at the Connecticut State Capitol for the first time in the state's history.

They want to continue to use their voice to speak up and make change. "I think drag is politics and politics is drag. Stepping out, pushing the envelope, making change," said Stillson.



Lauren Tagliatela

Lauren Tagliatela has been involved with North Haven Pride since its founding three years ago. She leads fundraising efforts and builds connections with community partners and sponsors.

What started as a text from a friend who was meeting with North Haven First Selectman Mike Freda quickly grew into a Pride organization with support from parents and volunteers and more than 1,000 attendees.

"We met with the library, with Public Works, and with the first selectman. The first selectman was on board from the start. And from there within a few short months, our group grew," Tagliatela said.

The Pride celebration at North Haven Town Green features entertainment, music, and food, creating an environment where everyone feels welcome. North Haven Pride also hosts educational programs, guest speakers, including Stonewall speakers and gender-affirming speaker panels and partners with Q+ to host inclusive teen nights events twice monthly through its "Pride 365" programming.

"We don't want to just have one day of Pride for the whole town," Tagliatela said. "We want to really show that we're here. And we live here. And that we belong here."

Tagliatela says she is proud that North Haven Pride continues to grow and provide a sense of belonging for the people they serve, and in advance of the fifth Pride celebration, more people are getting involved. Tagliatela credits the entire team behind North Haven Pride, emphasizing that she is just one small part of a larger group of people doing the work to make it possible.



Barry Walters

Under **Barry Walters'** leadership as founder and co-chair of West Hartford Pride, the organization has grown from a rally on the steps of the town council in 2019, to a huge event where the community can celebrate Pride.

Walters has worked to make universal HIV testing a reality in Connecticut. In 2023, he helped pass legislation to encourage people who would not normally get tested to do so. The measure was later included in the DPH Omnibus Bill.

He has worked with A Place to Nourish Your Health as director of prevention. He was part of the Connecticut HIV Planning Consortium (CHPC), serving as a co-chair and working on policy, implementation and planning. He also worked with the Health Collective in HIV-related work and ran the food pantry.

Walters is still an active member of the Social Justice and Opportunity Network, where he was one of the founding members and a town council member since 2023.

Walters joined the town council to give a voice to those who normally don't have one and inspire others to be leaders of their communities. "I think it's very important that LGBTQ+ folks step up and put themselves in positions where they can make change, influence outcomes, and give the community a greater voice. I always encourage folks to look at the history of the LGBTQ+ movement. If you want to be in a leadership role, you need to know a little bit about what's happened in the past before you can move forward."



Christina Vega

Suffield native **Christina Vega** has been a vocal presence in the Suffield community and beyond, becoming involved in activism while she was still in high school and speaking and volunteering at Suffield Pride. In 2020, Suffield held its first rally on the town green in support of George Floyd, as well as its first Suffield Pride celebration.

"This was the first time we ever had underrepresented voices celebrated in our community, and I want to be involved in any way I can," Vega said.

Vega was also a founding member of Suffield High School's Black Student Union, a general body member of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance, and an integral member of the student newspaper.

She has continued her passion for storytelling and activism when she began attending Howard University, where she is currently a junior studying film and journalism. "My form of activism actually comes through my art," Vega said. Through writing and producing student films, Vega stresses the importance of telling stories that highlight the queer community while exploring intersectionality within it. This year, she hopes to further that work by focusing her thesis on the transgender community.

Vega stresses how being educated on queer history helps move us forward, and it's up to the younger generation to keep the momentum going and to be catalysts for change.

"The path to justice isn't always linear, and it's not always the most comfortable place to be either," she concluded. I think we need to confront that within ourselves to continue to move forward."



Chion Wolf

As host of *Audacious* on Connecticut Public Radio for the past six years, **Chion Wolf** inspires others to use their voices and platforms to live audaciously and be brave enough to tell their stories. Through questions that spark new ideas and emotions, she brings attention to stories that often go untold and are misunderstood.

She knew she was gay from the age of 5 and found a safe space through songwriting, allowing music to speak for her and helping her express herself.

While working as a T-Mobile sales representative at Westfarms Mall, she noticed a call for volunteers to answer phones at NPR. Her curiosity led to an internship with the show, followed by 10 years as a producer for Colin McEnroe before he greenlit *Audacious.*

Through *Audacious*, Wolf explores a range of topics, from double mastectomies to a transgender woman who is an opera singer. Her work has earned recognition, including four Gracie Awards, and she was named an Advocate Champion of Pride, an award presented annually by the magazine. Wolf builds community through live Audacious events and by hosting the Other People's Poems events at Hartford Flavor.

Wolf says that making a difference happens through small actions. "We're just here for like a second, and nobody knows what they're doing. So while it may feel like you have to be big and strong to do the big things, I've found I've been humbled into seeing the little blip of an existence I've been given. I want to take that little blip and see how bright I can make it," Wolf said.

At *Connecticut Voice,* we are dedicated to celebrating the visionary, dedicated, and hardworking people who make improving life for LGBTQ+ communities in our state the focus of their efforts.

We all owe them a profound debt of gratitude.

If you have people whom you'd like to propose for these awards in 2027, we invite you to reach out to our editor, Christopher Byrne, chris@ctvoice.com.

We'd also like to hear about people you'd like us to profile throughout the year and help get the word out about the great work they're doing for all of us.





Greater Hartford Gives Unveils PRIDE Giving Circle

COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

By **CHRISTOPHER BYRNE** / *Photos by* **KEITH CLAYTOR,** *TimeFrozen Photography*

What happens when charitable giving is more than writing a check?

For many people, generosity is a quiet, private transaction: a donation in December, a gift in honor of a friend. It does good, but the engagement is fleeting. For those who want to do more—as individuals and with their donations, giving circles foster connection, and deeper understanding of needs within communities that are served. The way it works is that members pool their money, join forces to understand their community's needs, and make grants. The voting members are actively involved in determining where revenues go. Yes, the monetary value is significant—and so is the human value. A giving circle doesn't just provide money. It builds relationships, shared knowledge, and a sense that the community's future is something its members shape together.

At the Greater Hartford Gives Foundation, this approach goes back decades. The Catalyst Giving Circle Fund began in 1993, and its giving circle has made 68 grants totaling $1.1 million to local nonprofits. The idea has since grown. The Foundation now has four giving circles. In addition to the Catalyst Circle, the Latino Giving Circle was established in 2003, and the Black Giving Circle was launched in 2015. In all, the giving circles have delivered more than



Emmy-winning soul singer Charmagne Tripp (left) and drag artist Xiomarie LaBeija performed at the PRIDE Giving Circle launch



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Attendees gather to celebrate the launch of the PRIDE Giving Circle

$1.75 million in community-enhancing grants.

The newest Foundation initiative is the PRIDE Giving Circle, currently in the planning stages and slated to begin next year. Ramonita Garcia, Donor Experience Officer for Greater Hartford Gives said that the PRIDE Circle "grew out of requests and surveys from the community, particularly around supporting LGBTQIA youth. The Foundation committed an initial $250,000 to seed the fund, giving the circle a strong start before a single member writes a check."

In addition, she said the new circle is being designed to be as broadly inclusive as possible, making room for people who may be at different financial points in their lives. As with other Giving Circles, a voting membership requires a minimum $365 donation—a dollar a day. However, supporting members, who don't vote on grants, can be involved on a pay-what-you-can basis. And for $750, a Pay-it-Forward member covers their own seat and sponsors another community member's voting membership, ensuring that in certain situations, cost isn't a barrier to taking part in decisions.



Steering committee member Curtis Rodriguez-Porter raises a rainbow fan, and the energy in the room, at the PRIDE Giving Circle launch.

That openness is central to the PRIDE Giving Circle's purpose. Garcia explains that the goal is to create a space for anyone who identifies with the queer community, and the organizers are deliberate about not letting it become a group that serves only a narrow slice of it. A key component of the giving circle initiative is the educational programming that help members understand more fully the issues being addressed and the organizations that the program will support. Garcia said that they plan to bring in non-profit leaders, state representatives, and other community leaders so that participants have a broader understanding of the issues—and how their support can make a difference. She says that "being in the know" about issues is very powerful for community members.

Because it's so easy to become involved, reaching people beyond the usual circles is part of the plan. As the PRIDE Circle becomes established, organizers will share information through the Foundation's website and through its community funds, which span the organization's 29-town region. The idea



From left: Josh Kornberg, Vice President for Advancement and PRIDE Giving Circle member; PRIDE Giving Circle steering committee members Robert Reader, Curtis Rodriguez-Porter, Miguel Badillo, and Orlando Rosado; and Ramonita (Romy) Garcia, Donor Experience Officer.



Mark Morriar Jr. (left) and Orlando Rosado celebrate the launch of the PRIDE Giving Circle.

is to connect with the local "go-to" people whom neighbors already trust. Information on how to join the giving circle is now on the GHG site.

"It's really people just joining people to make a difference," Garcia said, adding "in our other circles, it's the connection that keeps people coming back year after year."

Members of the Steering Committee continue to meet and strategize how to engage more community members to the circle as it gears up for its first year of operations.

Robin P. McHaelen, MSW, McHaelen Consulting Services, LLC, said, "After 30 years leading True Colors, Inc. and organizing the True Colors conference (now called SOGIEcon), I've seen how far a small gift can go when it reaches the right hands. I joined this giving circle to put resources directly into underserved queer communities, and to help build a culture of giving that's led by the community itself."

The Reverend Edwin Pérez Jr., Senior Minister at Immanuel Congregational Church in Hartford added, "Greater Hartford Gives is important to us because of our overlapping objectives. We're able to make significant impacts when we work together and when we know who to connect and where."

He continues, stressing the importance of the relationships being built within the community, "It is those relationships and proximity that exist in Hartford and the Greater Hartford area that can help us direct funds and the grant writing and approvals for grants. Because of our relationships we are well-positioned to be of assistance in that way."

Steering committee member Martin L. Heft sums up the effort noting that the goal is to attract as broad participation as possible. "Bringing all these like-minded people together, we can really do something to make a difference. And we're looking at youth, seniors, and everyone in between." One of the benefits of the Giving Circle is that participants can understand a wider range of issues. Younger people, he says, may come to understand issues like senior housing in the LGBTQ+ community, while older folks may understand the cultural, mental health, and medical issues faced by younger LGBTQ+ individuals. "This is a great process to bring all of that about," he concluded.

For more on Greater Hartford Gives—and to become involved—visit the Foundation's website at greaterhartfordgives.org.









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Making a Difference, Changing Lives

By **CHRISTOPHER BYRNE**

Here at *Connecticut Voice,* we have always been impressed by and admired The Leonard-Litz LGBTQ+ Foundation and the important work they do to support causes and organizations, significantly enhancing their capabilities and improving quality of life for our communities.

The Fairfield-based foundation was created by Easton residents Elliot Leonard and Roger Litz in November 2019, and it publicly launched in late 2020 with a call for grant proposals. Leonard built a career in law and real estate development before becoming an entrepreneur and had long volunteered for and donated to LGBTQ+ organizations. The foundation grew out of that history of giving.

To date, the foundation's Community Grants program has awarded approximately 100 grants, which have ranged from $500 up to more than $150,000. Awards largely focus on the northeast, and recent grants have expanded the foundation's impact to include projects addressing the needs of people of color and the transgender community. In the current political climate, this focus is particularly important as budget cuts, political attacks, and the fundamental challenges faced by people in these communities have created greater need for support.

IMPACT IN CONNECTICUT

The impact of their work has been felt strongly in the state. Indeed, one of the reasons for starting the foundation was to support queer people and allies in Connecticut. The foundation committed to partner with the Greater Bridgeport Pride Committee to establish the Bridgeport Pride Center, providing community infrastructure, not a one-time program, and it gives a city's LGBTQ+ residents a lasting place to go.

Many of the grants are modest. A median grant near $6,775 may seem small, but for a volunteer-run Pride committee or a small community center, that can mean the difference between holding a youth program and not holding one. Supporting community centers often gives young people in Connecticut their first chance to take part in activities with peers like them, and for many LGBTQ+ people, these centers become part of their chosen families, offering services that range from social connection to health and crisis support.

As another example, the result of the foundation's collaboration with Circle Care Center has been a Pride Coalition across Connecticut and New York, which has grown to more than 40 towns and lets organizers of all sizes network and support one another.

One of the organizations that Leonard-Litz has supported is The Out Accountability Project, a Connecticut-based initiative working to ensure every student has the right to an education in a safe, affirming learning environment. In its programs, parents, caregivers, allies, students and provide support each other and work to enhance LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools.

Founder Mellisa Combs said, "The Leonard-Litz Foundation's support helps the Out Accountability Project turn research into action. Their investment gives us the resources to closely monitor what is happening in Connecticut schools, identify gaps in protections, and equip families, educators, and advocates with the information they need to protect LGBTQIA+ students. Their support makes this work possible and, importantly, sustainable."

It may all start with a monetary grant, but the work the foundation does has human value that can't be measured in dollars and cents.

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