Virtually Fabulous

Loosey LaDuca helped Triangle Community Center mark its 30th anniversary with a virtual fundraiser. Such events have been commonplace during the pandemic, but have also helped organizations like TCC expand their missions.
As you age, living at home can be challenging and costly, especially if your health needs change. That’s why if you’re 50 or older, you need an ally today for a more secure tomorrow—with Thrive at Home with Whitney Center, the country’s first, and Connecticut’s only, platinum-certified, SAGECare provider.

Thrive at Home is not a home-care agency, but it can help you prepare—and pay—for life’s “what-ifs”. A more affordable and comprehensive alternative to long-term care insurance, Thrive at Home lets you:

• Choose a coverage plan that works within your budget.
• Access a personal care coordinator 24/7 to arrange and receive quality, inclusive care in your home.
• Protect yourself—with a lifetime of benefits and no hidden fees—against the inevitable rise of long-term care insurance and future health care costs while also avoiding a nursing home.
• Enjoy access to Whitney Center’s exceptional amenities including a fitness center, pool, concerts and so much more.

If you can’t predict...protect. And enjoy the comfort of home now and in the future. Learn more by calling (203) 848-2626 or visiting ThriveAtHome.org.
TCC at 30: An Evolution
With their 30th anniversary recently behind them, Triangle Community Center looks to the future with an expanded mission and further growth. 6

Anti-Asian Hate Spreads
The pandemic has brought fresh anxiety for many Asian Americans, heightened by the recent mass shooting in Georgia. Local Asian Americans share their perspectives. 12

LGBTQ+ and Disabled
The intersectionality of those two identities yields unique challenges around stigma and being "high-risk" during a pandemic. Maria Altamura shares her view. 15

Crisis for LGBTQ+ Youth
The abrupt release of the True Colors staff at the beginning of the year has caused other leaders in state to rally to figure out how to pick up the work left behind by the org. 18

PLUS: Viewpoints, Photos from Around Connecticut, and MORE!

Centerline Magazine is published six times a year by the New Haven Pride Center. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the publisher or of Centerline but of the writers. We welcome a variety of viewpoints and encourage submissions. Complete or partial reproduction of any advertisement, news article, feature or photography without written consent from the publisher is strictly prohibited. Send advertising inquiries to mleonardo@newhavenpridecenter.org ©2021 New Haven Pride Center.

Editor in Chief and Designer
Joshua O’Connell

Editor
Patrick J Dunn

Contributors:
Maria Altamura
Lucy Gellman
Vu Tran
Melinda Wang

Cover photo: Courtesy Loosey LaDuca

Printed by TCI Press
Health Care Advocates International

We are a full service health clinic located in Fairfield County, CT
Accepting most insurances
Friendly & Compassionate staff

Our Services:

• Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) consultation, screening and treatment
• Care for primary care health issues, such as hypertension, allergies, depression or anxiety, diabetes, obesity, or simple colds
• Comprehensive preventative care for HIV/AIDS
• Knowledge about or diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections
• Advice for your struggles with recreational drug use such as crystal methamphetamine or opiates
• Correction of your HIV-associated facial lipoatrophy with Sculptra

2595 Main St 2nd FL Stratford CT 06615
203-345-0404

For more info visit us online
www.hcaiinc.com
Welcome to the first issue of 2021 for Centerline. We're pleased to share this latest issue with you, at a time when things are looking a bit optimistic, but with plenty of challenges still ongoing.

The abrupt "release" of True Colors staff earlier this year shows how fragile things remain a year into the pandemic, but also shows how important the LGBTQ+ organizations we have in the state are. Thanks to the work of a number of community leaders like Mel Cordner and Kamora Herrington, there are people picking up the work that was so abruptly dropped when the organization decided to reset. But there's still a lot more work ahead. The New Haven Pride Center recently received a grant that allows our youth programming officer to shift to a full-time capacity, a welcome development, but still can only make up a fraction of what a dedicated fulltime organization could offer. So Lucy Gellman takes a look at where things stand.

On a more optimistic tone, our community centers continue to be a vital and critical resource, and Triangle Community Center recently celebrated its 30th anniversary with a successful fundraiser. Just before we went to press it was announced that former board president Edson Rivas was named their third permanent Executive Director, great news for the organization as they retain someone with experience within TCC and a wealth of local knowledge. Gellman shares not only how TCC reached this point, but what's ahead.

This month's viewpoints hit upon other challenges faced in our community. Anti-Asian hate has been a persistent problem, but recently the issue has become more prominent because of the pandemic, as well as the shootings in Georgia. We asked a number of our local Asian-American community members for their thoughts, and while we're still collecting others, we have two we are sharing with you this issue. We'll continue to share more of those viewpoints in future issues.

Intersectionality of LGBTQ+ identities and other perspectives can also yield unique insights, and Maria Altamura shares hers, being LGBTQ+ and disabled. Between stigma, dealing with the identity of a "high-risk" person in a pandemic, and more are a part of the viewpoint she shares in this issue.

The pandemic continues to make socially distant events the norm, but fortunately our community has successfully adapted to make this successful. Aside from the TCC 30th Anniversary, there's been other events such as Halloqueen, the Hartford Gay Men's Chorus, and the Imperial Sovereign Court of All Connecticut's Coronation, just to name a few. We've shared some images from some of these events, our way of continuing to move forward while awaiting more favorable conditions for a return to in-person functions.

Finally, speaking of fundraisers, the Center had its 18th annual Dorothy Awards this winter. It was my 15th year serving on the planning committee, and I wanted to personally share my appreciation to all the honorees, performers, attendees and sponsors. Despite the virtual shift, we raised a record amount of money for the New Haven Pride Center, ensuring we can make 2021 another successful year for the organization. From our earliest roots as an all-volunteer nonprofit to our current position of having nearly a dozen members of the team whether in program officer or full time capacities, we continue to take our own steps to ensuring the community has an increasing array of resources that can offer support, education, or networking opportunities.

We'll see you in May with the next issue!
Loosey LaDuca looked straight into the camera, her pink-and-aqua curls bouncing in the light. She lifted her arms to reveal a shimmering top, ribbons of rainbow cascading down her torso as a purple wall glowed behind her. She smiled coyly, and blew a paper party horn lined with pink polka dots. On screens across Connecticut, viewers tuned in to celebrate an anchor in Connecticut’s LGBTQ+ community as it passed the three decade mark.

It was the scene at Triangle Community Center’s (TCC) recent 30th birthday bash and fundraiser, moved online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the organization is looking back—and sprinting forward—as it moves into a fourth decade serving Fairfield County. On the horizon, it is already planning for expanded programming across the state.

It is helmed by Edson Rivas, a former board member who took over after TCC’s second director, Sean-Michael Hazuda, left unexpectedly in July of last year.

“When I was on the board, I found it rewarding to be part of an organization that gave back to the community,” Rivas said in a recent phone interview, while assembling food kits.

Drag performer Loosey LaDuca and Triangle Community Center Executive Director Edson Rivas are on screen during the 30th Birthday Bash fundraiser last fall.
for clients. “Now I get to see more of the things that we do. When Covid happened and we went into lockdown, we closed our offices and went into the virtual space. All of our programming moved to Zoom or Discord. Everything was able to be moved to the virtual world.”

Its 30-year history has helped it survive and learn during the pandemic. TCC was founded in 1990 by a group of LGBTQ+ community members in Fairfield County, who ran it on a volunteer basis until 2013. For its first two decades, it held public programming and an annual fundraiser, but was too resource-strapped for frequent support groups or case management services.

Then 23 years in, TCC’s board of directors secured a grant from World Health Clinicians. It hired Anthony Crisci, a graduate of Hofstra College who had grown up in Fairfield. While Crisci said that it originally “felt like a big risk” to take the position—he had been working for Bend The Arc, a nonprofit geared toward Jewish justice work in New York City—he was also excited to return to Fairfield County. He wanted to give back to the community where he’d grown up.

“It was exciting,” he said in a recent phone call, as he drove home from his current job at Circle Care Center. “I really wanted to help bring these services to the community. I wanted to help things go right.”

Almost immediately, Crisci said, he saw multiple levels of need in the community. Early in his tenure, requests started rolling in for medical advice, affinity spaces, and drug and addiction services. One day, he picked up the phone and the person on the other end of the line was in crisis. Crisci, who has lost several friends to substance use disorder and suicide, tried to keep them on the phone for as long as he could. He referred the person to a substance use disorder agency in Fairfield.

“They felt like they had nowhere to go to be safe,” he said. “Growing up as a queer young adult, I had a lot of friends who dealt with substance abuse. When I started at TCC, I wanted to do something about that.
“I wanted to help my friends who didn’t survive their addiction. When I got that phone call, he was just like: ‘Where can I go?’ I was trying to keep him on the phone with one hand while Googling social services with the other. TCC didn’t even have NA [narcotics anonymous] at the time. I felt useless.”

The experience made him double down on building social service navigation and case management services. In 2014, he applied for and secured funding to build case management, and adult and young adult groups focused on peer support and recovery. The same year, Crisci and the board kicked off a one-day summer celebration that became Norwalk’s beloved “Pride In The Park” festival. Until last summer, the event drew thousands of visitors. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, it pivoted to online programming for an entire pride week.

By early 2015, Crisci had created new tools for social service navigation within the organization. During his tenure, TCC launched case management services and began growing its focus on clients across Fairfield County. For many, its Norwalk drop in center became a lifeline and a refuge. In 2015, Crisci also began holding cultural competency training in the area and across the state. They took off: by 2016, TCC was teaching LGBTQ+ competency in schools, hospitals, medical offices, homeless shelters and even the FBI office in New Haven. Crisci also honed in on relationships with the state, which TCC maintains today.

“It was really incredible that it really just clicked,” he recalled. “I don’t really want to see TCC go anywhere. I want to see TCC provide the services it’s providing in the best possible way and to be a consistent and reliable organization in our community.”

Dr. Erica Hartwell, an associate professor of marriage and family therapy at Fairfield University who joined the board in 2018, helped build out TCC’s counseling services. After moving to Connecticut from Columbus, Ohio in 2013, Hartwell found TCC while looking for queer affinity spaces in the area. Before joining the board, she volunteered. She, like Crisci, saw a need—culturally responsive counseling that was free to the people who needed it most.

When she came onto the board, she helped create an internship program through which graduate students in mental health could learn to provide culturally responsive therapy alongside full-time counselors. She called it an issue of accessible, equitable care: mental health professionals may enter the field without knowing how to fight their own internal biases against LGBTQ+ clients seeking services. Currently, there are two full-time counselors and eight interns.

“I’ve really had a front row seat for this growth and all the ways that we can serve the community, including during COVID-19,” she said. “Thinking about case management and counseling over telehealth, and how we move our social groups and our support groups to a virtual space.”

“I would like to see us continue to expand our social and community services and to be able to provide wraparound services for
anyone in the community,” she added. “Since we’re starting with queer folks, we can create a model for serving the community. I like to say, these are life saving and life giving services that help people thrive.”

In the midst of a global pandemic, TCC has continued to provide counseling services, affinity and support groups, and community training and education programs. The center has expanded its food pantry and has kept its service line open, with a 211 navigator who Rivas praised as “LGBTQ supportive and very knowledgable.”

In the next year, Rivas is also working to develop and strengthen partnerships with the Center For Family Justice in Bridgeport and similar crisis service organizations in Danbury. He said that it’s part of a mission to extend client-based care to LGBTQ+ communities across the state, including those that may not yet have a plan for LGBTQ+ people facing substance use disorder, housing and food insecurity, domestic and sexual violence or harassment.

“I want people to know that we will make strides to get the community more involved and invested,” he said. “I want them to know that even though our offices are closed, we will still continue providing the services that they need.”

As programming has gone virtual due to COVID-19, Rivas has seen more people using TCC’s services and support groups. He said he understands the trend—a Zoom room may present a certain level of anonymity on the internet that doesn’t exist in in-person support groups. At the same time, rising anxiety, depression, isolation and lack of in-person gathering are driving people to join social groups and support spaces.

Rivas added that the need for services has also grown since last March. He’s watched food insecurity and unemployment skyrocket. There’s now a waiting list for its counseling services, the majority of which are presented free of charge (all are currently done as telehealth appointments due to COVID-19).

“I think that one of my biggest shocks when I got introduced to TCC was the need,” Rivas said. “I think that everyone assumed that because Fairfield County tends to be so wealthy, the same problems don’t affect us. But it’s still very much an issue.”

Colin Hosten, currently the president of the board, said he’s excited for the future of the organization. Shortly before COVID-19 hit Connecticut, TCC finished an expansion that doubled its physical footprint, including five soundproof counseling rooms. It also finalized and voted on a strategic plan meant to see it through the next three years.

“One of the things that we have been trying to do throughout the time of Covid is to make sure that our community knows that we’re here for them,” he said. “It’s tough. We’ve all retreated into our little corners. That does not mean that our work has paused at all.”

“How can we make sure that we are reaching programming that is centered around connection?” he later added. “We want to think about the diversity of our LGBTQ community, and think about the services that can cater to the community.”

---

**Be part of the Pride Center’s team of sustainers and see the impact of your gift grow with the Center!**

Set up your recurring gift at newhavenpridecenter.org/recurring or text nhpcrecurring to 76278
Virtual Fundraising

Many nonprofit fundraising events moved online as an acknowledgement of the ongoing pandemic, but that didn't stop some creative scenarios from being developed. Here's screenshots from a variety of events that have taken place in recent months.

Virtual event screenshots
WE PROVIDE
Transgender Medical Services
General Checkups
Sexual Health
HIV Care
PrEP & PEP
Gay & Bisexual Men’s Health
Queer Women’s Health

LOCATIONS
2200 Whitney Avenue
Suite 290
Hamden, CT 06518
203-903-8308

30 Myano Lane
Stamford, CT 06902
203-674-1102

PHARMACY NOW OPEN!
Anchor Health Initiative has set out to provide you best-in-class pharmacy service. The pharmacy will be able to service both the Hamden and Stamford Clinics. Our goal is to streamline prescriptions within one centralized pharmacy.

30 Myano Lane, Stamford, CT 06902 | 203-674-1102

www.AnchorHealthInitiative.org
Over the past year, anti-Asian hate has been on the rise across America, often exasperated by the hate-filled rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The Center asked local Queer Asian Americans to share some of their experiences.

At press time, the shootings in Atlanta had just happened, and were still quite fresh. We will share additional perspectives in upcoming issues.

VU TRAN, WINDSOR

After significant acts of hate, there is usually a moment of reckoning where we realize that these events did not materialize overnight. They are the result of underlying injustices that have been ignored, waiting for a catalyst to bring them into public consciousness. It was that way for the marches in Selma; the riots at Stonewall; and now the massacre in Georgia. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) have been under attack due to the rhetoric surrounding COVID-19, with terms like “China virus” and “kung flu” making their way into common speech. According to an analysis released by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, crimes targeting Asian people in 2020 rose by nearly 150 percent in 16 of America’s largest cities.

But the mass shooting in Georgia also elevated the conversation around other systemic forms of oppression that pre-dated COVID-19, including the fetishization of Asian women. The notion of Asian-owned massage businesses as fronts for illegal sexual activity has found roots in mainstream culture, with television shows and movies perpetuating jokes about “happy endings.” This is not a phenomenon isolated to the straight community though, the queer community is also guilty in the fetishization of Asian people. The pressure surrounding body image in the gaso jusy community is heightened when intersected with race, creating unfair and damaging expectations for Asian men to be “twinks” or classifying them as exotic “pandas” when they fall outside of those expectations. Cultural norms are also often twisted in the straight and queer community to force the label of “submissive” onto Asian people based on the emphasis on respect in many Asian cultures.

As with any minority group, representation matters; and that is true for AAPI folx in the queer community. When mainstream culture features queer storylines, AAPI voices and identities are often not included. When I look at the leadership and the figureheads of the queer community, I do not see many people who look like me. I have often been the first Asian to fill a particular role or the only Asian on the leadership team of an organization. When there is a lack of diversity in a community, it gives the implicit message that those not present are not welcome, and we must do better to change that narrative. This is complicated by barriers in some Asian cultures where queer identities are not accepted, but we must ask ourselves whether we are upholding our part to actively engage the AAPI community. We may not get everyone to walk through the door, but we must ensure the door is open.

We are in a pivotal moment in the AAPI rights movement. Oftentimes AAPI communities are hesitant to speak up due to...
a fear of “creating trouble” or an acceptance of being ignored. But as with any form of oppression, there comes a breaking point and we are experiencing one now. If there was a time for the queer community to step up as allies to the AAPI community, that time is also now; and it goes beyond protests and demonstrations, it goes to changing the culture. It goes to making sure that our art and drag do not include racially insensitive themes. It goes to ending jokes that perpetuate stereotypes. Asians who are good at math are good because they worked hard. Asians who own salons should not be demeaned because of the nature of their work, but celebrated for their entrepreneurial spirit. When we strike down stereotypes and discrimination, we see each other as human beings, which is the first step to creating community.

MELINDA WANG, NEW HAVEN

This past weekend, after the white supremacist murder in Atlanta of eight people, six of whom were Asian women, my mother gave me a phone call. She asked me if I still had the pepper spray she bought me and told me to be careful. She expressed fears that I could be a target of racial violence, telling me I was too naive and too trusting, that I didn’t truly understand the extent to which much of the country still hates us even if they don’t show it.

My mother and I don’t agree on much. She’s homophobic and a registered Republican, and from a time and place that I may never know. But we do share something-- an awareness of what it means to live as Asian Americans and be seen as women in a white supremacist nation. For my mother, the only logical response to her knowledge that almost anywhere in the world someone with white skin will be valued more than her is to conform-- to be respectable, to try to stay safe, to keep her head down and survive. And she loves me, so she tries to teach me how to survive in the same way that she has learned to, even if that means trying to make me reject parts of myself.
But I have always wanted more than survival. And I know that being respectable will not save me or my mother. From their earliest arrival in the United States, Asian women have been reduced to sexual objects, strange and deviant fixities that don’t approach the sanctity of white femininity. One of the first modern immigration laws, the Page Act of 1875 effectively forbade Chinese women, who were assumed to be sex workers brought for “immoral purposes,” from entering the country. Asian women’s bodies were marked as dirty, immoral, corrupting forces, and as always sexually available. Decades of war and imperialism have encouraged the sexual exploitation of Asian women abroad by American soldiers and sex tourists alike, further the image of Asian women’s bodies as inherently violable. These same histories of war and imperialism destabilize nations, pushing women like those murdered by Robert Aaron Lang in Atlanta to migrate abroad, where they might take up jobs in garment factories, nail salons, massage parlors, or as domestic care workers in order to support their families.

And so my mother tries her best to protect me. She calls me, checks in on me, loves me and cares for me in ways much deeper than I could ever find elsewhere. But, to keep me safe, she also has asked me to hide parts of myself. She insists that I, as her lesbian child, should find and marry a man to keep me safe and that I should avoid political participation in fear of retribution. But she doesn’t seem to quite understand that I’m much more likely to experience violence at the hands of my perfectly respectable white heterosexual classmates, or my boyfriend or husband, than I am a stranger on the streets, and that it is white supremacy that drives this violence all the same. And she doesn’t understand that it is only being with my community that has made it all liveable.

Being queer and Asian has been such a blessing. My queer of color communities have given me so much joy, inspiration, and care. I know that it is them, along with my mother, who I could call on to protect me and stand up for me if anything were to happen to me. But I am thinking also of those who don’t have my same privileges. Being queer in our social order is often experienced as a state of precarity, as being at any point vulnerable to being cut out of existing systems of social support like the nuclear family.

For many immigrant communities and communities of color, it is often only our families, churches, and neighborhoods that we can turn to in times of crisis. As such, queer immigrants and queer people of color are especially vulnerable to sexual and gender violence, houselessness, and unemployment. But we are also especially resilient, especially empathetic, and exceptionally able to find ways to come together and form family and love outside of it all.
Intersectionality Between LGBTQ+ and Disabled Communities: Two Sides of the Same Coin

by Maria Altamura

Most of my life I have lived being invisible. Invisible in my passing my ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and even health. Being a part of multiple marginalized groups has led to the knowledge of understanding the intersectionalities that lie within these communities. Being Queer and Disabled, I find that stigma is the most harmful commonality in both these communities. Stigma allows the rest of society to put multifaceted beings in a box. Though these identifiers allow me to put words to feelings, the remainder of society has allowed a very one-sided opinion to take hold. Even across these communities, the stigma that is internally held can be extraordinarily harmful.

Through the last year we’ve lived through an extreme health crisis- those of “normal” health had an inside view of how many disabled people live their lives. Isolation and fear filled our communities. With the evil attack on health care for trans lives, what many didn’t see was the overbearing struggle for the LGBTQ+ and disabled communities. Not only did many of us struggle within the fear of contracting Covid-19, but the inability to receive treatments, loss of healthcare and overwhelming death toll filled our minds incessantly.

The category of “high risk” widened to not only those who are immunocompromised, but included those who would not have access to proper health care, simultaneously leaving the LGBTQ+ community and the disabled community not only at risk, but essentially to die.

The stigmatization of both these communities has put a dangerous and inaccurate representation of us as beings. We have been placed into these characteristic roles. Whether it’s being fabulous and lacking in emotion, or being in a wheelchair and not living a happy and fulfilled life- these portrayals of our communities leave us completely at risk when it comes to our rights as humans. By creating this facade that we do not feel, that we simply are, the public creates a lack of care for our general well-being. I’m always shocked when others comment on how “I live life”. Well, I’m alive- what else would I be doing? Does my disability immediately dehumanize me? Does being queer prevent me from living a normal life?

These are some questions I find myself wondering every time I have a strange interaction with a cis, non disabled, straight person. I’ve found stigma within both communities I am a part of as well, I attended a pride event in 2019 using my walking aid. I was pushed and shoved aside on many occasions, stared down and whispered about. Now this isn’t uncommon behavior, but it was extremely disheartening coming from my own community. In the same respect, there are many disabled folks who do not understand the duality of living both as a disabled and gay.

These harmful concepts and biased ways of thinking are what makes being queer and disabled dangerous for me. The longer we continue unacknowledging our built in ableism and homophobia, the longer we deny both communities liberation. By coming together we can lower the stigma and fight for equality in all sense of the word. All people deserve to live out and proud and be supported, whether that’s with the one they love, or while using a mobility aid.
HEALTH

Proud to Count in Connecticut! State’s LGBTQ+ Health Network Debuts Needs Assessment Survey

The first statewide LGBTQ+ Health Needs Assessment Survey in Connecticut has just launched!

The Survey aims to enhance our understanding of the number of people that identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community in our State and to identify the needs of the LGBTQ+ Community by asking questions related to their service needs, service access, and experiences of discrimination.

Without this Survey, Connecticut lacks sufficient data to identify the scale and diversity of needs of the community. Limited data also means that organizations in the state often struggle to secure adequate funding to provide LGBTQ+ support services and programming.

The survey is sponsored by the Connecticut LGBTQ+ Health and Human Services Network and the Connecticut Department of Public Health and is administered by The Consultation Center at Yale.

The survey is anonymous. We are asking Connecticut residents that are 18 years and older and identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ Community to take the survey and let their voice be heard.

What’s a small way that you can make a big difference? Share the survey link to LGBTQ+ folks in your network, as well as organizations and businesses that proudly serve the LGBTQ+ community.

Together, we can make every voice count!

Take the survey here: http://bit.ly/3siusqC

For more information and survey updates, follow @ctlgbtqsurvey on Facebook and Instagram.
HUMAN SERVICES CAREERS AVAILABLE

VIRTUAL OPEN HOUSE
2nd and 4th Wednesday of every month
10a-12p and 4p-6p

View our current openings by going to:
www.marrakechinc.org/current-openings

EMAIL RECRUITMENT@MARRAKECHINC.ORG
FOR MORE INFORMATION.

WHAT WE DO

We provide services to people of all ages with intellectual disabilities, acquired brain injuries, physical disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, mental illness, addiction, and people who are economically disadvantaged. The services we provide include training and support in independent living, vocational skills, community integration and socialization as well as health services, quality of life events, behavioral, financial, benefit and educational supports.

6 Lunar Drive, Woodbridge, CT 06525
www.marrakechinc.org
www.facebook.com/MarrakechIncCT

MARRAKECH: creative opportunities

www.eaststreetartsnh.org
f / @eaststreetartsnh
597 East Street, New Haven, CT 06511
Monday-Friday 9a-6p + Saturday-Sunday 11a-4p
In LGBTQ+ Youth Crisis, Who Will Fill The Gap?

A statewide organization for LGBTQ+ youth has unexpectedly hit pause during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, queer organizers and advocates across the state are trying to figure out who will fill the gap—and how quickly they can do it.

by Lucy Gellman
The conversation has been taking place among dozens of LGBTQ+ activists, organizers, peer leaders, and service providers who are stepping up for queer youth in the absence of True Colors, Inc. In late January, the Hartford-based organization abruptly announced on social media that it would be pausing operations and laying off all program staff until further notice.

In the weeks since, organizations and grassroots groups including Q Plus, the New Haven Pride Center and Kamora’s Cultural Corner (KCC) have come together to provide expanded youth programming. They are particularly concerned about the young people that were part of True Colors’ Safe Harbor Project and one-on-one Mentorship Program, who were cut off from their mentors without warning or explanation. Both programs receive significant funding from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF), which is now hanging in the balance.

“This is the riot act,” said Kamora Herrington, who ran True Colors’ mentoring program for 15 years before she founded KCC. “If you talk to anyone who was trained by me, you’d hear it. I would say, ‘These kids have been let down by the world numerous times, and you are choosing to come in here. So if you hurt them, I will end it for you.’ And True Colors did it again. These kids know that they were abandoned.”

For nearly three decades, True Colors served queer youth and families across the state as a safe harbor and educational hub. In August of last year, founding director Robin McHaelen stepped down after 27 years. In November 2020, executive director Patrick Comeford also left the organization after just months at the helm. For the past three years, it has been the only LGBTQ+ social service organization in the state to receive DCF funding for its mentorship program.

Since its initial announcement, True Colors has named Jeannette de Jesús as its interim director. De Jesús was also a consultant for the organization when it shut down programming in January. Neither de Jesús nor the board of directors responded to multiple requests for comment for this story. The organization has maintained that it still plans to hold its annual conference virtually in May, but has not released any details on how it will do so without program staff.

The announcement comes at a particularly hard time for LGBTQ+ youth across the state and the country more broadly. Even before Covid-19, LGBTQ+ youth were at higher risk of suicide, unsafe home environments, and housing insecurity than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. In July of 2020, the Trevor Project reported that 40 percent of LGBTQ+ youth considered suicide, a number that has risen as the Covid-19 pandemic fuels social and physical isolation.

In a community conversation last month, Herrington focused on the mentorship program as a vital lifeline for LGBTQ+ youth, many of whom are living in congregate settings. As she spoke, current and former mentors nodded from their one-inch boxes on screen.

“We’re going to talk about what needs to happen going forward,” she said. “People need to figure out where the chips need to fall. People need to figure out who takes responsibility for what. But the most important thing right now is that our queer babies need to be cared for in the moment.”

In the weeks since, Herrington and fellow organizers from across the state have done just that, often working around the clock to replicate services and talk to mentors. For five years, Mel Cordner served as the youth activities and GSA coordinator at True Colors for five years. After losing their job unexpectedly in January, they have grown programming at Q Plus, a grassroots group for and by queer youth.

While Q Plus has existed for roughly two years, Cordner expanded its reach immediately to hold weekly youth and adult support groups, game and activity nights, open mics, and GSA support groups. They said they are hopeful that donations can sustain and support programming as the year continues.

“This has to get done so we’re doing it,” they said in a recent phone call. “We’re piecing it together.”
Within weeks, they watched attendance double as youth from True Colors’ public programming discovered and migrated over to Q Plus. Currently, programming takes place entirely online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Eventually, Cordner hopes to have a physical program space.

They estimated that they are working between 50 and 60 hours a week without a salary. Much of that time is spent reaching out to schools across the state, where GSA members have been cut off from True Colors with no context. For the most part, they said, schools and students are eager and sometimes desperate to reconnect. Occasionally, they find themselves correcting misinformation, including a rumor that they left the organization without giving notice.

“My hope, somewhere down the line, is that everyone can contribute in some way,” they said in a recent community conversation on Facebook Live. “I’m looking for this to be an actually community driven group. So instead of, like, taking you in, having you volunteer that one time, and then kind of ignoring you for the entire year, and hoarding all the resources, hoarding all the information … Instead of doing that, we actually connect with you as a person and connect with youth as people and we do this together.”

“I’m not looking to save everybody on my own,” they added. “I’m looking to be the connector and kind of back away when appropriate.”

At the New Haven Pride Center, Youth Program Officer Ala Ochumare has been expanding youth programming online during Covid-19. Currently, she holds a “safe space” meeting every Thursday for people between the ages of 14 and 24. Every third Friday, the center is home to a virtual art space, where youth can make, share, and discuss their artwork.

In March, the center also rolled out applications for its all-new “Buddy Program,” a peer support and mentorship program for students 12 to 17 years old, led by college and high school students. The center is also actively raising funds to bring Ochumare on full time. Pride Center Executive Director Patrick Dunn added that the center also
offers case management and social services for youth and families.

“Here is a network, a queer community that has always existed in Connecticut,” Ochumare said last month, in conversation with fellow LGBTQ+ organizers. “And some of us are connected. Let’s just do the things that we’ve been talking about doing and passing, and let’s just be intentional and get this stuff done. And really make sure that we are stepping into what has happened with Covid, and that we’re centering youth voices.”

Herrington said that she is trying to see True Colors’ abrupt stop as a new beginning. Most immediately, she is concerned about the young people who have been cut off from their mentors with no explanation, and may be in unsafe home care situations without any queer people to talk to. She is also trying to ensure that DCF does not cut line item funding for queer youth in its care, who were vulnerable well before the pandemic. She recalled meeting a young West Indian woman years ago, who DCF removed from her home after a guidance counselor outed her at school and her parents beat her. The agency placed her with two lesbians who practiced Wicca. The girl—who had grown up with the narrative that gay people worshipped the devil—was traumatized, Herrington recalled. Then mentors stepped in, ready to share their lived experiences. It changed her life.

“This is my community. This is what I do,” Herrington said.

“THERE’S MASSIVE BLEEDING”

Mentors, almost all of whom were told after the initial announcement, are still reeling and worried for their mentees. Speaking halfway through the first community conversation, a longtime mentor said that she was feeling especially frustrated at the lack of communication from the board before the announcement. She likened the board’s responsibility to her own as a new mom to a 19-month-old baby girl.

“I can’t just walk out of my home without a plan and leave her there,” she said.

“And what’s happening right now is you’re feeling from us the betrayal and the tear in the trust relationship that we have worked years to build with one another, with our kids, with all of us. And that needs repair immediately, because there’s massive bleeding.”

During that conversation, True Colors Board President Evelyn Mantilla said that the organization struggled during Covid-19 because it lost its two largest revenue generators, a gala and its annual in-person conference at the University of Connecticut. In response to questions, she said that the board is in discussions with DCF to figure out how to continue or hand off its mentorship program.

Both Herrington and Cordner said they do not feel that the organization is doing enough to reach out to community partners.

“The Board of Directors at True Colors, we’re not vested in holding on to a particular program,” Mantilla said at the time (she has not responded to any further requests for comment).

“We are vested in making sure that the youth that need that support get that support. And if it turns out that we are not the ones to give or provide it, or wholly be the ones to provide it, then I wholly welcome partnership conversations.”

The New Haven Pride Center is proud to announce that, thanks to a special grant from the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, Ala Ochumare, the Center’s Youth Program Officer, will be transitioning from part-time to full-time on May 1st. This transition will allow us to continue to provide programming for LGBTQ+ youth and expand our services and youth empowerment opportunities two fold.

As part of this expansion the Center will also launch a youth mentoring program. For more information visit newhavenpridecenter.org/youth.

Expanding Youth Efforts

The New Haven Pride Center is proud to announce that, thanks to a special grant from the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, Ala Ochumare, the Center’s Youth Program Officer, will be transitioning from part-time to full-time on May 1st. This transition will allow us to continue to provide programming for LGBTQ+ youth and expand our services and youth empowerment opportunities two fold.
In Connecticut, many of True Colors’ mentors were working with queer youth who live in congregate settings, and were caught off guard by the announcement. On the first community call, multiple mentors said they had not yet heard personally from the organization and feel that they are hanging in limbo when their mentees may need them most.

Trans advocate Tony Ferraiolo recalled working with a young trans man in Hamden, whose life in a congregate setting improved after he met and began to talk to a mentor with the same lived experience. Ferraiolo has since served over 1,000 trans youth and families across the country as the founder of Translations. Each week, he runs support groups for trans and nonbinary teens, and is launching a new group for youth between 10 and 12 years old. He has an art group for children.

For the past several months, he’s been also growing virtual programming as the director of youth and family programs for Health Care Advocates International. He said he has been developing a resource list “for people who are culturally competent with our children” that may help fill a statewide resource gap.

Attendees also addressed an immediate concern over what happens to DCF funding if True Colors is not there. Herrington said that she believes the New Haven Pride Center has the capacity to take over the mentoring program, which would entail new contract and funding negotiations with DCF. She described it as a race against the clock, as legislators debate Gov. Ned Lamont’s proposed budget.

“Knowing how DCF works, knowing what our state budget looks like—if it disappears for a second, it’s gone,” she said. “And then queer youth in out of home care in the State of Connecticut don’t have this amazing thing that they’ve got. And right now, that will be all True Colors’ fault.”
Personalized health care, for everyone

At Middlesex Health, we understand how hard it can be to find inclusive, affirming health care, especially during these challenging times. That's why we offer all of our services in a clean, safe environment dedicated to the dignity and privacy of all patients. Plus, we offer virtual visits, so you can get the care you need, no matter where you are.

MiddlesexHealth.org/LGBTQ
NEW HAVEN PRIDE CENTER ANNUAL REPORT SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

THE NEW HAVEN PRIDE CENTER 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

#TRANS LIVES MATTER

CENTERLINE MARCH/APRIL 2021
Five years ago, the New Haven Pride Center’s Board Co-President Joshua O’Connell announced the Center’s intention to hire its first staff member. At the time the Center’s annual budget was between $25,000 – 35,000 and was operated by a small core group of volunteers. Today, five years later, the Center is operating on an annual budget of half a million dollars and has a staff of nine! The past year, since the onset of COVID-19, the Center has experienced many highs and lows. There were times where we were unsure if the Center would survive, however thanks to the effort and willpower of our community the Center has emerged from the pandemic as a leader.

The Center responded to the impact of COVID-19 by stepping up, launching new initiatives, increasing the Center’s advocacy-based initiatives, paying artists and thought leaders to shape our programming and virtual events, and offering tele-case management to so many in the community.

As I close out this letter, I have to take a moment to recognize and thank the incredible group of folks that I have the privilege of working beside every day. We started as a small nonprofit on a small budget with a big dream, and every day when we come together to do this work, we get a step closer to that dream where no one in our community goes without the services, programming and support that they need. The team working at the New Haven Pride Center is unmatched in so many ways and I appreciate each of you for what you bring to the table and for being a part of building a space where folks can be their authentic selves and we can celebrate the rich diversity of the LGBTQIQIP2sAA community.

Thank you to our community. We look forward to many more years of shared experiences together.
INVESTMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

The New Haven Pride Center’s COVID-19 response has been second to none. At the onset of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions in Connecticut, we responded to help provide for our community in the absence of real relief from local, state, and federal authorities.

FOOD PANTRY PROGRAM

Thanks to a $10,000 seed grant from Yale University, we launched a food distribution program that fed hundreds of individuals across Greater New Haven, distributing 65,000 pounds of food for several months over the summer before winding down due to funding constraints.

VIRTUAL CASE MANAGEMENT

Most Frequent Community Requests
- Mental Health Referrals
- Housing Assistance
- Unemployment/Stimulus Assistance
- Food Assistance
- Social Support/WarmLine

1,000+ hours VIRTUAL CASE MANAGEMENT
Art is how a community heals, and the LGBTQ+ community is no different. The New Haven Pride Center is committed to developing and protecting LGBTQ+ art, expanding from our Great Room Gallery space in Downtown New Haven to two additional spaces for the 2021-22 season. We’re excited to feature up-and-coming LGBTQ+ artists at spaces curated by us at the Health Care Advocates International office in Stratford as well as at the historic Chez Est bar and entertainment venue in Hartford. LGBTQ+ art is often overlooked by the mainstream and just as often not shown in mainstream galleries, making our investment in artists all the more essential.

Being featured in a New Haven Pride Center art exhibit isn’t just an opportunity for artists to gain exposure and recognition, it’s also an opportunity to sell their work. In 2020, despite the pandemic’s effects on in-person gallery visits, thousands of dollars of art were sold from our exhibits, providing a lifeline to artists who have been struggling with the effects of the pandemic. Our gallery spaces uplift artists who may not get the opportunity to showcase their work elsewhere and our spaces introduce LGBTQ+ art to a wide audience through virtual tours hosted on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.
This year’s community engagement was a little different. With the move of all of our programming to the virtual spaces of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube our programs became even more accessible than before. Allowing us to reach a broader audience.

- **Over 4,000 Likes**
- **1,000 followers**
- **2,000 followers**
- **200 subscribers**
- **Over 50,000 Views on all of our digital programs**

**THANK YOU TO THE BOARD FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP**

COMMITMENT TO OUR STAFF & VOLUNTEERS

100% STAFF RETENTION

+3 NEW HIRES

+5 INTERNS

Successful transition to work from home resulting in zero disruption of services and support groups. We made 3 new hires, 2 part-time, 1 full-time, and onboarded 5 new interns.

33 NEW VOLUNTEERS

OVER 300+ HOURS OF VOLUNTEERING

MEET OUR STAFF

Left to Right top to bottom: Patrick J Dunn, Juancarlos Soto, Laura Boccadorro, Maia Leonardo, Max Cisneros, Ala Ochumare, Miranda Rector, Elliot Olson, Devanté Dodgens

Photos by RahVisions
This year more than ever our community needed to celebrate PRIDE. PRIDE New Haven Virtual allowed us to do just that.

**VIRTUAL PRIDE 2020**

- **24 TALKS & WORKSHOPS**
- **70 SPEAKERS, TRAINERS, AND PERFORMERS**
- **$7975 INVESTED IN ARTISTS AND PERFORMERS**

**PRIDE IN PERSON**

- **42 ARTIST & PERFORMERS**
- **$7575 INVESTED IN ARTISTS AND PERFORMERS**

**Over 2,500 in-person and online participants**

By following strict social distancing and CDC guidelines, we were able to host a PRIDE In Person event, allowing us to safely enjoy performances, community, and some Zumba!
A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR LEAD SPONSORS:
The John Allen and Keith Hyatte Fund

For LGBTQ+ Interests

The 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots inspired John Allen and his husband Keith Hyatte, to start thinking about their legacy. They decided it was time that giving back to the LGBTQ+ community take on a new form — one that will provide a revenue stream long after their lifetimes.

In 2019, they established a donor advised fund at The Community Foundation and included a bequest in their wills so that the support of these interests will be advanced for generations to come.

With a donor advised fund you can provide certainty for your favorite causes and nonprofits.

The Community Foundation, with its local knowledge, can help you support organizations that make a critical difference — now and forever.

Learn more at cfnh.org/startmyfund or call us at 203-777-7071.