We Adapt

COVID-19 has forced organizations to get creative; many groups, including prides, have opted to revamp and revive, rather than retrench.
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Our spaces had to evolve quickly to meet the challenges of COVID-19, and did so to ensure we had our spaces open. 12

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PLUS: Viewpoints, Photos from Around Connecticut, and MORE!
Our community has always been tough. Whether it’s been having to fight for our rights, or just fight to survive, we take each challenge on and figure out how to not just survive, but thrive.

In this issue, we highlight a lot of the mettle and might that our community brought to the table when it was needed to keep ourselves going. COVID-19 has tested a lot of us for over half a year now, and despite all of the challenges it brings, we’ve found ways to support each other, and lift each other up.

Nowhere was that more evident than the recently concluded food program through the New Haven Pride Center, which after starting out as an 8-week program at the beginning of the COVID crisis to help out those who noted fear of food insecurity in a needs assessment the Center conducted, it expanded into a 17-week program thanks to the support of the community, and continues even now into a food pantry program. Read about the program on page 23.

Other organizations and businesses transformed themselves and made changes needed to be able to survive and open. Karleigh Webb takes a look at a number of them, from Trevi Lounge and the Chez Est to Kamora’s Cultural Corner, all entities that we’ve featured here in the past doing good work, and have continued to do so in these challenging times. Check out Karleigh’s piece on page 12.

Pride looked quite different this year, but that didn’t mean pride completely retrenched as an idea. Many prides moved online, and a few did have some in-person, albeit socially distanced, events. OutWorks in Bridgeport offered a hybrid event, Pride in the Parking Lot was a brand new event, and OutCT held a virtual event even as their traditional beach event took place on a much smaller scale. You can read all about those efforts in this issue.

Too late for this issue cycle but still available for you to read on our website, the Pride New Haven event took place in two parts, with a virtual event in September followed by Pride in Person in October (with a virtual event featuring highlights not only from the live event but previous prides too). You can read about those efforts by visiting newhavenpridecenter.org and clicking on Centerline Magazine.

Shari Lucas, a Bi+ advocate, shares her perspective on the importance of Bi+ visibility at pride events, including here in Connecticut, and how some small actions she has taken has proven to be important for so many.

We also share another informative piece by regular contributor Mel Cordner, who this time takes a look at what follows the T in the various acronyms that we see in the community today, which may help those who aren’t certain about the longer and more inclusive variations that are floating around. But regardless of format, as Cordner thoughtfully notes, your identity is your own, and our community is there to support each other, and that’s important to remember.

Finally, we feature an interview with Patrick Comerford, who recently took the reins of True Colors after a lengthy and successful run helmed by founder Robin McHaeilen. Comerford is no stranger to Connecticut nonprofits or True Colors, and despite signing on at a challenging time in society, Comerford arrives excited and ready to continue the success of the organization.

As always, we’d love to hear your feedback about this issue, and what you’d like to see - email your thoughts to centerline@newhavenpridecenter.org - and we thank you for reading this issue.
My conservative family didn’t get dial-up until high school, so I thought I invented queerness for a while. It changed my life when the internet gave me WORDS for what I was—I realized I wasn’t alone or ‘broken’ and gained the vocabulary necessary to find myself and my community. The acronym has lengthened and rearranged several times since then. If you’re questioning whether these changes are important or necessary, you’re not alone—but you’re also not remembering what it was like to not have any words for your experiences and identity.

GLBT was a starter Pokémon; our name evolves as our community gains experience. New words for the type and intensity of attraction we feel, the rigidity or fluidity of our gender identity, and even the specific commitment inherent in some platonic relationships are emerging all the time. These words allow us to better define and describe ourselves and to better relate to one another; they are about connection and clarification, not limitation.

That said, language serves the person using it; if none of these words do anything for you, that’s fine! Whether you identify as gay or as a pansexual demiromantic nonbinary genderqueer, your identity is yours alone to name. You might use newer acronym evolutions like LGBTQIAP+ or LGBTQQIP2SAA, lean on the much-easier-to-say SAGA (Sexuality And Gender Awareness), or default to something cutesy like ‘alphabet soup’ or overarching like queer; the bottom line is, we’re in this together!

Here’s a breakdown of some of the acronym letters you’re most likely to see:

(Q) **Queer** simply means “not cishet” (short for cisgender [not transgender] heterosexual). Queer intentionally creates space for variation; it embraces fluidity and diversity, and often implies a progressive mindset. The word does have a history of bigotry, so it also serves as an example of a marginalized group ‘taking back power’ by reclaiming and repurposing a word that has been used to harm them. Queer can refer to a person as well as the overall community.

(Q) **Questioning** our identity is a vital step for many of us, and it’s a process that some people stay engaged in for months, years, or even life. We include space for this experience in our acronym just like we include space for people who are questioning in our community.

(I) **Intersex** bodies have sex characteristics that do not neatly fall into a typical male-female binary. This is MUCH more common than we’re led to believe, but natural variations in human anatomy are often hidden or even forcibly “corrected” by medical providers, sometimes without the consent or even awareness of the intersex person. Having an intersex body does not dictate a person’s identity; anyone could be intersex, and sharing that information is a personal choice. The experiences and identities of intersex people are incredibly diverse.

(A) **Asexual** refers to a wide spectrum of experiences regarding the intensity or existence of one’s sexual attraction. People on this spectrum might be sex-indifferent (willing to have sex but not seeking it), sex-repulsed, or even sex-favorable. Identities like demisexual—experiencing a sexual attraction only after an emotional connection is established—are usually considered to fall on this spectrum. Some asexual people still experience romantic attraction; likewise, some aromantic people still experience sexual attraction.

(A) **Androgynous** typically refers to the
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appearance of being both masculine and feminine simultaneously. It can be used to describe an aesthetic or an identity.

(P) Pansexual is related to, but generally considered separate from, bisexual. Some people use pansexual to mean they have the capacity to be attracted to a person of any gender. Other people use it to mean an attraction REGARDLESS of gender, describing their attraction to “hearts not parts.”

(2S) Two-Spirit is a specifically Native American concept that predates many words we use to understand gender. The word refers to a person having both a feminine and masculine spirit within them. The title includes specific religious and cultural significance and responsibility that non-Native people cannot fulfill, which is why they shouldn’t use this term. There are MANY gender and orientation words that are specific to a culture, but that’s another article!

Here are a few commonly used words that don’t often make it into the acronyms:

**Nonbinary** simply means ‘outside the gender binary,’ and is often used as an umbrella term to encompass gender identities other than man and woman. It can be used as a standalone identity as well, which makes it function in a similar way to the word queer.

**Genderqueer** creates an intentional “other” space beyond the gender binary, and implies an intentional avoidance of, or challenge to, standard gender roles and expectations. Like queer, the word is often seen to have a progressive connotation.

**Genderfluid** acknowledges gender is fluid and flexible. A genderfluid person might identify or express as more feminine on some days and more masculine on other days.

**Gendervague** is a word used by neurodivergent people who experience their gender identity as related to and inseparable from the way their brain is ‘wired’ to process information and experiences. This term is especially popular among autistic people.

**Queerplatonic** refers to a committed life partnership that is not a typical romantic or sexual relationship. Words like “squish” and “zucchini” can be used to describe one’s queerplatonic partners. Think of this as someone who is “more than” a best friend, but not a lover. This is one of many ways the queer community has developed to describe our chosen families.

Whatever words you come across, it’s important to remember two things: first, that there are always more words, and second, that every one of them can mean slightly different things to different people. Every person’s identity is unique, so even the most specific of these identity labels won’t mean the same thing to all of us! Whenever possible, get to know the person behind the label—a simple “what does that mean to you?” is all it takes to open a conversation.

**SAVE THE DATE**

Trans Awareness Week

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**For full list of events, visit newhavenpridecenter.org/trans**
Bi+ Visibility a Critical Need for Pride Events

by Shari Lucas

Everyone has their story. I just turned 60. In my youth being gay or lesbian wasn’t talked about. I knew I was attracted to women so that must mean I was a lesbian. After college I dated women exclusively for many years. Then, at 39, I had a major pendulum swing where I started being attracted to men. I still didn’t call myself bisexual because the word wasn’t used much and I had no one else who was bi to talk to and compare myself to. I met a straight man whom I married. Years went by fine, but I realized I missed my community. I was meeting his friends who all assumed I was straight and I really didn’t like that. I came out as bi on Facebook on National Coming Out day in 2014 and received tremendous support. After that I tried connecting with LGBTQ+ groups but had a hard time finding other bisexuals. I was missing the aspect of being able to look in a mirror through someone else find the common ground that I couldn’t find from speaking with my gay and lesbian friends.

I attended a pride event in hopes of finding connection. It didn’t happen. Here was something where I could celebrate who I am yet I felt very alone. The lesbian folks gathered, the gay guys gathered, the trans folks gathered, but there was no...
“space” for the bi folks. The common thought is that the part of bisexuals that are attracted to the same sex are welcome and they should sit with either the lesbians or gays and not talk about their opposite sex attractions.

I tried to find bi connections via pride centers and groups but it still wasn’t happening. So I began a Bi+ Discussion Group on Meetup to find others like me so we can talk about our commonalities. I also started a Bi/Pan table at pride events. I bought giveaways in the form of pamphlets, bi/pan bracelets, pins, mardi gras beads and stickers. I brought a bunch of chairs so that other bi+ folks could literally have a place at the table. I intentionally made the space for the bi+ community that I couldn’t find elsewhere. To my surprise I was very busy the entire event giving out literature and giveaways and having so many wonderful conversations. When I took a break from the table I saw a young woman wearing a bi flag so I stopped her and gave her my bi bracelet, to which she sincerely replied “you just made my day”. When I saw three young women walk by wearing their bi/pan flags I called them over and gave them trinkets. One of their moms was their escort and was so thankful that she put money in my donation can.

I had invited a lesbian and a straight friend to sit with me at my table. I was kind of shocked when they declined because they were not bi and did not want to give anyone the impression that they were. What? Are we really considered that scary? Our society tells me over and over that I belong with the other women (lesbians) or with straights and I’m supposed to be ok with that. But apparently vice versa isn’t cool.

Bi+ visibility is not only important, but vital. It is vital for the bisexual+ community and for those who are not bi+. Vital for those like me who have struggled and still struggle to find our place in our own community. Many bi+ folks are still afraid to come out because of backlash from society and from within our own community. The bi+ community is the largest in the LGBTQ+ community yet you wouldn’t know it. We suffer high rates of mental health disparities, high suicide rates, and high domestic abuse rates, yet you wouldn’t know it because it’s not talked about. Throughout my years I have been expected to help others in the LGBTQ+ community, like when we have AIDS, when we are murdered, when we fight for same sex marriage. Our community helps each other. I can hope that bi+ education continues to be forefront to increase understanding. Bi+ visibility at pride events is an excellent tool to do that.
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ADAPTATION

Creative Businesses

Both Troupe429 and the Chez Est transformed their businesses as regulations placed limits on the types of businesses eligible to be open. Troupe429 (top half) transformed into a record store, while Chez Est (bottom half) heavily renovated and focused on its food offerings.

Photos courtesy Troupe429 and Chez Est
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QUEER SPACE AND COVID CRISIS:
TODAY AND TOMORROW

HOW A PANDEMIC FORGES INNOVATION AND EXAMINATION

BY KARLEIGH WEBB
The third week of March 2020 was a week where it seemed the ground truly shifted under our collective feet. A St. Patrick’s Day that may normally see revelry after a workday instead saw empty roads, empty places, and a near-dystopian silence.

It’s a silence that the co-owner of a 44-year Connecticut LGBTQ+ institution says is etched in his memory, along with harsh thoughts about having let go a lot of staff to stay alive.

“When it all started, we thought it was just going be one week or two weeks,” Chez Est co-owner John Pepe started. “and now we are six months into it. It’s now just me and my husband doing everything. It’s a lot more work now.”

Such stanzas became commonplace in the narrative of these unsettled times. The pandemic would sent many ambitious plans for the year scrambling.

“March 17th hit us like a ton of bricks,” said Katia Capieziello, the owner of Trevi Lounge in Fairfield. “Prior to COVID, we had our fourth year with Fairfield Pride lined up. We were putting together big shows and plays during the summer. As these months went by, it’s like it takes everything out of you. It takes away your drive because now you are living to pay your bills, and you’re not able to support the community the way you really want to.”

“I feel like living and working in COVID has been a constant state of exhaustion,” New Haven Pride Center Executive Director Patrick Dunn stated. “There is in the back of my mind this constant nagging feeling and stress of ‘what if the Center closes?’. If something happens and we run out of money and the community loses something our community needs.”

Dunn’s fears are justified when you consider the preliminary impacts that COVID-19 has had on LGBTQ+ communities.

On March 20, the Human Rights Campaign put out an early statistical sketch on potential effects of the pandemic on LGBTQ+ communities. It found that more than 5 million LGBTQ+ workers are in sectors were the virus is a high-risk threat. Such numbers work in contact with a Williams Institute study that shows more than 1 in 5 of LGBTQ+ adults overall are living at or below the federal poverty line, and 1 in 10 are unemployed.

The New Haven Pride Center also put together its own survey, and the painted a confirming picture of those numbers. A majority of those surveyed cited food insecurity a prime need.

Left, The Pride Center’s mutual aid food program fed thousands during the summer and will continue to combat food insecurity as a pantry in the months ahead. Right, Chez Est owners Luis and John Pepe vow that COVID will not stop the state’s oldest LGBTQ establishment from a 45th birthday celebration in 2021.

Photos courtesy New Haven Pride Center (left) and Chez Est
The survey noted that nearly 60 of those surveyed cited it as their top need. Health care access and securing unemployment benefits followed close behind.

**IMAGING AND LEADING DURING A LOCKDOWN**

“March was a scary chaotic hell,” said Kamora Herrington, the founder of Kamora’s Cultural Corner. “But once I heard that the people I loved and cared for couldn’t care for themselves that’s when the creativity kicked in.”

As a Black-led and queer-centered multicultural creative arts space, KCC stands at the intersection of many vulnerable communities dealing with the pandemic. Those fact added to the urgency to strategize and innovate for Herrington, a long-time Hartford activist. Among the first initiatives involved direct mutual aid and fundraising for the artists and performers that have used their space as a means to showcase their work and have seen many income sources dry up.

While spaces Trevi and Chez Est were closed down in the first three months of emergency and many bunker in, KCC turned to streaming technology and turned their open mic nights, for example, into virtual performances.

In the summer months, a great deal of programming headed outdoors, including a weekly art sale and bazaar centered around community talent being able showcase and sell their works.

They also expanded much of their pre-pandemic education and organizing, into local and global online spaces where people and groups could learn, network and build synergies. Their efforts stepped forward as the protests against police brutality stepped locally and nationally from May into the summer months. The KCC aided organizing for a number of actions and demonstration across Hartford and surrounding areas, including sponsoring demonstration as far away was Windsor and Somers.

“We set up spaces for organizing to happen organically,” Herrington noted.
EVEN IN BLACK AND WHITE, OUR COLORS STILL SHINE

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“Through a lot of awfulness, a lot of greatness can happen through the outline spaces and lot of different means to look at issues in new ways.”

New ways also took hold as New Haven Pride Center closed their physical operations on March 23rd. After being forced to physically shut down the center had their first online streaming program, centering around women in politics, four days later. Since then, NHPC has put on more than 50 online forums, events, discussions, and seminars in addition to maintaining their regular support group schedule. All of them with social interaction via video conference software/apps such as Zoom and Streamyard. A system of “check ins” to members of the community was established as a means for those may need additional support or just space to hear another human voice to stave off growing isolation.

The word “isolation” was an inspiring catalyst for the Pride Center’s efforts. Isolation was seen as a creeping threat as viral as COVID, and Dunn stated that it was NHPC’s marketing and development coordinator, Maia Leonardo, who made a statement why it was such threat.

“The defining moment of COVID response for us was when Maia wrote the line ‘homophobia and transphobia thrive in isolation’, Dunn recalled. “It was this ‘a-ha’ moment for all of us in that we have a responsibility to make sure our community does not feel alone. How do we do that?”

One way was the online engagement, but material needs also rose as a challenge to be faced. The center’s case management services saw a marked rise in utilization through the rise of pandemic. A larger need for aid in regard to programs such as applications for social services such as unemployment benefits drove the increase. In May an emergency food drive was started. In fifteen weeks over the summer months, over 45,000 pounds of food was distributed to over 200 people per week, many of whom would have otherwise gone without.

“COVID is shining a light on the real systemic issues,” Dunn noted. “All these people, many for the first time, have been in a position where they need SNAP benefits, or they need unemployment benefits and the system wasn’t built for the volume and it falls apart.”

PREPARE TO MAKE A PIVOT

As the community centers regrouped, the

Kamora Herrington, top left, kept the Cultural Corner alive and managed to thrive by aggressively embracing change in the moment.
traditional watering-hole mainstays were closed due to the COVID restrictions in place.

Yet neither the respective owners of Chez Est or Trevi were dormant, even if the early period was demoralizing. As the state slowly began to reopen in June and July, each had retooled to regroup and reset.

Capieziello and Trevi played to a strength when they reopened by using their outdoor space to have limited live events such as their bingo night and shows. They also expanded food options to enable opening back up under tighter restrictions, all well fighting to keep their well-known “no cover charge” tradition alive despite the hard times.

“It’s been challenging toward a way of thinking, especially in regaining the trust of your customers and letting the see that we are still open,” she noted. “This is going to be our new normal for a while, but we’ll be able to utilize what we have going forward and have more attractions in a safe way.”

Pepe went full bore toward reinvention and turned the old lounge into a restaurant space when many said it was a fool’s errand. Chez also added a coffee bar in an effort to expand their customer reach. Due to regulations, the revamped venue is open Wednesday thru Sunday, and inside the rule is simple. as Pepe noted, “If you’re standing up, your mask should be up.”

The efforts to reopen sees to reverse the trend were an estimated 50% of revenue was lost due to the lockdowns. There is also urgency to address two other critical issues: Getting a skittish clientele to come out, even in masks, and perhaps bring new visitors into the fold.

“I see people on a daily, and for many it’s their first time back out again and they choose the Chez, and I’m grateful for that,” Pepe noted.

The Chez Est completed a remodel during mandatory shutdowns, and implemented new protocols such as a socially distanced stage to protect entertainers and guests.
“I have customers who say, ‘thank you for what you are doing’. They are my world. Next year Chez turns 45 and I will not let it fail.”

HOPE AMID THE CHAOS

All sides have a common belief that the idea “of getting back to normal” must give way to the reality that the chaos of COVID will be part of wherever is defined as normal for the months.

The chaos has taken a great deal away already. Many lives lost, civic trust in our public institutions diminished, and it shut down the traditional pride month completely. The crisis even forced one of the iconic gay bars in the nation, San Francisco’s The Stud, to close after 55 years because their revenue collapsed amid pandemic lockdowns. Such news would unnerve a John Pepe or Katia Capieziello, and from community already feeling a siege from many directions amid the social, economic, and political tenor of this crisis and this year.

Dunn notes the danger not only as a community leader, but also a lauded drag performer in Connecticut. “That is scary to me, the loss of a queer space,” he noted. “There is a level of responsibility to raise up these spaces, especially here in Connecticut where there is only 3.9 percent of us. For example, yes, a John and Luis Pepe own Chez Est, but as a community we own these spaces and they belong to us as a community. They are our safe spaces.”

Such statements speak of resilience even in this difficult moment. All expressed a national hope that this pandemic may also spark a LGBTQ+ “homecoming” in physical presence and spirit.

Pepe sees this as his establishment tries to get back up to speed. “I do see a return of the younger generation,” he notes. “I’ve seen the shift in the clientele, and it is more people, especially non-binary and genderfluid people, all the colors looking for a place to go.”

For Herrington, the importance of the spirit part of the equations is a key takeaway to move forward with. Even in the crisis and with effective structures in place, attention must be paid to building up each other as much as we seek to build up our institutions. “I think in some ways the queer community has been doing some reckoning,” Herrington said. “Some of us are choosing to step back into this and asking what it looks like. For example, how the Pride Center figured out how to create art exhibit online, but also acknowledged that there will still people who will not have access. As we step into this new world we need to continue to acknowledge, understand, and think about how to deal with and address these issues.”

New Haven Pride Center Executive Director Patrick Dunn was sometimes online, but often was out front of as NHPC stepped forward as a lighthouse in the COVID storm.
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Exhibitions of LGBTQ+ art continued even during COVID-19 at the New Haven Pride Center, albeit with more enjoying the art through virtual forms. The Center will curate exhibitions in two additional locations starting next year. See the virtual tours on the Center’s YouTube.

Photos courtesy New Haven Pride Center
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NHPC Food Program

More than 65,000 pounds of food was distributed over a 17-week program that was born out of a community survey that confirmed food insecurity as a major issue during COVID-19. See article on adjacent page for more details about the program.

Photos by Linda-Cristal Young
Over 100 boxes filled the lobby of the New Haven Pride Center, spilling into its main room. At a desk, volunteer Dolores Dégagé Hopkins measured rice into clear plastic bags. Nearby, Juancarlos Soto lifted three ears of corn triumphantly and found a home for them. On the floor, boxes filled up with apples, potatoes, tomatoes, broccoli and carrots. Oats and pasta sat nearby, ready to join in a culinary symphony.

That was the scene at the New Haven Pride Center, which piloted a 17-week food distribution program in late May that continued through the summer. The center has served hundreds of families across New Haven with over 65,000 pounds of fresh produce, dairy, bread and grains (that’s roughly 4,000 pounds of food a week). After concluding recently, the program has pivoted to a food pantry model.

The program initially grew out of a needs assessment survey. The pantry, its newest iteration, came just in time for Connecticut PRIDE celebrations at the center and across the state.
“We analyzed all the data, and the number one thing is food insecurity,” said Executive Director Patrick Dunn. “And about 59 percent of the people who filled out the survey said that they were about to face food insecurity or already were facing food insecurity due to COVID-19.”

The program, which began as an entirely grassroots effort, was run by Alison Lopez. Lopez first got involved with the center through its youth programming; she now supervises the operation with a mighty fleet of volunteers and staff members. Earlier this year, distribution efforts joined several mutual aid initiatives in the city, all designed to fight food insecurity during COVID-19.

The program formed partnerships with Haven’s Harvest and Whole G Cafe and Bakery. It has also worked closely with The Semilla Collective, due in part to overlapping missions. Lopez came on to formally assist on early July and helped with the pantry until its conclusion.

The efforts come right on time for a city where hunger is on the rise. In the past five months, emergency food distributors in New Haven have reported a four-fold increase in demand as both unemployment and food insecurity skyrocket during the pandemic. Food distribution sites and emergency pantries have become vital lifelines for families and individuals across the city.

“It’s community first, it’s always been my style of looking at how we do anything here at the center,” Dunn said.

Alex Garbera, one of the founding donors to the center in the 1990s, is one of the 200 to 300 people receiving food from the center weekly. The program has become a bright spot in his weekly ritual: Garbera lives with Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), a condition where good nutrition is strongly recommended because AIDS makes it harder for the body to fight disease.

COVID-19 is an especially dangerous time for people living with HIV and AIDS, because a suppressed immune system can be more susceptible to the novel coronavirus and its long-term respiratory and pulmonary symptoms. In 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that there were 1.2 million Americans living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Garbera initially read about the food distribution program on the organization’s Facebook
He had only positive things to say about the system, despite any initial doubts. Since starting to use the program, he has urged staff to think about ways to include more protein in distribution packages.

“As a person living with AIDS on a limited income, good nutrition is a challenge,” he said. “At first I was reluctant, but when Patrick Dunn told me about getting fresh produce I was all in.”

“I thought I would have to swallow my pride in asking for help, but what I found was that the distribution process is very respectful, caring and dignified,” he continued. “It’s always a very cheerful process. Instead of swallowing my pride, I get to swallow some fresh produce and food that I normally wouldn’t get at the store.”

The availability of fresh bread, dairy and produce is part of the program Dunn and Lopez—and the community members that they serve—take seriously. Currently, purchased food comes from local sources wherever possible, meaning that money goes back into the community. Dunn estimated that the organization has spent over $3,000 at Whole G.

He’s also excited to see the fresh fruits and vegetables that come from Haven’s Harvest, a food advocacy and recovery organization based in New Haven. When he receives his box each week, Garbera is too.

“When I wrote the check in 1996 I didn’t really think I would be living this long,” he said. “I’m still here and I am glad the center is still here doing this work. I strongly encourage others to support their good and great efforts to help our community in meaningful ways with dignity and respect.”

The program is also personalized. In a regular week, Lopez often contacts the individuals who need distribution through via text, phone call, or email. They pick up food on Saturday; recently the center has enlisted drivers to also do food drop off, in an attempt to further streamline their food distribution process.

“I’ve always wanted to help people,” Lopez said. “We really really work hard to make sure people get their box. We want to give away this food!”

She worked to streamline the program, texting recipients and classifying boxes as regular food boxes, family boxes, and large family boxes. To keep volunteers healthy, she made sure that people wear masks (the Pride Center also supplied extra face masks), practice social distancing and wear gloves when packing and transporting the boxes full of food.

She praised staff and volunteers at the Pride Center for making things run smoothly, particularly during the current pandemic.

“These people who I’m working with are exceptional, I love working here,” she said.

Dunn said that his position still feels “like a dream job.” He became the center’s first full-time, paid executive director in August 2017. In three years, he has grown the center’s programming, expanded its staff, and adapted to serve New Haven through a pandemic.

“I endured a lot professionally in my previous positions that I’ve worked that have set me up to be in this position,” he said. “There are definitely some unique challenges of being an organization focused on a very specific minority group that not everybody likes.”

He added that he doesn’t do anything alone—his staff and volunteers have helped build and sustain the center’s progress. He praised Lopez for her work, noting that he’s watched her grow from experiencing youth programming to running a program herself.

“I think the big thing I would say is a big thank you to all the volunteers, who have given up hundreds and hundreds of hours of volunteer time to come and make this program possible,” he said. “And to all the funders who gave us money to do this program big and small, from the people who gave us five dollars on Facebook, and to the bigger donors that gave us the seed money to actually buy the food.”

This piece comes to Centerline Magazine through the Arts Paper’s third annual Youth Arts Journalism Initiative (YAJI), a program of the Arts Council of Greater New Haven.
Changing of the Guard
Looking at the Next Phase of True Colors

by Lucy Gellman

Patrick Comerford looked to True Colors when he may have needed it most. Now the organization is looking to him as it moves into uncharted territory.

Comerford is the second-ever director of True Colors, Inc., a statewide organization designed to serve LGBTQ+ youth and adults through robust programming, leadership training, and its now-beloved annual conference. The 39-year-old, who has over a decade of organizing experience, follows founding director Robin McHaelen. She founded the organization in 1992.

“It’s this really pivotal moment,” he said in a recent Zoom call. “We get to say as an organization: Who do we wanna be? How has the landscape changed? What do we need to be doing to move forward, and what is the future? What are the next 20 years of this organization? That was just too tempting to not step into.”

Comerford’s experience with True Colors goes decades back to his childhood, when he was an 11-year-old kid living in Glastonbury (“a lot of farms,” he joked). He first came out to a friend in 1992—the same year McHaelen held the inaugural “Children from the Shadows” (CFS) conference at the University of Connecticut. The event later became known as the True Colors Annual Conference, with attendance of 5,000 in the years leading up to COVID-19.

At the time, Comerford was growing up unsure of what the future looked like for a gay kid in small-town Connecticut. There wasn’t yet a Gay-Straight Alliance at his school. He remembered feeling profoundly lonely. Then he walked into an early CFS conference. Something clicked.

“I don’t think I went to a single workshop or talked to a single person that day,” he recalled. “I probably sat plastered against the wall in total paralysis. But I saw a room full of people who were LGBTQ, wrestling with their identity, living, thriving, and creating community. It opened up a possibility and a future for me in my mind.”

Over the next several years, Comerford returned to the conference—first as an attendee, then as a presenter, and then as a mentor for other young people just coming out themselves. His experience there gave him a springboard into high school theater, including *Once Upon A Mattress* and Studs Terkel’s 1974 *Working*. He now credits that outlet with changing his life.

As Comerford got older, he watched attendance at CFS/the True Colors Annual Conference grow from a few hundred to a few thousand. When he finished school, he took a pause before heading to college. He started doing what True Colors had done for him: LGBTQ+ youth advocacy work.

“There’s a trauma of coming out in the early nineties,” he said. “LGBTQ folks don’t get to have an adolescence in the way that so many other kids do. It wasn’t something that I had language around at the time, but that’s what I was doing. I was out living. I was trying to explore who I was without the trauma of being in school.”

“I had a lot of roadblocks to seeing a future,” he added. “It wasn’t culturally expected for a gay man, frankly, to live in significant ways. I was trying to figure out who I was. Your twenties is a complicated time for exploration.”

When he headed to Southern Connecticut State University in 2010, the organization was never far from his burgeoning organizing career. In 2011, both he and McHaelen advocated for the inclusion
of gender identity in the state's expanded protections against discrimination. Six years later, he worked with her on H.B.6695, a bill that banned the practice of conversion therapy in Connecticut. It was passed into law by Gov. Dannel Malloy the same session.

During his time in college, Comerford’s own work in politics and community building was growing. In 2011, he became an organizing and training specialist at Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, where he remained until 2018. He has also worked as a facilitator and educator with Niyonu Spann Associates (Co-Creating Effective and Inclusive Organizations, Beyond Diversity 101) the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and Anti-Defamation League. He’s no longer that lonely gay kid from small-town Connecticut: he now lives in New Haven with a statewide network built around advocacy.

As he takes the helm at True Colors, he said his first priority is making sure LGBTQ+ youth are getting through COVID-19, from potentially unsafe home environments to remote schooling. He praised Texas teacher Taylor Lifka, who was temporarily put on leave for including a pride flag and Black Lives Matter Sign in her Google classroom. Not all educators and families are so welcoming: as COVID-19 cases continue to rise across the country, many of those young people remain closeted at home.

“Young LGBTQ folks in too many instances are just trying to survive the day at school,” he said. “Or the day at home. And so that’s really crucial. You can talk about...”
bullying and harassment at school—40 percent of LGBTQ youth and their peers are less likely to have an adult to turn to when that happens. That's really, really significant.”

Many are also grappling with the parallel pandemics of COVID-19 and white supremacy. Just as Black Americans are more likely to be infected by or die from COVID-19, Black LGBTQ+ youth have been harder hit by the pandemic. Comerford—who acknowledged that he is a cisgender white male running a historically white organization—is looking at 2020 as a moment of both statewide and national reckoning around the intersections of queer identity, housing security, personal safety, and race.

“We have to face what life is like for Black and Brown and LGBTQ youth in our community,” he said. “And what support systems are needed not only to create a safer system for LGBTQ youth, but to reduce racial stress for Black and Brown youth. They trying to manage their queer identity and trying to stay alive in a system that doesn’t value their bodies, their beings.”

“I think it’s crucial for organizations like ours to be thinking about what young folks need,” he added. “They need access to an immigration system that doesn’t threaten deportation and devalue their lives. They need access to some sort of community support that doesn’t necessarily look like the police. And those are the things that we need to be looking at.”

In the coming months, he envisions rolling out inclusive, intersectional programming for both youth and adults across the state. Already, the organization offers multiple trainings, “safe haven” open houses, its multi-week “Queer Academy” led by Mel Cordner. He praised a resource bank that receives constant updates and has become a lifeline during the pandemic.

After the organization held multiple virtual “mini-cons” in lieu of a conference this year, Comerford is already thinking about how to keep the conference online if COVID-19 continues to be a threat through 2021. Calling it “a sacred piece of work,” he stressed the importance of making sure that accessible panels, workshops, conversations and affinity groups exist even if they must remain online.

The digital hurdle expands to work beyond the conference, he said. Within the organization, he’s been trying to navigate work while the organization’s members can’t specifically be in the same space together. Beyond it, he would also like to expand the program’s footprint to “the quiet corners” of the state, with partnerships that lead to grassroots, regional youth-led organizing and expanded training programs.

“We have some learning to do as an organization” he said. “We are a historically white-led organization—still are. And so we have some learning, some trust building to do in communities. And that is the primary focus, so that we can be in right relationship as we do this work and honor the work that is already being done.”

That also takes money, he noted. True Colors employs five full-time staff members and a fleet of contract workers who have continued to work during the pandemic. While their payroll continues, however, the organization has seen a drop in traditional sources of revenue, including conference registration and trainings.

Since March, True Colors has seen a 26 percent loss to its annual budget, which is just under $700,000. While the organization received Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funding early in the pandemic, that money is now gone. Comerford said that means the organization will be focusing on fundraising, including a year-end giving campaign that keeps the lights on—and the programming coming.

“We have some deep work to do as organizations,” he said. “As organizations, as queer folks out there, as white folks, as white queer leaders, there’s work for us to do. To make sure they have what they need.”

“We have to keep going, and we will keep going,” he added. “But we can’t implement a new vision without support.”
PRIDE

...Both New and Old

Pride in the Parking Lot (top half) was a first-year event at the Tipping Chair Tavern in Milldale, offering an outdoor event that was socially distanced yet entertaining. Out CT, meanwhile, held their annual pride (bottom half), but combined it with virtual offerings to reach all interested.

Photos courtesy Carrie Ashton and Out CT
This year, the newly renamed Bridgeport event offered a hybrid of in-person and virtual events, with a variety show broadcast on TV and online, and an art exhibit that could be viewed either in person or virtually. This year marked the 10th year of Bridgeport's pride events.

Photos courtesy OutWorks
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Joseph “Joey” Goodwin drove that message home on a recent evening at 168 York Street Cafe, as he spoke about the history, legacy and future of New England’s longest-running gay bar and the building in which it is located. After 28 years as owner, Goodwin and his business partner Mary Tirozzi sold the building to Yale University for $2.85 million last week. The building is also home to Salon J and a number of apartments.

“When I bought the building, I knew that I was going to sell it,” he said in an interview at the bar, as plates of salads, piping hot wings, burgers, and salt-dusted fries came out from the kitchen. “That was my plan. I’m a real estate agent. Yale’s been looking at this building forever, and I knew that. Deep down inside, I knew that I didn’t want to be a landlord anymore. I said, ‘you know what? This is a godsend.’”

Joey Goodwin recently sold the building which houses 168 York Street Cafe, but vowed the bar will remain open for years to come.
“I didn’t sell to Yale to surrender,” he later added. “I sold to Yale because I think they’re good for the City of New Haven.”

Yale spokesperson Karen Peart did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Goodwin declined to comment on the terms of his lease, but said that “I can tell you I’m not going anywhere for quite a long time.” The spot, which has a dining room, bar, and full menu, has recently reopened after months of COVID-19 closures.

He has run the bar with the co-ownership of his longtime partner George Coyle, who has worked at some version of the spot since 1971.

Goodwin’s relationship with 168 York began long before it was officially 168 York, and before he had snagged its long-running title (that belonged to Westport’s Brook Cafe until 2010, when it closed after 71 years in business).

Born and raised in New Haven, Goodwin grew up in the 1970s, first in Wooster Square and then in the city’s Annex neighborhood. As a teenager at Richard C. Lee High School, he became part of city history as he participated in attempts to desegregate through bussing.

He also spent those years trying to find his people. In 1976, he started going to what was then called The Pub Cafe at its original location on Chapel Street, where Book Trader now stands. He was underage and starry-eyed; the place became a sort of home base. When The Pub burned down in 1978, he watched as owners Jimmy Bombard and Jerry Carlson moved down the block to 168 York St., and started to rebuild.

Before they moved in, the space had been a biker bar called Inside Out. Keith Hyatte, who worked as a cook at The Pub, recalled it as dirty and “just creepy.” Then it transformed.

“The gay boys took it over and it became the neighborhood bar,” laughed his husband John Allen, who co-founded the New Haven Pride Center in 1996. “Everybody went. The local people and the students. It’s such a wonderful part of New Haven’s history.”

Around Goodwin, New Haven’s gay scene was slowly, cautiously expanding. On Crown Street, Jack Garity opened Partners Cafe in 1974, in the spot where it is still operated by Dave and Bernard Kleman. Gotham Citi Cafe, which Robb Bartolomeo opened in 1996, would not come for over another decade. The Pub held down its spot as the local watering hole.

Richard Tortora, a former Pub employee and longtime friend of Goodwin’s, recalled bringing his son there in the early 1980s, when both he and many of his friends were largely closeted. Decades later, he still returns to the space for pub food and glasses of chilled white wine.

“I was brought up hearing that I needed to meet a girl and get married,” he recalled during an interview at 168 York, as he ordered wing dings with a side of teriyaki. The wine sloshed in his glass as he spoke. “And what did I do? I met a girl and got married.”

Goodwin began working
for Bombard and Carlson in 1985. At the time, he was still working a job selling concessions and managing the box office at the New Haven Coliseum, as groups including Iron Maiden, Deep Purple, Twisted Sister and Mötley Crüe made their way through town. When he wasn’t there, he was at The Pub. He saw how a gay bar could become the wildly beating heart of a community.

“Back then, this was the only gay bar to go to,” he recalled. “We migrated towards here.”

In 1992, Bombard decided to sell the building, and Goodwin bought it. When 168 York opened on Christmas Day in 1993, patrons dubbed it “The Gay Cheers.” The name stuck: 168 became a spot for first (and second, and third) dates, pre- and post-theater drinks, and meetings between new friends and old ones.

Goodwin loved being at the center of the action; he still does. After most work days as a real estate agent, he rolls into the bar around 6 p.m. and stays for hours.

“The economy was booming,” he said of the bar’s early years. “Gay men especially had so much disposable income. And that’s when advertisers took note.”

But the 1990s were also bittersweet and often frightening. During his first years as owner, Goodwin found himself navigating the AIDS crisis in New Haven, at a time when the disease was largely stigmatized as a “gay cancer.” Around him, people were disappearing. One week, he’d see a regular at the bar. The next week, they’d be gone.

Most customers had nicknames—Coyle was “Kitty;” another patron went by “Midnight Mary”—which meant there was no way to find them. According to the CDC, 78,000 people in the Northeast were diagnosed with AIDS between 1993 and 1995.

“We lost a lot of people,” he said. “The most disturbing part of that was the wondering. Everybody would be here, like, once a week. And then you don’t see them for the next week, the next week, the next week. And what you said to yourself was: Gee. Another one down.”

“You have to remember, you couldn’t contact anyone,” he continued. “Back in the 90s, these people weren’t out. You had a lot of people who were still married and had children. You had to protect your community. People would lose their insurance. They would lose their homes. They would lose their families.”

Goodwin recalled a single doctor who would do cash-only HIV testing, to prevent insurance companies from finding out about a patient’s diagnosis. Instead of using patient names, he would use code numbers. He remembered hearing the name over and over at the bar, as one friend referred another, and then another.

Even in the midst of crisis, Goodwin focused on giving
back to the community. In the mid-1990s, he started charging $1 at the door two days a week (with a laugh, he recalled the amount of grief some patrons gave him over the price). With the money he raised, he funded a local LGBTQ+ bowling league. Then he added a softball league. Then the Connecticut Gay Men’s Chorus, which performed at the bar once a week for two decades. In the late 1990s, the bar raised $15,000 for the then-nascent Oprah’s Angel Network, to go toward storm relief. Then it kept going.

In his first decade of business, Goodwin raised $250,000 for community groups. Each year, he still donates 100 percent of sales to A Place To Nourish Your Health (APNH, formerly AIDS Project New Haven) during its annual Dining Out for Life fundraiser. Two decades after sending his first check to the region’s gay bowling league, he makes sure he has enough money set aside to be a sponsor.

“One thing about the gay community is that when there’s something to be done, we’re there,” he said. “We are definitely there. When someone needs help, we’re there.”

As time went by, he also watched gay bars become an endangered species. After almost three decades in business, Goodwin isn’t competing with fellow bars, so much as with the internet, dating apps, Netflix, and most recently a pandemic. Before COVID-19, the bar was still home to several weekly drag shows, fundraisers, well-loved Sunday brunches, and at least one musical about the dating app Grindr.

It was where first dates turned into long-term relationships, friends came back to reconnect after decades away from New Haven, and queens got their start. Robin Banks
became a beloved community member during her monthly shows there. Kiki Lucia stepped into the spotlight and never left it. Goodwin still jumps at those opportunities. But he feels like the bar's role as a lifeline is gone.

“We really sold ourselves out,” he said. “There’s an older generation and a younger generation. The older generation wanted to live on the down-low. They wanted their private clubs. You had a younger generation that wanted more freedom. The younger generation pushed for acceptance, and acceptance and acceptance.”

“This is where we are right now,” he continued. “They got accepted. Now meanwhile, my generation, we lost everything. We lost clubs that people died to come in. We set fashion. We set music. Everybody turned to the gay community back in the 80s and 90s. We paid a price to have acceptance. So now we don’t have the best bars anymore. We don’t have fashion. We don’t have music.”

Still, he said, he’s excited to be staying—this time as a tenant—for years to come. As he grabbed a chilled bottle of water from the bar last week, he joked that he won’t be the one replacing toilets when they break. Coyle has been ribbing him about the building, which he initially called a 10-year investment, for years.

In a phone call, Allen and Hyatte echoed that enthusiasm. The two met at Partners in 1982, and have become fixtures in the city’s LGBTQ+ history in the decades since. But Partners “was really a place to dance,” said Allen—they went for their first date at 168 York. Over matching chopped salads, they clicked. They’ve been together since.

In the decades that followed the 1980s, Allen said he’s watched Yale buy up properties with a sense of anxiety. Even in the 1990s, the New Haven Pride Center couldn’t afford to pay rent downtown, in a building owned by the university. He said he wonders how long independent, small businesses will be able to hold on as the university continues to expand.

“These things are so important,” he said. “Pretty soon, Yale’s just going to own the entire city.”
The news also came as a relief to Father Tom Jackson, who met his husband Alex there 20 years ago. Jackson, who is now the priest in charge at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, was almost 50 and working at the Regional Water Authority when 168 York changed his life.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Jackson worked as an environmental activist and reporter in New Haven. He was also closeted for the first four decades of his life, and had just started the coming out process in the 1990s. He went on to be one of the founding members of the New Haven Pride Center in 1996.

On the night he met his husband, “it was one of those cold New England winter nights.”

The windchill had dropped considerably. There was a full blue moon overhead; inches of snow on the ground glittered in its reflection as they crunched beneath his feet. He recalled watching his breath hang in the air as he rolled into the bar early, and waited for his date, who “just wanted to talk,” to arrive.

He went outside to look, and marveled at the wintry majesty even as he saw an empty street. He ducked outside a second time, and saw that no one had arrived at the bar. He went out a third time, and saw nothing. Then he turned around. Alexander Han—or as Jackson called him, simply Alex—was standing behind him.

The two were away from the city for 15 years, while Han pursued a law degree and Jackson went to divinity school on the West Coast. When they returned in 2019, they celebrated their anniversary with dinner at 168 York.

“It is a very special place and I’m hoping that other people will realize that and be able to enjoy the community bar,” he said. “Gay bars are an endangered species, and it’s part of our history. It’s part of our heritage and part of our community.”

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