The Queer Side of Ridgefield:

LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Ridgefield, Connecticut

As part of its ongoing commitment to preserving and sharing the full breadth of Ridgefield's history, the Ridgefield Historical Society recognized an opportunity to expand its oral history collection by documenting the experiences of Ridgefield's LGBTQIA+ community. *The Queer Side of Ridgefield* grew from that effort to ensure these voices are represented in the town's historical record.

With support from CT Humanities and in partnership with Ridgefield Pride, the Ridgefield Historical Society worked with nationally recognized LGBTQIA+ historian Susan Ferentinos, PhD, to train student volunteers from Ridgefield High School to record the stories of LGBTQIA+ Ridgefielders. In these conversations, students listened with care as community members shared stories of identity, family, friendship, love, prejudice, perseverance, loss, joy, and belonging. This project gave students and interviewees a meaningful opportunity to listen, learn from one another, and build new connections across generations.

This book, edited by Dr. Ferentinos and published by the Ridgefield Historical Society, presents highlights from those oral histories, offering a moving glimpse into the richness of queer experience in Ridgefield and the ways individual lives intersect with larger historical events. Together, these stories affirm that LGBTQIA+ people have always been part of Ridgefield's history, and that their voices belong at the heart of the community's shared memory.

RIDGEFIELD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The Queer Side of Ridgefield • EDITED BY SUSAN FERENTINOS

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Edited by Susan Ferentinos
Produced by the Ridgefield Historical Society with support from CT Humanities.

This publication is part of the Ridgefield Historical Society's commitment to preserving and sharing the diverse stories, voices, and experiences that have shaped Ridgefield's history. The oral histories included in this volume are presented with care and respect for the individuals who shared their memories. The views and experiences expressed are those of the narrators and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ridgefield Historical Society.

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To the LGBTQIA+ people of Ridgefield
who came before us,
to those whose stories fill these pages,
and to the young people who will write
the chapters still to come

"The best history is the history that comes right from the people who are living it and who have lived it."

-Daniela Sikora

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PREFACE

History is never complete. It is shaped not only by what is preserved, but also by what is overlooked, omitted, or left unspoken. For too long, the stories of Ridgefield's LGBTQIA+ community were largely absent from the historical record. Yet these lives, relationships, struggles, achievements, and acts of courage have always been part of the history of this town. *The Queer Side of Ridgefield: LGBTQIA+ Experiences of Ridgefield, Connecticut* was created to help correct that absence and to ensure that these voices are preserved, shared, and recognized as an essential part of our community's story.

The Ridgefield Historical Society's mission is to preserve, interpret, and foster public knowledge of Ridgefield's historical, cultural, and architectural heritage. This book directly advances that mission. It grew out of a broader commitment by the historical society to increase its relevance, diversify its collections, and more fully reflect the many people who have shaped Ridgefield's past and present. Although the historical society has long maintained an extensive oral history collection, it became clear that not one of those interviews represented an LGBTQIA+ perspective. That realization made this project both necessary and urgent. Through this initiative, we set out not only to record and preserve underrepresented stories, but also to foster intergenerational conversation, increase civic pride and awareness, and make our town's history more inclusive.

This book emerged from the Ridgefield LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project, a CT Humanities supported collaboration among the Ridgefield Historical Society, Ridgefield Pride, the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at Ridgefield High School, and nationally recognized LGBTQIA+ historian Susan Ferentinos, PhD. High school student volunteers coordinated by the GSA advisor conducted

interviews in 2024 with queer Ridgefielders who lived or worked in town, creating a remarkable exchange between generations. In those conversations, students encountered histories that too often go untaught, while narrators found space to reflect, remember, and be heard. The project became more than an effort to document the past; it became a living act of community building in the present. As we witnessed these interviews unfold, it became clear that oral history can do something rare and powerful: it can preserve memory while also creating connection, empathy, and belonging.

The abridged interviews in this volume represent only part of a larger body of work, but together they illuminate the richness and complexity of LGBTQIA+ life in Ridgefield. They speak to family and friendship, joy and isolation, prejudice and perseverance, visibility and silence, change across generations, and the enduring human search for identity, dignity, and community. No single volume can capture every queer experience in Ridgefield, nor does this book claim to do so. Rather, it stands as an important beginning: an offering to the historical record, to the community, and to future readers who deserve to know that LGBTQIA+ people have always been here, and that their stories matter. The full interview videos and transcriptions are publicly accessible online through the Ridgefield Historical Society's catalog at www.ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org and the Connecticut Digital Archive at www.ctdigitalarchive.org, ensuring that these stories remain available to readers, researchers, students, and the broader community.

This project would not have been possible without the generosity, care, and commitment of many people. First and foremost, I offer my deepest thanks to the thirty-three members of the Ridgefield community who generously entrusted us with their stories. Their willingness to speak openly and honestly has created an enduring gift for this town and for future generations.

I am deeply grateful to the Ridgefield High School student volunteers, whose curiosity, empathy, and seriousness of purpose made this project so meaningful. Aaron, Ace, Elizabeth, Frankie, Georgiana, Grant, Jane, Knox, Levi, Luna, Mae, Millie, Seraphim, Skylar, Sofia, Theo, and Will listened with respect, compassion, and maturity as they conducted these interviews. I would especially like to thank Julie Henderson, Ridgefield High School GSA advisor and English teacher, for recruiting and guiding students and helping sustain the project within the school community, and Danny Martins, chair of the Ridgefield High School History Department, for recognizing the educational value of this work.

I offer my deepest thanks to Alisa Trachtenberg, founder and chairperson of Ridgefield Pride (www.ridgefieldpride.org), whose boundless passion, vision, and advocacy made this project possible. As the leader of our indispensable partner organization, Alisa was at the heart of this effort from the beginning. She helped build the partnership on which the project depended; connected us with participants; fostered trust within the community; and brought energy, care, and conviction to every stage of the work. This project never would have happened without Alisa's leadership and her unwavering commitment to making Ridgefield's LGBTQIA+ community seen, heard, and valued.

My sincere thanks also go to Dr. Robin R. Collins, project manager, whose thoughtful leadership, organizational skill, and care for the students helped shape the project at every stage. Robin facilitated preparation and debrief meetings with the students for each interview, supported scheduling and interview logistics, and generously made space available at the The Literacy Barn for many of the interviews. Her belief in the power of storytelling and reflection strengthened this project immeasurably.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Ferentinos, project advisor, queer historian, and editor of this book. Sue provided the scholarly foundation for this effort, trained students in oral history practice and LGBTQIA+ history, offered guidance throughout the project, and helped shape these interviews into the volume you now hold in your hands. Her expertise, generosity, and commitment to inclusive history have been invaluable from the start.

I also wish to thank CT Humanities for its generous grant support, which made this ambitious project possible. Their investment in public humanities helped us preserve stories that might otherwise have remained unheard, while demonstrating the importance of local history that is inclusive, accessible, and deeply connected to community life.

I am grateful as well to Betsy Reid, former Ridgefield Historical Society collections manager, for her longstanding stewardship of the historical society's oral history program and for her role in managing transcription and archival workflows during the project's early phases, and to Anna Jones, Ridgefield Historical Society collections manager, for helping carry this work forward. I also thank Janet Graves, Ridgefield Historical Society operations manager, for her steady support in helping keep the organization running smoothly throughout this project. My thanks also go to the team of volunteers who reviewed, edited, and cataloged the interviews; to Kevin Julier for tech support; to Mason Boilla of Nautilus Media for creating the project film; and to Philip Yarnall of SMAY Design for designing this book with such care and thoughtfulness and for helping bring these stories to life on the page.

Finally, I thank the Ridgefield Historical Society Board of Directors for supporting work that asks our institution to grow, listen, and better reflect the full breadth of our community. Projects like this remind us that history is not static. It expands as we ask new questions, welcome new voices, and recognize those who were always part of the story, even when the archive did not yet say so.

It is my hope that this book will honor those who shared their memories, affirm those still searching for belonging, and inspire others to preserve histories that have too often been neglected. The stories in these pages are now part of Ridgefield's history, preserved here at an important moment in time.

Stephen Bartkus

Executive Director, Ridgefield Historical Society

Project Director, Ridgefield LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project

INTRODUCTION

The stories featured in this volume depict the life experiences of thirty-three members of the Ridgefield community whose identity falls under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. The people interviewed range in age from eighty-nine to twenty-six, meaning that their memories span much of the twentieth century and a significant part of the twenty-first century. Each person's life is comprised of unique experiences, and yet, these experiences often intersect with larger historical trends, and an understanding of that larger history can provide perspective on individual experiences. Thus, in an effort to provide nuance and context to the stories that follow, this introduction offers a brief overview of LGBTQIA+ history in the United States, from the 1950s until the present.

A Note about Language

The term LGBTQIA+, of course, stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and all the other wonderful shades of identity that present themselves when we consider sexuality and gender. This last concept is represented by the + sign and includes relatively common terms such as pansexual, gender nonbinary, and two-spirit, while also leaving room for an even wider range of self-expression, now and in the future.

The use of the + sign also serves as a reminder of the need to think inclusively when we talk about sexual and gender minorities. Sexual and gender outsiders have not always been welcoming to identities other than our own, but the establishment of the terms "gay and lesbian" in the 1970s and of "GLBT" in the 1980s and 1990s both marked a growing awareness that sexual and gender minorities are stronger

together and that, by excluding certain identities, we were perpetuating the same discrimination we received from the larger society. As our awareness of these issues expanded, so too did the acronym we use to describe ourselves. The addition of the + sign provides an ongoing reminder that our quest to be inclusive is not yet over. We have not always succeeded in our goal of being a welcoming community, but this project's use of "LGBTQIA+" signals the project organizers' desire to document a range of sexual and gender experiences.[1]

LGBTQIA+ Lives in the Twentieth Century

The earliest memories described in this book took place in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a particularly challenging time to be LGBTQIA+. Recent memories of World War II and the looming threat of war with the Soviet Union resulted in a general desire in the United States for "normalcy." European American heterosexual families living in the newly expanding suburbs were celebrated in popular culture and rewarded in government policy, and those who didn't conform to this ideal were treated with suspicion. Difference was seen as dangerous in the 1950s and into the 1960s, whether that difference was based on race, class, religion, progressive social views, sexual orientation, or unconventional gender expression.

Laws enforced the dominant view of morality. In much of the United States, it was illegal to have sexual intercourse outside of marriage, to marry someone of a different race, or to read sexually explicit material. Same-sex sexual behavior was illegal in all fifty states, and to be arrested on a "morals charge" (usually a code for homosexual activity or gender transgression) meant a person was likely to lose their job, be evicted from their home, and be publicly ostracized. Indeed, homosexuality and gender variance were seen as so egregious, people who were arrested for these activities regularly had their names published in local newspapers, further contributing to the public shunning people risked by engaging in LGBTQIA+ activity.

Within this larger context, the federal government decided that LGBTQIA+ civil servants were security risks, because of their supposedly weak moral character and their susceptibility to blackmail. Executive Order 10450, signed by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, called for federal agencies to ensure that they did not employ anyone who had engaged in "criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously distasteful conduct [or] sexual perversion." As a result, as many as five thousand federal civil servants lost their jobs because they were suspected of being homosexual (which, at the time, would have included anyone who strayed too far from established gender norms). Far more were discharged from the military for the same reason, or denied governmental jobs in the first place. This governmental purge became known as the Lavender Scare.

Because of these various and dire consequences of being identified as LGBTQIA+, queer people lived under the constant threat of discovery, although numerous historians have made the point that this did not mean they lived lives of isolation. Rather, most LGBTQIA+ people in the Cold War era lived double lives, establishing a public presentation of heterosexuality and gender conformity in order to maintain social acceptability and stay employed. However, many also engaged to varying degrees with underground communities of others who shared their sexual and gender identities.

Despite this general climate, however, there were a few countertrends that offered a glimpse of the cultural changes to come. Alfred Kinsey, a zoology professor at Indiana University, released the results of the largest study of human sexuality ever completed. His findings, released in two volumes in 1948 and 1953, became known as the Kinsey Report and indicated that far

1 Although the project this book documents used the phrase "LGBTQIA+," many of the people we interviewed used other terms to describe themselves or their larger communities. In abridging the interviews, we chose to retain whatever terms people used. However, when adding clarifying or summary text (which appears in brackets throughout the book), we used the term "LGBTQIA+." Similarly, I use "LGBTQIA+" in this historical overview, even though this term was not in use during most of the time period I discuss.

more people in the United States had engaged in same-sex sexual behavior than previously realized. Christine Jorgensen, a World War II veteran from the Bronx, made national headlines when she went public with the story of her gender-affirming surgery and transgender identity. And in some of the larger US cities, the first sustained LGBTQIA+ organizations began to advocate for greater acceptance of sexual variance. However, these groups, such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, emphasized the "respectability" of their members, in contrast to public perceptions of perversion. As a result, these early groups tended to distance themselves from members of the LGBTQIA+ community who were gender variant.

The dominant mid-century atmosphere of conformity started to break down in the 1960s. Various groups—African Americans, young people facing a military draft for the Vietnam War, women—began protesting the status quo, revealing a pent-up frustration with "business as usual." Culturally, a younger generation also started openly rejecting traditional moral codes, which Kinsey's research had already revealed were not as widely followed as previously believed. This flouting of prescribed moral behavior became known as the sexual revolution, and it resulted in a gradual acceptance of previously taboo behavior.

As part of this change in the moral climate of the country, divorce became more acceptable in some circles, and this, in turn, led a significant number of people—including some of the people interviewed for this project—to leave unhappy heterosexual marriages and explore their sexual and gender variance. Politically, many LGBTQIA+ people were involved in the protest movements of the 1960s, and some continued to advocate for better understandings of sexual variance as well. They did this through legal action and small demonstrations, LGBTQIA+ activism that was known in the 1950s and 1960s as the homophile movement.

Perhaps the most visible homophile demonstrations of the 1960s were the Annual Reminders, held each year from 1965 until 1969 on the Fourth of July at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Gay and lesbian activists from throughout the Northeast gathered each year to draw attention to the fact that, because of prejudicial laws and attitudes, they were denied access to many civil rights. (Again, these demonstrators' point was that queer people could conform to mainstream standards of decorum. Organizers enforced a strict gender-conforming dress code—dresses for women, ties for men—and as a result gender variant people were excluded from these protests, unless they were willing to adhere to the era's understandings of "respectability" for the day.)

In addition to small demonstrations for LGBTQIA+ rights, activists initiated a number of court cases in the 1960s, seeking to force the question of homosexual people's right to public assembly. In many states at this time—including New York and Connecticut—businesses could lose their liquor licenses for serving alcohol to homosexuals and/or people wearing gender-variant attire. This meant that police were free to harass (and sometimes extort) owners of gay bars and that any bar, restaurant, or nightclub that permitted LGBTQIA+ people to congregate was subject to being raided by the police and its patrons arrested. In New York City in 1966, a "sip in" at Julius's Bar resulted in an official statement by the State Liquor Authority saying that it would not revoke liquor licenses for serving homosexuals.[2] However, police raids on gay bars continued.

Less well known at the time, the 1960s also saw pockets of growing frustration among LGBTQIA+ people, particularly those who did not fit the homophile ideal of "respectability." At the same time homophile activists were becoming more visible, a few organizations were beginning to take a more radical approach, calling for a rethinking of mainstream society to

2 For more on the sip in, see the NYC LGBTQ Historic Sites Project, https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/julius/.

make room for a diversity of sexual and gender expressions. A few spontaneous protests against police harassment erupted in US cities, including one at a Dewey's restaurant in Philadelphia in 1965 and another at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966. These protests were both led by gender-variant young people, who were most often the target of police harassment.

Another such uprising began on June 28, 1969, when LGBTQIA+ patrons at the Stonewall Inn in New York City refused to peacefully submit to yet another police raid of a gay bar. As with Dewey's and Compton's before it, a significant number of the protesters at Stonewall were transgender. The protests continued for six nights, and this event proved to be the main catalyst for a new era of LGBTQIA+ organizing known as gay liberation, which fought for an end to discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people, regardless of their adherence to mainstream standards of "respectable behavior." Gay liberation activists saw "Gay Pride" as an important political strategy, encouraging LGBTQIA+ people to be open about their identities, in order to demonstrate the size and scope of these populations. This approach led to increasingly visible LGBTQIA+ subcultures, which many of the contributors to this volume discuss.

At the same time the gay liberation movement was emerging, lesbian activists within the women's movement were also growing increasingly frustrated with mainstream feminism's discomfort with lesbian identities. In the early 1970s, these women worked to articulate a new philosophy known as lesbian feminism. According to these thinkers, lesbianism—that is, devoting one's energies exclusively to other women—was the purest form of feminism and a necessary tool for dismantling male supremacy. Lesbian feminists throughout the country started feminist collectives where they worked and lived; created their own vibrant subculture of music, writing, and mutual aid; and continually advocated for the needs of lesbians within the larger women's and gay liberation movements.

By the late 1970s, LGBTQIA+ people had won many important victories. LGBTQIA+ Pride parades were held in major cities each

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June to celebrate LGBTQIA+ identity and commemorate the Stonewall Uprising of June 1969. In 1978, at the San Francisco LGBTQIA+ Pride parade, gay textile artist Gilbert Baker unveiled two massive rainbow flags that were raised over United Nations Plaza, in downtown San Francisco. Baker chose the rainbow to symbolize the joining together of many different identities into something beautiful, just as different colors join together to make a rainbow. This was the first showing of what came to be called the Pride flag; a later incarnation designed to be even more inclusive is often called the Progress flag. These became the symbols of LGBTQIA+ identity, largely replacing the earlier symbols of various colored triangles (pink for gay men; black for lesbians, among others). The triangles had their origin in the Nazi concentration camps of World War II and represented the patches various sexual and gender minorities were forced to wear in the camps. While the adoption of these patches within LGBTQIA+ communities marked the remaking of a symbol of violence into a symbol of pride, the rainbow flag instead represented something created from within our own community, born of joy.

Other accomplishments of the 1970s included a few major victories in the political realm. Between 1970 and 1979, twenty states repealed their sodomy laws, which outlawed consensual sexual acts between men. Connecticut was the first state in this

wave of repeals. Following Illinois, which legalized same-sex sexual behavior in 1962, the Connecticut legislature voted to repeal the state's sodomy law in 1969, though it did not go into effect until 1971.

The 1970s also saw the passage of many local laws—and a couple statewide executive orders—barring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. (The prohibition of discrimination based on gender identity would come later.) Finally, this decade saw the first openly LGBTQIA+ candidates elected to public office in the United States. Harvey Milk, a navy veteran, business owner, and activist in San Francisco, was one such politician. Although not the first openly LGBTQIA+ candidate to win, his election to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors garnered national attention, due to his charisma, his skill at building coalitions, and San Francisco's reputation as a city that celebrates its diversity.

The political gains and growing visibility of LGBTQIA+ communities eventually led to a political backlash. By the late 1970s, US conservatives were joining together to protest the acceptance and legal protection of LGBTQIA+ people. Amid this opposition, some local civil rights laws were repealed, while other efforts to obtain protections failed. In November 1978, tragedy struck in San Francisco, when Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone were assassinated at City Hall by Dan White, a former city supervisor. The following spring, when White was found guilty of manslaughter, rather than first-degree murder, LGBTQIA+ people and their allies marched in the streets of San Francisco to protest the ruling, and violence once again broke out when city police ordered the protesters to disburse.

Challenges continued. In the early 1980s, doctors began noticing an unusual combination of symptoms that were causing previously healthy people to fall ill and die. In June 1981, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued its first warning about this condition, which would later be given the name of Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. Gay and bisexual men and trans women were among the first people to be identified as having the condition that would become AIDS, and in the public imagination, it became a "gay disease." These populations were indeed disproportionately infected in the early years of the pandemic, as were intravenous drug users, sex workers of all genders, and people with hemophilia—due to the fact that HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, spreads through the exchange of sexual fluids and blood (as well as breast milk).

Sadly, the disease's association with people who already received harsh judgement from the larger society meant that relatively little effort was made to understand the disease, find a cure, and prevent its spread. President Ronald Reagan did not even publicly utter the word "AIDS" until four years after that first CDC warning, by which point over twelve thousand people in the United States had already died. In the face of the larger society's indifference to the toll AIDS was taking on queer men and trans women (among others), LGBTQIA+ communities mobilized among themselves to help the sick and the dying. Throughout the country, informal social circles and new and established organizations worked together to connect people to the care they needed and to advocate for more resources allocated to AIDS research and treatment. People of color—of all sexual and gender identities—also worked to draw attention to the links between racism, poverty, lack of health insurance, and death from AIDS.

For fifteen years, between 1981 and 1996, there was no reliable treatment for AIDS, and the vast majority of people who were diagnosed with the disease died from its complications. The trauma of those years is evident in the stories our narrators tell, of losing loved ones, of facing their own mortality, of being among those who survived. Historians have also suggested that the realities of AIDS caused a shift in the priorities of the LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement. The pandemic was made so much harder by the lack of legal recognition for same-sex couples. Without that recognition, an LGBTQIA+ person was not guaranteed the right to visit their partner who was dying in the hospital; people who were too ill to work did not have the option of getting on their partners'

health insurance plans; LGBTQIA+ people did not automatically inherit their partners' estates, and this meant that many survivors lost their homes and their savings, as well as their beloveds. For many LGBTQIA+ people who had lived through these indignities, it became extremely important to obtain the rights of citizenship afforded to others in the United States, and two of the biggest goals of the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century LGBTQIA+ movement were the legalization of same-sex marriage and lifting the ban against gays and lesbians (and later trans people) serving in the military.

LGBTQIA+ Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century and Beyond

While the early 1970s saw scattered efforts by same-sex couples to obtain marriage licenses, a sustained, nationwide fight for legal recognition of same-sex relationships began in the 1990s. LGBTQIA+ activists began advocating for coverage of "domestic partners" in employment benefits, and a number of court cases were filed actively seeking the legal ability to marry someone of the same sex. In 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that the state's ban on same-sex marriage might violate the state constitution. The case was sent back to trial court to determine whether there was a "compelling state interest" in maintaining the ban. Although this ruling did not result in the legalization of same-sex marriage in Hawaii, it did raise the *possibility* that same-sex marriage might one day become legal. In response, between 1995 and 1998, more than half of the US states passed laws explicitly banning the legal recognition of same-sex relationships. In 1996, by an overwhelming majority, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage as between a man and a woman for the purposes of federal law and which declared that states were not required to recognize same-sex marriages performed in any other state or jurisdiction.

However, a few states resisted the larger trend of insisting marriage be reserved for heterosexual unions, and most of those states were in New England or on the West Coast. In 2000, Vermont became the first state to offer legal recognition of same-sex relationships, though it fell short of legalizing same-sex marriage. Instead, it allowed gay and lesbian couples to enter into "civil unions," which provided the same benefits afforded to marriages, without the name. In 2003, Massachusetts became the first state to provide equal recognition for heterosexual and homosexual unions when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the state's same-sex marriage ban was illegal and required the state to begin issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples within six months. Connecticut passed a civil union law in 2005, but numerous same-sex couples sued the state, arguing that there should not be a separate law (and terminology) governing same-sex relationships. Eventually, the Connecticut Supreme Court agreed. In 2008, the court ruled that restricting marriage to heterosexual couples violated the state's constitution.

Yet, despite these actions at the state level, it was not until the mid-2010s that same-sex marriage became legal throughout the United States. In 2013, in *United States v. Windsor*, the US Supreme Court struck down the federal Defense of Marriage Act, thus requiring the federal government to recognize same-sex marriages that had been performed in jurisdictions where it was legal. This ruling gave many same-sex couples access to benefits they had never had before, including those related to taxes, social security, and immigration. However, same-sex marriage was still banned in thirty-eight states, and the *Windsor* ruling did not address these state bans. Same-sex marriage did not become fully legal in the United States until 2015. That year, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that state same-sex marriage bans violated the US Constitution and required all states to recognize same-sex marriage.

In addition, at the same time activists were advocating for legal recognition of same-sex partners, they were also

lobbying to remove the ban on LGBTQIA+ people serving in the US military. Since World War II, military policy had forbidden gays and lesbians from serving. (While bisexuality and gender variance were not mentioned in the regulations, in practice they too were grounds for dismissal.) Individual LGBTQIA+ military personnel began contesting this policy as early as the 1970s, and the effort gained national attention in the 1990s, when Bill Clinton, in his 1992 presidential campaign, promised to end the ban if elected.

Although Clinton won the election, the removal of the ban faced steep opposition from Congress and military leaders, resulting in a compromise policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT), enacted into law in 1993. Under this law, LGBTQIA+ people were permitted to serve in the military, provided they hid their sexual or gender identity. However, military personnel continued to be discharged if they were discovered to be LGBTQIA+, resulting in seventeen thousand dismissals in the seventeen years that DADT was law. Activists continued to fight for full inclusion, which resulted in a partial victory in December 2010, when DADT was finally overturned. However, the military continued to ban transgender people from serving, classifying transgender identity as a "psychosexual disorder" that made an individual unfit to serve. Since 2016, transgender military service has been subject to changing political tides, with two presidents allowing transgender military service (Barack Obama in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2021) and President Donald Trump twice reinstituting the ban on transgender military service (in 2017 and 2025).

The 1990s also witnessed a growing understanding of the diversity of identity and experiences *within* the queer community. LGBTQIA+ people of color became more vocal about the ways their multiple marginalized identities intersected to create a complex understanding of self, as well as layered experiences of oppression. This concept is now known as *intersectionality*. In a similar vein, transgender and bisexual activists fought for more substantive recognition of their unique identities and experiences. A groundswell of writing by gender variant theorists, including Judith Butler, Leslie Feinberg, Jack Halberstam, Sandy Stone, and Susan Stryker, created a shared language of gender variance and sparked a national conversation. Because of this effort, in the 1990s a range of terms—transvestite, transsexual, transgender, cross-dresser, queen—solidified into one broad term: transgender.

In addition, the 1990s also saw the emergence of an acronym to describe the common interests of sexual and gender variant people. In the 1990s, the most common acronym was GLBT, but this shifted over time to LGBTQ. As people with other variant identities have followed the lead of trans and bisexual activists, additional letters and the inclusive + sign have been incorporated into the acronym to signal the larger community's desire to be inclusive.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, LGBTQIA+ identity and experience has changed significantly. Perhaps the most impactful alteration to LGBTQIA+ culture—as with culture at large—has been the widespread incorporation of the Internet into our daily lives. For queer people, the Internet has provided ready access to information on sexual and gender variance as well as the ability to connect to other LGBTQIA+ people, regardless of one's age or proximity to LGBTQIA+ businesses or organizations. At the same time, continued advocacy on the part of LGBTQIA+ organizations and individuals has led to a growing acceptance of various sexual and gender identities in much of mainstream US culture. These two trends—the creation of virtual LGBTQIA+ communities and the increasing acceptance of obviously queer people in mainstream society—has led to the decline of LGBTQIA+-focused spaces, such as bars, bookstores, cruising areas, and community centers, while also allowing LGBTQIA+ individuals a freedom of movement and expression unheard of in previous eras.

The greater access to information and lessened fear of ostracism has resulted in people publicly embracing variant

identities at younger ages. Aiding this effort has been the spread of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs, which now often stand for Gender and Sexuality Alliances) in high schools. While the first known gay student organization was founded at Columbia University in 1966, the first such groups at the precollegiate level emerged in the late 1980s at high schools in New England. From there, the concept steadily spread, and by the late 2010s, GSAs were a relatively common high school activity in many parts of the country, including Connecticut. However, in recent years, "Don't Say Gay" laws have passed in many states, prohibiting the discussion of sexual and gender variance in public schools, and as a result, young people in those states are denied the opportunity to learn about the full range of sexual and gender expression present in the world.

Generations born since the late 1990s have often surprised their queer elders with their expansive thinking about gender and sexual identity and their acceptance of a far greater range of identities, as well as their comfort with sexual and gender fluidity. They have helped shift mainstream thinking on these topics as well. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association removed "Gender Identity Disorder" from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, explicitly stating for the first time that "gender non-conformity is not in itself a mental disorder." The World Health Organization followed suit in 2018, removing transgender identity from its *International Classification of Diseases*.

However, as often happens after periods of progressive change, since the mid-2010s, the United States has experienced a rise of conservative thinking on issues of gender and sexuality. A coalition of moral conservatives and Christian Nationalists, led by Donald Trump, has been working tirelessly in the last decade to erode the political gains of LGBTQIA+ people, along with the political gains of women, people of color, and immigrants. Many members of traditionally marginalized

groups feel under attack in the current political moment and are fearing for their civil rights, their safety, and even their ability to continue living in the United States. Nevertheless, the people whose stories appear in this volume bravely chose to share their experiences, in the hope of creating understanding and fostering empthy within the larger Ridgefield community.

Susan Ferentinos, PhD

Project Advisor, Ridgefield LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project

E. Gerald Dabbs, born 1937

I was born in a little town in West Texas called Slaton [in] 1937. [I identify] as gay or queer [and use] he and him.

Early Life

I lived on a small farm, small by Texas standards, a few hundred acres, cotton growing. Nearby, literally across the driveway, was my paternal grandmother and a quarter of a mile away were my maternal grandparents.

One of the first play things I did was wearing my grandmother's and my mother's clothing. I had a brother, two years older, and we were pretty close [although] he was quite different [than me]. He was much more my father's child; I was much more my mother's child. I was not into sports from the very beginning. I played with the girls mostly; I always liked women's clothes better than men's clothes, because I thought they were prettier. I considered myself a boy, but not like the other boys. Two years ago, I asked my brother how he felt about the fact that I was wearing their clothes [back then]. And he said he asked my mother about it, and my mother said, "Leave him alone. He's having fun."

When I was five years old, I became absolutely fascinated with Hollywood and movie stars. I had a little wooden suitcase that I packed up to run away to Hollywood. My first stop was my grandparents' house, and I decided I'd wait and go the next day. So, that never happened, but I played around with the idea of being an actor. I had favorite movie stars, almost all of them women. When I was six years old, I saw Elizabeth Taylor in *Lassie*

E. Gerald Dabbs (left) and John Abbott at their wedding, 2017

Come Home, which was her first movie, and I fell in love with her. She was someone I idealized.

When I was a junior in high school, I decided I was going to become a child psychiatrist, but I never knew how I knew there was such a thing. The only psychiatrist in the hundreds of miles around where I lived was a "crazy doctor," who treated crazy people, but that meant adults; children had nothing to do with it. So, how I knew there was such a specialty, I must of saw it or heard it somewhere. But certainly by the time I was a junior in high school, I decided that I was going to be a doctor, because I liked the way they lived and I liked tak[ing] care of other people.

I became aware of my sexual attraction to boys as I was sexually maturing in high school. I had sort of an affair when I was a senior in high school, with a younger [boy]; I think he was a sophomore. We had a sexual relationship a little bit, but I just thought, "That's just a part of growing up." In college, I started dating a local woman, and she and I went on to become engaged. In February of my freshman year in medical school, we married. My daughter [was] born when I was a junior in medical school. My son was born when I was an intern, two years later.

Coming Out

I graduated from medical school, went to residency in Boston for a year, and while I was there, I became much more aware that my attraction to men was more of an issue than I [had] thought it was. In medical school, they didn't talk about it [back] then. I was very disappointed in my profession, medicine in general, [because] of the lack of acknowledgement of it. Homosexuality was considered a psychiatric disorder. I mean, literally.

I was, at that point, picking up guys, and I had a little encounter with a guy who took me to his apartment. And on the shelf was [a photograph] with a psychiatrist that I had just met with to talk about my sexual conflicts and how I was going to deal with it. And that was his lover! When I [had met with] him, it was, "Well, you have to do psychoanalysis," and all this. It was seen as a condition that could be controlled or fixed, and not as a fact of life

In the middle of it, I was drafted to go into the service. The Vietnam War was going on, and I had prearranged that I might be able to go into the US Public Health Service, which is the health service for the Coast Guard. This was 1966, at that point when I was realizing, "Okay, I'm gay." It wasn't called that; it was queer. I realized, "Okay, if I identify as queer, I will be a pervert. I will be a criminal, because it's against the law. I will be mentally ill, and I'll go to hell." Had I come out when I went for my physical and said, "Well, I'm gay; I'm homosexual," I would've been kicked out of my residency. I would've lost my medical license. I had no choice but to go on. I [had] two children to take care of, and my profession. So, I decided to continue, but I also decided that I had to accept my sexuality, what it was.

My wife and I divorced. It was very hard, the most difficult decision of my life. [But] she went on to have a fifty-year marriage with the man she loved. And we raised our children together. I [was] in absence more, but my children were with me a lot. So, that was the transition that I made. That's when I decided, also, that I wanted to help other people through the same thing [I had just gone through].

My parents were very upset when I was divorced because my wife and I decided we were not going to talk to people about it. So, I did not come out in the family then. I behaviorally came out as time went on, because I started appearing with men and it became apparent. And sometimes then we would talk about it. In the late eighties, early nineties, I had a lover from Iceland, [Ruen Stefnisson], who was a women's wear designer. He and my mother became very friendly because he would send her fabrics and she would make quilts out of them. That was sort of a high point. I think [my mother's support] was the basis of who I am.

Moving to New York and the Stonewall Uprising

A major turning point in my life was [when] I went into the service. And while I was there, I came out. I was divorced, but I still had a year and a half of training [to do] to become a child psychiatrist. I initially accepted a position in LA [at the University of Southern California], but then a friend of mine, who I'd met at a psychiatric meeting, invited me to come spend the weekend with him and his lover in New York and go interview. I had an offer to interview at Albert Einstein [College of Medicine], in the Bronx. And I did that. I came to New York and I thought, "This is where I belong." That's how I ended up in New York. That was the turning point, professionally and personally, for me.

[At that point, in the 1960s], it was illegal to sell alcohol to a homosexual, so the police were free to raid bars where people did that. They were raiding bars in New York to such an extent that we would sometimes go to Philadelphia for a Saturday night, to go out to the bars. I was at that point living a block away from [the Stonewall Inn], with a young man who had come with me to New York from Kentucky. We went to Stonewall the night before [the uprising started], just for drinks, and hung out there, dancing and some people in drag, just a typical New York bar. And then the next morning it was in the news that there had been a raid.

Psychiatry, Relationships, AIDS

I'm on the faculty of Cornell Medical School. Cornell is in upstate New York, but the medical school is in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. I was head of child psychiatry there for a period of time.

My profession's changed a lot. From the start, I was involved in the American Psychiatric Association and the Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, which are the two big psychiatry organizations. Finally in 1973, [the American Psychiatric Association decided homosexuality] was no longer an illness, no longer a psychiatric disorder. I worked very diligently helping gay and lesbian people become accepted professionally, and as far as I know, I was the first openly gay physician in Cornell.

In addition to being on the faculty, I had a private psychiatry practice in New York, on the Upper East Side. I was very involved in children who were in disadvantaged situations, especially foster care, adoption, that sort of thing. I helped found the Lesbian and Gay Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Association, and I was president of it. To this day, we still have a much, much higher percentage of child and adolescent [LGBTQIA+ people] who have suicidal ideation and who make suicidal attempts. So, I've been involved with organizations working to help them, [and] also [in] making other people aware.

Primarily, one of my main concerns has been homeless kids, lesbian kids mostly. I was involved with the city organization to help those kids. Hetrick Martin Institute is a school that's for LGBTQ kids in Manhattan, and I mentioned that a friend of mine advised me to come to New York. Well, that was Emery Hetrick, who was the founder of that school, and he and I worked with the city to try to reach out to kids who were on the streets, because at that point, there were a lot of homeless kids on the streets who had left home and come to New York.

The AIDS crisis was obviously a huge turning point, personally, for me. The lover of mine from Iceland that I mentioned, my Ruen, he died of AIDS in 1993 [at age thirty-five]. I became very involved in AIDS politically and in the founding of different sorts of groups, foundations and that sort of thing. And as things often happen in life, it led to something that was quite extraordinary because I got to see Elizabeth Taylor. You may or may not know, but she went on to become one of the major [advocates for people with AIDS]. And I went to a big fundraiser [that] she helped organize.

I, for whatever reason, never had AIDS. I do have a couple of friends who still have AIDS and are being treated, which is wonderful because there are people who now have survived it. So, it was a big turning point in the lives of not just gay men, but especially gay men. I knew countless people who died, psychiatry friends, people all around.

What brought me to Ridgefield is I met the next love of my life. [After] Ruen died, [I had another] lover for several years. He betrayed my love, and I further fell apart, and I was sort of alone. And I decided in 2014 to go on Match.com—by that time, I was seventy-seven—and I met a gentleman on Match.com called John Abbott, who turned out to be almost eighty-nine.

It turned out he was also a psychiatrist, had lived four blocks from me [in Manhattan], had graduated from Cornell University Medical School. I knew his late husband, Peter Guggenheim, who had died two or three years before that, before we met, who was a child psychiatrist. John was a general, adult psychiatrist. They had married in Canada when it was first possible to marry, and then [Peter] passed away in 2012.

John, who went on to become my husband, was one of the people who contributed to the payment of the legal team that put [same-sex marriage] through the Supreme Court [in *United States v. Windsor*].[3] That was in part related to the fact that he [and] Peter were legally married, [but] that wasn't recognized in the United States. So, part of what happened with the [*Windsor* ruling] was that he then was accepted as having the benefits [to] his husband's estate. There'd been huge money, taxes, that he'd had to pay, and he got that money back. That was a big deal.

So, [John and I] started dating. I had been ill, but I was coming out of it, and he was older than me, but he was pretty healthy. He proposed to me, and we were married here in Ridgefield, at his house, which became our house. It was a "real wedding" wedding; my son was my best man. Unfortunately, John passed away in January of 2020, before Covid was diagnosed, but that's what he died from.

Reflections

I'm eighty-seven years old, so I've had a lot of experiences. I'm retired. I have seven grandchildren, two great-grandchildren. I've been very dedicated to making it better for other people and myself. My hope [for the LGBTQIA+ community is] that we be self-confident but not blind to that which might threaten our safety and ourselves. I would like to be remembered as someone who liked to have fun but also as someone who cared about other people and who liked to help other people.

E. Gerald Dabbs, 2024

3 *United States v. Windsor*, decided in 2013, ruled that the United States had to recognize same-sex marriages performed where they were legal. Another Supreme Court ruling, in 2015, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, ruled that it was unconstitutional to deny same-sex couples the right to marry, thus making same-sex marriage legal throughout the United States.

Stephen Zemo, born 1946
Michael Taylor, born 1961

Stephen Zemo: *I was born in 1946, and I moved to Ridgefield in 1978. I identify as gay.*

Michael Taylor: *I was born in 1961; I moved to Ridgefield in 1997, a couple of years after we started dating. I also identify as gay.*

Becoming a Couple, Moving to Ridgefield, Adopting a Son

Zemo: [I moved to Ridgefield because] I liked the town. I [visited] during college. We all came down from Boston, Boston College, and I thought, "Well, someday I'm going to live here," and via Boston to New York, Stamford, Ridgefield, I ended up settling down.

Taylor: I came here because of Steve. We started dating in '95, '96, and later, we moved in together here in Ridgefield. We met at the bar that was called Triangles, up on Route 7, just this side of the Danbury line. I was with friends; he was with a friend. My friends knew his friend, and we got to talking.

Zemo: Triangles had a big sign out front so that everybody knew [it was an LGBTQIA+ bar]. A triangle with a rainbow on it. Now isn't that wonderful? Think about it. It was a long time ago, but not so long ago, that you could drive down Route 7 and see this sign go up and think, "Oh, I want to go there." [It's different now. We have a son.] We have a very athletic kid, and we just came off of basketball season, and now we're into ultimate Frisbee season.

Stephen Zemo (left) and Michael Taylor, 2024

Taylor: [Our son] joined us when he was twelve weeks old. We were living in Florida, and it was legal at the time for two men to foster, but not to adopt. You could have this human being, "Thank you for [taking care of him], but no, you can't keep him." We thought that was odd, but it didn't matter to us. We loved him just as much. We [eventually] did the dual adoption thing, in Florida, in Connecticut. The great one was in Florida, because it was with a judge that was very friendly to the idea [of gay adoption] and a whole score of social workers. Everybody knew—wink, wink—what was going on.

Taylor: I usually think of our life as 95 percent like everybody else's life, frankly. We do the same things for our kids that straight parents do for their kids. So, I don't know if there's anything special that we've done because we're gay. Maybe we're more sensitive because our son is African American, so he can be subject to a whole other layer of discrimination or microaggression.

Zemo: I can remember showing up, we were living in Fort Lauderdale, and that's where Sean was born. And I can remember being at a park with this infant and thinking, "Oh wow, there's a grandma and her daughter and a little kid, and we're on the swing, too." And then you could see it in the grandma that she figured it out, and they quickly gathered up and left the park.

Domestic Partnership and Getting Married

Zemo: We've lived together for, I don't know, twenty-some-odd years. We decided [to do] that when there was not gay marriage in this state. There was that funky purgatory, and it was called...

Taylor: Domestic partnerships.

Zemo: Domestic partnerships was some blessing you could get from the straight world in terms of, "Now go away, be quiet. You have this; we let you do this, but we can't call it marriage." And we thought, "Well, that's a lot of BS. I mean, I don't need that. I don't need to justify my relationship with this piece of paper that says domestic whatever on it." So, we ignored that. But when things changed to be marriage, both in the word and in the legality and all of that, we decided we were going to be the first couple to get married in this town. We staked it out. The date was November 12th.

Taylor: 2008.

Zemo: We showed up; we expected a line, and there's nobody. But [the town clerk] sent us away to the bagel place. She said, "Legally, it's not starting until I get a phone call from Hartford saying the race is on, the ribbon is cut." There was some politics going on. Somebody wanted to be first in Hartford, so they didn't want to be one-upped by somebody in Ridgefield.

Taylor: [We had our wedding ceremony] in our backyard, the house we were building, that we now live in. Our good friend Ruth Leibowitz was a justice of the peace, and she married us. I loved it; I loved that it was intimate.

Zemo: [Just] the folks that were near and dear were there, that core group. We had two people who [were the] best man and best woman, and our dear friend performed the ceremony, and our other very best friend was the official photographer. And then we all walked down to Luc's. That was it.

Taylor: Being married brought a different feeling for some reason. I don't know; maybe there was more solemnity and solidity or something. We had already been together fifteen years or something by then. So, it wasn't like we needed that, but there was something that came with that [marriage license]. I still, I got a chill talking about it.

This was as laced up as you could get, and I thought, "What am I doing here? I can't be me." I never went back to corporate America.

Zemo: Absolutely. We're certainly of a generation that never thought this would happen. "This isn't going to happen. That's why they're giving us these crumbs and the certificate [of domestic partnership]." [Of course], it still wasn't cool in [some] churches. Let's make that abundantly clear; this was not a church wedding.

Zemo: Our son, who was only two at the time, will always say to us, "How come I wasn't there?" And we're like, "Well, you were in preschool. You wouldn't have known what we were doing. We were under a tree with four friends, and that was our reception." So that was it.

Community Service

Zemo: I decided that I was going to run for the Board of Selectmen. There was a group of us trying to get the Ridgefield Playhouse off the ground, and the Board of Selectmen decided that wasn't going to happen. So, we thought, "We'll just take over the Board of Selectmen." And so, Barbara Manners and I ran for office. I got elected, and it was enough of a rattle for the powers to be for them to change their mind.

Zemo: I didn't run as a gay candidate. I ran as Steve Zemo, wanting the playhouse because the playhouse is an economic driver. I am here to serve the community. I didn't take it bigger. So, I wasn't challenging. But I must've been naïve because at the time, the head of the Democratic Town Committee said to me, "Oh, you're going to run for the Board of Selectmen?" I said, "Yeah, I'm going to do that." And he said, "Yeah, but what am I going to do about your problem?" And I thought, "I didn't know I had a problem."

Zemo: So, then lo and behold, we had a little lawn sign. That was it. I mean, now it's a relative machine in town. Then, it was, "Here's the name of where you get your signs printed. Good luck." There's no fundraisers; there's no staff; there's nobody. And so, I had one location that my signs kept getting "fag" written on them. So, I would just take it down and put a new one up, and I'd go back and "fag" [was] written on that one. I thought, "We're going to play this game until November." And then whoever it was just stopped doing it. And so, my little sign sat there, and I thought, "Well, see that." Like most of the stuff we do, they have to get to know you as a person first. And then it's like, "Who, him? Oh, he's okay."

Taylor: I was on the Board of Ed for a four-year term. As our son became part of the school system here, from kindergarten to middle school, I volunteered in the schools. And then, that leads to getting involved with PTA, and then if you want to keep influencing the school at a higher level, it's running for the Board of Ed. And Steve encouraged me; a couple people on the Democratic Town Committee encouraged me. I mean, nobody ever told me I had a problem [like they had with Steve]. So, I guess the world had shifted a bit [by] then. Like Steve, I wasn't there to push for anything gay in the schools in particular, other than watching out for any discriminatory issues, which—I didn't see any. So yeah, it seemed like kind of everybody knew that I'm gay, and it wasn't an issue.

How LGBTQIA+ Life Has Changed

Zemo: [After college], I was recruited by a bank [in New York], and they gave me an apartment on Perry Street in the Village. And one night there was all this ruckus and I thought, "What is going on down there?" Well, it was the Stonewall Riots. But because of my association with the bank and their apartment, I think, "I better not get in anywhere. The news [is] here, cameras everywhere." But it was amazing to think, "I've been to that bar."

There was some harassment of people there, and the drag queens said, "Enough is enough." I've always remembered that. Good for them! It wasn't the guy working at the bank that was banging on the police car. They were like, "Look, we're doing this. We're tired of this."

Zemo: The bars were a very key part of our culture. It wasn't about the alcohol. It was more about the socialization and the opportunity. Whether it was Sunday afternoon after the beach in Westport or whether it was Friday night at the bar in Danbury, you knew you were going to meet up with people, chat with them. You knew the bartender; during the week at some point there was a buffet. It was just the social center of our world at that time.

Zemo: [My sexuality] very much influenced my relationship [to my job at the bank]. They [were not] interested in knowing about what I did after five on Friday. I suspect that's why I left after six months, because I just wasn't comfortable. This was as laced up as you could get, and I thought, "What am I doing here? I can't be me." I never went back to corporate America.

Taylor: I went to work for IBM, which was kind of my dream job from a professional standpoint. That was 1983, '84, that I started to work there, and they were tolerant. I came out to a few people there. Over a couple of years, they certainly became aware that I was in a long-term relationship, but it wasn't a problem and [I] never felt harassed or anything.

Zemo: I had a pack [of friends], but it wasn't structured around an activity. It was just a group of people that might have vacation together, dinner. I remember having my thirtieth birthday party with my pack, and my boyfriend at the time cooked it, and we had fun. But I also remember that the pack is all dead; they all died during the [AIDS] epidemic. They were gone fast. I had a very close friend, partner, whatever, Allan, who opened a business in Ridgefield. It was very successful, and people loved him. He was

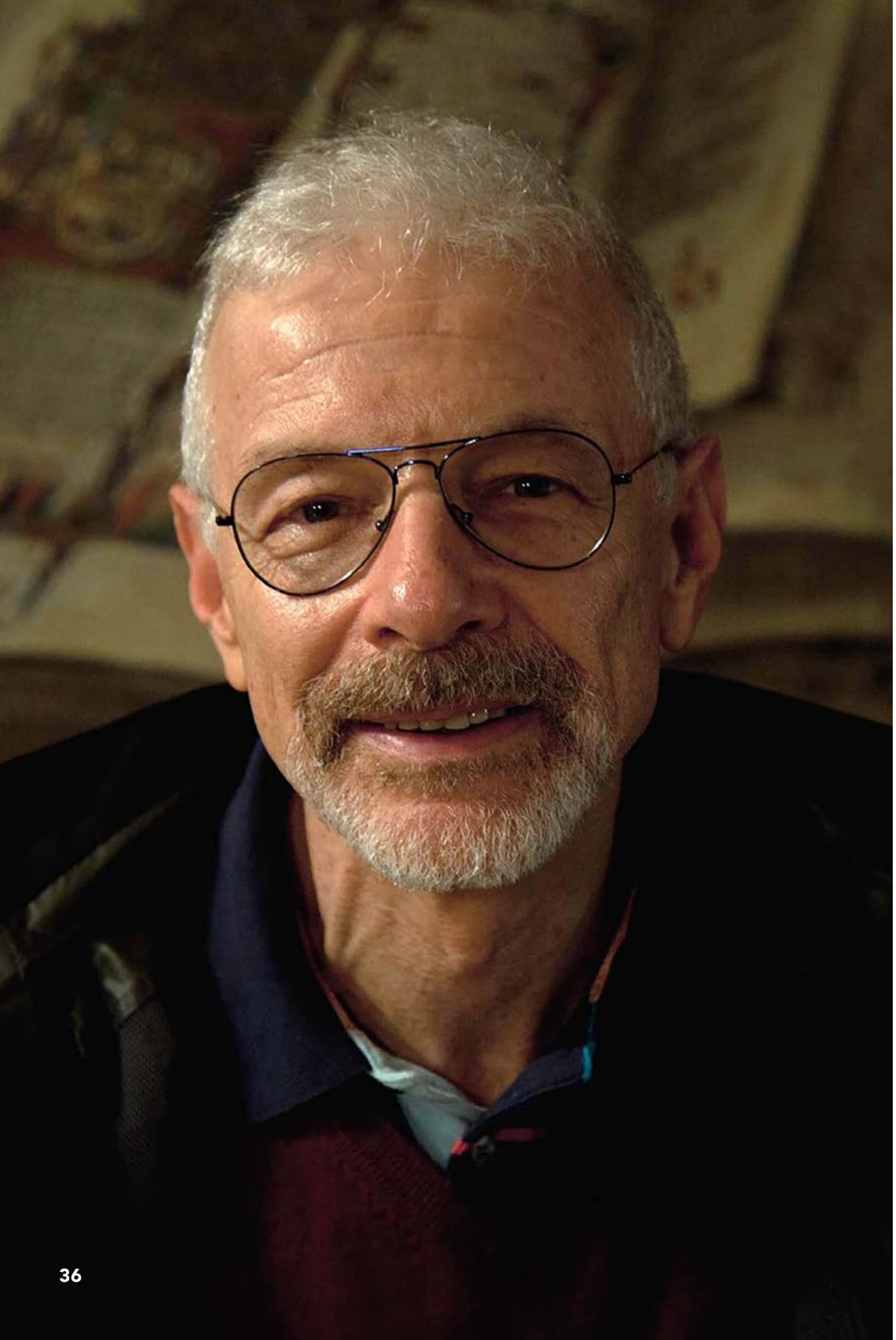
Michael Taylor (left) and Stephen Zemo, 1996

a big personality; he was very creative. And he died when he was thirty-six. That was in 1986, and the outpouring of support with cards, I couldn't believe it. "There are people I don't know out here, who know what's going on." It was an eye-opener for me.

Taylor: When I came out in the early eighties, there were bars and there were groups on college campuses and whatnot. But there was never a gay character on TV back in the eighties and nineties. I mean, never, [unless] it was some sort of a tragic story.

Zemo: Just watching from the outside, just paying attention to our community and listening and reading, I mean, it's a whole different world. The fact that we're sitting here doing this [interview] is a whole different world. It's wonderful that the drapes are open. Hi out there! I think the clock has really moved, not to 180 degrees, but it's better.

Taylor: I think the Pride in the Park Days—five years now, something like that—I mean, that's amazing to me. And that it's organized by the youth in the community! I think, "Oh my God, this is amazing." The needle is moving toward fuller acceptance, but there's still a long ways to go.



Perry Brass, born 1947

My full name is Perry Brass.
I [use] he/him pronouns, and I'm very proudly gay.

Early Life in the South

I was born [in] 1947 in Savannah, Georgia. My life in Savannah was terrible. It was a totally segregated city, very conservative, very racist, very redneck, with an extreme class structure. I grew up southern, Jewish, impoverished, and gay. I realized I was gay by the time I was about twelve years old, but at that point, all I could do was hide and hope no one would guess it. I did not act like normal boys; I had no interest in sports. I loved art, music, and writing.

My father died when I was eleven years old. After he died, my family and I were thrust into a level of poverty that is hard to even describe. I mean, we were barely eating. We had to move into a public housing project where we were the only Jewish family in the whole project. I was constantly beaten up and harassed. I describe my childhood as this nightmare that I had to sleep through until the age of seventeen.

When I was a junior in high school, I was fifteen, and I would easily describe that as the most difficult year of my life. There were rumors whispered about me that I was queer, and I was extremely unhappy. My mother and I were at complete war with each other. She had terrible mental problems; she'd been in and out of mental hospitals for years, and because we didn't have a father, I had to be the man of the family. When I turned fifteen, she decided she was going to start controlling me, and I was not going to let this happen. That summer, I tried to kill myself; I'd swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills. I realized later that this is a terribly common occurrence among gay teenage boys.

Perry Brass, 2017 / Photo: Steven Dansky

I lived in San Francisco when I was seventeen and eighteen and there was this gay teenage underground that I joined. It was marvelous.

When I woke up from this experience, about two or three weeks later, I came to an amazing epiphany, that I was going to be the person that I was meant to be. I was not going to take shit from anyone, and anyone who kept me from being this person, I would just knock them off the playing board. I was not out, but the next year in high school, I became extremely confident about myself, extremely cocky, and I became very popular. Oh, and I also became very popular with girls, but this situation with girls was just a mask, and I understood that.

I went to the University of Georgia, as a freshman, and that was just terrible. I had to stay so deep in the closet [that] it was suffocating, and I had death threats in my dorm room. I was depressed. I was majoring in art; I was going to get a BFA in fine arts. On a professional level, I was doing very well, but on an emotional level, I could barely stand it. At the end of that year, I decided I was not coming back. I dropped out, and that summer I hitchhiked from Savannah to San Francisco, because I had been told that San Francisco was crawling with queers, and I wanted to be someplace where I didn't feel like I was going to be murdered on the street. I lived in San Francisco when I was seventeen and eighteen and there was this gay teenage underground that I joined. It was marvelous.

Activism and Art

[After San Francisco, I moved to New York]. I was in the village when Stonewall happened. I was in a bar, and people came in and said there was rioting at the Stonewall. The next day, after the first day of riots, I went out into the streets. I felt elated that this had happened. One of the things that I hated as a young man was the idea that you had to be passive in the face of oppression, that you couldn't fight back.

I joined the Gay Liberation Front (GLF)[4] in November 1969, about six weeks after my twenty-second birthday. GLF wanted a socialist revolution, in which gay people would be simply a part of society. One of the things I loved was what I called the GLF mindset; gay feelings and relationships were foremost. You should never hide your deepest, most authentic feelings. To hide them was a terrible act of self-effacement. There was this extreme level of public affection and tenderness, like you could kiss your friends and hug them. There was a deep feeling, a bedrock feeling, that we were all sisters and brothers, and that was the most important thing. I stayed in GLF for about three years. It was extremely intense.

I went back to college at twenty-four and finished my degree at [New York University]. NYU was completely different from Georgia. I became president of the gay students' group in 1972 because I was the only out student, and I had already been through this extreme political experience [with the GLF].

I was about twenty-six when I decided I didn't want to make visual art anymore. I was a really gifted artist, but I could no longer do it. I loved writing and the whole world of writing [and] I started doing a lot of freelance writing, and I was getting paid to write. During the 1980s, gay theater started to surface all over America, so I started writing plays, and I got a lot of support with that. I had written a novel, and I was trying to get this novel published, and nobody wanted to publish this novel.

4 The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was a radical queer activist organization formed in 1969 immediately after the Stonewall Uprising. Inspired by broader liberation movements of the era, the GLF rejected assimilationist politics and instead advocated for systemic change—challenging homophobia, racism, sexism, capitalism, and militarism. Rather than focusing solely on legal equality, the GLF sought to transform social norms and power structures, emphasizing collective liberation, mutual support, and unapologetic visibility for LGBTQIA+ people. https://www.glf-foundation.org.

Then, I had this idea that I wanted to publish a book of poetry. I had these friends who had this fabulous photography gallery in New York called Wessel + O'Connor Gallery, and I went to them and said, "I want to do a book of poetry that has images from your gallery in it." They said, "We'd love to do that with you." So, I started sending out these queries to publishers, and every one of them rejected it. I was like, "Well, fuck this. I'll put out the book myself." And everything just fell into place. At that point, there were probably about sixty gay bookstores in America, and then another couple of hundred that had what we called strong gay shelves. And I ended up selling almost three thousand copies of this book. I mean, to sell three thousand copies of a book of poetry is just exceptional.

When I did that book, I decided, "Well, this is going so well, I've got to do another book." And I had this idea [that] I should do a gay science fiction book, because science fiction was a very popular category among gay readers, and there was almost no science fiction material that was openly queer. And again, the book ended up selling about four thousand copies. This is just stunning, [and I've been a writer ever since].

Partnership and AIDS

The man who's now my husband, we've been together for almost forty-three years. We met in 1980 in Central Park, and he was a very romantic and sweet guy. He is also from the South, from Birmingham, Alabama. His father was a doctor, and his family kind of pushed him into medicine, so that he'd become a doctor like his father was. [My husband, Hugh], was a wonderful doctor, extremely devoted to his patients, but he was never very happy as a doctor. He really wanted to be a musician. So, now he's retired and makes music.

When AIDS surfaced [in the early 1980s], Hugh and I were living in New Orleans, which is this conservative southern city. It was horrible. They were ashamed of it; they kept it

I came to an amazing epiphany, that I was going to be the person that I was meant to be. I was not going to take shit from anyone, and anyone who kept me from being this person, I would just knock them off the playing board.

hidden. And a friend of mine and I became an AIDS buddy to this man who was hospitalized. He was totally alone, dying of AIDS, and we saw him through, all the way to his death. Then, when I moved back to [New York, in about 1983], AIDS was really happening. I did not get involved too much with AIDS organizations, although I did take care of a number of my friends and became their care partner. What I ended up doing was using my artistic talents to become involved with the AIDS crisis. I wrote a whole group of poems that became set to music, under the title *All the Way through Evening*. And the last poem was called "Walt Whitman in 1989." And this song became an unofficial anthem of the AIDS crisis, and it was done hundreds of times all over the world.

I think what prepared me for AIDS was being in GLF, because the Gay Liberation Front was such a preparation for the idea of confronting a situation head-on. And also, there was a primacy to gay feelings. So, if someone had AIDS and they were queer, you could embrace them wholeheartedly. You didn't have to be evasive about it. I think a lot of the gay community picked up on this, and it really changed what it was like to be gay in America.

Living in Ridgefield

We moved to Ridgefield in 1989. [Hugh] got a job at Four Winds Hospital, which is near Katonah, New York. So, we moved to Ridgefield and stayed for approximately three years and left in 1993. It was a beautiful place to live. I mean, we lived on a small dirt road street called Cedar Lane, with flowers and trees and the whole deal.

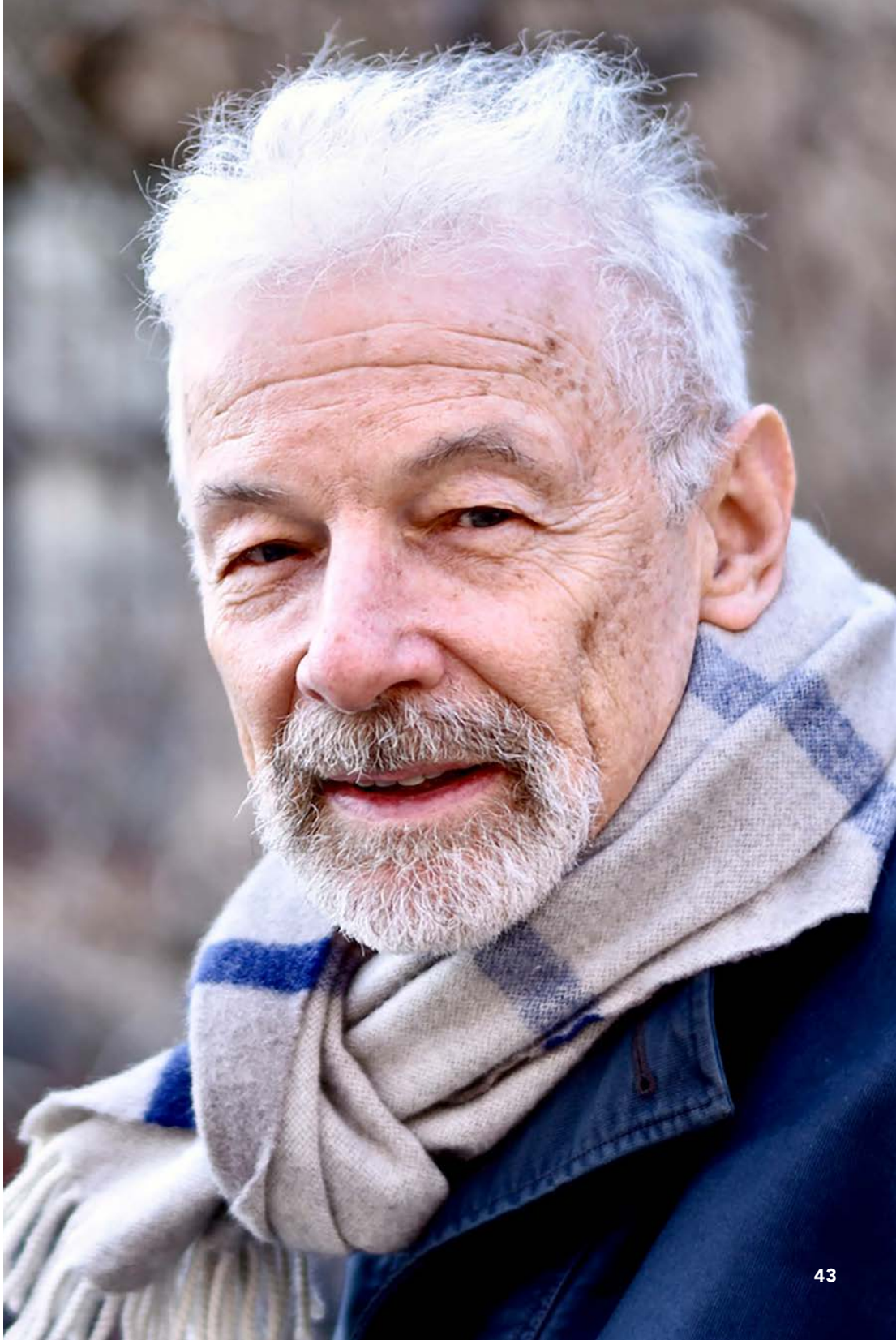
The good thing about living in Ridgefield was that I had the time and the space to [write]. Then, after we left, I came out with this book of gay horror stories. I wrote a story called "The House of Nightmares," and it takes place in a small suburban town that I call Ridgeland instead of Ridgefield. It's about this gay couple who moved into Ridgeland, and one of them is an artist, and his partner is a stockbroker. And I very much modeled the artist on myself. His feelings were like my feelings, this feeling of being very alienated, but enjoying this naturalism of the environment, and someone who is driven to create art. And I certainly was that when I lived in Ridgefield. That was just what I wanted to do all the time, just create art.

Reflections

I don't believe we've gone as far as we can go; I really don't. And I think that what we're going through now is a really good example of how the community cannot afford to be complacent, not with all of these laws happening about trans people, about books being banned from libraries. You can't be complacent. What I would love to see would be a return to the kind of supportive tribalism we had when I was younger, [and] I'd like to see affection and closeness among men become normalized. And it's starting to happen, but it's still difficult.

I'd like to be remembered as someone who contributed to this extraordinary movement that I love being a part of, and also for the books I've written, the plays I wrote—and also as a good person who I think has meant something to a lot of people. I've loved my life. I've loved about 99 percent of my life. That's pretty damn good.

Perry Brass, 2023 / Photo: William Crist



Fred Turpin, born 1948

I was born [in] 1948 in St. Joseph, Missouri, but [grew up] in King City, Missouri. [I identify] as an out gay man.

Childhood, Marriage, Coming Out

I had a pretty good childhood. I assume that all of the boys, for example, in my class were severely beaten by their fathers, as was I. My parents were well known in the community, both alcoholics, both smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. My father was actually a more feelingful person than my mother, and I eventually had a much closer bond with him than I did my mother. I had an older sister, [and] we were closer, each of us, to my grandmother than to my mother.

I was probably about thirteen or fourteen years old [when I began to realize I was gay]. I had sleepovers with my closest friend, who later announced he was gay, after Vietnam. [But] growing up, I didn't know homosexuality was out there. There wasn't a single person in my hometown who was outwardly gay, and there were no role models in the media, or in celebrities, or anything else. So, to be gay was just never talked about. And when something is so hidden, it makes it easy to be stigmatized.

I was married for twenty years [to a woman, and we had two daughters]. This was back in the day when being gay was considered a psychiatric issue. I worked in my own analysis for years hoping I could not be gay, but after my marriage ended and I came to Ridgefield, I had to own up to the fact that if I was going to have love in my life, it would no longer be with the opposite sex.

Fred Turpin, 2024

[Now], I'm married [again]; his name is Cameron. He's younger than I am, and he comes from Utah, raised in a Mormon family. He reached out to me online about five years ago, and we got married a little over two years ago. Rudy Marconi presided at our wedding,[5] and we got married at the Elks Club and probably had four clergy who took part in the ceremony and had the dinner there. I feel like we really love each other.

Living and Working in New York City and Ridgefield

I went to seminary at Louisville Presbyterian Theological School in Kentucky, and three years later moved to Boston to work on my doctorate in psychology and then moved to New York City for a five-year residency program in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. When I got my certificate, they immediately asked me to join the faculty, and a year later [I] was asked to be head of a department with twenty-five faculty. From that, I ended up directing four different counseling centers in New York City, then was asked to be the director of training at a new institute for relationship therapy.

[I was in New York City during the AIDS crisis.] I had patients who came down with AIDS, and they were brilliant young men who died a horrible death. The pastor of the church that I attended turned out to be gay. He began work in September but was installed in late October. In between September and October, he came down with HIV, and eventually as he got sicker, each person that came to help him, he swore them to secrecy, because he was afraid that if anybody knew he would be fired, he would lose his health insurance and his housing. So, the church rallied very much to support him. And about two months after his death, they asked me to lead a weekend workshop. And I remember one evening somebody said, "When Mark died of AIDS…" And I said, "Stop right there. How many people are aware that Mark died of AIDS?" And in this room of thirty-five people, every hand went up. And I said, "Have you ever talked with anybody about it?" People started sobbing; the whole room just started sobbing, because they had all been sworn to secrecy by this pastor.

I was in Manhattan on 9/11. I was out on a pier in the Hudson River with about four hundred people, and a lot of the women on that pier had husbands who worked in the towers. When the towers fell, I kind of assumed twenty thousand people, maybe even thirty thousand people, had just perished. [In reality], it was closer to three thousand, but the screams of those women and the numbers of them that fainted… It was a rugged day.

I ended up staying [in New York City] for twenty-two years. [By that time], I was the executive director of a postgraduate institute with ninety-five faculty and about 450 candidates in training, and I remember exactly the minute [I decided to leave the city]. My best friend Elliot was the head of the faculty of the institute [where] I was the executive director. And I turned to him and said, "We haven't had lunch in ages. Let's sit down and find time to have lunch." And he looked at his calendar, and I looked at mine, and we found an hour, eight weeks in the future, when we could have lunch together. And I walked away and within one minute I said, "That's it. I'm leaving New York. I just don't want to spend the rest of my life this way." The next weekend, there was an ad in the *New York Times* for a house in Ridgefield. I came and looked at it and within fifteen minutes decided, "I love this place. I think I'm going to take it." [Now, I've lived in Ridgefield] for about twenty-five years.

As a member of the clergy, I started attending Ridgefield Clergy Association meetings. There were, at that time, about twenty-two clergy in town, and I decided to take each person out to breakfast and during that time come out to them, because I wasn't about to have a situation where my sexual issues were talked about behind my back and whispered and everything

5 Rudy Marconi has served as Ridgefield First Selectperson, the town's highest elected office, since 1999.

else. I wanted to be open and out about it. [Almost all] of the other clergy were accepting, and to my absolute surprise, about three years later, I was elected president of the Clergy Association. It was unanimous, and I wondered at the time how many clergy associations in the United States had an openly gay man as the president of their clergy association? I'd doubt there were that many.

Reflections

[Acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people has] gone from hiddenness to where it is today. The Stonewall Rebellion was very important to publicize [the oppression sexual and gender minorities faced]. [The assassination of Harvey Milk in 1978] was a horrific situation, where a member of the Board of Supervisors killed both the mayor of San Francisco and Harvey Milk, who was also on the Board of Supervisors. [Milk] was the first outwardly gay man [elected to public office in a major US city]. I think such tragedies, [while] horrific, have a beneficial aspect to it in that it raises the issues in a very stark way, to all of our population, about how bad things are. [Now] we have senators that are gay, cabinet members that are gay. It's very much accepted now, and that's wonderful.

It was a monumental thing when the Supreme Court said that gay marriage was a constitutional issue, although I'm not at all sure it will be legal in all fifty states in the years to come. A number of years ago, after [same-sex] marriage was legal in the state of Connecticut, I think the Jewish synagogue held the first gay marriages, but for a long time, the Protestant churches were not marrying gay couples. And St. Stephen's Episcopal Church had a lesbian couple that wanted to be married in the church, and the rector went to the vestry, the governing body, and asked them for permission to do so. And the vestry voted unanimously to allow this lesbian couple to be married in the

I worked in my own analysis for years hoping I could not be gay, but after my marriage ended and I came to Ridgefield, I had to own up to the fact that if I was going to have love in my life, it would no longer be with the opposite sex.

church. So, [the rector] then went to the bishop and asked the bishop's permission, and he said, "Since your vestry has given you a unanimous vote, you as rector can allow the marriage to take place in the church, but you cannot preside at the vows, and you cannot sign the marriage certificate." So, the Episcopal priest called me up and said, "Fred, why don't you come and handle the vows and sign the marriage certificate? And together we will marry this couple in church." And to my knowledge, I'm the first minister to officially do a [same-sex] wedding service in a Christian Protestant church in the town of Ridgefield.

There aren't clear boundaries in my own mind that separate my religious and spiritual faith and the work I do as a psychoanalyst or marriage counselor. They both are rooted in my deep respect for marriage, for family that is safe and encouraging, and accepting of their children. When it comes to love, there are both psychological and spiritual realms.

Victor P. Torchia Jr., born 1954
Benjamin Ortiz, born 1958

Victor Torchia: *[I was born in] 1954, White Plains, New York. I use he [pronouns]. I see myself as an Italian American man who happens to be gay, and the reason I use that is, as a young man at that time period, between the sixties to the eighties and nineties, your perception of who you are was sharply different than how it is today.*

Benjamin Ortiz: *[I was born in] Tallahassee, Florida, 1958. I use he and him. I [identify] as a first-generation Puerto Rican living and working in Bridgeport, Connecticut.*

Growing Up

Torchia: I come from a traditional Italian family, so everybody either lives next door to each other or we all get together every night [for] dinner. I didn't know I was gay, probably until [my] late teens. Growing up in that timeframe, you had to basically live in the shadows or pretend you were something that you were not. That's how the world was, and then it changed, thank God.

Ortiz: [I grew up] in Bridgeport, coming from Tallahassee, because my father was in the marines. Growing up in a Puerto

Victor P. Torchia Jr. (left) and Benjamin Oritz, 2024
Benjamin Ortiz (left) and Victor P. Torchia Jr. in Puerto Rico, 1985

Rican family, [it was] very strict, but I knew I was gay at the age of five. Can you believe it? I was always attracted to men. We were brought up to respect each other, respect each other's privacy, but [that] also gave us the opportunity to do the things that we wanted. It wasn't really discussed.

Torchia: In grade school, there were kids who used to pick on me. I was a heavy-set kid, and people used to make fun of me. I was bullied a few times, not because I was gay; it was just because I was heavy-set.

Ortiz: One incident that I remember [from grade school] was this student, who was also from Puerto Rico, and he [had] a very femme kind of appearance, always impeccably dressed. The fifth-grade class, one recess, ganged up on him. I was so freaked out; they're just ostracizing this poor kid, major bullying. And I just kept hearing all the students saying, "Gay, gay, gay, gay, faggot, faggot, faggot." That really still is very ingrained. I felt so helpless that I couldn't help him as a friend.

Torchia: [In high school], I knew some guys who were very effeminate, but no one ever said anything to them. Then years later, I went to the Gay Pride parade in New York City, and I saw twelve of the guys that [had been] in my class, like, "Victor, you finally came out! What took you so long?" Also, I'd lost weight, and they were like, "Oh my God, you're gorgeous!"

Ortiz: An Adonis.

Torchia: Then they put glitter, I had baby oil, and they put glitter all over me. I was walking down the stairs, "Oh my God, look at me. Wow! I'm shiny." I had fun. They [took] me to all the bars on Christopher Street. We had such a blast, and I was like, "Wow, this is the best day I ever had."

Ortiz: [In school], some of the teachers were gay, but they didn't come out. I know a couple of teachers took me under their wings to say, "This is what you need to do to survive." So, I kind of had angels, I called them angels, to guide me. And the way they did this is through creativity, the arts, painting, sculpture, printmaking, music, piano, listening to jazz, classical, you name it, the whole gamut. And they just [said], "Okay, just concentrate on that in order for you to survive and get through the day."

Ortiz: Lots of folks in my life recognized my abilities, that I could paint and sculpt, and they said, "You need to go to this special high school, Park City Alternative." I owe that school, the students and the faculty, a great deal of respect. I had the advantage of taking advanced classes at the University of Bridgeport, and they were the ones who helped me put my portfolio together to go to art school. I was accepted to Yale School of Visual Arts and the School of Visual Arts at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design], but because of the economic situation, I could not go to any of those schools. I decided to go to a community college called Housatonic Community College.

Torchia: I was second in my [high school] class and had my choice of universities to go to. I chose Manhattan College 'cause [that's] where my buddies were going. I had a great time. It was a party school.

[Coming out] was a bit of a drama because I had family members who were totally unaccepting of the lifestyle. In the beginning, they said, "We're going to send you to Switzerland for psychiatric help and help you transition back to being a normal person." But that didn't happen, thank God.

Coming Out, Work, and Relationships

Ortiz: My first lover was in his forties; I was eighteen at the time. He showed me the ropes. He showed me that you could be gay, but you could also [be] all these other things, and he said, "Don't be ashamed [of] what you are." It took me a long time to accept what I was, because also being Puerto Rican, that whole identity crisis kind of thing. "Are you this? Are you that? And are you an American citizen?" I went through all that. Then on top of that, being gay, it's like, "Oh my God, what a hot mess."

Torchia: When I was in my mid-twenties, I had a girlfriend. Actually, I had three girlfriends, and then I realized I was attracted [more to one of their male friends than to them], and that's how it led in that direction [of being gay] for me. My first experience being a gay person [was when] my friends took me out to a gay bar. I had never been to a gay bar before.

Torchia: [The two of us met] October 25th, 1984. That's how long we've been together.

Ortiz: Forty years. And it goes like that. I can't believe it! Like, where did it go?

Torchia: It took us a while to get a place together, because I was working in New Jersey at the time, and he's working in Bridgeport. So, we'd see each other on the weekends or in the middle of the week. And that's how we [eventually] ended up here in Ridgefield, because it was between the two locations.

Ortiz: My father was in the real estate business. [When we bought our first house in Ridgefield], I wanted his professional opinion on it. And in Spanish, my father said, "Oh, Ben and that man, oh, that man." My mother turned around and said, "That man has a name. His name is Victor. He's with your son. Answer me a question: Was your son ever arrested for drugs? Was he ever arrested for stealing? Did he bring shame to this family? Did he embarrass us?" [She] kind of gave him the riot act. He clammed up, didn't say anything. From that point on, he's just been just one cool dad.

Torchia: [Coming out] was a bit of a drama because I had family members who were totally unaccepting of the lifestyle. In the beginning, they said, "We're going to send you to Switzerland for psychiatric help and help you transition back to being a normal person." But that didn't happen, thank God. When I came out, and I wasn't the one who came out, it was a friend of mine who revealed that. My family was having this huge Fourth of July party, [and my friend] introduced Ben as my boyfriend. They asked him to leave, and he wasn't allowed to come back to the house. We had to work through all this, and it took several years. That was 1984, 1985.

Torchia: I have a cousin who turned out to be gay. His father says, "Talk to your Uncle Victor, because he had to go through the worst of it, and you didn't. So, don't be a crybaby; talk to him." And we talked. He said, "I can't believe that you survived all this." And you have to understand that I worked on Wall Street, which was extremely conservative and very homophobic. You had to play these illusions. I had to have a girlfriend. I had a girl I knew who was also gay, and she didn't want to come out to her company. So, we would go on dates together, pretending to be a couple. You had to play those roles back in the eighties and nineties, even though [Ben and I] were seeing each other.

Torchia: I worked on Wall Street for forty years. I was a global equity trader and supervisory principal. And at one point, I was the head of the desk for a multibillion-dollar international asset manager. Everything you've seen in those movies that came out [about] Wall Street, I lived through all of that, and all of it is true. The crazy parties, the crazy dinners, money flying left and right.

Ortiz: I was involved in the arts. [In college], my advisor said, "Have you ever thought of going into the curatorial field?" I said, "I didn't think of it." So, a light went [on]. I consider myself a cultural worker for forty-plus years.

Torchia: We came to Ridgefield in 1988. When we came to town, we said, "Wow, what a beautiful, quaint little town." And we met a lot of people who said, "Hey, good morning," or "Good afternoon." Even the realtors [were] very welcoming to us. When we came in to look at houses, they just accepted us for who we were.

Ortiz: We moved [to Ridgefield] with no problem, and then all of a sudden, we get this letter from the Welcome Wagon, to welcome [us] to the community and to the neighborhood. When the Welcome Wagon person came with the [welcome] basket, she said, "Oh, I'd like to meet your wife." And I said, "There's no wife here, but I have my other half." And she [said], "Oh, okay. Welcome, welcome. Oh, yes, okay." She didn't know where to hide, but that's okay. We sat down, and she gave us all the interesting things that the town had to offer at that time.

Torchia: The company I worked for, they were homophobic, but they got acquired by a Dutch company, which [was] totally open. They transitioned the company, and it was a complete turnaround from where it was years ago, which is why we ended up getting married. [Ben] had all his benefits covered [by my company, and when same-sex marriage became legal in Connecticut], my company said, "He's been getting benefits for the last five years, and [now] your state recognizes your union. You need to follow through with that, otherwise you're going to get taxed."

Ortiz: The funny part was that I went to City Hall to say, "What's the process of getting the union?" She says, "Oh no, honey, it's not a union. You could get married. We give you a marriage certificate." I was like, "What?!"

Torchia: So, we got married in December 2009. We didn't have a formal wedding. We had been together for so many years that [the] whole formality of having a wedding is like, "Really? We've been together twenty-five years. Do we really need a wedding?" We got married in town hall, and everybody came out of their offices, and they threw confetti and flowers. Then some friends, our neighbors, who [served as our witnesses] came to the house and we had champagne.

Reflections

Torchia: When we were younger, we didn't have much support [from the larger society]. We had none. [But now] we have everybody.

Ortiz: But that's only for now. What's going to happen to us in the future? Because that's really scary, what's happening, especially the whole thing with abortions. Who's going to be next? It's just scary, the situation. But that's why we're here. We're here to support each other, keep the light and the flames going.

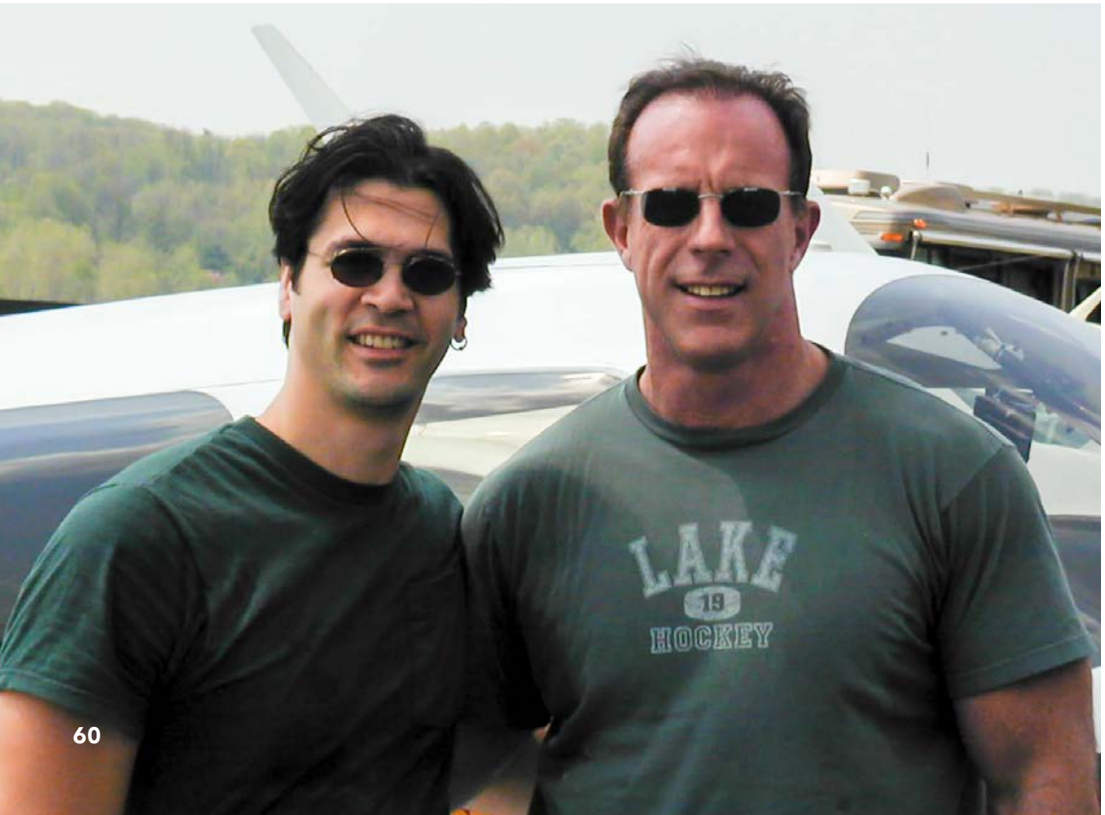
Torchia: It's like the pendulum has swung one way, and now slowly it's trying to swing its way back.

Ortiz: I always encourage the younger folks to just go and do it all. We have your back, because other folks behind us had our backs when we were growing up and going through this, and you have our support.

Torchia: Be yourself; be happy, and if you need help, know that it's there for you. Don't give up. Believe in yourself and just say, "I'm moving forward." And if someone else says something to you, just say, "Oh, well."

Ortiz: "Bye!"

Torchia: And walk away, because that's what you have to do. You got to learn to stand up for yourself and say, "You know what? I am who I am." And just be yourself. That's really the meaning of pride, to be proud of who you are.



Adam Broderick, born 1955
Peter Goldstein, born 1965

Adam Broderick: *I was born [in] 1955, in the Bronx. Gay man; he/him.*

Peter Goldstein: *My full name is Peter David Goldstein. I was born in Fairfield, Connecticut, [in] 1965. I am a gay man; pronouns would be he/him.*

Early Life, Coming Out, and AIDS

Broderick: I grew up in an area called Country Club, which probably sounds high-end, but it was [a] working-class neighborhood. My friends' [parents] were all blue-collar workers, and my dad was a tavern owner, third generation. [There was] a lot of community, because houses were very close together.

Broderick: I remember early on being a loner and kind of considering myself a little different. By the third grade, I had really experienced a lot of issues. I was in parochial school; the class size was fifty-five to sixty-five students. I was labeled bright but lazy, kind of a troublemaker, and just didn't follow the rules. I was pretty much punished for my entire eight years in grade school. I think that set the tone for everything and, in hindsight, really did affect my relationships, my secretiveness, just the whole level of being comfortable in your own skin. [It wasn't until I was in my forties that I realized I probably have ADHD.] So early on it was just kind of whispered that I was different.

Adam Broderick (left) and Peter Goldstein, 2024
Peter Goldstein (left) and Adam Broderick after a flight in Pete's plane, 2000

Goldstein: For me, I think it was somewhere around [age] six or seven [when I first had a sense of being different]. I went to the JCC [Jewish Community Center] day camp, and there was this one camp counselor that… just something was different. And obviously, at that age, you have no idea really what it is, but that was my first inkling. Ever since I had any kind of sexual awareness, I was always on that 100-percent-gay side. It was never a question in my head.

Broderick: In kindergarten, I remember having an attraction to someone in the class, and again, not associating it with anything sexual but, in hindsight, realizing that I definitely was interested in men, and that became more apparent as I was a little bit older. It went from that attraction to then having real crushes on girls in school, dating pretty normally. And that evolved into my dirty little secret.

Goldstein: When I was thirteen, I got caught with magazines that my father found in my closet. He just said, "[If] there's anything you ever want to talk about, let us know." Like, "Hey, it's cool, and we're not asking you to decide or tell us what you are. It's normal that you look at whatever and figure it out, and if you have any questions, ask." I think a lot of it is, I had the right parents at the right time. We grew up reformed Jewish; their parents were conservative Jewish; the parents before that were Orthodox Jewish. So, as the generations came, it was kind of okay. From a religion and family thing, there was no problem with being gay. When I got older and I came out to them, all they were concerned about was, Am I going to have a hard life? Am I going to find love? I think AIDS had just hit the cover of one of the big national magazines, and it really scared my parents, because no one knew what it was and it was really, really bad at that time. So, the timing wasn't good, and that was their bigger concern, health and wellness.

Broderick: I have trouble remembering how out of touch we were with [no] cell phones and Internet. There was very little information, no formal communication. It was a secret that I kept and never really felt comfortable sharing that with anyone until much later.

Broderick: As I started to gain awareness of myself, it wasn't unusual for me to get [my] friends on the train and go into the city and do things. There [were] peep shows in Times Square and areas that you could go to and get some information. But all of that was done very much on the down-low by myself, alone. I might go down to the city with friends and then suddenly get lost or disappear and then go and look around to see what I could find out. That was my introduction to gay life. And at that time, gay bars, the few that were around, were always in really bad neighborhoods, very isolated. And the reason for that [was], if you were looking for activities in a gay bar, it had to be in a place where none of your friends or other people might see you [go] in or out. So, there was a lot of risk even seeking places out where you could be more comfortable and accepted.

Broderick: [I was] probably fifteen or sixteen. I remember I was wearing braces, so I was pretty young. Because my father was in the bar business, we had alcohol very available. I think a typical adventure in the city might be drinking something at home, some liquor or whatever, getting that false courage and getting on the train heading down to Times Square. Somebody came over to me and asked me if I wanted to watch French films in his apartment. So, I did, and that, looking back, was one of my first sexual experiences. One night I was picked up, and we went to a club, the Continental Baths, which [was] a very famous gay bathhouse. I remember walking in there and there was an in-ground swimming pool with at least thirty gay men naked, swimming, hanging out the pool. And I was like, "Holy shit! Nobody ever told me about this." It was a twenty-four-hour club, so I stayed for two days. Every encounter was more information, [to] evolve that part of yourself.

Goldstein: That's where our ten-year [age difference becomes obvious]. We were on different sides of [the start of AIDS]. For me, it was like, "I'm out!" and you open the curtains, and there's a big brick wall right in front of you. I definitely had many fewer encounters and casual relationships [than Adam did], because I was just terrified of the unknown monster that was AIDS at

the time. I got involved pretty quickly in a [monogamous gay] relationship that lasted many years, and, looking back, I think one of the core reasons why I got into a relationship so early was because then I could be sexual in all of this [confusion brought about by AIDS].

Broderick: I think for myself, before AIDS, there was the kind of a free love movement in New York, in the late seventies and early eighties, [that] was "Anything goes" and was just kind of wild. By then I had been a hairdresser, a hair colorist, and working on Fifth Avenue in some of the best salons in the world. And that environment led to me being very comfortable with my sexuality. Moving in that circle, it seemed kind of cool to be gay. But within the first year or year-and-a-half of the AIDS epidemic, I would say thirty percent of the hair people, the male hairdressers and colorists, got sick and died. It was horrible. All of a sudden, [everything was] getting very heavy and [with] me not really understanding what was going on but being very aware that the party time of New York was coming to an end.

Careers and Marriage

Broderick: I left school when I turned sixteen, enrolled in the New York School of Dog Grooming, and became a dog groomer. I asked my dad for a loan, rented a retail store, and at sixteen-and-a-half, I was in a business. [I] built a very successful business but realized I didn't like it. I thought hairdressing might be something, [so] I sold my business, finished beauty school, became a hair colorist and moved to the city.

Goldstein: I came from a family, "You go to college; you get your degree; you get a job in a big corporation," and that's what your life is. But even when I was a young kid, my father would bring home this computer. He worked for General Electric, and he taught both [his] kids how to program in the 1970s. Both me and my brother ended up in technology. Eventually, I ended up [developing] software to help the phone companies and large companies manage their networks and their bandwidth. I was kind of in that Internet boom, right place, right time. I grew up in Fairfield, bounced to Norwalk up to Bethel, and then started a business in Ridgefield, over in the Branchville area. I moved into town, lived here for about ten years, then met Adam.

Broderick: I moved [to Connecticut] to spend some time with my sister. She lived in Brewster, New York, and I was on my way to California to work in a salon there. [I] came up, got involved in a relationship, not this one, and decided to stay. So, Ridgefield ended up being where I started my business [Adam Broderick Salon and Spa], but I lived in Danbury. [I] did get sober, and then the rest kind of fell into place once I was clear-thinking and not under the burden of addiction.

Goldstein: [My relationship with Adam] started with me just going to a party somewhere and chatting with somebody, and I needed a haircut. So, [this person] said, "Oh, I'm a hairdresser. Come on in and see me one day." I made an appointment, came in, had a haircut, and the next thing he said was, "Oh, I think Adam's here today. Would you like to meet him?"

Broderick: I was walking by coincidentally to get some coffee, and the stylist called me over and said, "Hey Adam, I want you to meet a friend of mine, Pete." Never have I dated clients or coworkers, [but] that was the beginning of the best years of my life. Even being older now, my life truly gets better and better. Knowing you have someone in your life that is always going to give you the truth and be there, the rest is so irrelevant to me.

Goldstein: It became practical, within the first year, for Adam to move in on a permanent level into [my] house. The conversation we had was, "We both feel really good about this relationship. We both feel like it's got a lot of potential. It doesn't mean anything from a lifelong commitment, but right now this is really working and let's see where it goes."

Goldstein: We met in 1999. By around 2007, I was doing more and more within Adam's business. Adam had a lot of consulting projects; he was helping to set up Ulta. So, he was in Chicago a lot, going back and forth. And my business was at a point where it was quiet. We just kind of consolidated and took the risk of "Let's just work together." And that's when I really came on, mostly full-time, into the salon business.

Goldstein: So now we're in one business instead of all of our different projects. That's working out well; we're home. And for many years, we had been paying a ransom basically for insurance policies on each other, because we both had assets and being gay and not being married, we had no protection should something happen. We couldn't get into a hospital in some places. They might not let us see each other or make decisions. Lots of awkward stuff that was going on there. And we said, "This is ridiculous. We've been together like ten years. This is our forever relationship." Marriage was freshly available in Connecticut, but it wasn't a national thing, and we were very romantically proposed to by an accountant and an attorney, who said, "You really should consider this. You could get rid of the insurance policies; you could have the rights to see each other. All the wills, everything will work really, really smoothly."

Broderick: I never wanted to have a formal wedding, because it wasn't available to me. We thought, "We're just going to go and do it, no big deal." And then I thought, "If my sister and our brother—and Pete felt the same way, if his mother and father—weren't part of that ceremony, it would be devastating to them." [So], we put a list together, very quick. We netted fifty of our closest friends and family. Our anniversary was 11/20/2011. We planned our wedding [for] 11:20 in the morning. It was a perfect day and meaningful in a really authentic way for us.

Goldstein: The oddest part was, the next morning, getting up, and there's nobody around and it's a regular day. I was convinced that it wasn't going to change anything, [but] it actually felt different, and it felt nice having made that permanent commitment, when really it had been there the whole time. That was the most surprising thing to me about getting married, all the layers. "Okay, we're doing what the straight people do, and we're doing it for the lawyers and the accountants." [But also], it ended up, and still continues to be, "Wow, this is a really cool institution, this marriage thing." I was totally surprised that it really felt different. And I love it! Go figure.

Reflections

Broderick: It's obvious to me that our point of view is one that is a moment in time. This wasn't what I had planned; I actually thought I'd be in the disco until I was ninety! I have the life I never wanted. It's normal, but the fact [is] that we are giving views from a point of not feeling a lot of the conflict. We are a large employer; if you come into the salon and walk through, it's a safe environment where many, many alternative people find acceptance. And being in a business where I employ people that are celebrated or just welcomed in because they're so authentic, really is a moving part of our business. I go in sometimes and look around and think, "Wow, it's a lot. It's a lot of personality," but the pronouns and the changes that are happening, I didn't have those choices. You were gay, straight, or for me, I chose being bisexual, at least wearing that label, but those were kind of the three. Now there is this kind of a menu of alternatives that I think at a young age must be just overwhelming to even have those choices or to be expected to pick a lane.

Goldstein: Hence the fluid lane, which is a word I love, because with every letter, every pronoun, there's a definitive choice. And for some, that really works, but it doesn't apply to everybody or for your entire lifetime. It feels really good to participate [in that, providing a safe employment space for everyone].

Daniela Sikora, born 1956
Keitha Kinne, born 1958

Daniela Sikora: *My birthday is 1956, and I was born in Mannheim, Germany.*

Keitha Kinne: *I was born in Yonkers, New York. [We both identify as] lesbian and [use] she/her.*

Coming Out

Kinne: In high school, [LGBTQIA+ identity] was not very prevalent or spoken about, but college is a time of experimentation. There were other women who wanted to experiment, and so you start to realize, "Hey, wait a second, this is something that's more meaningful to me." [But] I had a really hard time connecting with the lesbian community. I'm not really sure why.

Sikora: You should have played softball. That's how I did it.

Kinne: I should have played softball.

Sikora: [I also first discovered the LGBTQIA+ community] when I was in college. I was actually engaged [to a man] at the time, but I was in the arts. I've always been in the arts, [and] it's a different vibe in the arts. I was very much an observer at that time, and it wasn't until my senior year that I kind of jumped in with both feet. I was in Chicago, where I grew up, and I joined a softball team and became very active in the [lesbian] community. Then [I] met someone, and we ended up moving in together. We applied to the same graduate school—her [in] business, me in music—and moved to Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University. After graduate school,

Keitha Kinne (left) and Daniela Sikora, 2024

we moved to Manhattan, but we used to come up to Connecticut to play golf every weekend.

Kinne: When I moved to London is when I really, finally [connected] with the lesbian community. London had one of the oldest lesbian bars in existence—Smithy's, or something like that. It was on the King's Road.[6] So I went, and it was a real eye-opener for me at the time. This is 1982, and in order to get in, you had to know someone or be a member of a club, or you could show up with your passport. It was in the basement of a building in the heart of London. You went around the corner and down some stairs, had to knock on the back door. And then you'd have to say, "Hi, I'm from America; here's my passport." Everybody was incredibly friendly, and it was wonderful.

The Early Years of AIDS

Kinne: It's pretty hard to be our age and not have been involved in AIDS. In 1982 [while I was living in London], I remember articles coming out talking about the [number] of people who were dying, gay men in particular, and they didn't know what it was. [Then, after] I had moved back to Manhattan…

Sikora: She lost a very dear friend.

Kinne: One of the guys I worked with, we became really, really close. In fact, when I moved back from London, I brought my partner at the time, and in those days, we couldn't get married, [so] she couldn't stay [in the United States]. In order for her to stay, he and she got married. So, he was a very close friend. He did not get sick right away, but he eventually got sick. Right before we met, he got AIDS. At that time, most people who got AIDS died. It was very sad and very scary and very hard to deal with, and it was very political. Those were the Reagan years, and he pretty much ignored it. The public policy was terrible. It really took decades for AIDS to get to a point where people had some compassion for that.

Sikora: That was a really horrible, horrible time because there was this open vilification of gay men. The lesbian population really didn't get as affected by it as the gay men's population. But because it almost immediately got called the gay man's disease, guys who were gay were ostracized. They would be beaten up because they were [supposedly] causing this epidemic, and they wouldn't be treated in hospitals, or doctors wouldn't see them. It was a horrible time for gay men. It was a very dark moment in gay history. It's amazing that we got past that.

Sikora: The gay community started this quilt project. To memorialize these beautiful young men who were dying, they would make them these quilts. We saw them in Washington, DC. It was massive. Where the Washington Monument is, [the National Mall] was completely covered with thousands of quilts. All the people who had died, and pictures of them on the quilts and loving messages. There were just hundreds and hundreds of people there, but you could hear a pin drop. Everybody was quietly walking and crying and looking at these quilts.[7]

Kinne: Just being out in that time was how you tried to make a change in the world, just the process of living an out life at a time when it wasn't as broadly accepted. Throughout that period, we would go every year to Pride, whether it was New York or Connecticut. You were kind of engaged in an ongoing way, trying to be a positive influence for the gradual acceptance of gay and lesbian people.

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6 Gateways, at 239 King's Road in London, was a lesbian bar that operated from 1943 to 1985. In the 1980s, the bar was managed by a butch woman known as Smithy. For more information, see this article in *Smithsonian* magazine: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/gateways-lesbian-nightclub-documentary-180980312/.

7 The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a large-scale, community-created memorial composed of individual panels honoring people who died of AIDS. Families and friends stitched panels to honor loved ones lost to AIDS, creating a vast, colorful patchwork that made the scale of the epidemic heartbreakingly visible. First displayed in Washington, DC, in 1987, the quilt transformed private grief into public remembrance and brought national attention to the human toll of the AIDS epidemic, by insisting that every life be seen and remembered. https://www.aidsmemorial.org/interactive-aids-quilt.

Love, Work, and Moving to Ridgefield

Sikora: When [I lived] in Manhattan, I was invited to a very interesting group, which was called CML, the Classical Music Lovers. It was a lesbian underground music scene of classical musicians. You would get the location of where—whose home—the meeting was going to be; the only requirement was that you had to have a grand piano. Closeted famous people in the classical music world would come and play, sing, or perform. Everybody knew that you didn't talk about CML [outside the group], because that was a time when any performer had to be really careful about being publicly identified as gay. In order for them to have a career, they had to be closeted, but in order to have a life, they needed a connection to their community. And this was a very, very safe connection. I went to that group for four years, until I left [New York].

Kinne: I was living up in Schenectady, New York, and I took a job down on Wall Street. I was working for GE [General Electric] at the time, and [Ridgefield] was very central to the GE location. I just moved here. I thought it was convenient.

Sikora: [My ex-partner and I] bought a house in Weston. [I had] been very out before I met her, [but] she was very closeted. I was not allowed to answer the phone in case one of her business associates called the house. For those ten years, I was not involved with a community. When [we] broke up, I immediately thought I needed to find my tribe. I found a notice about a lesbian support group at the Women's Center, and that's how I got to meet primarily a Danbury community. I don't think I met anyone from Ridgefield.

Kinne: Me

Sikora: Well, yeah. We met in Danbury [at the lesbian group], and I ended up moving in about a year later. I moved here [to Ridgefield] because of her.

All the people who had died, and pictures of them on the quilts and loving messages. There were just hundreds and hundreds of people there, but you could hear a pin drop. Everybody was quietly walking and crying and looking at these quilts.

Kinne: When I first worked for GE, that was very corporate, and it was not a very comfortable place to be out. When I moved to New York City and went to work for Kidder Peabody, which was owned by GE at the time, it was a whole different world. I started to come out, [and] I don't feel like it affected my career. So, my work life and my personal life were more aligned once I got to New York City.

Sikora: I met [Keitha] a couple years into that, [and by then] I was [just] accepted as Keitha's partner. There were no weddings, though. We got married in 1992. It wasn't even a civil union. It was with the Unitarians. There was no civil union at that time; that didn't come until much later.

Kinne: We decided we were going to have this ceremony [and] be married by our Unitarian minister, who was this amazing, wonderful lesbian woman. It was a wonderful ceremony; for us, we felt like we had been married. And then it became legal. Connecticut was one of the first states to get the right [for same-sex couples to] marry. I said to Daniela, "Let's get married." She's like, "Nope. When it's legal nationally, then let's talk about it."

When I was younger, having the gay community, a strong connection to the gay community, was, I think, almost necessary to feel like I wasn't alone in the world.

Sikora: As far as I was concerned, we had been married for years and years and years. And I said, "I'm not going to marry in Connecticut," almost as a small personal political act. "When it's legal in all the United States, we'll do it."

Kinne: But in the end, we decided, "You know what? We already had our big ceremony." We didn't need to do all that again [just] because now it was legal. So, the two of us went down to the town hall, and Rudy married us."[8]

Reflections

Sikora: Our lives are really very ordinary. We're just two people who live in Ridgefield. I happen to do arts; she happens to do business. Just like a straight couple would be, living in Ridgefield, [they would] have their community. I think if I am really part of a community in Ridgefield, it's the community of the arts more than the community of gay people. It's not life-defining. I'm a whole person, and one part is, "I'm a lesbian." Another is, "I'm in a long-term relationship." Another is, "I'm a caregiver;" another is, "I'm an artist." When I was younger, having the gay community, a strong connection to the gay community, was, I think, almost necessary to feel like I wasn't alone in the world.

8 Rudy Marconi is a local politician, serving as First Selectperson of Ridgefield for many years.

Kinne: I think, actually, in some ways, the more accepting the general population is, the less there is a cohesive [LGBTQIA+] community. That sense of community was really, really strong in Manhattan. You felt part of something that was very vibrant and very supportive. Here [in Connecticut], the women's group was wonderful. It really connected [me] to a lot of people in the area, and we did a lot together. People were very supportive of each other. It was really a strong community and very tight. We're still friends with many people from that group.

Sikora: Like a lot of marginalized people, the best history is the history that comes right from the people who are living it and who have lived it. And because things have changed so [much] in the last thirty years, forty years, the kids who grow [up] queer now have no idea what it was like [back then. That is why we volunteered to do this interview].

Keitha Kinne (left) and Daniela Sikora with the Rev. Barbara Pescan at their wedding, 1992

Peter Bancel, born 1957
Philip Shew, born 1961

Peter Bancel: *I grew up in Westchester [County], in Rye, New York. I was actually born in the town next to it, Portchester, 1957.*

Philip Shew: *I was born in Taiwan, in the town called Chiayi; that was in 1961.*

Bancel: *I identify as a gay man [and use] a "he" [pronoun].*

Shew: *Me too.*

Early Life

Bancel: My childhood was really lovely. I grew up in this town on the Long Island Sound, and where we lived was a five-minute walk to a beach. My father, who was an engineer, missed his opportunity to [be] in the theater. So, he would get the kids together, and we would put on plays in our backyard, and also in the church. The whole family would be involved in that, with my mom making costumes and my father directing, and all the three kids, plus all the neighborhood kids, in the shows.

Shew: I was the middle child, and both of my parents worked. We lived in the housing provided by my father's school; he was an educator. My mother was a public servant. I knew [when] I was maybe five, six years old [that] I was interested in boys, and I knew I had to hide that.

Peter Bancel (left) and Philip Shew at Ridgefield Pride in the Park, 2025

Bancel: I had no clue until I hit puberty. I had no idea at all. And then at puberty, it was pretty obvious what was attracting me. That's when I knew I was in trouble. Many years later, my mother told me two things. She told me once there was some elementary school play, and she saw me come on the stage and thought, "Oh, something's going on." And then the other thing was that when I was born, my mom saw me, and she said the first thing that came into her head [was], "Oh, this one's different."

Shew: My mom was a Christian, and she took us to her church, [but] I couldn't stay with them because I knew they were so against me. I think that was during my high school years, and I already knew they were talking about [homosexuality very negatively] in the church. And I even asked the minister, "Okay, if I do everything to be a good person, but I don't get baptized, would that be a problem? Am I going to go to heaven?" And the minister couldn't give me a straight answer, and that's the time I knew, "Church is church; myself is myself, [and they] don't mingle."

Bancel: At some point, I heard on the news or something, someone from a religious standpoint saying that [homosexuality is] a sin. And you would hear two things. One is it's a sin, and then it's a chosen lifestyle. And I absolutely knew that they were wrong from my own experience. And that was the first time, when I was maybe fourteen [or] fifteen, when I realized, "Oh, adults can be totally wrong."

Careers, Immigration, and Relationships

Shew: In Taiwan back then, it's very difficult [to be gay]. You really have to hide your identity. I told one of my doctors I was gay, and through my doctor, I got to talk to a professor in psychology. And that professor was very nice. He told me being gay [is not wrong]. And he told me the possibilities: I could be gay in Taiwan, and probably I should get married.

Bancel: Hide it, you mean?

Shew: Yeah, and then do something on the side. That was pretty common, in earlier times. And then he [said], "I think you're a pretty good student. Why don't you study abroad in the United States or in Europe?" He [said that] in the big cities in the United States, people can live freely. And he mentioned San Francisco, New York. And now [that] I look back, he planted the seeds for me. And then, after I came here, I saw the difference. I compare the possibilities if I go back. By the time I finished my graduate school, I was already thirty-one years old, and people already asked me about my girlfriends, about marriage, and maybe probably some of them are counting how many children should I have—which I have no interest [in] at all. I probably would have [more] opportunity in terms of career in Taiwan, but I have to face all that kind of stuff. In the end I stayed [in the United States], and I was pretty lucky. I was able to find jobs, one after another one, so I stayed.

Bancel: I'm a research physicist, so I got a doctorate in experimental physics. And going through a doctorate [program takes] quite a few years, and it's pretty intense. So, part of my arrested gay development was because you enter a PhD program in physics and your life is taken over by that. You never get out of the lab for four, six, seven years, something like that, and for me, I wasn't particularly forthright or courageous about [coming out].

Bancel: Actually, part of the reason I ended up in Europe was [that] I was gay. I realized that if I [become a university professor in the United States], that is also a black hole of your time and energy. I realized, "If I do that, I'm never going to explore my sexuality and have a partner or even go dating." So, moving to Europe was a chance to continue with physics. I worked in France, at the University of France, but it wasn't as intensive. That was a way that I could keep up with my passion

[for] doing physics but also let the career path be a little bit gentler, so I could start to deal with my own needs and my own sexuality.

Shew: I got a degree in taxation and public finance, and then I got another degree in accounting, and I passed [the] CPA [Certified Public Accountant] exam in New York. I was in the merger and acquisition world. I worked for Pepsi, and in the beginning, in the late nineties or even early 2000s, there was nothing. They [didn't] talk about [being gay]. Then gradually they start to offer the domestic partner benefits, and then they have this outreach group. So, I joined the Asian group; I joined the gay group. However, the company policy says one thing, but the reality, pretty much, in my experience, is "Don't ask, don't tell." If being gay hurt my career, I'm not sure. There are more [things] than sexuality [that] can hurt my career. I'm an immigrant; I don't speak English perfectly; I'm Asian. There's enough to discriminate [against] me if they want to. It's a jungle; you have to protect yourself, and you have to make your own judgement what's best for you.

Bancel: About halfway through my career, when I was in my forties, I made a very big leap. Now I do research in parapsychology, which is psychic research, phenomena like telepathy and clairvoyance. [It's] a taboo field in science. So, I had my taboo orientation sexually, and I gravitated towards another taboo in science. And that was the best career decision I ever made. Something that I learned from my experience in being gay is if you don't [take a leap of courage], you'll have regret. I said, "If I don't make this change now at forty when I'm sixty, I will regret that I just went along the old physics road and I didn't try something more adventurous." And so, for me, that's a personal/professional achievement that is very meaningful to me. It turned out to be a really great ride.

Bancel: I lived in Europe for thirty, thirty-five years, but I always had a connection with this area, Connecticut and New York. [And] I know Ridgefield because my mother moved here in 2005, and I would come back and forth to visit her several times a year.

Shew: We met online. Back then, Peter lived in Paris; I lived in New York City. I thought I was wasting my time until [I] learned that his mother lived in Ridgefield, which is like twenty minutes away from my office in Katonah, [New York], and so we had our first dinner at [a restaurant in] Katonah. It evolved, and it worked, and it's still working after nine years. We met late in our lives. When we got married, [our] combined age [was] 120.

Bancel: In the spring of 2020, when the [Covid-19] pandemic started, I flew over [from France] to check on my mother and to check on Philip, right at the beginning of the pandemic. And as soon as I got here, all the borders closed; I couldn't even get back to my apartment in Paris. So, I was staying with Philip in Manhattan, and then the aide that was helping my mother got afraid of the situation during Covid and she left. We had to come out [to Ridgefield] and take care of [my mother]. So that's how we ended up here. And then after she passed away, it felt comfortable to just stay. But it wasn't our plan, was it?

Shew: No, we never thought, [but now it's the] place we call home. It's a nice place overall. Very few people with my ethnic background, but that's okay.

Bancel: Yeah, and for me, I knew that when my mom would eventually pass away, I would [probably] just lose any sort of homestead in the States. So, for me, the fact that I ended up here in Ridgefield means I keep that. I still have a place in Paris, but I keep this connection of where I grew up. It actually does mean a lot to me, in that sense; it [feels] like home.

Reflections

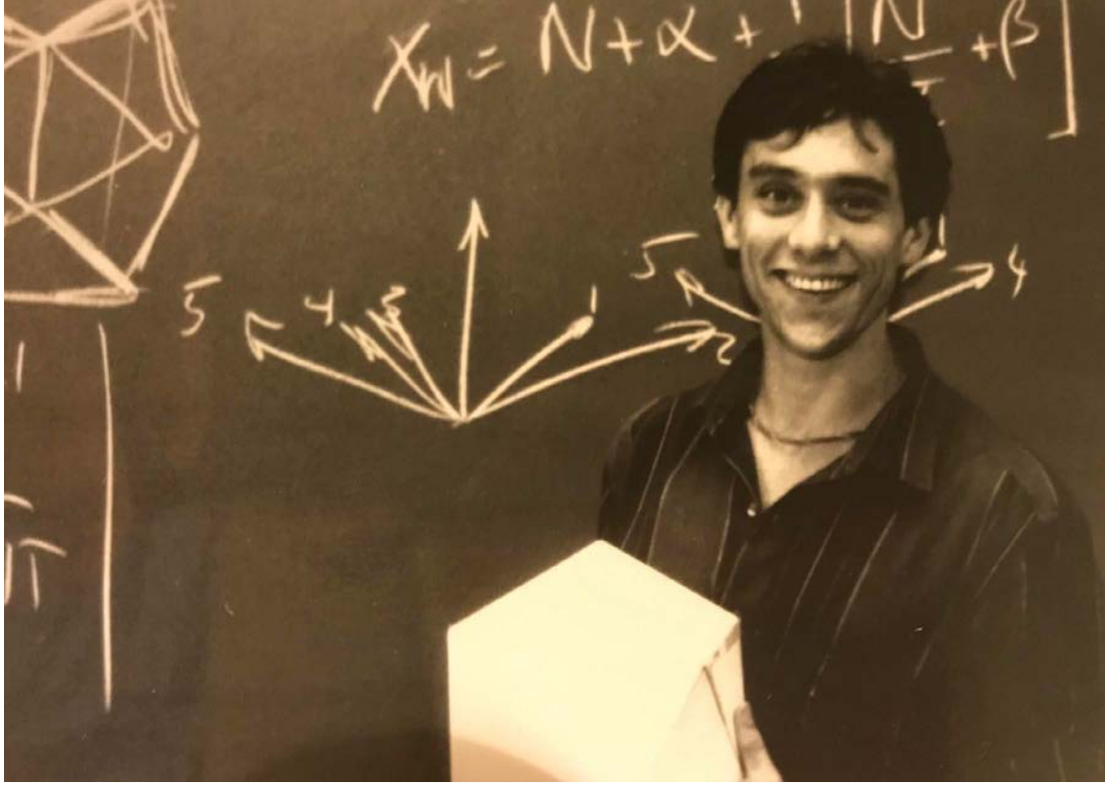
Shew: [When] you're gay, you are afraid of being found out, and that kind of isolation, loneliness, and even fear [is the] most difficult thing to deal with. But, as I grow over time [and develop] self-confidence and self-worth, make some friends, [I] overcome it, it gets better. And of course, I got lucky. I have a life partner; that makes a huge difference, too.

Bancel: There's fundamentally no problem [with being gay]. The problem is just all in our head, [but] that doesn't mean it doesn't take courage.

Shew: It's not easy, but it gets better because you [get] more experience, and that will take you through all the challenges.

Bancel: I really love this life. I love the sex; I love the love. I love the view that it gives me [of] the world. And what I found [throughout] my life was [that] it really takes decades. You think you've come out, but then there's more. Even when you get to the point where you feel good about it, there's still more [to explore]. If you overcome something that's difficult like that, [with] your own courage and gumption, people see that. It's actually a gift that you give to other people. So, you can look at it that way, and that can give you a little bit more courage to go forward.

There's fundamentally no problem [with being gay]. The problem is just all in our head, [but] that doesn't mean it doesn't take courage.



Peter Bancel as a graduate student at University of Pennsylvania, c. 1988
Philip Shew in Central Park, New York City, 2007

Lynn Discenza, born 1957

My name is Lynn Samantha Discenza, and I use the pronouns she/her/hers. I identify as a transgender woman [and] pansexual. I think I probably identify as all the letters: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. I might be intersex too. I just don't know.

Childhood and Early Memories of Gender

I had a great childhood. I grew up in a big family with five siblings in West Hartford, Connecticut. My dad had his own construction company, so I grew up around a kind of privilege, and my parents were really cool. I was probably closest to my mom. I had operations on my eyes when I was very young, and I think my mother doted on me, and maybe my siblings resented me for that. I always felt kind of special.

As a kid, I loved sports. I played all the town sports, then three sports in high school, and was the athlete of the year. I was always working out, running, exercising, and constantly involved in activities. I was on the student council since the eighth grade, class treasurer, and on the West Hartford Town Council, organizing dances. I hardly spent any time at home. Parents with six kids, they lose track of you.

[Early experiences of gender] happened without me understanding them. I shared a room with my older sister, and I remember getting kicked out because I was playing with her dolls, well, tearing the heads off her dolls. I tap danced with her in first and second grade, and I remember seeing all the girls

Lynn Discenza, 2024

in tutus and sequins and thinking it was so cool, while I had to wear black pants. As a child, I would put on my mother's clothes and look in the mirror. I didn't know why. When I was married, I wore my wife's underwear and pants. I didn't have a vocabulary for any of it. Sexual orientation is something different. I was always attracted to girls, so I just thought I was just a straight cis person this whole time.

In my youth, there was almost no education about LGBTQ life. In Catholic school, as our sex education, all the boys watched one video about male reproduction, while the girls were in another room. The big word around seventh grade was "faggot," and people said it without knowing the meaning. My dad once said, "I don't want to hear you use that word again," and that stuck with me.

In high school, I could cross all the cliques. I was a jock, but I hung out with girls into music and guys who were greasers. I was involved enough that the principal asked me to address the senior class during a class-wide conflict. I felt like an adult in high school.

I had a pretty good religious influence growing up, my family being Italian and Catholic. My grandfather was a lay Franciscan; he prayed a lot when he came to visit, [and] he taught us the rosary. At nineteen, I told my family I was going to enter the priesthood, [and] go into the seminary at my college. The Catholic and Christian community continues to be a big part of my life.

Adult Life, Relationships, and Transitioning

Professionally, my early jobs were paper routes, cutting lawns, shoveling snow, and working at my dad's construction company. I followed my older brother into civil engineering. I worked at a nuclear power plant in Michigan, then on ballistic missiles in California, then at Pratt & Whitney on aircraft engines. In 1995, I started my own engineering company. Over twenty-seven years, I worked on submarines, aircraft, spacecraft, and had up to twenty-six engineers [working for my company]. Later, I returned to Pratt & Whitney as a structures engineer.

After twenty-nine years of marriage and three kids, I came out to my wife as bisexual. We divorced for many reasons, but we used that as the explanation. Soon after, I met a man and was in a same-sex relationship for eight years. I just introduced him as my partner and eventually my fiancé. People often have misconceptions about my sexuality, assuming that being a woman means I must be heterosexual. I've always been attracted to men and women.

A turning point was becoming a foster parent. My partner and I went through foster training because they needed parents for LGBT kids. We ended up fostering a sixteen-year-old gay boy. Because of him, I joined support groups for parents of LGBT kids.

I came out at work twice. After my divorce, I called my twelve employees in and said, "I'm bisexual," and everybody was just like, "Okay… why are we in here?" Also, at work, I hired a woman who later became my best friend, and she was trans. She became a huge part of my life. Being around her, hearing her story, I began to realize, "Maybe I'm trans." In 2018, she did my makeup, and we went out as two women on Halloween. It felt so good. A few months later, I was in Las Vegas for a conference and ended up helping her deal with the mobile home of her deceased trans mother. Her mother's clothes fit me. I put them on and went to a transgender bar. All week I went out. When I came back, I said to myself, "I have to do this."

In June 2018, I came out to my partner as trans. Because he was gay—we were in a gay relationship for eight years—it hit him hard. I moved in with my mom, who was ninety-two. I came out to my mom as trans, and she was so cool about it. She was like, "Whatever makes you happy," and helped me pick out clothes or model dresses for her. My siblings were upset I came out to her, but I'm glad I did.

Later, during Covid, I was living gender fluid. Inside I was female, but I just couldn't come out at work. I had come out to

Pope Francis greets Lynn Discenza (left) at the Vatican, 2024 / Photo: Vatican Media

myself as transgender, so I was doing my fingernails, letting my hair grow, and [wearing] makeup. I would go out on the weekend, and then Monday, I would come in all cleaned up and all. And then, I went out on a Wednesday night, and I actually slept in the office. I got up the next morning, and people were there, and I had makeup on, so I told the employees, "I'm transgender," and they said, "Oh, we know." And I had been trying so hard to hide it!

During my transition, I lived between my office and my car for about three years, traveling a lot and sleeping in my car at truck stops or hotel parking lots. I loved it, even though everyone else hated it. I experienced some incidents while traveling, but overall, the people have been so friendly and so accepting.

I started medically transitioning soon after socially transitioning. Facial feminization surgery was a huge step. I've had facial surgery, but I'm not interested in having bottom surgery. [Some people] assume all trans people have the same surgeries. Not every trans person goes through transition the same way.

I saw plastic surgeons who wanted to charge exorbitant prices or who tried to talk me into breast surgery instead. Finally, at Yale, I found a surgeon who understood facial feminization. He told me what would be good for me and what a female face pretty much looks like, and what he could do to feminize my face. It was an eleven-hour surgery. I had some complications, and I recovered in a hotel for six weeks because I had nowhere else to stay. It's been three years since my surgery, and I am just growing into my face and accepting it. People are like, "Oh, you pass; you're beautiful." Now I know how women feel when people tell them they're good-looking.

Creating Accepting Communities

Transitioning brought challenges, financial, emotional, and familial. Two of my siblings don't accept me, but I'm happier now. Transitioning also changed my focus. I've thrown myself into activism. I started a PFLAG chapter[9] in Waterbury, facilitated groups for Ridgefield youth, and became a Stonewall Speaker[10] as a bisexual male, then later as a transgender woman. In my religious life, I joined my Catholic church's LGBTQ ministry and also a UCC [United Church of Christ] church. I got to meet with twelve US Catholic bishops who wanted to meet a transgender person, and I got along well with them. I also joined Women in Aviation, which advocates STEM [education] for young girls. People ask whether I'm happier, and I say, "I was happy before I transitioned. I'm even happier now."

I try to educate young people, "Find community, and appreciate the times." You might think it's bad today, but in the sixties, you were getting arrested. You couldn't even go into a bar as a gay person and get a drink. There was the Lavender [Scare], thousands [of] government employees who came out as gay or lesbian were fired from their job.[11] It's gotten better, but we have to persist.

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9 Formerly known as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, PFLAG is a national nonprofit organization that provides support, education, and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ people and their families. Local chapters offer peer support groups, community programming, and resources aimed at fostering acceptance and safety for LGBTQIA+ individuals. For more information, see https://pflag.org/.

10 Stonewall Speakers is a Connecticut-based LGBTQIA+ education organization. Stonewall Speakers share their personal stories in schools, workplaces, faith communities, and civic groups to promote understanding, reduce prejudice, and foster safer, more inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ people. See https://www.stonewallspeakers.org/ to learn more.

11 The Lavender Scare took place in the United States from the 1940s through the 1960s and targeted not only people who came out as LGBTQ, but people who were suspected or accused of having a variant sexual identity. For more information, see https://outhistory.org/items/show/1425.

Bruce Lombardi, born 1957

[I identify as] a gay man. [I was born in 1957, in] Pawtucket, Rhode Island. I use he/him pronouns.

Early Life

I grew up in a very traditional Roman Catholic, Irish-Italian family, in a little town in Rhode Island. We didn't show emotion; we didn't talk about our emotions. We didn't talk about things that might be concerning us. I was a really shy child. I didn't really come out of my shell until I went to college. I think a lot of it had to do with my sexuality and the fact that it wasn't discussed in that era. A lot of that got internalized.

Our school was unusually hostile [for LGBTQIA+ students]. There were no support systems. I was fully in the closet, and so I wasn't treated differently because of that. I went to Providence College in Rhode Island, which is a Catholic school, [but then I] decided I needed to get away from Rhode Island. I knew that I wouldn't be able to evolve as easily if I stayed in the place where I grew up. My sophomore year, I transferred to George Washington University, in Washington, DC, to finish my undergraduate degree. I went away to college, and then, like a cliché, burst out of the closet, became involved in sports, a little bit more outgoing, found my wings academically, and went on from there.

Career

I got a master's of business [administration], also from GW. [After] I graduated from business school, I started out as an investment analyst, and then I worked for a small bank in Atlanta, Georgia. I moved to New York in the mid-eighties and worked in

Bruce Lombardi, 2020

a brokerage firm, worked in an institutional asset management firm, and then, for the last twenty-five years, as a private advisor working with ultra-high-net-worth clients.

In the late eighties, when I first moved to New York, it was very much an environment where being homophobic was fully acceptable in the workplace. We had something called the morning huddle, where all the professionals got together every Monday morning at nine o'clock, including the chairman of the firm. There would be all the normal straight football conversations about what happened the weekend before. [The chairman] told a homophobic joke, and I can still remember this, twenty-eight years later. I stood up, [in front of] a boardroom table with fifty chairs. I was one of the most junior people. I was all the way at the end of the table, and as he was finishing his little joke and everybody was laughing, I said, "It's not funny. It's not funny at all." And I stormed out of the room. No one ever said anything, but they never told another gay joke again at the morning meeting.

All the secretaries and the women in the firm would say, "We have to find you a girlfriend." So, I spent, I don't know, five years dodging that. And finally, I'm at a Christmas party, [and I] came out to the whole gang and said, "Guys, I'm just not interested in dating women. I'm gay." After a stunned silence, everybody moved on, and it was fine. That was the environment back then, at least for me.

The AIDS Crisis

My first boyfriend died of AIDS. Kelly Roland, [he] died when he was twenty-four. [That] was the hardest part, I think, for so many of us; we were young. I was in my mid-twenties, and folks were in their teens. It really was folks being cut down before they had a chance to live, because in the early days, it was a death sentence. And as friends died, a little piece of me died.

It was a really challenging time, and it wasn't made any easier by the political situation. Ronald Reagan demonized [people with AIDS] and refused to acknowledge that there was a crisis. There was a feeling on the part [of] a lot of the establishment that [they] didn't really want these people anyway, and so the more that died, the better. Things like folks were ostracized in hospitals. I remember when I went in to see one of my friends. There was a very kind nurse who brought me in, but some doctors wouldn't even go into the AIDS patients' rooms. They would give instructions to the nurses from the hallway. I mean, it was just unbelievable.

I've been living with HIV for twenty-six years. When I was first diagnosed, there was nothing you could do. So, I just hoped for the best for a few years. And then treatments began to evolve; now, by and large, it's a manageable disease. I've been on medication for twenty-five years; I'm undetectable,[12] and other than the fact that it's always there, it's just not had a negative impact on my life… now. It did. Back in the early nineties, there weren't efficacious treatments for HIV, [and] that cast a pale over the whole community. It was [like] being in a war zone. You'd [go to the doctor] just to get a blood test, but it would take an hour and a half because there was crisis after crisis—people being wheeled in on gurneys and whatnot—that the two doctors that ran the practice had to deal with. That went on for maybe four or five years, and then one day it just stopped, because the treatments were there. Not that it's gone away; it's still out there. But I think there are equally loud voices providing solace and places that folks can go to get the support that they need. And you may have read about this, but I have to share it. [In] the LGBTQIA+ community, the L comes first because the women took care of the men who were dying.[13]

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12 Within the context of AIDS, being undetectable means that HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is no longer detectable in your blood. For more information, see https://www.cdc.gov/global-hiv-tb/php/our-approach/undetectable-untransmittable.html.

13 An acronym to describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual community first emerged in the 1980s, and that acronym was GLBT. Over time, the order of the letters switched to LGBT, and then additional categories (and their corresponding letters) were added. The reason for moving "lesbian" to the beginning of the acronym is unclear, but one common explanation is, as Bruce states here, to honor the lesbians who cared for gay men, bisexual men and women, and transgender women with AIDS during the height of the epidemic. The other most common explanation for the switch is that it was a feminist attempt to challenge the wider society's tendency to view women as second in importance to men.

I was involved when they first created and put down the AIDS quilt, on the mall in Washington.[14] I had a friend, [Jim], who died of AIDS in 1982. We wanted to commemorate [him], and we somehow heard about this [project] and made sure that his commemorative patch was included. And then we went to help roll it out; it wasn't very large. It seemed huge at the time, but by the late nineties, they had to break it into pieces, and it would go all over the country in different locations because it was so big.

Faith and Community

I [was] Roman Catholic for much of my life, but [in] November 2016, my world shifted. I was still practicing the Catholic religion. [I] drove into the parking lot of St. Elizabeth Seton Church over on Ridgebury Road, and a third of the cars had red [Make American Great Again] bumper stickers. I turned around, and I literally left the Catholic church. The next Sunday, I joined the Episcopal church here on Main Street.

Since I've joined St. Stephen's in Ridgefield, I've gotten somewhat involved in social justice work. One of the things that we've done at St. Stephen's is to try to make the church more welcoming to the queer community. We've become a visible presence at Pride in the Park, and we're looking to foster more activities, in particular for the youth.

[Seeing Pride flags and the rainbow crosswalk in Ridgefield is] incredibly moving. At St. Stephen's in June, the rector draped the altar [with LGBTQIA+ Pride] colors, and I didn't think I would be as moved as I was to see that inside the sanctuary.

14 The AIDS Memorial Quilt is a large-scale, community-created memorial composed of individual panels honoring people who died of AIDS. Families and friends stitched panels to honor loved ones lost to AIDS, creating a vast, colorful patchwork that made the scale of the epidemic heartbreakingly visible. First displayed in Washington, DC, in 1987, the quilt transformed private grief into public remembrance and brought national attention to the human toll of the AIDS epidemic, by insisting that every life be seen and remembered. https://www.aidsmemorial.org/interactive-aids-quilt.

One of the things that impresses me every year as I've gone to Pride in the Park is young parents with their kids. [With all these things], my view is that we're normalizing the queer experience. It just is; it's part of society. It's not a big deal.

Reflections

I think it's important to capture, within the context of queer history, those who have come before. If there's some small bit of use of the experience that I've had, that might help people today or in the future, that was my motivation [for telling my story].

[If I could give any advice to my younger self], I would say, "Come out! Come out!" I've wasted twenty-five or thirty years worrying about what other people are going to think, my parents in particular, and I would say to myself, "Just be yourself and try to evolve and not worry about what everybody else is going to think about you."

Bruce Lombardi with dog Minnie (right) and friend Matt Franz at Ridgefield Pride in the Park, 2023

Issy Caporale, born 1958

My name is Isabelle Caporale. I'm known as Issy. I was born in the Bronx, [and] my date of birth is 1958. I identify myself as me; I'm who I am. I know I'm not the most feminine person in the world, but I am a woman and I enjoy being a woman and being with a woman.

Early Life

I was raised here in Ridgefield. When we moved here, I was three years old. I grew up in an Italian family. My father was a very gentle soul. My mother was the one that was very aggressive and tough. Sports was very big to me from the beginning.

When I was younger, I felt that there was something very different about me. When I was in Catholic school, I used to have crushes on my teachers, [and] I could never understand why. I had many conversations with my sister, and I came out to her when she was in college, even though she already knew.

Schooling wasn't a big thing for me. I was more into athletics. I was the jock. In high school, everybody knew [I liked women]. I'm almost positive everybody knew, but nobody said anything. Comments would be said and stuff, and we just kind of like, we'd let it go, we'd laugh, but there were a lot of people that were in athletics that you knew that they were gay. I[t] was in the seventies, [and] you had to keep quiet about it. Nobody wanted to know. And that's where it was really difficult; I just wanted to be who I was.

Issy Caporale, 1984

I went to college, to Southern [Connecticut State University]. I did outstanding in sports, but I didn't do so great when it came to classes. I had to stop going because I was the one that was paying for it. And so, then I kind of was trying to find myself.

Military Service before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

[After college], I had a couple of jobs, [but] I wasn't happy. I always wanted to be a professional athlete. In the early eighties, late seventies, [I was a] professional softball player, but it wasn't like it is today. I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere, and that's when I decided to join the [US Coast Guard] at [age] twenty-four.

Being in the military, you couldn't be gay. My first duty station was Guam. There was, right in the center of the town, a place called Incognito, and it was a gay [bar]. And we went there, and it was just like an eye-opener because there were men that were dressed up as women that were absolutely gorgeous. It was a big bar, and there were a lot of men and women in the military that were there. [But] you'd always have a lookout because sometimes the Army or the Marines would come in and do a sweep, and anybody [who] was there would be thrown out [of the military]. I know it happened to a couple of men. They tried getting themselves back in, but they wouldn't allow 'em. I was only in it once [when] I had to go out the back door and run. So, it was really important that even though we didn't know a lot of people, everybody kind of protected everybody. It was so scary, because people that were in the military, including myself, loved what [we] did. I loved serving my country.

I had an incident, but it was because I didn't want to go out with a guy. He turned around and said that I was gay, and there was a whole big investigation. I had to go down to Washington [from New York] and had a five-hour interview. There was five people, and each of them were asking me a bunch of questions. I got very upset. I basically said, "This man has been haunting me to go out, and I don't choose to go out with him, but that doesn't mean that I'm gay." So, I was able to get through that, but it was hard. I'm sure a couple of them did [know that I was gay]. I'm sure they had a feeling about it but [couldn't] prove it. They used to set up people and take pictures, though, years ago. They would try to get people in a compromising position to throw 'em out. That's how bad it was.

[As a recruiter], when I would ask that question and I was almost positive that the person across from me [was] gay, I'd look at them and I'd basically say, "Do you have any homosexual tendencies?" It was hard for me to ask that. I'd look at them, and I was like, "Did you experiment with it?" I kind of let them know, "Don't give too much information." A lot of times they would look at me, and they were like, "Nope, I'm good." But I knew, and they knew.

Living in Ridgefield

I've been living in town since [I got out of the military in] 2006. I got a job at the [Ridgefield] Police Department as a dispatcher. I was with them for eleven years [and] learned a lot. Most of the guys were wonderful. That's why I decided, once I got out, I wanted to become a police commissioner. I ran for it and got [the position] the first time around, and I got it again. So, I'm on my second term as a police commissioner, which I absolutely love.

We oversee the police department and what goes on with the roads, the lights, the signs, everything to do with the department. Chief [Jeff] Kreitz works under us; we respect him for everything that he does because [he's] an outstanding chief. And that time when it came to the [decision to paint a local crosswalk in LGBTQIA+ Pride colors], that was the first time I ever went against [the chief]. And there were some people that were very upset about it. It had everything to do with "What harm is it? There is no harm." But there were a couple of commissioners that didn't want to go against the chief of police, and I respect that, but I had my own side and what I felt.

I felt [the crosswalk] was very important because this was something important to our younger generation, but we're not

doing it just because of [them]. We're doing it because of who we are. And that's the first time I ever [publicly acknowledged] I'm out. And I felt really good about it and felt even better after we got [the crosswalk project] accomplished.

I felt like I never really needed to come out because people knew who I was anyway. I was with a woman for eight years in this town. And I was coaching and [refereeing] little girls and everything. And people [never said,] "I don't want my daughter around [her]" or anything. Never happened.

We may not like it all the time, but this town is a great town. It's very open to a lot of things. I wish I could say that when I was younger, but unfortunately, I couldn't. But we kind of opened the doorway and opened the paths for the younger generation coming up.

Finding Personal Acceptance

[The last ten years], it's probably the most comfortable I've ever been. It's not that I wasn't comfortable [before, but] I was afraid to let myself be known [for] who I was. I don't need to let people know I'm gay or not, because like I said, it's just who I am. I enjoy being who I am. It takes a lot of years to feel that comfortable.

Be who you are. Don't ever change for people. Nobody. If you're happy with who you are and you stay who you are, as you learn and get older, you're going to become even happier because you fought for who you are. And that's what's the most important. Fighting for yourself means you're going to be able to fight for other people, because if you love yourself, it's okay to fight for who you are.

Issy Caporale with her mother, Vera, 2018

Robert Kruzykowski, born 1962
Craig David Rosen, born 1964

Robert Kruzykowski: *I was born in 1962 and the place, Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, New York. I use he/him/his [and identify as] gay.*

Craig David Rosen: *My date of birth is 1964, and I was born in Manhattan, New York. I also identify as gay and use he/him/his.*

Early Life

Kruzykowski: I lived in Elmont, Long Island, for most of my life, moved when I was just over a year old until my late twenties. I'm the youngest of three; I have an older brother [and] older sister. My dad was in the Navy.

Rosen: I'm one of six children. I was brought up in a two-family home. My parents, my three biological siblings, [and I] lived in the upstairs apartment. My grandparents, my two cousins, and my aunt lived in the downstairs apartment. Then, eventually, my great-uncle and my great-grandmother came to live in the house with us. So, we were actually four generations living in one household. And my two cousins who were raised downstairs, I consider them to be my brother and sister. It was a very loving household, just very loud.

Kurzykowski: His family is very, very boisterous. My family was very subdued; we never really got into arguments.

Robert Kruzykowski (left) and Craig David Rosen, 2024

Craig David Rosen (left) and Robert Kruzykowski at their wedding, 2015. Photo: Picture This Photography

Kurzykowski: I think [Craig and I] both experienced severe bullying. For me, [I had] eight years of Catholic school and bullying all eight years, and then went to public school for high school, which was easier.

Rosen: I'm Jewish, so my parents wouldn't have sent me to Catholic school, but I got picked on enough, because I was not the butchest boy in town. Sissy, that's what they called us. If you didn't act masculine, you were a sissy, and you got picked on—and not just [by] kids; adults would do it too. It was the seventies. Now, you would never speak to people the way we were spoken to in the seventies.

Kruzykowski: The first real instance of being aware of my identity was the first day of school in first grade. [The teacher, who was a nun, was asking] different questions, and one of the questions is, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I said, "Well, when I grow up, I'm going to marry a man." When you're that young, you're not aware of sexuality, but I just knew that there were certain boys that I found very, very appealing and wanted to be around, and marrying one was the natural step [to me]. That's probably [what] started [me] being picked on.

Rosen: As a teenager, I didn't have that many friends, because I was coming to terms with who I was and I wasn't crazy about [how] I was being treated by a lot of people. But for me also, I grew up one of six children, [and] four of us are gay. So, I had that support right there in my family.

Kruzykowski: Going through high school and not having a lot of support or knowing any allies or even fellow gay students, I never thought of suicide or anything like that, but the gay hotline would be something I would reach out to once in a while, if I had any kind of issues. Before there was the Internet, there was a thing called the gay switchboard where you could call and get information [and] advice.

Rosen: The first person that I remember meeting that I just felt was gay was a guy [who] used to come over and do my mother's and my aunt's hair. He was very flamboyant. I mean, there was no doubt this man was gay! And then there were other people that I would get cruised by, and you could just tell. They're staring at you and… "Oh, hi." Cruising is when you're actively looking for someone for [a] sexual encounter.

Kruzykowski: You catch somebody's eye and then you kind of stare. It's like a game; you're feeling each other out. "Are they interested in me?" And then there's a point that you just know, and then you approach and you talk, and then you take it from there. Some men were more bold about it; a lot, more subtle, but pretty much like that.

Coming Out

Kruzykowski: My sister was the one who prompted me to come out. I think I was eighteen. She would say things like, "Is there anything you want to tell me? You can tell me anything." I finally came out to her, and she was fine. She was very supportive, [and she told] me that I should come out to my parents, [which] I finally did. We were sitting in the living room, and I said, "I have something to tell you. I just want to let you know I'm gay." And there was a little bit of silence, [then] my mother said, "Do you think we would love you any less?" That's all she said. And I honestly don't remember what my father said, but he didn't fly off the handle or anything. A week or two later, I said to my parents, "I'm seeing someone, and he wants me to stay the night at his apartment." And my father looked [up] and said, "Are you going to be safe?" And I said, "Yeah." He goes, "Okay." It was not the reaction that I expected from him, being the Navy man and the image of masculinity.

Rosen: My parents did not take it well. I remember, it was a Sunday morning. My mother asked me about [a] party, [and] all

of a sudden, she's like, "How come you don't date girls?" My heart sank. I said, "[My cousin] said you asked if I was gay." She's like, "Yeah, I wanted to know." I said, "Well, I am." My mother's like, "Oh my God, it's not normal. Is your therapist helping you?" She's like, "Well, straighten yourself out!" I'm like, "That's not what therapists do." My father said, "Don't think your boyfriends will ever be allowed in our house." They weren't accepting of it.

Rosen: [Later that day], I'm lying in bed [and my] grandmother flings the door open. She says, "Craig, you're my grandson. My flesh and blood. I love you, but how can you be this way?" First of all, hearing that I was still loved was very, very important. I said, "I don't know why I'm gay. If I did know, I'd write a book; I'd be a millionaire." She says, "I love you," and she looks at me, she goes, just like this, "The love is here in my heart, and you can never take it out."

Rosen: By the time I met Rob, [my parents] had really come around. [Once, after] we were together a couple of years, it was Rosh Hashanah, [and] my father says, "When is Rob coming over?" I said, "Oh, Rob's not coming over. He's going to spend some time alone." My father had this perplexed look. Finally, he says, "I have to tell you, I'm really upset that Rob is not coming over." He said, "You guys are married, right?" This is before we could legally get married. I said, "Yes, we're married." He says, "Alright, well that makes him family, and this is a holiday, and you spend the holidays with your family." That's what my father was saying: "Don't you ever come here without your family again; he's your family." When we did get legally married, my parents walked me down the aisle.

Marriage and Raising Children

Kruzykowski: [Craig and I] met on a Wednesday night at a gay bar out in Queens, the Silver Lining. I don't usually go out [on weeknights], because of having to get up for work the next day, but I was in the stage of my life where I wanted to meet somebody and form a relationship. I was in my late twenties. [That night, I saw Craig], and our eyes met. The first thing I said to myself was, "Wow."

Rosen: I don't think of myself as a "wow" kind of guy.

Kruzykowski: He was wearing this hat.

Rosen: My bebop hat?

Kruzykowski: Your bebop hat. I remember that, and being the shy guy that I was, I didn't approach him, but I kept making sure that he saw me. Every time someone would come between us, I would move and stand in a place where I knew that he saw me. After about an hour and a half of this, he approaches me and says, "Can I buy you a drink?" [At the end of the night], we parted ways. "Give me a call," whatever, whatever. Thursday night, I called up good friends, spent the night talking about this guy I just met, and I don't know what's going to happen.

Rosen: Friday, I called you. "You want to go out tonight?" Went to the movies, then dinner, and that was it. That night I professed my love to him. I said, "I'm going to be sorry I said this, but I'm already in love with you." And he's like, "I'm already in love with you too." And here we are, thirty-four years later.

Rosen: I was living in Forest Hills [in Queens, and so was Rob.] We had our two apartments in Forest Hills until we bought our house in New Fairfield [Connecticut]. What brought us to Ridgefield was literally the Ridgefield Theater Barn. [It's a venue where] we put on live theater, musicals and plays. I answered an ad in *Backstage* newspaper looking for directors. I was like, "I'm here in New Fairfield, not that far." I interviewed and was given the opportunity to direct a show. I've been involved with the theater for twenty years now.

Rosen: If we could afford it, I would love to buy a house in Ridgefield. It's a great town, very welcoming, very open, very artsy.

Kruzykowski: I like the village feel of Ridgefield, walking down Main Street. It gives you a good feeling to be here.

Kruzykowski: Once we moved up here [to New Fairfield] and had the house, we started talking about [having children].

Rosen: The night we first met, we talked about [how] we wanted to be parents. That's something that attracted us to each other. Even as I was growing up and realized I was gay, I always wanted to have a relationship, to get married [and] to raise children.

Kruzykowski: We started discussing, "How would we do this?" And we finally settled on adoption.

Rosen: We found an attorney in Pennsylvania who assisted couples looking to adopt. He matched us up with a young woman in Philadelphia. We were scheduled to be in the delivery room when she delivered the baby, [but] long story short, she lied about who the father of her child was. It wasn't her husband; it was this other boyfriend she had, and he wanted to keep the child, and there was nothing we could do about it. So, we lost the child, which was devastating, just devastating.

Rosen: After this whole situation, I thought to myself, "Why is God—and I'm not a religious person—Why is God putting us through all this pain and anguish?" And I finally said to myself, "Because we are being told that we need to be adopting someone from the foster care system and that we are the type of people who can handle whatever this situation is." We changed our plan. Then we got this call from the agency that did our home study [approving us to adopt children]. They said, "Listen, we have this new program. It's a foster-to-adopt program." We said, "Okay, this is perfect. This is what we want." We told the agency that we'd be willing to adopt a sibling group of up to three children. We wanted to keep the siblings together.

Rosen: And then, I'm fantasizing to myself one day. "Ideally, I think two kids would be good. One boy, one girl. Ages four and two are good ages." A few days later, [we] get a call from the agency saying, "We have a situation. It's a brother and sister, and they're four and two." My chin was on the floor.

Rosen: We met them on what was our daughter's third birthday. They moved into our home, [and] we fostered them for three years [until their mother's parental] rights were terminated. Then they set up the adoption date, and it was three years to the day they came to live with us that we adopted them. Our son is [now] twenty; our daughter is eighteen.

Reflections

Kruzykowski: We didn't have [resources] when we were in school. I came into my teens in the late seventies and the early eighties, and I [never would] have dreamed of having a Gay Student Alliance in high school. Seeing how things are today, there are more outlets, more resources, and I wish we had that when we were younger.

Rosen: I believe all of us, as we grow older, should mentor and be there for the younger generation. That's what helps to make each generation stronger.

Kruzykowski: Yeah, we've seen a lot.

Rosen: I long for the day when we just look at each other as human beings, not all the different [labels]. Difference enriches us all. We need to embrace differences and realize that it does make us stronger and more exciting. I live for that day when we just look at each other and don't care about anything other than the person that you are.

Bruce Hrozenchik, born 1963

I [am] a gay man, born nearby in Greenwich, Connecticut, [in] 1963.

Early Life

I grew up in Ridgefield, and it forged my identity. When my family first moved here, we were one of the first developments in town. Living out there, it was this idyllic neighborhood with streams, and the school was nearby. It was just tons of kids; you would play outside from dawn to dusk with your friends.

I had two older sisters and an older brother who was sort of born the "Marlboro man". He was burly [and] sports oriented. I really just emulated [my sisters]. I'd always want to play with their toys and their dolls. I'd want to dress up in my mother's clothes. I abhorred sports. [At some point the] teachers and especially the PE teacher [told me], "Stop playing with the girls. It's bad. You should be playing with the boys; you should play sports." They used to take me aside and tell me I would turn out bad.

It's funny, people talk about bullying. As a school teacher, I've joked with my principal, "Sometimes I think I should have my blood drawn and made into a vaccine because somehow I survived [bullying]." I would have recess events where something would happen, and all the boys would chase me and tease me, or kids would just push me. Classic bullying, but I would just get back up and go to school the next day. I would just make another friend or get up and try again.

In junior high, I tried to reinvent myself. Boys didn't cross their legs; boys held their books like this. I started having boy friends, and then an awareness of sexuality came. I grew up with

Bruce Hrozenchik, 2024

really bad male role models, so part of me was also looking for male role models. A lot of my boy friends were just people I wanted to emulate.

I grew up with parents who [were] lovely in the beginning, and they developed some drinking problems in my early teens, late adolescence. That defined me as much as growing up gay. [I felt] responsible for them, trying to avoid them publicly if they were drinking. My brother also [struggled with] addiction, so it was a nightmare in terms of growing up with that. I would just go to other people's houses to look for role models. I would just adopt a family. I would become the neighbor boy who wouldn't go away.

[In high school], I had a best friend who was just a great super friend, and we were spending all this time together, and I was starting to react physically to our togetherness, and I confessed to him how I felt. He was wonderful. He said, "That's okay, but I don't feel the same way." So, I was sort of crushed. I really wanted this person in my life. He's still a good friend today.

I remember coming home from school really upset and telling my mother, and her response was, "Well, there's some things a mother already knows." I remember my dad coming up after dinner that night, [and he] said, "Mom tells me you're having some interesting feelings." He tried normalizing it. They were pretty supportive on the surface level [and offered for me] to go to therapy. But then weeks later, I came home from school, and my mother was gone. She was going to hurt herself. She went to stay at a mental health facility [and] stayed there for a month. So, I completely internalized it; I retreated and [thought that] I destroyed my mother by [being gay]. She, over the years, got sober and is [now] very supportive. But that was pretty powerful.

Adult Life and Finding Community

I went to Emerson College in Boston. I was in journalism for nine or ten years. Then I went into teaching in my late twenties, [and I am still a teacher today].

I sort of just stayed asexual as long as I could. Part of me was thinking, "Well, maybe I'm not gay if I don't act on it." I had incredible self-control in terms of fooling around all throughout college. I went to Boston in the early eighties; most of the gay people I knew are dead now from AIDS. So, in a way, I'm grateful that I wasn't out there experimenting.

[During the AIDS crisis], you were petrified to have sex. And also, at that point, the government—when Reagan was president—didn't support [people with AIDS]. His wife famously said, when there was a young boy who got AIDS through a blood transfusion, "He didn't do anything wrong," meaning that all the gays were deserving of AIDS. That was the nastiness out there. I had a few close friends who died. A lot of my friends now are retired hospice workers. The hospice centers were full of gay men because their families abandoned them. It was tragic.

After college, I heard of a twelve-step group for [gay] people who grew up with alcoholic families. I went to a meeting, and this handsome man walked in, and I said, "I'm in love." We dated, and it was a wonderful relationship for about six months. But he was really an adamant buttons-galore, in-your-face gay. And I was like, "I just want a boyfriend; I don't want to march in parades." Although eventually that became part of my identity as well.

I remember celebrating with [my friends from Al-Anon] when they passed the gay rights bill in Connecticut in 1991. [After that], I would travel with them. We would drive down to New York City; we'd march in the Gay Pride parade, which was neat. I also hate to admit it—sometimes when I'd go out with them to like an IHOP, I was like, "I'm out with a bunch of gay people in front of [straight] people, and that guy is really effeminate." I could see people in the bar looking at us. And again, this was in the late eighties, early nineties. Shamefully, I think [this was] my internal homophobia. Since then, [those feelings] all went away.

The bars and clubs, I do miss. I loved the underworld. We were almost like vampires; we were hidden. There used to be a gay bar on Route 7 called Triangles. Going to those clubs was so much fun, and it was just a time to let loose. I would see teachers that I didn't know were gay; they'd see me. It was a real coming out, but real celebratory in the music and just the sense of community. Back then, because the gay thing was the common thing, you might have friends [from] all walks of life. Your commonality was the gayness.

Marriage and Relationships

I never thought gay marriage would happen. I remember when civil unions in Connecticut came to be, and my husband, we were in Provincetown at the time, said, "Hey, do you want to get married? We can get married at least in a civil union." We got married in 2008; it was actually a civil union first, all we could do, and it got sort of upgraded to a wedding. We got married in a big church right on the green in Guilford. I've been with the same person for thirty-five years now.

We've been vacationing in P-Town[15] every year since my husband and I met in 1992. I remember even the first time there, we were holding hands at a diner. And then when the waitress came by, I took [my hand] away, just out of reaction from living here. And she's like, "Honey, this is P-Town, what the hell?" [Now], it's just who you are. I just went to the Ridgefield [High School] reunion a couple years ago, and we were all dancing. It didn't matter if you were dancing straight, gay. It could just be because we're all old and happy to be alive and dancing at a reunion, [but] it's just dancing together, without having to be in a gay bar to do it.

15 Provincetown, Massachusetts—often referred to simply as "P-town"—is a historic coastal community at the tip of Cape Cod known for its longstanding significance to LGBTQIA+ life and culture. Since the early twentieth century, it has been a refuge for artists, writers, and queer communities, later becoming one of the most prominent LGBTQIA+ destinations in the United States, celebrated for its activism, Pride traditions, and vibrant queer social and creative life.

Reflections

It gets better. And when you move, especially if you're from a small town, it gets better. Find your group. You're going to move and meet people who are a lot like you. Find the right group where you feel the most comfortable, whether they're gay or straight. Be grateful for what you have today. If you go back ten years, twenty years, or thirty years, things could have been horrible. [But also], don't get too comfortable, be careful, watch your back. There's still work to do.

I'm very happy. I married a social worker, and I'm a teacher, so we're obviously not millionaires. One of the things that was really powerful for me was having someone I really love, and I realize how fortunate I am for that. Having a happy relationship for so long is winning the lottery. That also kept me from ever going back in the closet or [hiding] my sexuality. It was like, "No one's going to hide my husband and me and what we stand for."

Bruce Hrozenchik (left) and his future husband, Vincent Samuolis, 1994.

June Presslaff, born 1964

My full name is June Presslaff,
and I go with she/her.
I was born on Long Island, New York [in] 1964.
I would say that I'm a lesbian, [but] I don't really
use labels as much. I think of me as just who I am.

Early Life

I grew up on Long Island. My parents, my grandparents were all Christian Scientists, but as a kid who didn't really buy into religion that much, I saw it as a very strict religion. So, even though I would say my parents were kind of progressive, I thought we were a very strict Christian home. In hindsight, it wasn't that way. As I got older, my mom and dad both said, "You make your own choices in this world, June, whether it be religion or community. You just want to be a good person."

I have two older sisters, one who's eight years older and one who's ten years older. My dad passed, unfortunately, when I was only in sixth grade, so that was really hard. And although [my mom] remarried, because I was that much younger [than my sisters], it was [like] being raised as an only child, which I loved. [My mom and I] were very, very close and continued to be very close until she passed [at age ninety-five]. She lived a great life.

The stereotype of a tomboy, I was the poster child for [that], but I never thought too much about being different in that way or [of being] different as a bad thing. I just thought of it as who I was, and my mom was just like, "That's who you are; that's who your sister is; that's who your other sister is; you're individuals." It wasn't a big deal.

June Presslaff, 2024

Because of the time when I was growing up, there was really no queer community, and that was probably the most confusing part for me. As I aged more, I would say more high school time and college time, I feel a little different, but I don't really have a tribe. I don't have people that are like me. I certainly don't have people I can talk to, because I don't even know what this means. I didn't have any sort of role models.

[After high school], I headed off to this school where I was going to study phys ed, and that was a bad decision. This is not the place for me. And when I was there, a friend of mine said, "I'm going to go visit a friend at Smith," which is a historically women's college. I was like, "Oh, I'll go." And once I was on that campus, I was like, "There are so many people like me!" This was in the eighties, even back then, just because that campus was women focused, everything was about individuality, and you didn't have to dull your light. So, I immediately put in my transfer application, and the rest is history.

Teaching, Raising Children, and Building a Family of Choice

I graduated college in '86, and I started working at a school in New York right after college. It was a private school, and that's actually where I met my to-be wife. Her name was Betsy. She was teaching PE, and I was teaching at the lower school, and I was living on campus, just right out of college. And we met and we hit it off immediately, and we just started hanging out and having fun together. We dated there for two years, but we weren't necessarily out with the staff there. I think people probably knew, but again, late eighties, first job for me, I was careful.

When Betsy left [the school], and I left, that's [when] we were trying to figure out, "Where are we going to live?" She was in New York, and I was in Connecticut, [and] that's when we came to Ridgefield. We were living in Ridgefield; I was teaching in Greenwich, Connecticut. There was no way in hell I was going

Betsy Kennally (left) and June Presslaff, future spouses, Provincetown, MA, 1990

to be out in Greenwich, Connecticut, with the staff that I was working with. They were all—so, I'm in my twenties, and most of the people I was working with were in their fifties. Big generation difference. And I was so aware that I could lose my job. That's what I believed. If they found out who I really was, I could lose my job. And I was in Greenwich for six or seven years before I met a couple of other people that felt safe to me to say, "This is my real life, this is who I love, this is who I live with." But those people understood this was a confidential kind of thing.

When Betsy and I decided that we wanted to pursue being parents, I said, "Something has to change in order for us to bring

children into the world." We said, "There's no more of not being who we are and out." And that was a big shift for us. But I thought, "When we're looking to buy a home, we're buying this together." That was new. "When we're looking at pre-schools for them, we are together." So, that may seem like a very normal thing now, but it wasn't back then. But to us, we recognized, "We will not go forward to be parents and not show our children how proud we are to be forming our family this way."

We chose to do international adoption. In order to do that, you have to go through a tremendous amount of screening, and the social worker that was screening us on the Connecticut side, she wasn't homophobic, but she was very fearful for us. If you're going forward to a country like we did, with Guatemala, you cannot go forward as two women. You have to go forward as one woman, because the court would deny you immediately, the social workers on that side would deny you. So, we had a lot of discussions about, "We're going forward, and we're having to lie."

Bringing up our girls, every summer, we'd go to Provincetown. Provincetown is sort of like the gay Mecca of the world. And for us, it was. You could be yourselves; you could be free.

It felt awful. "But we know we can be really good parents, and we know we're really good people. So, if we have to lie, then we will."

Bringing up our girls, every summer, we'd go to Provincetown. Provincetown is sort of like the gay Mecca of the world. And for us, it was. You could be yourselves; you could be free. But the beautiful part of Provincetown for us was, and still is, that there grew over time about thirty of us. [We] make sure we have our two weeks together as families in Provincetown [every year].

All of these women that chose one another to be our chosen family, to bring our children up together, they would travel to Provincetown. Some are in New York and travel to Provincetown; some in Boston, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, really all over. And that was sacred space for us, to be there. And although my daughter is now twenty-three and my other daughter is twenty, they'll say, "We can never stop going to Provincetown, right, Mom?" I'm like, "Yep, we got it." That's their place, too, which is like, then we did our jobs right.

I lost my wife seven years ago to cancer. So, I'm a single mom, and it was a really tough time to be raising kids as a single mom. And the support that came from the community toward our family was amazing. When we really had a tough trauma, this community became that circle around us. Both of my kids played sports, so their teams embraced us, the town embraced us with all those things that you need when you're going through trauma, meal trains and helping with rides and all of that stuff. So, Ridgefield was very, very special and always will be very special to me because of that. And because I was teaching at the time and my whole staff knows my story, knew Betsy, knew my girls, everyone was there for us.

My oldest daughter was an [LGBTQIA+] ally at Ridgefield High School, and I was so proud of her. So, she's Guatemalan, she's identifying as woman of color in a very homogeneous town, [and] she wanted to make sure that she was an ally. And I said, "That's where I can be an ally. I can be an ally to young kids who

June Presslaff and daughters Graciela (left) and Eliana, Brooklyn, NY, 2024

maybe don't know why they're different, similar to how I didn't know why I was different." My activism is to be a progressive educator that is going to be willing to step in and step up when necessary. I can step up [and I] can say no to the stuff. "Nope, not going to say that. Nope, not going to participate in that kind of language." So, I feel strongly about that. I think that's [a] form of activism. "What are you going to do to be a positive change maker?" It doesn't matter how big, how small, but you speak up and you make a change somehow.

One thing that I do believe is when you speak your truth and you operate as a good person or you operate as a caring human being, it doesn't matter how you identify. That's how people will see you. And I think that I haven't changed, but I've allowed myself to be known in my workplace, in my community, for my kids' relationships, as, "This is who I am, accept me or not." I'm living my life as an out sixty-year-old. I've come to this place where I am comfortable with who I am. I'm happy. I've been a good educator along the way. I've been a good parent, a good partner, a good friend. That's how I want to be remembered.

Reflections

I have thought a lot about the importance of sharing one's history. I think that [there's] value for kids who are trying to figure out their place in the world to hear another generation's perspective. If I'm talking to a young person, I'm going to say, "Be you and be true to you." I couldn't be true to myself as a youth because that wasn't anything that was discussed. But because [now] it is, I could say with conviction, "You will be okay, and you will be supported. You will find your support system."

When you look back and you say, "Was it worth what you went through?" I would hope that all would be able to answer like I answer, "Yes, absolutely, 100% yes." And for those that weren't as fortunate as me and have lost members of their family or whatever, because of being true to themselves, that's pain that I'll never erase. That, to me, is the deepest pain of my generation. That was the existence of most of my community, and that was really hard.

To have those people around you saying they're your people, that are going to build you up, I want for our youth. I want them to have those people around them saying, "You're going to be okay."

Christine O'Leary, born 1967

I was born in a place called Niskayuna, which is part of Schenectady, New York, [in] 1967. I've been queer a very long time, and I have always identified as a lipstick lesbian. The pronouns I use are she and her.

Early Life

[I was] raised [an] Irish-Catholic girl in Boston, in a place called Needham, which is very similar to Ridgefield in terms of the kindness and heart and utopia and privilege and opportunity. My parents are liberal and very "Boston." And [I] spent a lot of my life in Maine.

[I] was always a people pleaser. I was a very early talker and haven't shut up since. My parents used to worry that I would talk to anyone. [I was] very engaging, [a] social butterfly, sort of a little bit pathologized for being a social butterfly theater kid. [I was] not particularly athletic, which confused the lesbian identity of the early eighties and late seventies, because the only lesbian was Martina Navratilova, the tennis player. It was like, "Well, I don't play tennis, but can I still be a lesbian? And my favorite color is pink. Can I still be a lesbian?"

My first kiss was with a very butch girl. We were the same age. She had a hard life and hard stuff happening in her house at the hands of her parents, and looked like a boy, and I looked like a girl. And we were absolutely in love and all the stuff that goes with it, like the sneaking, the pretending, the "Can she sleep over?" I have a bit [in my comedy act] that my brother wasn't even allowed to hold his girlfriend's hand, and I was smart enough not to tell my parents I was gay and could have sleepovers.

Christine O'Leary, 2025

I somehow knew I wasn't supposed to be gay, even though my parents were very progressive. I felt like God made me like this, but I felt like people wouldn't have made me like this. Being with her, I could not deny that this was real, what I was feeling and experiencing. And so, I knew that [it] was right but could sense a lot of tension about what it would mean. Was I going to be able to get married? Was I going to be able to have kids? Was it going to ruin my life? Were people going to hurt me? Would I be at risk? It took a long time to feel or know that I would be safe. Every summer, I would try not to be gay. [We would go to our] place in Maine. [There were] new people around every Saturday, [and I thought], "Maybe I'll find a boyfriend; they'll be here for seven days and gone." And I'd come home and [my first love would] be sitting on my step on Labor Day, and I'd be like, "I'm definitely still gay."

I went to Needham High School and graduated in 1985. I went to my senior prom with my friend Kenny, and Kenny is this handsome, artistic, articulate, wonderful man. The theme was Paul McCartney's "Ebony and Ivory," and I'm white and he's not, and we both wore tuxedos. At the end of the night, he goes to kiss me. I just put my hand on his leg, and I was like, "Honey, you don't have to kiss me." He is like, "I don't?" I said, "No, you're gay." He goes, "I am, right?" And I go, "Yeah, me too." We were very relieved by all that, but what a day, in a tuxedo! The writing [was] on the wall. I'm so proud of myself that I did that. I mean, that was like 1984, maybe.

In Boston, there was an organization, I think it was called BAGLY, which was the Boston Alliance for Gay-Lesbian Youth. [I would take the train and go] by myself, and I'd have to find out when it was in the church basement. But a funny thing that I used to do was that I used to tell my mother I was going to a Lebanese potluck supper, and my mother would be like, "Good, do you have the Baba Ghanoush?" But Lebanese was code for lesbian. [The thought that] my mother thinks that I have fifty Lebanese people who are waiting to meet me in Boston is hysterical!

My mother actually told me I was gay. [I] had a breakup with the person I've been telling you about, caught her cheating with

She said, "Honey, I know. I know you're gay." And I was like, "What?" She goes, "What do you think I thought all the sleepovers were about?"

my friend. I'm crushed. I had just moved into our apartment, and now we were going to have to split up the apartment. My parents [were also] going through a separation. I called my mother, and I was just sobbing. And she said, "What's the matter, honey?" And I said, "Oh, Mom, you don't even know the beginning of it. You can't even imagine." She said, "Honey, I know. I know you're gay." And I was like, "What?" She goes, "What do you think I thought all the sleepovers were about? Come on!" I was giddy. It helped me get over the breakup.

Career Journey

[I] wasn't ready to go to college, and so my parents said to me, "You have three choices. You can go to hairdressing school or go to hairdressing school or go to hairdressing school. You have to do something, and it's August, so what are you doing?" [I] went to hairdressing school, which was great fun. [I loved] to make people laugh, because I had someone in the chair for forty-five minutes that I could make laugh. That was great fun. I was a makeup artist, and that was really fun. Then I started working at a gay restaurant and was exposed to drag, which was great fun.

Then I realized that I really cared about people. I thought for a minute I would be a speech pathologist; then I realized that I don't care if the kid is stuttering, I care about what makes them stutter. I became a social worker, and I ran a shelter for homeless kids in Portland, Maine, called Preble Street Teen Center. I was the first coordinator director to get a failed collaborative up and running. [Before that], homeless kids were fed, and then the agency would pull out, and there was no place for them. [I] was the first person to pull together this citywide collaborative and started doing meals seven days a week. It was a low-barrier shelter. I loved working with homeless kids.

Then I started doing public speaking with United Way [and] loved that. To have that real-life experience and get to tell people that would invest in that work was a game changer for me. I did that for many years [for different agencies].

I was in a very dark relationship that wasn't good for me anymore. I left that person, and that was very difficult. My friend said, "Why don't you do stand-up comedy?" And I said, "Why would I do stand-up comedy?" And she said, "Because you love it." And I started, and I entered a contest, and I won the whole thing. Portland's funniest professional. I won a thousand dollars.

I was working for an agency at the time, and they asked me to never say who they were. But they said to me, "Your image on stage does not match who you are to the agency, and so you have to stop doing stand-up comedy." So, I did what any defiant Irish Catholic lipstick lesbian would do. I went into that agency, and I said, "I quit."

But they said to me, "Your image on stage does not match who you are to the agency, and so you have to stop doing stand-up comedy." So, I did what any defiant Irish Catholic lipstick lesbian would do. I went into that agency, and I said, "I quit."

I decided to do comedy full-time, which meant nothing. I hardly had any time. Then I moved to Ridgefield and started auctioneering, because all my mentors in stand-up were auctioneers: Whoopi Goldberg, Rosie O'Donnell, and Tracy Ullman. I [also] started teaching stand-up comedy, and I started doing events, and then started my own business more than ten years ago.

And now I do corporate trainings; I teach CEOs how to do stand-up. I created a methodology, which is that stand-up is based on a truth, a problem, and a feeling. A feeling is the only thing that makes people laugh. So, I teach [CEOs] to do the hardest thing in the world, which is to do a five-minute set on stage. And they are *born* on stage. For CEOs to have their life be judged not on their performance or their leadership—to have it be based on just their truth, their problem, and their feeling—is their game changer. Stand-up comedy, when you do it with me, is really about personal development. And it's fun to give people joy.

Marriage and Ridgefield

I fell in love with my lesbian husband, or my "lusband," as I like to say, many years ago. My experience is that queer people never know exactly how long they've been together, because we only got [marriage] equality maybe halfway through our relationship. But we've been together, we think, like seventeen years and have been married since 2013. I moved to Connecticut like sixteen to seventeen years ago, for love. She worked for the Department of Justice at the Danbury Prison, otherwise known as [the setting for] *Orange is the New Black*. So, I moved here, [because] she had a job and couldn't move.

Ridgefield [is where] I live closest to who I authentically am. [I] have found the most welcome there, despite my zip code being eleven miles away in New Fairfield. Ridgefield [has] this

affirming energy [that contributes to me] knowing who I am, knowing what I'm supposed to do, where I'm supposed to be, and how I can contribute to whatever's happening there.

My spouse retired, [and] we moved to Florida two years ago. It's been great, except for the hurricanes.

The woman I married is definitely my soulmate. We have just been through everything together. Sickness, health, her retirement, Covid, losing everything [to] Hurricane Ian. [Over] the last few years, we're sort of closer than ever.

Reflections

If you have to be less than who you are, it's not for you. Don't make your life small to fit [other people's expectations], because your small life will never fit *you*. You want to set a tone, not match a tone. You want to set a tone for who you are right out of the gate.

I don't tolerate much anymore if it's not working. If there are things in my life that don't support me, it takes O'Leary a little bit to get it, but then I move on. It's like green light, yellow light, red light. My job in life is to be and affirm other green-light souls in the world. This feels green and good. And yes, my job is to wait thirty seconds for the yellow energy to get green. And if it's red energy, I've got to keep walking. So, that's how I sort of swashbuckle through my life, to best know where I'm supposed to be and what I'm supposed to be doing.

Christine O'Leary, 2025

Jeffery Albanesi, born 1968

My name is Jeffery Albanesi, and my pronouns are he, him, and his. I am an adult gay male from Ridgefield, Connecticut.

Early Life and College

I would classify my family as a working-class family. My dad was an Italian immigrant, and my mom grew up in the Bronx. Her parents came to the US from Italy through Ellis Island. My parents met in New York, and then they both had Italian relatives in Ridgefield. My mom used to come up here as a child and decided to raise her family here. I have an older brother and a younger sister; I'm the middle child.

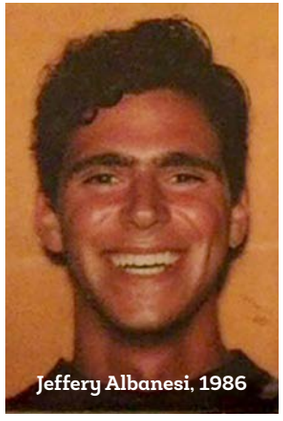
I was never an out gay man in my time at school here in Ridgefield. I was friends to everybody so I wouldn't get teased or bullied. I had a girlfriend here or there, and I went to all the school dances 'cause I was a great dancer. I was a great date, but I wasn't out at all until I came out to myself at college.

[Eventually], I started to have these feelings [of attraction to other boys], and I started to want to experiment. I found one or two classmates to sort of experiment with, and then I freaked out and went to the school psychologist, and I left that visit in tears.

I couldn't go to my mom, because I already knew that it wasn't okay for me to be gay. I had a gay cousin who was older and was very flamboyant, and my mom would make some comments about him. My mom [had] already made it clear that, "It's okay that this cousin of mine is gay, but not in my family." So, what do I do now? How do I not be gay? It's like a job to try to not be who I am. It was so overwhelming.

Jeffery Albanesi, 2024

All I wanted to do was get out of Ridgefield. I was so excited to go to Emerson College and get away from all this and be myself. I came out to myself my freshman year of college, because I was like, "You know, I don't have my mom to answer to. I'm not living with my mom. She can't kick me out of the house." I did get a phone call [though]. My sister and her friend came up to visit [me], and there were gay people at my party kissing. [She] went home and told my mom. My mom called me, and she was so angry and she threatened me with all these things. She said, "I won't pay for your school. You won't be allowed to come home. You're out of my will. You're not my family." It was very hard to hear, but I said, "You know what, it's not the right time. She's not ready for me to come out [yet]."


Jeffery Albanesi, 1986

The AIDS Epidemic, Moving to New York City, and Coming Out to Family

[Going to college in] Boston was sort of like finding Oz; it was a great place to come out. [But] it was 1986, and that's when the AIDS crisis became huge. I had friends that I met while I was there that passed away from AIDS. My cousin got sick and died of AIDS in 1989. And so now I'm freaking out. [After college], I moved to New York. I was neurotic about HIV testing when I got to New York. I was in contact with way more people who were getting it and dying. I was a part of GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis][16] and God's Love We Deliver.[17] I was involved in all of that in New York; that kind of helped me deal with the AIDS crisis.

16 Gay Men's Health Crisis was one of the earliest AIDS service organizations, where volunteers would help people with AIDS with the tasks of daily life. It continues today, https://gmhc.org.

17 God's Love We Deliver provided meals to people with AIDS. Over time, its mission has expanded to include other people with severe or chronic illnesses, https://www.glwd.org.

[While I was living in New York], I'm feeling very comfortable in my own shoes. I was coming home for the holidays, and I was feeling comfortable. I was wearing clothes that I wanted to wear, and I had rings on my fingers, or whatever. I get back to New York, and my sister calls me up and she's like, "Mom has been crying and going to church praying. You came home, and she saw all those rings on your fingers, and you were very comfortable, and now she thinks that you're gay." And I said, "I'm not going to lie anymore," because at this point, I'd graduated from college; I'm living on my own. I didn't need them for anything except their love.

I did not choose to be gay. The choice was to stop *pretending* that I wasn't gay. That's the only choice I made.

I [called my mom and] came out to her, and then she started blaming everybody. She was like, "Oh, it's your dad's fault. He didn't play with you." And then she said, "Is it my fault?" I said, "Mom, why does it have to be somebody's fault? It's not anybody's fault. You did nothing wrong." And she said, "Well, why would you choose this lifestyle?" And I said, "I did not choose to be gay. The choice was to stop *pretending* that I wasn't gay. That's the only choice I made." And she said, "I think you should come home, and we should sit down as a family and talk about this." And I said, "I think that's a great idea."

And it was a real breakthrough for my family. I came home, [and] everybody could share things about what they went through. My sister could share some stuff, and my brother. I thought my dad would really flip a lid, but he said, "As long as I live in this house, you are more than welcome here." We never told each other that we loved each other, but it came right out of me. I said, "I love you,

Dad." And he said, "I love you too." And that was the first and only time he told me he loved me, but it was the perfect time.

My mom got sober, and so she was looking at the world through sober eyes. She shared about [my coming out] at AA and went to church and joined PFLAG[18] in Norwalk when it was there. I was very proud of my mom 'cause she stayed sober, died sober, and we were in a good place. She said to me, "I'm fighting cancer, I'm fighting alcoholism, and I'm fighting my son's sexuality." But I think at the end, she stopped fighting my sexuality, and she was fighting for her life. She realized that it wasn't her fault and that it was nobody's fault. My mom passed away in 1994; I was twenty-five.

Returning to Ridgefield, Marriage, and Divorce

[I moved back to Ridgefield from New York a few months before my dad died.] My dad died in 2009, and I was forty-one. [Before returning to Ridgefield], I was in a horrible situation. I gave up my little studio apartment that I could afford to live in by myself to move up to the Bronx, to live with this guy who then was physically abusive and emotionally abusive. I feared for my life. If I didn't give up my apartment and move in with him [though, I wouldn't have had] to move home [when I left the relationship, and] I wouldn't have been with my dad when he passed away.

Now I'm back in Ridgefield trying to make a life as a single person. I had to commute to New York; I worked at a fashion jewelry company, which is hilarious because my mom made all those comments about me wearing jewelry. I had a great time in New York, but now I'm in suburbia. It's a whole new world, but I'm still here fourteen years later.

18 Formerly known as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, PFLAG is a national nonprofit organization that provides support, education, and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ people and their families. Local chapters offer peer support groups, community programming, and resources aimed at fostering acceptance and safety for LGBTQIA+ individuals. For more information, see https://pflag.org/.

I left [Ridgefield] for twenty-four years and came back. When you leave and come back, and you see what else is out there and you experience life, you're like, "Wow, this is a really nice place." But it wasn't an easy place to grow up being a gay person.

[About a month after returning to Ridgefield], I went to go pick up [some food for my dad]. On my way back, I'm like, "You know what? I'll just stop and see what's going on at Triangles."[19] I walked in, I was like, "Oh boy, this is something else." You don't have many options around here; so, anybody, any one of those letters, would show up at Triangles. Everybody was mixing together. It was so eye-opening.

So, I had the drink. I was like, "Okay, I'm not going to really try to connect with anybody." And then my ex-husband walked in. He was not my ex-husband at the time; he was just a patron that had walked in, that I took an interest in. We struck up a conversation; I met him the next day. [We had] four years of dating, eight years of marriage, and now we're divorced. It helped me put my feet on the ground here and want to stay.

Right after I met him, my dad died, and I inherited the house that I grew up in. So now I'm dealing with the passing of my dad. My dad was sick, so it wasn't a surprise, but then it was the first thing [my future husband] said to me was, "Do you want me to move in with you?" And I was like, "God, no. I will figure this out." Because the last relationship that I was in was very dysfunctional on many levels, and I [had] moved in really

19 Triangles was an LGBTQIA+ bar in Danbury, just over the line from Ridgefield.

quickly. So, [my future husband and I] dated, and we had fun and we traveled. [And we got married four years later.]

It was the most successful relationship I had ever had. I had to be less OCD, and he needed to be a little bit neater. I was living my New York life in Ridgefield. I was going to art openings and to the theater, and I was going to the Playhouse for music. I dragged him around for six years. Then he said, "Okay, I'm done with this." We grew apart. Towards the end of the relationship, we weren't really doing much together, and he was focused on the business, [the Market at Union Hall]. I [still go there] once a week; I post social media posts, and he pays me in food. He's still a part of my life. It was a very sad ending of a chapter in my life, but I learned a lot about myself in that relationship.

Now I have a roommate, a friend of mine from junior high. I currently sell cars. I'm in a relationship now, too. I still do things in town. My boyfriend lives in Danbury, and I spend a lot of time in Danbury now. I left [Ridgefield] for twenty-four years and came back. When you leave and come back, and you see what else is out there and you experience life, you're like, "Wow, this is a really nice place." But it wasn't an easy place to grow up being a gay person.

Reflections

The first thing that comes to mind [as advice for young queer people] is to be true to yourself. If you can't go to your parents, there is somebody out there that can help. Find like-minded people who can be supportive. There's so many of us out there, and people are coming out earlier and younger. You're not alone.

Regrets? No, no regrets. I came out at a really difficult time, and I'm still here to talk about it. I just wish that I had more time with my mom. I am happy with who I am today, and I wouldn't be who I am if I didn't go through all of that. It builds character.

Jeffery Albanesi (left) with friend David Pirola at the New York City Pride parade, 1995; a 2025 photo of Pirola (right) at Ft. Lauderdale Pride is superimposed

Jeffery Albanesi with his parents, Concetta (Connie) and Giancarlo, 1984

Daniel Levine, born 1972

I was born in 1972 and grew up in Framingham, Massachusetts. I graduated high school in 1990, then I went to college at Brandeis University, a small liberal arts school right outside of Boston. I graduated Brandeis in 1994, and then I went to Tufts Dental School. My second year of dental school, I auditioned for a Broadway show, got the Broadway show, dropped out of school, and became an actor.

Early Life, College, and Coming Out

I think that I knew [I was gay] really early on. I remember being at day camp as a seven- or eight-year-old and feeling different. It wasn't about anything sexual; it was just about not fitting in with the other boys. As I got older, when boys started showing interest in girls, I realized, "Oh God, that's what's different about me." I thought, "Okay, I understand what I am, but I'm going to have to pretend. I'll have to pretend to like girls, pretend to go on dates, pretend to be happy with that, and someday get married." I convinced myself that this was what my life was going to have to be. I also remember feeling ashamed. There was a lot of homophobia in my school, my neighborhood, even my house. My parents—there were no other gay people around. The only gay person I knew of was my mother's hairdresser. She would be so nice to him, and then in the car afterward say, "Can you believe?" Faggot, and all of that. And I'd think, "Oh God." So, I understood from a very early age that I was going to have to pretend.

Daniel Levine, 2024 / Photo: Kristen Jensen

I didn't think there was a choice. You couldn't act on it, couldn't admit it. You'd lose your friends, your family. At that time, people were dying of AIDS, and I thought, "You're going to get AIDS and die." My father used to talk about somebody he worked with that was gay, "That guy's going to get AIDS and die." It was always about that, "AIDS and die; AIDS and die." So, I actively chose to hide it. In high school there was one out gay kid, very effeminate, and he got bullied and picked on—even teachers talked about him. I thought, "Okay, just hide it. Never tell anybody." Until I went to college, then I realized there was a world of other people. There were clubs for gay people. It was so different. You couldn't be out in high school back then. The thing that really changed it for a lot of people was the TV show *Will and Grace*. Before that, gay characters were stereotypes. With *Will and Grace*, the main character was gay, and that was huge for society. It was a positive impact for gay people and for the country.

I was very anxious in high school, thinking I'd have to hide this forever. But instead of depression, it made me hyper-focused to get away, to get to a big city. Theater allowed me to do that. When I got to Brandeis, I found my people in theater. There were lots of gay students, and it was eye-opening. I thought I'd have to hide this forever, but then I saw seniors who were out, dating, having boyfriends and girlfriends. I thought, "Maybe it's going to be alright."

I came out in college. I was in a fraternity, Alpha Epsilon Pi. At a meeting, I told everyone I was gay. The response was overwhelming support, though in hindsight it was more like, "I don't get it, I don't like it, but you're my brother." Still, I was grateful. But then someone told their girlfriend; her mother was friends with my mother somehow, and that mother told my mother. My mother then called me and was like, "If this is true, we're going to have a huge problem."

That's how I came out to my family. I then didn't talk to my parents for a bit. I was close with my grandparents, and I thought, "I don't want my grandparents to find out from my mother and my father, who have preconceived terrible notions about gay people." So, I called my grandparents; that was super great. My grandmother said, "That's fine; we love you. You've always been different, always special, and this makes you even more special." My grandfather was a rabbi, my grandmother very observant, but they loved me unconditionally. That support was incredible. My parents took a long time to come around. My siblings too, but eventually there were zero issues.

Career and Marriage

Daniel Levine (left) and Bryan Perri, 2019 / Photo: ACT of CT

In college, I was a pre-med student but also a theater major. Senior year I thought, "Should I move to New York and become an actor, or should I become a doctor?" I thought dental school would give me time to do community theater on the side. But luckily, my second year at Tufts Dental School, I got a Broadway show and changed my career. My first professional audition was *Les Misérables* on Broadway, and I booked it. I played Marius for nearly three years. I can still feel what it felt like to be on that stage, a big, massive Broadway stage that revolved, listening to Valjean sing "Bring Him Home," and just being so grateful. Another favorite was Mary Sunshine in *Chicago*. Mary Sunshine is a man in drag, but the audience doesn't know until the end when the wig and costume are ripped off. It was thrilling to see the shock in the audience. Ann Reinking, who was a famous Broadway choreographer, taught me how to walk in heels and carry myself like a woman. That role lingered with me, too.

I would just say, "Continue to make change, and don't forget about those people that started it and that came before you."

I met my husband Bryan through David Stone, the producer of *Wicked*, [who is also] my best friend's husband. Bryan was the conductor of *Wicked* for many years. David was producing a new show off Broadway called *Dogfight* many years ago, and Brian was the music director. And David said, "I want you to come to opening night, and I want you to meet Bryan Perri." And so, we met, and that was it. We got married about nine years ago.

About twelve years ago, my brother moved to Redding. I was still working in New York, but I visited him on weekends. I thought, "Oh God, it's beautiful here." I bought a little weekend house in Ridgefield, renovated it, and realized this is where I wanted to be. There was such a great arts community. I was involved with the Ridgefield Playhouse, created a Broadway and cabaret series, and then decided to create my own theater. I founded ACT of Connecticut, a professional theater where Broadway actors could work. ACT stands for A Contemporary Theater of Connecticut. I'm the artistic director, and that's what has kept me here.

I always thought I'd have to live in New York City forever, being gay. But when I moved to Ridgefield, I was surprised at how accepted I was, and my husband too. For the first few years it was great. When Trump got elected, things took a turn. My husband was called a faggot on Main Street, and that stuff never happened before.

Reflections

[About] ten years ago, there was this whole "It Gets Better" campaign.[20] There were a lot of teen suicides going on, and [someone] started this whole campaign, and I was a part of that. I was a big part of the Broadway community then, and there was a big commercial that was out [where] they had celebrities looking into the camera, just [saying], "It gets better." And it does get better. You eventually will find your people. I never thought that; I couldn't imagine that I'd be fifty-two years old, talking to high school kids about my life. Things change.

I think that sometimes kids don't think about what came before them; I know I didn't when I was in high school. People expect change to happen so fast, and you have to remember, it's taken decades and decades of people struggling to get to where we are today. So, while it's great to be loud and noisy, it's also important to be kind and to be patient and to educate people in different ways. I would just say, "Continue to make change, and don't forget about those people that started it and that came before you."

The whole thing for the AIDS crisis, the slogan was "Act Up."[21] And that's something that you still have to do; you have to act up. You have to be loud; you have to make waves. You have to make change, because if you don't, nobody else will.

20 For more information, see https://ItGetsBetter.org.

21 ACT UP is an activist organization founded in 1987 to fight for the rights of people living with AIDS. The group was instrumental in raising awareness about the AIDS epidemic and in advocating for expedited medical research of the disease. The organization's name is an acronym for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, and in the 1980s and 1990s, their slogan was "Act Up, Fight Back, Fight AIDS."

Bryan Perri, born 1979

[I was born in] '79 [in] Port Jefferson, New York. I consider myself a cisgender gay male; he/him. I do use the label "gay," and that's something that [was] really important when I was younger, because there was so little understanding [of sexual variance. And] in order to make understanding, you had to create something that people could understand, and for better or worse, the label "gay" ended up creating understanding. Eventually, the hope is [we don't need labels to describe sexual identity]; it just is, but that's just not where we are [yet].

Early Life

I grew up on Long Island, in Stony Brook. Stony Brook was beautiful; [we] lived on the water, so all that piece of it was nice, but it was a traditional community. It was a lot of Italian [and] Irish descendants of immigrants. It was not in any way a progressive place, but the weird kids found each other, so I was lucky for that.

Even before I came out, I was perceived as effeminate. And so, I would get called faggot, queer, words that we've started to take back now, which is great. [But back then], a lot of terrible things happened. My bullying was extreme from about the fifth grade to the eighth grade, some of the worst years of my life. I couldn't walk down the hallway at school; I couldn't go to my locker; I couldn't take the bus. I couldn't do anything without

Bryan Perri, 2019 / Photo: ACT of CT

masses of kids harassing me in the most horrible, public ways. The teachers would join in; the bus driver would join in; everybody would join in, and there was simply no consequence. I'm still healing from it.

I came out around the eighth or ninth grade. The first person I really came out to was my mother, and it was by accident, and it was not cute. My family was very conservative—devout, Catholic. I [had] figured out a way to talk to other gay men [through AOL, an early Internet provider], and I ended up talking to this guy who was seventeen. It was super innocent, and we talk[ed] all the time, late at night, and it was like my lifeline for a while, and I had to keep it so secret. And then one night it turned sort of, I wouldn't say sexual, it was like, "I'm going to kiss you." My mom was listening in. The next day she asked me about it, and then she lost her mind. It was real bad for a while. She sat on my bed every night telling me I was going to go to hell, get AIDS, and die. No one's going to love me. I mean, it was pretty crazy.

My mother was like, "You need to go talk to Father Blah-Blah-Blah," and I was like, "Okay." Church meant a lot to me; it was the beginning of [my love] of music. [So, I came out to the priest], and he took a lot of advantage of that situation, we'll just say. That has since been addressed, [but at the time it] forced us to tell my father [that I was gay, and he] also could not handle it. So, he left for a while.

And by the way, everyone [in my family] was at my wedding, and we came out on the other side, but it was hard.

My first boyfriend was in high school, and we had known each other for a while. We were in shows together, and one magical night, we had a date downtown. But we couldn't—no one knew. We hid behind this cute little pond and kissed, and it was the most intoxicating, unbelievable thing.

Adult Life

Undergrad was NYU [New York University]. There were some [LGBTQIA+] support/activism groups where you would come together in secret. Literally, you'd go in the basement of the university, and there was like seven of you. It felt weird, [like] we were doing something wrong. But then that would branch off into activism in some ways. There was a lot of AIDS-related activism when I was younger, so I was part of things like that.

I got a bachelor's in music and voice performance. I lived in New York City for a while. I had always gone to the city to see things when I was a kid. I got to my college dorm the first day, and I was just like, "I've never felt so at home." [At NYU], there were so little demarcations. It was just like everybody who was different or perceived as different became connected. It was really cool.

My master's was music from CCM [Cincinnati Conservatory of Music]. Cincinnati was not a very friendly place at the time. It was still completely legal to fire someone for being gay.[22] It borders Kentucky, and I remember the first time I [went] across the river to Kentucky, I got full-on gay bashed. It was very sad, actually. You just go, "You need [to lash out at] another right now to make yourself feel better."

After my master's, I got a job on a show called *Altar Boyz* for a couple months, and then I went right to *Wicked*. I was the associate conductor of the first national tour before I took over as music director. I took over the LA production of *Wicked* in 2007 or 2008, and I was in my mid-twenties. I was also an out, unapologetic gay man—not in the sense that I would talk about it, but there was no hiding. We'd have a conversation; if my boyfriend comes up, that's what's happening. I'm not minimizing myself. In a band full of mostly straight white men who were used to ruling

22 This remained true in Ohio until 2020, when the US Supreme Court ruling in *Bostock v. Clayton County* declared it unlawful for employers to discriminate against or fire people because of their sexual or gender identity. At the time of this ruling, such behavior was legal in twenty-seven states, including Ohio. For more information, see https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/government-politics/bostock-v-clayton-county/.

the world, they had problems with me being gay. They didn't think I could lead. They made it very hard for me at first, but I won them all over. By the end of it, we were all close, and I got apologies. It's shitty, but sometimes that's the hard work you have to do.

I've conducted a bunch of Broadway shows, [done] a lot of concert work, [I was a] Grammy nominee, received other awards. I came to Ridgefield twelve years ago because the guy I was dating [Daniel Levine] lived here. We were set up [by our mutual friend David]. We met on a Monday, went on a date on a Wednesday, got married two years later. This will be our ten-year wedding anniversary. We opened ACT [A Contemporary Theater of Connecticut], have done a lot of stuff. We're continuing to do a lot of stuff. So, it's been both a personal [and an] artistic collaboration.

I feel like given all the places I have lived and all the places I've been, Ridgefield is doing a pretty good job [welcoming LGBTQIA+ people].

When I first got here, I was super aware [of being gay]. I felt like the token, sort of, collector's edition, whatever. And some of it was not because anyone was a jerk to me, but because I didn't know [if I was safe] and I wasn't used to suburbia, and there [are] churches every three feet and it's tricky.

[Seeing Pride flags and other Pride symbols around Ridgefield] is amazing. I never thought I'd see it. I took [my mother] to the first [Pride in the Park event], and she had the most joyful time. I think seeing [a Pride celebration] in this suburban, almost rural-ish space was very eye-opening for her, that this isn't some boundary that needs to exist. I feel like given all the places I have lived and all the places I've been, Ridgefield is doing a pretty good job [welcoming LGBTQIA+ people].

Reflections

The gift of my family being difficult about [my sexual identity] and [my] having no support and no structure is that, really, you have to figure it out. Do people suck? Of course, they suck. Does it make me mad? Of course, they make me mad. Is it shocking? No. And it makes us better, frankly, at what we do. It forces us to connect to people. There will always be [people who have a problem with LGBTQIA+ identity], and it's how we deal with it that makes us who we are. And the better we get at that, the further we'll actually evolve [as a society] and not just stay in this sort of fear-based thing.

[When I encounter someone who is prejudiced against LGBTQIA+ people], the first thing I always do is put up some emotional armor. I'm like, "I see this; I've seen this a lot. Okay." It doesn't mean I'm not going to be mad, but the thing I will do is find something in common [with them] first, because no matter what, there will always be that. And it's amazing what you can [accomplish]. Things everybody does collectively, just living our lives and talking to people, has made this community a much more accepting place.

Bryan Perri (left) and Daniel Levine, in their engagement photo, 2013 / Photo: JAG Studios

Leslie Burton-Lopez, born 1981

[I was born in] 1981 in Sacramento, California. I usually just say [I'm] gay, but lesbian is also accurate, I suppose. I use she/her.

Early Life and Coming Out

I had a great childhood. My mom was a professor at UC Davis [University of California, Davis], teaching Spanish, and my dad was always at a different job, but was usually employed. Davis was a small town, completely connected with bike paths so you could get anywhere in town on your bike. I have a brother who's two years younger, and he and I have always been really close. My mom is from Puerto Rico, so I'm half Puerto Rican. We grew up speaking Spanish and English. Spanish is my first language because when my mom came to the US, she didn't speak English.

When I was little, I used to wear very frilly, girly pink everything, even though my mom actually encouraged me to wear pants, because when she was little, she had to wear dresses. So, she was like, "Look, you get to wear pants." And I was like, "I don't care. I want to wear the ridiculous lacy stuff." I did have very intense friendships with girls. I didn't know what that meant, but I just knew I wanted to be their best friend. Across the street growing up, there was a couple who were lesbians, and I never connected it with myself, maybe because they didn't look anything like me. I don't know. I didn't relate at all, but I should have known.

I went to [college] at CSU Chico [California State University, Chico]. I double majored [in] English and Spanish, and I got a minor in literary editing and publishing. College was really fun because I played rugby, and that was just a really cool group of

Leslie Burton-Lopez, 2024

women. Rugby was my gay support system. I mean, I would say fifty percent of us were on some level across the gay spectrum, so I got a lot of support there.

The first time I was actually [aware of being] physically attracted to another woman, I was working with her at a grocery store. That was when I first was like, "Oh." But I had also started playing rugby, so I was much more aware that [being attracted to women] was an option, in a way that I hadn't [been] before.

The biggest coming out moment [for me was telling] my brother, with whom I was really close. I said, "I'm bisexual." He was like, "Okay." It wasn't a big deal. I never had a big coming-out story with [the rest of my] family. I just started bringing home women that I was dating. Really. It was just kind of like, "Alright."

One of the dads on the rugby team owned an apartment complex, and he used to hire rugby girls to work maintenance during the summer. Sacramento was the closest big city that had gay bars. [One of the bars] had a ladies' night, and it was eighteen and over, and we just made that cutoff. We would drive down at night, and drink hard seltzers in the parking lot. Back then, it wasn't hard seltzers; it was Mike's Hard Lemonade, which was disgusting. And then we would go into the club and have so much fun. We didn't have any money; that's why we would buy drinks ahead of time and drink them in the parking lot. We couldn't afford those drinks at the bar. It was a bar called Faces. It was so much fun, though. I remember there just being so much color and noise and drag queens.

Career, Relationships, and Community

[After college], I moved to southern Spain, and then I lived in a tiny town in Italy. I lived in Seattle; I lived in Boston, and then when I came [to Connecticut], I was in Danbury for a while, and now Ridgefield. I do marketing. It's mostly writing-based marketing for the architecture, engineering, and construction industry. When I got my first big girl job, it was the exact same job I'm doing now, except I was doing it for a company. I really chafed under any kind of very rigid nine-to-five situation. I like to do fun things with my hair, which I couldn't do, and I like to dress a certain way, which I couldn't do in a corporate environment. So, I left and started doing the exact same thing just on my own. I've been doing that since 2016.

I met my wife on OkCupid. I was on OkCupid mostly just to meet friends, because I moved to Danbury, and I did not see a rainbow child anywhere, nowhere.[23] Kirsten kept coming up in those suggested matches. She was so pretty, and I just got goosebumps. And her profile was like, "Oh my God, there's no way. I'm definitely not good enough for this person." So, I kept deleting these emails. I was like, "Stop sending me this person. She's amazing. Stop it." And she messaged me. I was so excited.

We met at the very brand new Troupe429, the gay bar in Norwalk. We met there on St. Patty's Day [2018], and we had our first date three days later. And that was it. I was absolutely bowled over by this person. It was the love-at-first-sight stuff; it was pretty amazing. I won't ever forget that moment.

[When same-sex marriage was federally recognized], I was so happy. I wasn't in a position where I wanted to get married at that point, but how cool for all of our people to have that, and how ridiculous that we didn't have it before. I mean, come on! During my wedding, [I felt very supported]. We did have some family members, one in particular, who cared about both of us very much, but was struggling with her faith to attend our wedding. But she did come, and she sat in the front row. I think generally that day was amazingly supportive.

[We moved to Ridgefield because] my wife and I were looking for a home that was near my family, my brother and his kids, and my mom, and at that time, my father. My wife's family is in Norwalk, and we wanted to live in a place that had culture.

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23 The term "rainbow child" has different meanings in the United States, depending on context. Queer people often use it to refer to a fellow member of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Generally, I've found it very accepting. I've never felt like I can't say that I'm gay. I've never felt discriminated against. There's never even been surprise when I tell people, "Oh, my wife and I are doing this." It's just normal, which is really cool. I joined the Ridgefield Newcomers Club, and one of the ladies was so funny, like, "I know a lesbian!" She was really excited to meet me, and I was like, "Yeah, you need more of those. We're fun."

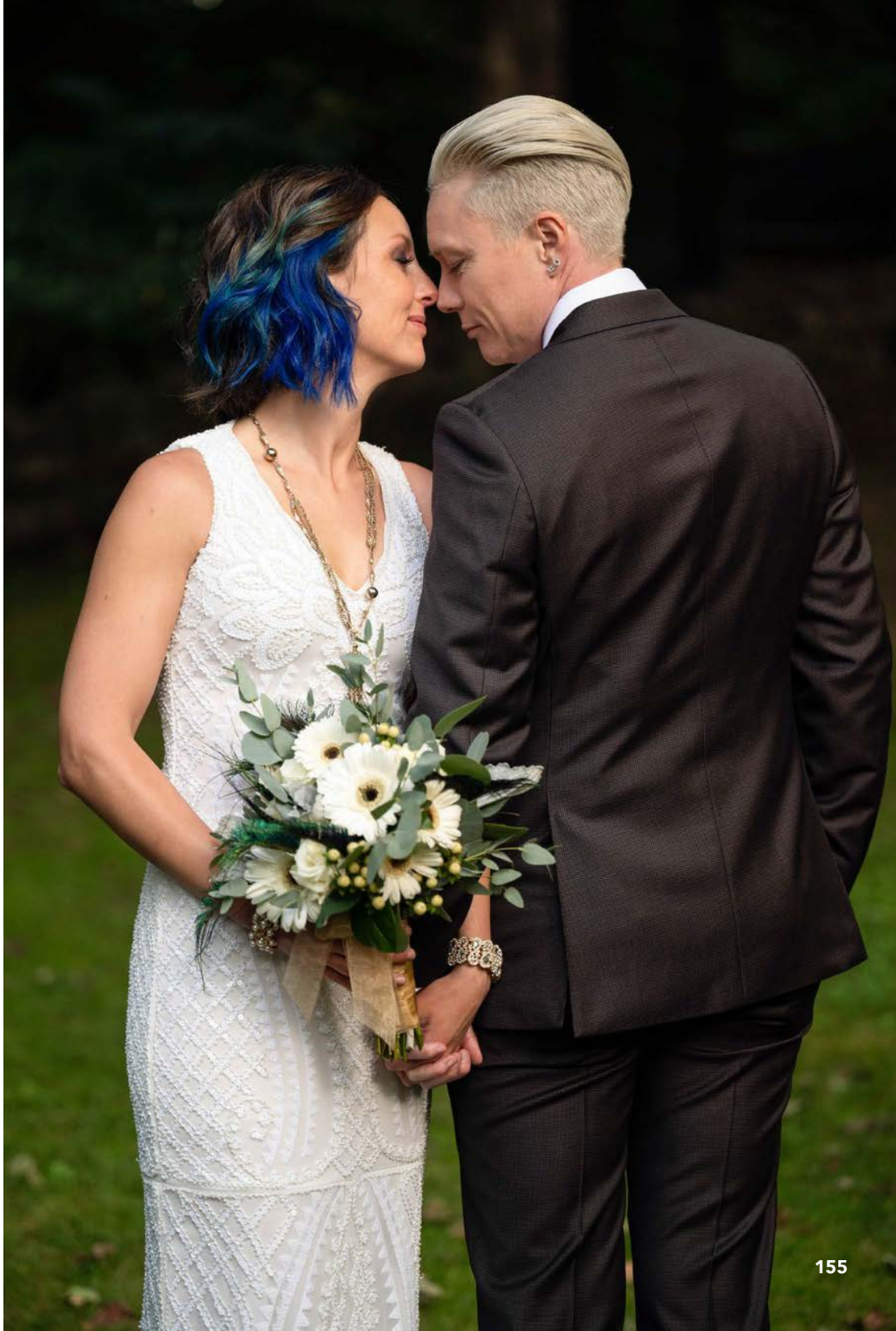
[After he moved to Connecticut], my dad was a therapist for trans youth. [He] was more well known in the gay community than I was, which I found hilarious, because my dad was straight. But it was his specialty; he really connected with people who were either struggling with their identity or had a different identity from his. He was a really curious person and an extremely nonjudgmental person, which I think is what made him a successful [therapist], made the community see him and recognize that this is a safe person. He died in 2022.

Reflections

[Being part of the LGBTQIA+ community is] just fun all over the place. We have the best of everything, I feel like. I think you develop friendships a little bit more quickly when you meet other queer people because you have something in common. There's either adversity that you've overcome, or you have stories in common, maybe about coming out, or you just understand that person in a way as a kind of marginalized person.

I would love to get to a point where we don't have to come out; there's no point, [because] it's just [considered] normal. And that includes trans youth. I just wish everybody could do their own thing. I wish gender was much less rigid than it is right now. Let's just calm down, everybody. Just wear what you want; do what you want. [I want everyone] to be completely safe and loved wherever they go in the entire world. That's what I want.

Leslie Burton-Lopez (left) and Kirsten Lee Burton at their wedding, 2021
Photo: Natasha Miller.



Daniel Micciche, born 1985
Chase Hall, born 1989

Daniel Micciche: *[I was born in] 1985, [in] Floral Park, New York. [I identify as] gay and am he/him.*

Chase Hall: *[I was born in] Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 1989. [I'm a] gay man; he/him.*

Early Life

Micciche: I grew up, from third grade on, in Darien, Connecticut, and I lived there until I went to college in 2003. I lived in Boston during college. Then from 2007 until 2020, [I] lived in Manhattan, and I toured extensively for work all throughout the world.

Hall: I grew up in Chalfont, Pennsylvania, just outside of Doylestown, where I lived until 2010, when I moved to Orlando, Florida, for a job with Disney. [I] then moved back to Pennsylvania for a couple of years, then to New York with Dan, and then to Ridgefield in 2020.

Micciche: My childhood was really great. I was a class clown; I got in trouble sometimes. [I met] a lot of my best friends, from fourth grade on, [through] this theater called Curtain Call in Stamford, Connecticut, and they're still my best friends to this day. I was able to fly my crazy flag there every night and kind of just do my thing.

Chase Hall (left) and Daniel Micciche at home with baby Sebastian and dog Henry, 2024
Photo: Mike Micciche Photography

Micciche: I definitely always felt I was different. Even though I felt safe in my own house with my family, I remember thinking in fourth grade, "How am I going to lie through my wedding, [acting] as a straight man?" And that's pretty deep. So, I always did feel that there was something different [about me], but I was able to use music and theater to let myself explore that until I went to college and started exploring myself as a gay man.

Micciche: Seventh grade and sophomore year were pretty [much] hell for me, especially seventh grade, but I was fortunate that I could push away the bullying with my humor, as I was able to be friends with a bunch of different groups, and I was already excelling in music and theater, where people kind of left me alone. When I was bullied in seventh grade, I think I ended up telling my mom and then got the kid expelled. I was always a bit of a badass in that way, but it definitely affected my self-esteem.

Hall: My childhood was, like Dan's, pretty fortunate. I had great friends that I grew up with in my neighborhood; I loved being outside. When I moved into high school, it was different because a bunch of different schools were feeding into one high school, and I didn't really have a lot of kids from my school that went to [that] high school. I went into this environment where I didn't really know a lot of people, so that was a big adjustment for me, but I think it was really fundamental and helped me get to the person I am today, where I'm a lot more comfortable going into different groups of people and just finding my way and seeing where I fit. And those people that I met in high school are the best friends that I still [have]. My friends just made it easy for me to do whatever I was going to do. There was never judgment; there was never pressure. I still operate that way; I don't get pressured by people, and I don't get really worked up by situations.

Micciche: I thought I looked fabulous in gold sequined shorts with leggings and a red scarf and a Fosse hat. I went to Darien High like that! I think I've always just kind of marched to my own drummer, and my friends, we all elevate each other. We were this weird group [where] we didn't drink, we didn't do drugs. I mean, I made up for my drinking later on in my life; [I'm a] recovering alcoholic. But we loved being with each other and just watching old Tony Awards and playing at the piano. We just loved each other, and we still do. I didn't have any gay urges; I didn't feel sexually stifled. And I think a big part of it is because we had strong friend groups, and I was crazily determined with what I wanted to do in my career.

Micciche: I came out [to my family] my sophomore year in college. It was winter break. I come from an Italian family, and it was like my last night before [going back to] college, and my mother made lasagna and crumb cake, and ice cream, and I wouldn't eat. And she's like, "Danny, what's wrong?" I just started crying and said, "I'm gay." My father picked me up from the table and hugged me and said he's never been prouder of his son. My mom just cried; she's like, "I'm so proud of you." They were like, "We just want you to be safe." Then, six months later, I came back from college, and I told my mom that I was dating a girl, and she was like, "Oh, Jesus Christ, Danny, what's going on with you?" But never, "There's something wrong with you."

Hall: I told some of my closest high school friends first, just because that was easiest. But then I did tell my parents, and right from the bat, they were supportive. The thing that sticks out to me the most is just that when I told my parents, they looked to find resources and answers to things that they thought I might need help with, just because they weren't sure what to do or what to say and they wanted to not only say the right thing but [to] not [say] the wrong thing.

Micciche: [My first queer experience] was [at the] end of freshman year in college, in the laundry room.

Hall: You do no laundry today. Zero laundry. Do you [even] know where our laundry room is?

Micciche: I wasn't doing laundry.

Hall: I had a boyfriend around [the] same time I came out. I think having somebody made it a little easier for me. I could just be like, "Oh, I have a boyfriend." And that was a little easier of a phrase to say than "I'm gay," because those words had a bit of a stigma to them.

Adult Life

Micciche: Since I graduated [college], I've been working in the arts. I'm currently the music director and conductor of *Wicked* on Broadway. I've been with the show for eleven years, and before that, I was with *Chicago*, the musical, on Broadway, but as an actor. I played Mary Sunshine in that musical for six years, right when I graduated, and then transitioned my career to become a music director and conductor. We [also] co-run a production company called Hit It Productions, which specializes in bringing different Broadway stars to a private event at your house or all the way up to resorts, clubs, and corporate events.

Hall: Right now, I'm a senior product manager at a tech company. We build recruiting technologies. I keep my finger on the pulse of the next generation: How are people looking for jobs? What technologies do we need to make finding jobs easier? What got me there was several years working at Disney, in technology, but I started as an intern there and worked my way up.

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24 Pulse nightclub was an LGBTQIA+ dance club in Orlando that, in June 2016, became the scene of the largest mass shooting in the United States up to that time. Forty-nine people were murdered and more than fifty more were injured during the attack. For more information, see https://www.britannica.com/event/Orlando-shooting-of-2016.

Pulse was a big place for us. And when the shooting happened, that rattled [me]. I mean, I was there earlier [that] week. It could have been me; I could have been there that night.

Hall: In Orlando [when I was working at Disney], I went to the Pulse nightclub a lot.[24] That was a place my friends hung out all the time. We were there multiple nights a week, and we had so many memories, just meeting people and getting to understand different parts of gay culture and making friends. Pulse was a big place for us. And when the shooting happened, that rattled [me]. I mean, I was there earlier [that] week. It could have been me; I could have been there that night.

Micciche: [Chase and I] met on Tinder. I was doing the tour of *Wicked* at the time, and we were in Orlando, Florida. He was living in Orlando, and we swiped right on each other. I knew in my gut when he walked in the room. There was a light around him, and he was one of the first guys who made the time and kept showing up in more than one way. We spent the first year of our relationship [with] him flying out to see me every couple of weeks for a year. And then I came home from tour, finally, on our one-year anniversary.

Hall: We got together in 2017. We've been married since October 2, 2022.

Micciche: [Our wedding] was a production. Chase planned it all; he's a spreadsheet man. We even hired a Broadway stage manager to run the entire event. We had one of our favorite singers, Jane Monheit, do our wedding; we had a drag queen, Paige Turner. It was very classy, all black and white, but people wearing anything they wanted to wear: gowns, men in gowns, tuxes, black and white overall, polka dots. It was fabulous.

Chase Hall (left) and Daniel Micciche on their wedding day, 2022
Photo: Love Me Do Photography

Hall: There's nothing traditional about what happens at a gay wedding! I was just like, "We can do it however we want." And I think that everybody who came to our wedding felt like it was truly a day that felt like us.

Micciche: Now we're having a baby in… nine weeks?

Hall: Yeah. We knew we wanted to have kids. We explored every option. We explored adoption, foster care, surrogacy. And ultimately, we just found ourselves gravitating down this path of surrogacy.

Micciche: When couples ask me how it is, I always say, "It's the most emotional, [financially] out-of-your-control experience you'll ever have in your life," because it's incredibly huge decisions [and] you have to just trust your gut. We're two very type-A people. So, it was very hard for us to let go, and we have. We've trusted the process, and we've been very, very blessed in these two amazing women [the egg donor and the surrogate] helping us, with good doctors.

Hall: Dan and I talked about, "Did we want to have a boy? Did we want to have a girl?" Because that's science today; you can do that. And I kept saying, "I just want to raise a really good boy. We need more of them." I'm really excited to raise a good human for this world. Whatever they decide to do, successful, not successful, gay, straight, whatever, just being a good person.

Micciche: [I'm most excited about] loving him, being so proud of him, and experiencing life through his eyes.

Reflections

Hall: It's been good to live here [in Ridgefield]. I think it's been a great space that we've always felt comfortable in. And I don't know where it's coming from, but I feel [that there are] more initiatives, more acceptance, more awareness. It just keeps getting better.

Micciche: [One of the main reasons] we moved [here was], I knew a lot of people from my industry that moved here. I knew that there was a gay presence here. I remember, the first time we came up here for dinner, that Pride banner in front of St. Stephen's [Church]. I remember that being so big for me. We're both proud gay men, and we're very proud of our lives that we share in the community. We love that Ridgefield creates such [LGBTQIA+] visibility in [the] region.

Hall: I think now at thirty-five, I understand what it means to trust my gut and trust my own feelings. [It's] taken a while to get there, but there's little experiences that I can look back to [and] say, "These were moments where I did [that], and it was good." If there's something that feels right and you need to do it, do it. If it feels wrong, wait for that comfort. Don't force yourself into it, because the moments where we force ourselves to do something, we're not being authentic to who we truly are. It doesn't come off the way that you want it to or the way that you intended to. So, just letting yourself land in that moment of your authenticity and who you are. There's no right way. There's no wrong way. It's only going to work for you the way that it's supposed to work for you.

JJ Jarrard, born 1991

My full name is Jessica Jarrard; I go by JJ. I use they/them pronouns. In most contexts, I will say I'm queer. I like that for being a general umbrella term and for reclaiming a slur. More specifically, I am nonbinary, bisexual or pansexual, and polyamorous.

Growing Up and Coming Out

I was born in Newport Beach, California, [in] 1991. We moved from California to Massachusetts when I was around two or three. [My childhood] was a mix. When I was around five, my parents got divorced. I lived with my biological mom for another five years. My mom had a lot of mental health and substance use issues, so there's been a lot of ups and downs throughout my childhood. When I lived with my biological mom, we lived on a street where a lot of houses were being constructed, so I would play in the newly constructed houses and on big piles of dirt and run around in the woods. [I was] a little bit of a feral child when I lived with her.

Eventually she left to move to Colorado, and I went to live with my dad and my stepmom. My dad and my stepmom, they're pretty conservative. They're pretty disciplined, but they're very stable and have really cared for me. When I lived with [them], I basically just studied a lot; I was very academic focused. I eventually found distance running. I was pretty good at that and did that competitively.

I didn't know I was LGBTQ until early college. In high school, I definitely had attraction towards women, but I thought it was jealousy. I was in denial about it until very early on in college.

JJ Jarrard, 2024

I went to a small Catholic college. I figured it out, admitted it to myself, but then kept it to myself for two years and was kind of in turmoil about it. When I got to college, I started to become aware of some other people being LGBTQ. I was pretty involved in helping to create the Moore Center for Gender Equity, which was helping students who were harmed by sexual assault. I had been involved in some campaigning for changing the school constitution to not allow discrimination based off of sexual orientation or gender identity.

I didn't directly come out to my dad and stepmom, but they assumed some things after I started dating women, and my dad told me he loved me anyway if I was lesbian, and I just cried. The only time I directly came out to them, I was dating a guy at the time, and I finally asked [my dad and stepmom why they wouldn't meet him], and they were like, "Well, aren't you cheating on him?" And I was like, "We're polyamorous. He knows about these other people in my life." And then they're like, "Oh, okay, he can come over for Easter," and that was it.

In terms of being nonbinary, that term wasn't really around when I was a kid. I didn't know that there was a way to describe how I felt in terms of gender identity. I just thought, "Well, part of me just really wants to be a boy sometimes, and [in] half my dreams, I'm a man." I thought that was just a weird thing about me. And then I realized there are terms out there that accurately described my experiences.

Work and Ridgefield

I've been in the mental health field basically since college. I'm a mental health therapist; I have my own practice, Rainbow Counseling and Consultation. We specialize in working with LGBTQ folks. We work with a lot of transgender folks, and I have three other therapists working at my practice, too. Pretty early on when I started my practice, Covid [happened], so in some

The big Pride flag that was in front of St. Stephen's Church, all of that was very uplifting for me when I first moved here. It's like, "Oh, there's some people here who at least are allies."

ways I lucked out, maybe morbidly so, with starting a very niche practice at a time where there was such high demand and need. I never really saw myself as a boss or even an entrepreneur, but I'm making it work and I've kind of surpassed my own expectations, which is nice.

I moved to Ridgefield three years ago. My partner Zach got a job in White Plains at the time, during the pandemic. I was working telehealth, so I could move with him. He had lived in Ridgefield before and really liked the town. I had visited Ridgefield a few times with him and thought the town was really cute, kind of [a] quintessential New England suburban town. I pretty much knew nothing else about Ridgefield and moved with him down here and have come to love it.

After I moved into Ridgefield, I went to Pride in the Park, and that was uplifting for me, because at that point, I didn't know much about the town and, just given the makeup [of the population here], I thought it was a little more conservative [than it turned out to be]. So, that was nice. The big Pride flag that was in front of St. Stephen's Church, all of that was very uplifting for me when I first moved here. It's like, "Oh, there's some people here who at least are allies." So, particularly having moved to Ridgefield without really knowing anyone here, all of those were positive signs for me. I think those things send a positive message to people in the community.

Reflections

[Accepting my sexual and gender identity] allowed me to be more authentic and form some really good, healthy, long-term friendships. I think just embracing some of the values of the community, valuing diversity and difference, and being yourself [had a positive effect on me, and I] became happier.

There's no timeline you have to follow. You can go at your own pace. Oftentimes when people first come out as trans, it's like, "Oh my gosh, I have to do all the things, all in a year." You can slow down, take things as they come, and as they feel doable to you. You don't have to meet any standards to be a certain way. It's a process of really discovering yourself and being yourself and trying to find people you feel comfortable with. So, it takes time.

I'm hopeful that over time we may have more rights, particularly against discrimination and more access to things like housing and so on, and particularly access to medical care. I would like to be remembered for making a positive impact on this community, particularly for helping people who don't feel supported, helping people have a voice who maybe don't feel heard.

JJ Jarrard hosting the Ridgefield Pride winter gathering at home, 2026

Shannon Keating, born 1992

[I was] born in 1992, Norwalk, Connecticut.
I use she/her and identify as a genderqueer lesbian.

Growing up in Ridgefield

I was raised in Ridgefield, and I felt like our family was a little unique in that I grew up in the same house that my mom had grown up in, because my grandma had moved to Ridgefield in the seventies and bought their house. After my parents got divorced when I was young, my mom ended up moving back in with her dad, my grandpa, and so my four younger siblings [and I] all grew up in that house.

My grandmother did hair on Broadway. Her parties, when I was growing up, were filled with gay men. I think that was my introduction to the gay world. It was all very much focused on men. I was so much more aware of gay men existing in literature, in the world. It was how I became interested in [LGBTQIA+ identity], which is strange.

I think my generation is one of the last ones [where], in a place like Ridgefield, there were no out kids when I went to school. It just was not a thing. I think my earliest gender/sexuality memory is from basketball camp when I was maybe eleven, twelve, thirteen. I remember having what I now understand to be a big crush on a girl who was very tomboy-ish. I mean, now I'm attracted to butch women and to masculine-of-center people. When I was growing up, there weren't really butch women around [in my life]; so, I don't think I made the associations that I would've otherwise.

Shannon Keating, 2023

As a kid, I spent a lot of time outside. I think that's one of the great privileges of growing up someplace like Ridgefield, with so much space. As soon as I was able to listen to music, I would be outside, lying in the grass or [sitting] on the swing set. I spent so much of [my teen years] just on the swing set, swinging angrily, listening to pop-punk music.

When I became a teenager, my mom and I fought a lot. I was an emo kid, very alternative, and she really hated that. [She] hated how I would express myself or look really freaky, because that's not the way it's supposed to be in homogenized Ridgefield. I was many years away from realizing that I was gay at all, but I think experimenting with alternative subcultures was an early way of exploring queerness, exploring difference, [and] going against the mainstream. I think that was a kind of proto-queerness in me that didn't know quite how to express itself yet. [It also allowed me to] ping-pong back and forth in gender expressions. I would go through phases where I was only wearing jean shorts and long basketball tees, and then I would become super girly-girl again. I did a lot of swinging back and forth, which I now think was kind of an exploration of gender presentation.

It's so funny, me and all my friends were in the GSA, but we all thought that we were straight! I really don't know if anyone was out. I think I gravitated toward alternate [crowds]. I think alternativeness and my budding interest in social justice were early ways of experimenting with gayness. Our GSA did Day of Silence.[24] It was an annual day where we would put tape over our mouths and not speak for a whole day. Long before I knew I was gay, I [was] getting involved with the GSA and advocating for social justice issues.

24 The Day of Silence is an annual, student-led demonstration in which participants take a vow of silence for the day to draw attention to the silencing and marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people, particularly in schools and communities. Originating in the mid-1990s, the action uses the absence of speech as a symbolic protest against discrimination, bullying, and erasure, and is typically accompanied by educational materials or discussion once the silence ends. https://glisten.org/campaigns/dayofsilence/

Coming Out

I went to a small liberal arts school, Connecticut College. I was dating my high school boyfriend then, and we both went to the same school. And I really loved my boyfriend. We were great friends. If I were not gay, [it] would've been great, but ultimately that did not work out. Right when I got to college, I sort of tried to come out to a bunch of girls that I'd just become friends with, as bi because I was still dating my boyfriend. But then everyone acted kind of weird about it. So, I just did not mention it again for three years. And it was actually when I started having some feelings for another person on my rugby team in college, and I was like, "Okay, I can't really ignore this anymore." So, I broke up with my boyfriend, and then at the very end of college, [I] was finally out.

I came out to my family right when I got home from my senior year of college. What was harder about telling my family was telling them that I was breaking up with my boyfriend of almost five years, [harder] even than saying that I was gay, because they were so devastated. I mean, we all loved this boyfriend. So, they were very sad about that. And then my aunt, who I'm very close with, was like, "Who is she?" Like, [she] knew, kind of. And then I told my sister over the phone, and I remember her being like, "It's like we just have to get used to a different version of you. It's not bad; it's just different." And I told my grandma and my cousins, and uncles at my grandma's house over the summer, and I became very embarrassed for having even announced anything at all, because there was just an awkward pause, and then kind of little hoorays.

To me, genderqueer is a helpful shorthand for just feeling gender expansive in some way. I think many, if not most, queer people have an interesting relationship with our genders. And I think for me, my gender is lesbian, my gender is gay. I can imagine an alternate world where I'm a gay man with men, but in this current universe, I'm a gay woman, married to a woman, interested in women. But I also think that words like women, like lesbian, in themselves contain so much multitude. There's so much overlap with all of our identities in our communities.

Career and Adult Life

I started my career in start-up culture. I spent almost eight years at Buzzfeed News. I started as the deputy LGBT editor, and then I became the LGBT editor, which was great. I was the LGBT editor when [same-sex] marriage was passed in 2015. That was pretty crazy. Buzzfeed had started its own LGBT [team] years before other places were doing it. And at our peak, we had a team of five people, and we were doing investigative journalism, but also videos and essays, and fun, stupid stuff. Yeah, it was great. But then, [like] a lot of other marginalized communities in our newsroom and other [places], when the money stopped showing up for it, they just cut it all. They decimated the LGBT desk a few years after I started and then picked off a bunch of other beloved projects, too. So yeah, there's highs and lows in LGBT journalism.

[My spouse and I] met on a lesbian cruise. This was actually a story that I did for Buzzfeed. It's this company called Olivia Cruises, which is the oldest still-existing travel company that just serves queer women. I wanted to do a story about lesbian spaces and how they've changed over time and this last bastion. I was kind of making fun of it a lot before I went on it, and then I had the time of my life.

[I felt really supported] at my wedding. I had really not been into [marriage]. I have always been very much like, "Marriage should not be the focus or the be-all, end-all [of the LGBTQIA+ movement]. We need to be focusing on housing and education and healthcare and all this other stuff, and we shouldn't have sold it all out for marriage." I think that there's so much more beyond marriage, to the point that I was so cranky about it that I don't even know if I would've gotten married if my wife [weren't] British. For us to actually be able to live together, we got married. And after being such a grouchy crank about it, it ended up being a thing where I was like, "Oh, I get why people do this. It's really nice to have all of your family and friends around you, and love and support you." We should do it at things that don't involve marriage. We should throw big parties and support our friends and loved ones in other ways [than just when they get married].

So, we got married. I applied for my visa, which took forever and cost a lot of money. And then we first lived in Preston, which is a very small city in northern England, where my wife was working. It was last November that we finally moved to Liverpool, because we wanted to have a bit more of an urban environment. We wanted to be around more queer people.

Shannon Keating (left) with Lynette Blake on their wedding day, 2022

Advice and Reflections

I think learning about yourself and loving yourself is a lifelong process and journey. I feel like I am still only discovering and playing with my gender expression, but I'm treating it just as a joyful journey rather than always thinking, "Oh, I don't know what or who I am, or what's going on, ever." And, instead, [I am] letting myself experiment and have fun and connect with my inner child. I like to express myself with clothing. I've always really liked being a kind of out-there dresser, and I think being able to dress however I want, the way I would've wanted when I was little, was very empowering.

To me, [being LGBTQIA+] enables us to have a radical empathy with each other in our community and out. To me, it means giving me a point of connection to other marginalized communities around the world and the ways in which we're all connected. And it means being proudly different. It means living in a way that doesn't necessarily align with all of the milestones and markers that the white hetero-capitalist world wants us to achieve. That there are different ways to have families. There are different ways to lead good and meaningful lives.

Thomas Stubbs, born 1995

My full name is Thomas Blaine Stubbs,
and I use the pronouns him and his.
I was born [in] 1995, in Knoxville, Tennessee
[and] identify as gay.

Education and the Stirring of Identity and Faith

[When I was young, I was] deeply involved in the life of the church in which I grew up, Church Street United Methodist Church in Knoxville. I was baptized into that congregation as an infant, came up through its children's programs and youth programs, and sang in the choir there. It's impossible to imagine my formative years without the time I spent in that place and with the folks who were there.

I attended West High School [in Knoxville]. High school was important and transformational for me. It was the setting in which my love for literature and history, what I would come to call the humanities, was cemented. Also, it was the beginning of my serious involvement in choral music and in theater. I went to college right after graduating from high school, a school called Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. I was a major in history and communications studies. It was while at Furman that I discovered, or rediscovered in a sense, my faith and also where I discovered a call to ministry of some kind.

High school would've been the first time I began to sense that there was something about how I was developing that seemed to be divergent from how most other people were. Eventually, part of what began to dawn on me was, "Well, I don't think I'm attracted to women romantically. So, what does that mean?"

Thomas Stubbs, 2022 / Photo: Leticia Soltero

[In the family I grew up in], I did not get any kind of reinforcement of the idea that somebody could be anything but cisgender, heterosexual. The effect of that was that it took me a very long time to be able to articulate, even to myself, who I was. It took me until well into my college years to begin to sort of piece that together. I had to do a lot of work to allow myself to believe that there was a larger world out there, in terms of identity, than what I had been raised to presume. The experience of being both in college and in graduate school, in these more affirming and welcoming environments, began to gradually undo the strictures that I didn't even know were there inside of me. Eventually, I was able to claim an identity for myself that I would never have imagined, been able to imagine, before.

Preparing for the Ministry

[After college], I entered into the ordination process with the United Methodist Church. In 2021, I was in my third and final year of graduate work at Duke [University] Divinity School, in Durham, North Carolina, which is a time in which, in addition to wrapping up your course studies, you are also sitting for interviews and submitting application papers to be commissioned. In the United Methodist Church [UMC], commissioning is the penultimate step before ordination, and it is the necessary step for someone to then be appointed to a parish or enter professional ministry.

The UMC is divided up into a series of bodies called annual conferences, just like a diocese in an Episcopal or Catholic church, and so, you do your work through a particular annual conference. I was doing mine through Holston annual conference, which encompasses East Tennessee for the most part, with the assumption that then I would be appointed there.

Then two things happened, which set me down a completely different path, and they happened in rapid succession. First, there were more people who came through the commissioning process than there were appointments available in the Holston annual conference, which basically means that the whole system comes apart. Nothing works if there isn't that guaranteed appointment. And so, I found myself in a position [of], "I don't know [if] I have a job waiting for me."

The second thing had to do in particular with my identity. The United Methodist Church, like so many Christian denominations, has been arguing itself to pieces over the last fifteen years over questions of sexual orientation and gender identity. In 2020, a plan had been put forward, that was to have gone through the [general UMC] conference, which would allow the church to amicably split into a centrist progressive denomination and a conservative denomination. Well, you all remember what happened in 2020. The onset of the pandemic, of course, led to the general conference being indefinitely postponed. And so, I found myself in a position on the knife edge of things. I didn't know if I had a job waiting for me, and I was also facing a situation where in all likelihood, at least for the first year, I would have to be closeted in my work environment. And I did not find that acceptable.

Coming to Ridgefield

[While all this was happening], somebody at the Divinity School who knew my situation put me in touch with a high-ranking member of the New York annual conference of the United Methodist Church, which encompasses New York, Long Island, Westchester County, and about half the state of Connecticut. The New York annual conference had made the decision to move ahead of the denomination and say, "We are going to ordain openly queer clergy. We are going to allow same-sex marriage ceremonies to take place in our parishes. Try and stop us." It was through that interview that I learned there was a church in Ridgefield, Jesse Lee Church, that had wanted an associate pastor. So I interviewed [for the job], and not but a month after I'd gotten this call out of the blue from a fellow at the Divinity School, Bill Pfohl called to offer me the job at Jesse Lee.

I've now lived here for almost three years. Ridgefield was, for me, a kind of refuge, a safe haven. [It] allowed me to do what it was that I wanted to do [and] felt called to do, without having to hide any aspect of who I was. There's hardly a day that goes by where I don't think, "My Lord, how extraordinary that I should have wound up in a place where I can do what I do and be the person that I am."

Current Work, Advocacy, and Hopes for the Future

I see a lot of my work as a pastor centered around trying to undo the presumptions and the prejudices that have often put the church in a position to be doing harm to members of the LGBTQ+ community. My hope for the future, particularly of the church, is that we do not rest on their laurels and that [instead we] would listen to the voices of leaders and particularly younger folks who are pushing for us to practice what we preach and be the kinds of welcoming spaces that invite everybody to a positive sense of fellowship and growth, becoming more fully who they are.

The advice that I would give [to younger people] is that insofar as you can, do not allow yourself to be alone in believing that you are valid and lovable; there are folks in the world who are excited to delight in you. Believe that there are people who are excited about you and find them.

Ridgefield was, for me, a kind of refuge, a safe haven. [It] allowed me to do what it was that I wanted to do [and] felt called to do, without having to hide any aspect of who I was.

Thomas Stubbs, 2024 / Photo: Michael Cruz

Jaden Mose, born 1998

I'm Jaden Mose, and my pronouns are he/him.
I would identify as a trans man or transgender man.
I was born [in] 1998, in Norwalk, Connecticut.

Early Life, Identity, and Family in Ridgefield

I'm really grateful to have grown up in Ridgefield. It's super safe, and there's great education, and it's a nice place to grow up. But just because I was a little different growing up, I was ostracized by my peers, and I had a weird relationship with a lot of the other kids my age.

[My] parents got divorced when I was in seventh grade. I have an older brother who's two years older than me, and then I have a twin. My mom died, and I have three stepsiblings and a stepmom. At the time [that I came out], my siblings were not queer, but they've both come out as queer in their adult years, which I think is kind of funny. I was pretty social as a kid. We had a lot of family friends, and we would just be playing outside a lot, going hiking. I had a pretty good childhood. I was always doing stuff outside, and it was pretty good.

I always hated wearing girls' clothes. My parents would try to put me in dresses and stuff, and I would throw fits. I would not let them put me in a dress. I wouldn't let them do anything to my hair. I just wanted to go outside and play with the boys. After a certain point, my parents would always let me wear what I want[ed]. I think they got tired of me throwing a fit every time. And I remember on picture day in first grade, they put me in a dress, and it was the first time I had worn girls' clothes to school, and I was crying the whole day because I was so upset about it.

Jaden Mose, Mount Baker, WA, 2025

Just because they were so okay with me wearing what I wanted, they always let me cut my hair short. [This] really helped my confidence in my own identity growing up. Just having their support and being able to present however I wanted was super important for me. And I feel like it's super uncommon for a lot of trans youth. So, I'm pretty lucky that they supported me.

[Also], my older cousin is a lesbian. I remember being a little kid, and I saw her kiss her girlfriend at the time, and I was like, "Wow." I was like, "Oh my God, this can happen." And she's one of my biggest role models.

High School and Coming Out

When I came out [the first time], I was actually lesbian in middle school. I just kind of emailed my mom and told her, but she basically was like, "I already knew that. I'm happy that you told me, but don't worry. It doesn't change anything." They were super supportive.

When I originally was at RHS [Ridgefield High School], I was there for maybe two months freshman year. I was incredibly isolated and depressed because I was so uncomfortable, and I didn't know why. I had no idea what trans was. I would get bullied about being trans before I even knew I was trans. Other people would come up to me and be like, "Oh, what are you?" I think in Ridgefield, especially, I had a lot of other kids being mean. Other adults who didn't understand me would try to tell me I should just try to be a girl, and why was I doing this? I would be so pretty, things like that.

I was the only out lesbian or gay person at the whole school, at least [that's] what I thought. I was really depressed there, and I had a suicide attempt. The guidance counselor got involved, and I was sent to a treatment place. The school basically told my parents, "We don't know how to deal with this." I was sent away, so I got sent to five different high schools, because they were all kind of short-term programs.

I am honestly kind of grateful that I was away from everyone I grew up around [during this period], because I don't think I would've had the courage to come out had I stayed [at RHS]. The schools I was going to were basically for troubled teens. A lot of the other kids there were queer and just depressed. It was the first time I had found any sort of community or people who I felt like understood me, and it was nice to be separated from all the people at Ridgefield [High School].

[When I first went away], I didn't know what trans was. I had a friend who had a trans brother, and he could tell how uncomfortable I was. And he came up to me and was like, "I think you're trans." I was kind of weird about it, just because I had never heard about it before. He actually brought me this book, and he highlighted a bunch of stuff about trans people in it. I read the book and cried.

Therapy, Transitioning, and Boarding School Community

The first school I got sent to, it got shut down. I was sent to another place in New Hampshire [for] two years. Then the next year, I was sent to a regular boarding school [in Massachusetts]. [There], we had a GSA, and one of my teachers [was] super cool and nonbinary and was the Spanish teacher. The first day of school, I was scared because I didn't know whether or not I should use my pronouns. And I was new there; I didn't know how people [would] perceive me. So, we were doing this exercise in Spanish class where we had to make a fake Facebook profile in Spanish. And I put that I was a girl in [the profile], and the teacher pulled me aside and was like, "You don't have to do that in my class; be who you are." And then I formed a really strong bond with this teacher, and we did a lot of the GSA stuff together. There [were] a lot of queer people at that school. We had at least fifteen kids in the GSA, which was pretty cool. We would do fun activities

and stuff; we would hold little picnics; and we planned a lot of activism-type stuff in the school.

I was sixteen when I went on hormones. I had to go through two years of gender therapy; had to have all these letters signed; I had to do this whole psych evaluation. Just because of the laws that were in place, I had to jump through all these hoops and do all this extra therapy, when I had already been in therapy for years. Once I was on hormones and everything, then with top surgery, I remember having to redo that whole process of getting all the letters, the gender therapy, doing it all over again, even though I was an adult. I do think it was important for me to go through all the therapy and stuff before going on hormones, but I think it was a little bit [excessive]. It's still kind of that hard when you're under eighteen. I feel like that's something that is one of the right-wing talking points, "Oh, these kids, they're being prescribed hormones when they're like twelve, with one doctor's appointment," and that's just not happening.

I remember being super scared about [the] bathroom laws when [that issue] first gained traction in the media. When I had originally come out, it wasn't a super political issue. I kind of flew under the radar. But as soon as all these laws and stuff started coming out, and it became a political issue, there was a lot more debate. It was really scary because a lot of those laws are just about trans youth, and I felt attacked. I think the bills of the time were literally just about whether or not trans people should be allowed in the bathroom that they identify with.

Life and Work after High School

After I graduated high school, I had started [a] support group in town. We had at least fifteen other people there. It was a really nice, supportive space for people, which I felt like I had never seen in Ridgefield before. The Boys and Girls Club was facilitating some of the meetings, which I thought was really funny, because [when I was younger] most of the bullying I experienced happened there.

I didn't go to college after I graduated high school. I was working a bunch of random jobs. I worked at Planet Pizza for a while; I worked at Jersey Mike's. I decided that I would move here [to Brooklyn], because I honestly think it's the best place on the East Coast for being queer. I decided to do a trade. My boss told me if I was going to do a trade that I should do welding. I didn't even know what welding was, but I just signed up for trade school, did that for a year, and then started working at metal shops.

[Now], I am a welder; I work at a metal fabrication shop in Brooklyn. As a queer person, doing construction and working with a bunch of men, it can be kind of scary. I'm pretty much stealth at my job. I don't really talk about being trans a lot at work. I've definitely experienced some scary moments, not about me, but my coworkers, maybe talking about something they saw in the news about trans people and talking to me about it as if I would agree with them, but just not knowing that I was trans. [I wasn't worried about] necessarily losing my job or being physically hurt, but just worried about what people may think of me.

You never really know how someone's going to react. I've had a couple acquaintances who didn't know, and then when they found out, were appalled and so confused. I [had] a whole existential crisis where this guy, we were hanging out, and he didn't know I was trans, and he made some comment, and I figured that he knew. So, I said something about being trans. We had just ordered a whole pizza, and he was like, "I can't eat this. I'm disgusted. I can't eat this pizza," and threw the whole pizza out and walked out.

Now, most of my friends are trans people. I have a huge community of other queer people [in Brooklyn]. There's lots of events here, meetups and protests. When I first moved here, I was specifically a part of the Stonewall movement protests. It would be every Thursday. [We would] meet at the Stonewall [Inn] in Manhattan and march all the way downtown for trans rights. When I started going, it is weird because I feel like the

original Stonewall Riot [in 1969] was a huge turning point, but it was originally led by trans people, and I feel like that kind of was erased in history. Now, [these Stonewall protests are] super trans-focused because there's a lot more going on in the media right now that's targeting trans people.

I've met a lot of my closest friends through protesting. I think it is really important that it's not just about the queer people, it's [about] protesting for liberation in general for everyone. We would go out and protest for black rights, and we would go out and protest for Palestinians. It's just a community of people who want liberation.

Most of the people who move here are around my age; they're mostly queer or they're just alternative in some way. I make music. I play guitar and have a bunch of little synths and stuff [to make] electronic music. I like to go out with my friends. We'll just go out, go dancing, or just go to the park. I have a little dog, so I bring him on a lot of little walks.

Reflections and Advice

People know a lot about trans people now [compared to when I was younger]. Doctors are getting schooled on this now. People are just getting more educated in general on what it means to be trans, which is really great for the community. But on the other hand, I think it's become an extremely political issue where people are voting one way or another because of it. I think people should understand that what trans people do isn't going to hurt them.

I think a lot of people have an idea about what a trans person looks like or how a trans person acts. A lot of people think that trans people, that's all they talk about. That's their whole identity. And that's just not the case. I do love being trans and talking about it with my friends and having shared experiences, but that's not in any way my whole identity.

I've met a lot of my closest friends through protesting. I think it is really important that it's not just about the queer people, it's [about] protesting for liberation in general for everyone.

[To a younger trans person], I would say, don't be scared to come out to your friends or people, or don't be scared to seek out community and talk to other trans people about it. Even if you're not sure that you're trans or queer, you can really gain a lot from learning from the rest of the community. Don't force yourself [to transition] if you're not ready; don't push yourself. You can take your time and really figure out what gender means for you, and there's a community of people supporting you if your family doesn't.

It's really cool to see people from Ridgefield trying to start these conversations and do all this work for the queer community there, especially the youth. It was really hard for me growing up there and being bullied and stuff. It seems like at the time, even the adults in my life, they didn't know what to do with me, and they weren't super keen on listening to me about my struggles. I think it's really cool that there's an actual support system there now.

Cara Mackenzie, born 1999

[I was born in] 1999, Greenwich, Connecticut. [I identify as] lesbian, dyke, queer, trans, nonbinary. I kind of go between. [My pronouns] are they/them.

Early Life and Identity

I grew up in Ridgefield. I was a bookish kid, so I read a lot. I was also a really anxious kid. I think I felt very out of place most of my childhood. A lot of people say they'd like to go back; I do not. I do not miss being a kid. It's a time of absolutely no agency. I think it was a good childhood, and that my parents were really lovely, but I often felt very out of place growing up. I'm also autistic, and I think there were things about me that didn't necessarily fit into the cis, able-bodied [expectations].

The Ridgefield Library was a big place for me growing up. I would go there and feel like I could be by myself, but also be around other people, so you don't feel lonely. I had a really great YA [Young Adult] librarian growing up named Gerri. She was one of the first adults who [spoke] to me like I was a person, not a kid. And so, I think I understood that there was a level of safety there.

In high school, I had a couple of crushes. I went to an all-girl Christian camp growing up, and I had really intense feelings for girls that I thought were just me really wanting to be friends with them. And then there was this one person in high school whom I didn't recognize I had feelings for until years later. I would drive [her] home from school even though I was not allowed to drive other people. I think when I was with boys, I felt a sense of deep anxiety that I misinterpreted as liking someone, butterflies. With the girls I liked, it was more this feeling of,

Cara Mackenzie, 2024

"This is really fun!" and nice and giggly, but overall, very calm, because it felt less dangerous.

I think Ridgefield is and continues to be a very homogeneous place. People portray it as a nice and accepting community in a very white liberal sense, and it is, on the surface. But what people really mean is that they don't want you to be open about your difference, because they don't want to see it, and they don't want to acknowledge that differences exist. I felt a sort of chafe between the person I wanted to be and [the person I was expected to be], growing up around here. So, when I went to college, I never thought I'd come back.

Education and Career

I went to Simmons University in Boston, which is a really small women-centered [college]. Every other person I was at school with was gay; so, it was like pretty easy [for me to come out]. I saw my first masc-presenting person, and I was like, "Oh damn. I guess it's time."

I got a degree in English literature [because] I love to read. I found that you could read so much queer subtext in everything that it allowed me to better explore my identity. I grew up loving romance novels, which was part of why I thought I couldn't be gay, because I was like, "You can't like straight romance novels and be gay. That's crazy." And so, when I came out, I started reading queer romance, and that helped me explore my identity. It allowed me to exist in my identity without having to overthink it.

[After college, I] got my master's at Queens College, in Queens, New York, in library science. Every time you go to a library, there are at least two queer people on staff, and it's a career that's centered around community, and so much of what queerness is to me is a political identity and also an identity based around community. Libraries, maybe not right now, but certainly have the potential to be very radical spaces of community.

I was a librarian, which was really fun. I was unfortunately fired for putting books about Palestine on a display. I was [out at work]; I kind of just assume that everyone will be cool with it. I will go to places, and instead of reading the vibe, I'll just be like, "I'm a lesbian." And I am pretty upfront about my pronouns from the get-go. Libraries do tend to be accepting of queer people, in my experience. Accepting versus defending are very different things, though.

[In] my old library, I ran Pride programming in June for all ages, and they got an email saying that I was trying to groom children. At one point, a very homophobic message was left on my desk about how I needed to do better in the eyes of God. I reported it to my director and was gaslit to hell and back about how maybe it wasn't meant for [me], and maybe someone accidentally put it on [my] desk, or "Maybe it's probably not about you being gay." And I tried to explain, [but] she was like, "How would they know you were gay?" At the time, I had [a] shaved head, so it was like, "Look at me. I'm the most outwardly queer person on your staff. There's a Pride flag on my desk. I've been out about my pronouns at all the programs, and I am on your Instagram promoting Pride. Of course, it's about me being gay." I think you face that a lot, where straight people do not want to cause a fuss. So, if something happens, they say, "I'm very sorry. We will not be doing anything about it."

That was [a] challenge. Another challenge is people are so bad at pronouns, and it gets to the point where correcting people feels like such a hassle that you're like, "I guess I am just a she/her now." There is a lack of accountability for people misgendering other people in a lot of the workplaces I've worked in; a lot of people who do gender me properly won't correct the people around them. And if I mention this, they'll be like, "Well, I didn't know if you wanted [me to]." It's all put on the one nonbinary person at work.

Finding Community through Activism

[Recently], I've gotten involved with local activism around anti-militarization, liberation, Palestine, and stuff like that. I've become involved with Connecticut Dissenters, which is an anti-military group out of New Haven. I go to a lot of protests and stuff like that, specifically for Palestine right now. And that is where I have found probably the best community I've ever found in terms of queer people, because to me so much of being queer is about it being political and wanting liberation, not just for queer people, but for everyone.

[Activism has helped me understand] that my identity doesn't just function within me. I function within a broader community of queer people and dykes and lesbians and gay men and trans folks. [This] made me feel a lot more comfortable in my identity, because everywhere I go, there are other queer people. I think understanding that from a level of working towards making this world a place for everyone has really allowed me to understand queer identity.

In the last year and a half, I've been the most comfortable and confident. I felt like I could never comfortably say I was a lesbian until maybe a year and a half ago. I think it all had to do with me finding my adult community and then feeling like I was comfortable, because I went from being in a total bubble of my college situation, where everyone was queer, out into the real world. So, feeling comfortable in that college situation was very different than feeling comfortable and functioning as an adult.

Reflections

My view on the world right now is [that] things have come to a head in a way that they cannot possibly go any further without change. I think the US is very much on a precipice, that something is going to happen. I would say that things can truly only get better and that we will exist within a world at some point where being queer is safer. And not even just safer, but something that you do not have to fear and that you can be more open about it.

When you are queer, I think you have to be ready to fight, but also ready to find the joy. There is genuinely so much joy—not just in being at the gay bar, going to karaoke, and having fun with other queer folks, and having glitter on your face and all those genuinely joyful moments. But also, just the amount of community I found at protests, like being with other queer people and joining arms in a very common cause. Despite that cause being something that is horrific, I think there's a joy and understanding that around the world, we are all joined together in what we hope to achieve as a queer community. I think there's joy in those moments. And I think there's also joy in being able to look at someone and think, "We are different, but we are the same on this level."

Cara Mackenzie at their library school graduation, Queens College, Flushing, NY, 2024

Sara Collins, born 2000

My full name is Sara Lynn Rachel Collins,
and I use they/them pronouns.
I was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado [in] 2000.
I identify as gender nonconforming,
genderfluid-ish, and then bisexual as well.

Early Life and Family

I've always been very close with my family. There's six of us total. I am the youngest, only AFAB [Assigned Female at Birth] person born to a family with three AMAB [Assigned Male at Birth] boys. Looking back on it, I can see I was both resisting a lot of femininity, but then also embracing a lot of it. It was celebrated from everybody else, outside of my brothers, like, "Oh my God, you're the baby. You're the little girl." And then on the other hand, my brothers [were] like, "If you play with Barbie dolls, you have to have them go under house arrest by our GI Joe, because that's how we want to play."

We moved from Colorado to Connecticut in 2008 and then back to Colorado, and then finally moved full-time [to Ridgefield] in 2010. The biggest reason was for my mom to get her PhD at Columbia University.

Around fifth grade, when a lot of my friends started talking about cute boys that they liked, I was like, "Yeah, the boys are nice and so are the girls, right?" That was a moment where I was like, "Oh, is this normal?" In middle school, I got very active on Tumblr, and there was a disproportionate amount of queer people in my space on Tumblr, which then cued an entire identity crisis. And I went through a lot of, "Well, I'm not homophobic,

Sara Collins, 2025

but I just wish I wasn't gay." A lot of that came from feelings of, "I don't want this to change how people see me. I don't want this to change how my family sees me."

I had a lot of internalized homophobia. It was never expressly told to me that gay people are evil, or gay people are bad, but I didn't really see many examples of queer joy. When I first started thinking about, "Am I bisexual?" the most easily tangible stories are ones of murder, you know, unjust murder of queer kiddos. And so that made me very scared to be queer.

Coming Out

I first came out to my parents very unexpectedly. I didn't really know how to tell my parents because [they] grew up with a very evangelical Christian upbringing, and there was a lot of a "Don't ask, don't tell" kind of philosophy baked into that. [Also], there was a big philosophy of mine that I shouldn't have to come out because they shouldn't expect me to just be straight. By the time I came out, it was just at a dinner table with my family. Two of my friends were there, and it was just very much not what I was intending to do. It just came up, and I was like, "Oh yeah, no, I'm not straight. I'm bisexual." One of my brothers was immediately like, "Oh, that's really cool; two of my friends are bi," which helped a lot.

My parents were surprised to say the least. My dad, who's normally very talkative, went very quiet, and my mom asked the stereotypical follow-up questions like, "How do you know? How long have you known? Are you sure?" My mom did end up asking me, "Are you trying to soften the blow of coming out as gay or as a lesbian by saying that you're bi?" And I was like, "No, if you know anything about biphobia in the community, you will know that that is not actually an easier way of doing this."

[With my Dad], I had to be very overt and say, "Does this change anything about our relationship?" That was very painful and uncomfortable, and then he said, "Well, it's new. It changes the future I imagined for you." I'll admit I was a little bit mad, like, "It's my future, so why do you have to be upset that this imaginary version of it isn't the reality now?" but we ended up having a good conversation about it.

When I was in middle school and high school, there was a queer community, but it was very informal, to my knowledge. It was my friends and then a few other students, and we all kind of had a little agreement that, "Hey, if anyone gives you shit about this, we've got your back." I would definitely say that at that point, it was just safer to stay a little bit more on the down-low, and kind of keep it a little bit more to a trusted circle.

It wasn't until my senior year [at Ridgefield High School] that the GSA became a thing again. [I was involved in] reviving the GSA that used to be [active at the school]. I was like, "Yes, I want to do this, and I want it to be very active." So, I asked my then-girlfriend; I was like, "We can be co-presidents and then we can get all of our other queer friends that we know to join." The pipe dream was, "Maybe we can establish it, so it will continue," because we knew we [wouldn't] be able to do a ton in just one year.

My personal campaign with the GSA was to talk about how curriculum enforces heteronormativity and provides space for homophobia in our schools, and why that does nothing to protect queer kids. [For example], in health class there was this exercise where the teacher would ask questions like, "Would you feel uncomfortable knowing a gay person?" and she'd be like, "Have a friendly debate." And I was like, "That is not okay." I had to hear them argue why they were uncomfortable with being near gay people.

I think being part of the GSA really got me more comfortable with queer activism and very excited about being vocal about queer activism in college. I was able to take a lot of that experience and skill into college. Just last year, one of my friends and I posted the first-ever lavender graduation at our college [University of Massachusetts, Boston]. We were like, "We want a queer celebration of graduation." So, I was like, "Well, when we did the GSA, we did this," and I relied a lot on that experience.

Career, Activism, and Gender Identity

For the past five years, I've been living in Boston. I worked full-time as a life coach and then housing stabilization specialist for a nonprofit called Roxbury YouthWorks Build, working one-on-one with cisgender males, trans folks, and nonbinary kiddos who were victims of commercial sexual exploitation as children. I got to work [mostly] with queer youth. I learned a lot about victim advocacy and that was my first introduction to harm reduction as a philosophy. And working with those kiddos was just so amazing—being able to talk with young queer kids about their lived experiences, but also the joy that they found in finding communities.

My current job, I am a case manager for an older adult, low-income, affordable housing self-governed cooperative that's funded by the HUD [US Department of Housing and Urban Development]. I work in their apartment building, and I help connect [the residents] with services [and] do basic emotional triage.

Outside of the activism associated with my jobs, I have been active in the North Shore Trans Defense Fund. We put together emergency funding for groups of trans kiddos in North Shore, Massachusetts. [I've] also been very active with Jewish Voices for Peace in Boston, uplifting the queer Palestinian struggle right now. I'm still active with AHOPE, the Boston Public Health Commission-funded needle exchange and harm reduction site, and they also specifically help queer folks. My understanding of activism is that it's collective liberation; [the issues] all go hand in hand. So, the second that you can start policing what one specific gender can do with their bodies, it puts at risk gender-affirming surgeries. It puts at risk decisions that people can make regarding their bodily autonomy.

[With my own gender identity], I've always been like, "Wouldn't it be nice to just jump into a male's body and then jump into a woman's body? Wouldn't that just be so amazing?" It became serious questioning once I started [asking myself], "Is this body dysmorphia or is this gender dysmorphia?" And then I came to the conclusion, "Maybe it's actually both." Once I realized that they/them pronouns really make me feel so much happier with existing and having a body, there was no way to hide it. I was like, "This is very much sink-or-swim for my mental health." That felt a lot more nerve-wracking, but almost more liberating in a sense.

Reflections

I always want to acknowledge that what I have today has been built by queer older adults and queer people who are no longer with us. I am aware of how far we have come, [and] I also am very aware of the backslide that's happening. You just see way fewer bills explicitly protecting [LGBTQIA+ people]. I just hope that we can survive. That's the big hope. But not just survive; I want the queer community to thrive. And that includes acceptance and growth [within the community], because biphobia, rampant transphobia, rampant acephobia[25]—we don't have to prove queerness. We don't need to compete. One person's liberation does not detract from another person's liberation. We can all collectively liberate. I want people to grow old. I want more queer people to be old.

Look for moments of queer joy. Our brains are hardwired evolutionarily to remember negative experiences to protect us in the future. So, you have to go out of your way to find moments of queer joy. Try and practice radical self-acceptance. If you don't feel like you're at the point where you can love yourself, try and get to the point where you can just tolerate yourself. If you have to start at the bare bones of, "I'm a human being and therefore that's the reason why I am okay," that's where you can start. You are not subhuman.

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25 "Ace" is a shorthand term for asexual.

RESOURCES

American LGBTQ+ Museum www.americanlgbtqmuseum.org
A national museum dedicated to LGBTQ+ history and culture, located in New York City

Being an LGBTQ+ Ally https://reports.hrc.org/being-an-lgbtq-ally
A booklet from the Human Rights Campaign, explaining various aspects of sexual and gender identity and offering suggestions for how to be a good LGBTQIA+ ally

PFLAG www.pflag.org
An alliance of LGBTQIA+ people and their loved ones

Queer History Boston www.queerhistoryboston.org/about
A community archives documenting, preserving, and sharing histories of greater Boston and New England's LGBTQIA+ communities

Ridgefield Pride https://ridgefieldpride.org
Celebrating, supporting, and advocating for the LGBTQIA+ community in Ridgefield and beyond

The Trevor Project www.thetrevorproject.org
The leading suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQIA+ young people; they provide information and support to LGBTQIA+ young people twenty-four hours a day

Special thanks to the student volunteers from Ridgefield High School whose curiosity, compassion, and commitment made this oral history project possible. By conducting these interviews with care and respect, they helped preserve Ridgefield voices and stories that will inspire understanding, connection, and pride for generations to come.

Back row, left to right: Levi, Seraphim, Luna, Aaron, Sofia, Theo, Grant, Susan Ferentinos (Project Advisor), Stephen Bartkus (Executive Director, Ridgefield Historical Society).
Front row, left to right: Julie Henderson (Ridgefield High School Faculty and GSA Advisor), Will, Knox, Millie, Frankie, Elizabeth, Mae, Ace, Jane, Alisa Trachtenberg (Founder, Ridgefield Pride).
Not pictured: Georgiana; Skylar, Robin R. Collins (Project Manager).

View the complete interviews online:

Ridgefield Historical Society
www.ridgefieldhistoricalsociety.org

Connecticut Digital Archive
www.ctdigitalarchive.org


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