Parade of Pride

Multiple Connecticut celebrations kick off pride season, including Martha Wash at Pride in the Park

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• A list of resources for transgender individuals and their family
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As I write this letter, we’ve had a very active summer weather-wise: Temperatures reaching 100 degrees, massive thunderstorms, beach days. Mother nature has had a lot going on.

So has our community, and thankfully mother nature hasn’t stopped our various pride celebrations from taking place, even if it literally rained on the SAMESEX 2019 parade in July. Successful pride events in Bethel, Norwalk, Fairfield, Middletown and Bridgeport have already taken place, with three major ones still to come in New London, Hartford and finally, New Haven.

This issue as such takes a look at some of the activity to date, including Middletown’s massively successful debut pride event (see parade photos on page 17) along with the 9th (!) Annual SAMESEX celebration in Bridgeport (starting on page 28) for a recap of some of the events that have taken place so far.

One of the pride events, Triangle Community Center’s Pride in the Park, was one of the first major events for TCC’s new executive director Sean-Michael Hazuda, who took the reins earlier this year. Lucy Gellman, editor of The Arts Paper, interviewed him about his background and his plans for the Center. Check out their conversation on page 18.

As we’ve covered in our pages this year, this was an important year legislatively for our state and LGBTQ+ rights. We’ve made a lot of progress, although there’s still plenty of work left. Frank P. Borrelli, a new writer to the pages of Centerline, talked with a few members of our community about where things stand and his recap is on page 8.

Erica Oliner is the author of this issue’s viewpoint, and has an interesting take on how as a lesbian she doesn’t feel the pressures of the patriarchy, a natural outgrowth, she says, of how she saw the world as a lesbian. I found it a fascinating take, and I think many of our readers will have a strong opinion about of it. Read her take on page 4.

One of the goals we’ve had at the Pride Center is to organize and share helpful resources for the community, and one population that has seen a burgeoning growth of resources has been the transgender community (long overdue, but not taken for granted). For those who aren’t sure where to turn, we hope this list on page 14 gives you a starting point, as well as some resources for your family.

The OutCT team in New London is gearing up for their pride in August, but earlier this year they had another edition of their popular Born This Way Fashion Show, which this year featured the theme "Midnight in Paris." Many of the fashion takes were modeled by drag personas, adding an additional queer touch to the proceedings. Check out some of the photos on page 17.

The Imperial Sovereign Court of All Connecticut’s Dragapalooza fundraisers tend to be a popular one, raising thousands of dollars each year, 2019 being no exception. The funds this year went to APNH: A Place to Nourish your Health and Y2Y New Haven. Check out the details about Dragapalooza starting on page 24.

Finally, we’ve been setting up some new technology at the New Haven Pride Center, and with that, some new email addresses. Going forward, please send your thoughts, opinions, and suggestions to our new email address, centerline@newhavenpridecenter.org - this gives us a separate inbox to manage things going forward, and to reduce the chances of your messages getting lost in the shuffle.

We thank you as always for picking up Centerline; our next issue will be our combination pride guide for Pride New Haven along with our September issue. We’ll have a piece about activities targeted at the queer women community, as well as one about Short Beach and its connection and appeal to our community. So keep an eye out for that in mid-September!
“Men are scared women will laugh at them. Women are scared men will kill them,”
Margaret Atwood’s perfect summation of patriarchal society. But what if the latter wasn’t true? What if it was possible that women did not have to be afraid of men? In my experience it is possible.

My best friend Aaron always used to joke that I have the confidence of a straight white cisgender male. For some time, it was simply a joke, but I started to realize it’s actually true. I move through the world differently than other women I know. I carry myself a certain way, unapologetically. I began to wonder why. Where did this confidence come from? Was it innate or learned? Was it due to my appearance or sexuality? I started examining my life experience and how it has shielded me from the toxic patriarchy in which we live.

I realized I was gay at age eleven and came out a few years later at age fourteen. This is a pivotal age for all people, girls and boys alike. This is the age at which we start learning about desire. Puberty strikes and hormones rage. We develop attraction(s), both romantic and sexual. Desire can be exciting but it can also be dangerous. Whenever we want something from another it can be leveraged. Desire has a direct relationship to power. You having something I want would give you a great deal of power over me. Young girls start to look to young boys for acceptance, approval and permission. As a collective they begin to change and edit themselves to gain this. Putting on makeup, dressing a certain way, wearing your hair a certain way, saying the “right” thing and often saying nothing at all. It is in these moments that their power starts to escape them and shifts to their male counterparts. I know many of you are wondering, don’t boys do this too? Don’t young men edit themselves for their female crushes? The answer is yes. They absolutely do. But the bombardment of messaging directed at young girls and women in our society is far greater than that for boys and men. Think about this. How many times in media, film and television, do we see an overweight man with a thin, “traditionally” attractive female? Now reverse it. The patriarchy affects us all. Boys, girls, men and women alike. I, however, can only speak on the experience of being a woman in this world as that’s all I’ve ever been.

I was unlike my cohort. I decided early on I did not want men romantically or sexually. I never had to edit. I never sought their approval or their permission. In fact, I struggled so much to find it within myself. My three years spent in the closet were the darkest of my life. Coming out to oneself is often harder than coming to anyone else. It was for me. Breaking free of that gave me a strength beyond my years and experience. The self-acceptance I learned still acts as a kryptonite to patriarchal ideals.

Young women learn to fear men. To never leave their drinks alone at a bar, to not go jogging alone at night, to go to the bathroom in packs and keep their keys between their fingers. Perpetuating rape culture and reactionary practices. Putting the responsibilities on the victims rather than the perpetrators. These concepts and ideas are so ubiquitous that they seem innate. They are not. These

How Growing Up a Lesbian Made Me Immune to the Patriarchy

by Erica Oliner

Erica Oliner

VIEWPOINT
ideas and concepts are learned. This is not something we are born with but something that is taught to us. I know this because I never learned it. At least until I did.

In college I would hear stories from my straight female friends about the atrocities. My utter bewilderment was met with echoes of concurrence and I started to feel different. So many women have these shared experiences yet I do not. You would think I was raised in a bubble or under a rock with the incredulity I felt as I learned how dangerous men can be. Since I learned to fear men at an age when I felt invincible, I was not afraid at all. I was enraged! I felt powerful, empowered in fact to do something about this. I started subconsciously protecting my female friends and strangers from catcalls and unwanted advances in bars. I would intervene whenever I saw a sober man with a drunk woman trying to leave the bar. On the dance floor I would wriggle myself between two people if I saw discomfort or fear on her face. I became very good at recognizing this. I was doing this in a naive and rather reckless way. Offering myself up as a substitute, a martyr. With a masculine presentation I felt immune to the dangers most women are conscious of on a daily basis. I felt men did not desire me as much as I didn’t desire them and thus I was safe.

As I furthered my understanding of this unique privilege, I became more conscious of the pervasiveness of the patriarchy. I also realized my interventions from college are simply a Band-Aid on a bullet wound and not a solution to a much larger problem. They are also incredibly risky and not something many of us are comfortable with. When I started to grasp what made me unique and where my confidence came from I found the actual solution.

Self-acceptance and self-love. As cliché as it may be it truly is what set me apart. My sexuality and gender expression were not the cause of my patriarchal immunity but rather catalyzed a process many of us experience far later in life. The real solution to the patriarchy, for both men and women, is to live as our authentic selves, unapologetically and knowing we have all that we need within us.
There is always something interesting and fun going on somewhere in Connecticut! Check out these events that are coming up around the state, which includes two competitions, two pride celebrations and a fun barbecue.

Know of an event you think should be featured? Email us at centerline@newhavenpridecenter.org

August 2 – 4: Mr. CT. Bear 2020 Competition at Sheraton Meriden, Meriden
Who will be the next Mr. Connecticut Bear? Join the Northeast Ursamen host the annual Mr Connecticut Bear competition where the members of the community strut their stuff and impress the judges and try to win the chance to represent the community for the next year!

More info at mrctbear.org.

August 12: Connecticut Sound Pride at Walnut Beach, Milford
Join in all the fun of a Pride Beach Day! Kickback and lay in the sun, enjoy beach ball and other beach games, and dance to lots of music. Bring your own food and drink to share with a neighbor!

Parking is $20, but the fun is free!

More info at facebook.com/events/1018258928358781/

August 18: Queer Kickass BBQ at College Woods in East Rock Park, New Haven
BBQ with the organizers of mPowerment New Haven. Join in all the fun of the 5th Annual event which will feature the talents of Xiomarie LaBeija, Robin Fiercè, Ava Cado, and Natasha Starr. Food will be provided by Eric from Sweet Relief Catering, as well as lawn games, free and confidential HIV testing.

More info at facebook.com/events/421502441772404/

August 24: New London Pride at Ocean Beach Park, New London
Join the OutCT team as they host the annual New London Pride which features a jam-packed day of music and entertainment on the beach. Vendors and information booths, yummy food trucks, and more await for you!

Additional events on August...
23rd and 25th!  
More info at http://www.outct.org

**September 6 - 8: Mr. Connecticut Leather 2020 Contest at 168 York Street Café, New Haven**

Who will be the next Mr. Connecticut Leather? The organizers of Mr. Connecticut Leather come together for a weekend of leather, education, and fellowship.

This year’s weekend includes a contestant meet and greet, two BDSM education classes/demos, a cigar social, the CONTEST, and a fabulous Victory Brunch hosted by the Imperial Sovereign Court of all Connecticut!

More info at facebook.com/events/599842067109233/

The Mr. Connecticut Leather 2020 Contest will take place September 6-8 at York Street in New Haven. The weekend is packed full of activities.

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- Pride Guide Ads

More into: newhavenpride.org/programming/pride

**Stay Connected:** @PrideNewHaven

**Our Sponsors**
Middletown launched their pride celebrations with a bank this year, featuring a parade and entertainment program that instantly became one of the state's most attended events. Here are some scenes from the massive parade that kicked off the pride celebration this year.

Photos by Perceptions Photography
The recent legislation signed into law by Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont has been described by some to be the most sweeping pro-LGBTQIA+ legislation to come out of the state of Connecticut house since marriage equality in 2008.

Although there is great excitement around the passed legislation, there is certainly work to be done to ensure full equality for LGBTQIA+ people in Connecticut. In the age of President Trump, it is comforting to know that there are elected officials that care deeply about the rights of all people and who invite the community to the table.

As a resident of Massachusetts, I am old enough to have been a part of the protests at the state house in Boston for marriage equality in 2003 and although that legislation was historic, it seemed that some forgot about the needs of some
members of our community for whom marriage equality was the least of their worries. The recent legislation passed into law in Connecticut includes:

• bills that concern paid family and medical leave that expands the definition of family to include “chosen family,”
• the development of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer health and human services network,
• expanded prevention of HIV by allowing minors to have access to PrEP,
• and the rejection of gay and transgender panic defenses.

Democratic Representative and Deputy Majority Leader Jeff Currey, who represents constituents in East Hartford, Manchester and South Windsor, expressed that “none of this could have been accomplished with the legislature alone. I must recognize CT Equality and enough can’t be said for community support.”

Although the four bills passed into law are certainly a reason to celebrate, there were a number of significantly important bills that did not pass during this legislative session. The bills that many would like to see revisited next term include:

• a bill that recognizes a person’s Intersex status or characteristics, updating of state forms to reflect ones gender identity,
• the creation of a task force to study discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression that occurs in state workplaces and schools,
• safe bathroom facilities at schools for gender nonconforming students, the adoption of the uniform parentage act of 2017,
• the formation of a bill of rights for adolescents in foster care and accessibility,
• and inclusiveness of the state capitol and legislative office buildings to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities and provide a public lavatory that is not gender-specific within the state capitol and legislative office building.

There is understandable disappointment regarding the legislation not passed during the last legislative session.
Layne Gianakos, Transgender Care Case Manager/Prep Navigator at Anchor Health Initiative testified in support of HB5505 the bill that would have added an additional gender marker on state documentation and state issued IDs.

Gianakos expressed, “I see clients every week who are distressed over being forced to choose M or F on their IDs and wish they could have documentation that accurately reflects who they are. Ideally, I’d love to have gender markers removed from IDs completely! However, I do think having options other than M or F is a great first step. There is still a chance it can happen during the next legislative cycle. What we really need are allies to come forward to garner support for this bill.”

Allies are to any movement of marginalized people an absolute necessity. Allies do not wear a uniform. Allies are everywhere and often manifest in forms that are not expected.

§ § §

On the road to equality each step forward sometimes comes with bumps in the road. Lindsay Pembrooke, who serves on the Board of Directors of the New Haven Pride Center, believes, “most important was the Gay and Transgender Panic Defense legislation. People are mobilizing everywhere around these issues. I’m disappointed as Connecticut used to lead the way on many of these issues and have yet to approve legislation defending and honoring a person’s Intersex status or characteristics and a third gender marker also needs to be passed in the next legislative session.”

I believe that we will see full equality in my lifetime but it will not come without a cost. It is the responsibility and the right of the people to mobilize. Our voices in the LGBTQIA+ community have lit the fire of revolution before and will again in this America. States, now more than ever, possess the ability to mark their territory with legislation that can limit or widen people’s access to their basic civil rights.

Connecticut is doing the work to widen access. Rep. Currey, along with Rep. Raghib Allie-Brennan and a number of community advocates, worked hard to represent the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community and their advocacy and determination will move future legislative forward to the Governors desk.

Although pride month has come to a close, let’s intentionally and officially recognize pride as an inclusive movement again. We must face facts that we are in danger. Transgender women of color are being brutally murdered daily and images of the victims of hate crimes against members of our community are plastered all over Facebook as President Trump sits in the oval office.

The recent legislation signed into law in Connecticut is just a law. It exists on a piece of paper signed by a man in charge. It is up to the people to ensure that the law remains the law.

When people with HIV get access to the advocacy and support they so desperately need and we eradicate the virus, then we have evidence of the law at work. When people can list their full and complete identity on legal document’s we have evidence of the law at work. When the killing of innocent Transgender people ends, we will have evidence of the law at work.

When our humanity is the thing that binds us all to each other again, we can look back and recognize the fight that was and the world that awaits us.
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Yale New Haven Health believes the sum is greater than all of its parts. When individual organizations work well together with a common mission, great things happen. This collaboration is what makes our community strong.
RESOURCES

Support and Social Groups for the Transgender Community

Compiled by Layne Alexander Gianakos, with additional resources provided by Lindsey Pembrooke and Patrick Dunn

HOTLINES

TransLifeline: 24/7 support hotline for transgender people with a suicide hotline, assistance linking with local resources, and grants for transition-related needs. Call 877-565-8860.

GROUPS FOR YOUTH

Translation, a support group for transgender teens 13-18 coordinated by Tony Ferraiolo. Meets every 3 weeks in Greater New Haven. For more information, contact tonyferraiolo.com or 203-376-8089.

Create Yourself, an art group for transgender and gender nonconforming children 12 and under coordinated by Tony Ferraiolo. Meets every 3 weeks in Greater New Haven. For more information, contact tonyferraiolo.com or 203-376-8089.

GROUPS FOR ADULTS

Express Yourself!, a support group for transgender and gender nonconforming adults coordinated by Jacki. Meets the third Thursday of every month at the YWCA Greenwich, 259 East Putnam Avenue, Greenwich. For more information, contact JackiAles@gmail.com.

Nonbinary Support & Discussion, coordinated by the Triangle Community Center. Meets 2nd Monday of the month (7:30p) at the Triangle Community Center, 618 West Ave, 2nd Floor, Norwalk. For more information, contact irene@ctpridecenter.org.

PFLAG Hartford Non-binary Break Out Group. Meets every 3rd Wednesday of each month (7:30p).

Questioning Gender Discussion Group, for non-binary/trans individuals and/or anyone who is in a process of gender discovery and exploration coordinated by Shayn Williams-Burrus. Meets on the 2nd Monday of the month at the New Haven Pride Center at 84 Orange Street, New Haven. For more information, contact shaynwilliamsburris@gmail.com.

Transitions, a support group for transgender individuals coordinated by Stokes Counseling Services at their offices at 35 Porter Avenue, Suite 2A, Naugatuck. For more information, contact 203.567.4317.

Trans Young Adult Support Group, a support group for young adults age 18 – 25 coordinated by the New Haven Pride Center. Meets twice a month on the 1st Wednesday (7:30p) and the 3rd Sunday (10:30a), at the New Haven Pride Center, 84 Orange Street, New Haven.

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**Transgender Support Group**, coordinated by Middlesex Hospital. Meets on the first Tuesday of the month (6:30PM) at Middlesex Hospital, 28 Crescent Street, Middletown (Bengtson-Woods conference room).

**Transgender Support Group**, coordinated by the Community Health Center in New London. Meets the 3rd Wednesday of each month (5:30p) at 1 Shaws Cove, New London.

**Transgender Support Group**, coordinated by the New Haven Pride Center in New Haven. Meets three times a month at the New Haven Pride Center, 84 Orange Street, New Haven. Please contact the group leaders for the schedule. For more information or for the meeting schedule, contact nhpcadulttransgroup@gmail.com.

**Transmasculine Support Group**, coordinated by the New Haven Pride Center in New Haven. Meets once a month at the New Haven Pride Center, 84 Orange Street, New Haven. Please contact the group leaders for the schedule. For more information or for the meeting schedule, contact nhpctransmascgroup@gmail.com.

**Triangle Transgender Society**, coordinated by the Triangle Community Center. Meets 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month (7:00p) at the Triangle Community Center, 618 West Ave, 2nd Floor, Norwalk. For more information, contact irene@ctpridecenter.org.

**GROUPS FOR PARENTS**

**Group Support for Parents of Trans Kids**, hosted by Jordan Buell Hunt, MSW, LCSW. Meets the first Saturday of each month. Call 973.975.4620 for more information.

**TransPACT**, a support group for parents of transgender and gender nonconforming children coordinated by Tony Ferraiolo. Meets every 3 weeks in Greater New Haven. For more information, contact tony@tonyferraiolo.com or 203-376-8089.

**GROUPS FOR SPOUSES**

**The Spot**, a free monthly support group for cis spouses and partners of trans individuals coordinated by Sarah Gilbert. Meets the 2nd Thursday of each month (7:00p - 8:30p) at 642 Hilliard Street, Manchester, CT. For more information contact sarah@transitionstherapyllc.com or 860-884-8372.

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NewHavenSymphony.org
New London's OutCT hosted the annual Born This Way Fashion Show to raise money for their youth program. This year's theme was "Midnight in Paris," and featured some amazing creations, including some worn by participants in drag. The event took place at the Port 'n Starboard at Ocean Beach Park.

Photos by Travis and Lori Lynn
In April of this year, Norwalk’s Triangle Community Center appointed Sean-Michael Hazuda to serve as the organization’s second ever executive director. In July, we sat down to talk about the role, and some of the chapters in his own life that have led to TCC.

LUCY: So first of all, congratulations! In some ways, this kind of leadership role isn’t new to you at all. You’ve done that for several years. But the organization is. Why did this position speak to you?

SEAN: I don’t know if it’s the position, so much as the work that’s at hand. You see what I mean? I’ve been working as a volunteer with AIDS service organizations for over 20 years, and it means a lot to me personally to be able to support and give back to my LGBT community.

And so, when this job opened, I thought “wow, it would be great to come back to Connecticut.” I had a great time when I was here [he holds a master’s degree from Yale University] and I enjoyed Connecticut. But most importantly, it was the mission of the organization, the scope of the work that we’re doing.

Let’s talk a little more about that.

A lot of people don’t know that TCC has been around for 29 years, and that we have a rich history. People know us, and we have a great reputation in the community, but they don’t really know the full scope of what we do. And so I tell people, they know us, but they don’t know us.

For example, I was giving a talk a couple of weeks ago in Stamford, and I got to share the full range of our services and what we do. This lady came up to me, and she said: “I wish that we had known about you [a couple of years ago].”

She had a friend that was kicked out of the house, because the parents disagreed with the gay lifestyle. He felt isolated and alone—like, “where am I going to go? What am I going to do?”

She said, “man, if I had known all about what you do, I would have sent him right
to you.” And that’s why our outreach program ... we’re gonna do a big outreach from the end of July through the end of November, really as an awareness campaign. So that way, people in the LGBT community, their friends, their family, anyone who could benefit from our services will really get an understanding of what we’re all about.

I would love to get into the nitty-gritty of that outreach campaign. As you’re heading into it, what are the community’s needs as you see them? Why the awareness campaign now?

Well, let me first tell you just a quick rundown of what I say when I go in and visit with people. This is how I wrap it up, because obviously we can’t sit there and talk about all 28 services we offer. I tell them: whether it’s food, housing assistance, counseling, support groups, or an individualized care program, you can come to us and we’re gonna do everything we can to help you. And when you come to us, you’re gonna find a safe place with loving and supportive staff and volunteers.

So the scope of our services is broad. We even have a PFLAG chapter. And I tell people: “Even if you may not be LGBTQ yourself, you may have a child, a friend, a coworker, and you can become an advocate.”

So that’s why this outreach and education program, it needs to be broad. A lot of people don’t realize we’ve been around since 1990. We started out as a grassroots, all-volunteer driven organization for years, and finally, six years ago, we hired our first paid staff. What a difference that has made.

So why right now? Why all of a sudden are we doing this outreach? Well, the Board of Director realizes that here we are coming up on our 30th anniversary—that’s a huge milestone for a nonprofit—and we want to take it to the next level. And then to another level beyond that!

One of the things I do is awareness and marketing. That’s a critical piece for any nonprofit. You can have a great product, and if nobody knows about it, you have a great product that nobody knows about. Right? It’s just real simple.

So this outreach program that we’re doing for this year, the purpose is two-pronged. One, to let the broad community know what we’re doing so we can attract new clients to TCC who are in need of our services. And then two, to attract donors to support our services so we can continue to expand.

Thanks for making a difference in our community

Bank of America recognizes New Haven Pride Center. Community leaders like you are a vital resource and inspiration to us all. Thanks to you, progress is being made and our community is becoming a better place to live and work.

Visit us at bankofamerica.com/connecticut.
I look at the remaining part of 2019 as helping us lay a solid foundation, so that 2020—our 30th anniversary—will be our springboard year where we can really leap up with new programs and new services for more people. There are so many LGBTQ people and friends and family in the broader community who need our services, and we need to be ready and poised to help them.

I want to backtrack a little bit. How are you reading this moment at which we find ourselves, and what is the role of a mission-driven community center like TCC?

Well we have to be completely clear that this is an LGBTQ community center, first and foremost. And we are to provide a breadth of services that will meet the highest demands of the community.

There is no nonprofit that is a one-stop-shop, right? That’s why we have partner agencies. And we have a great symbiotic relationship with these partner agencies that really makes a difference. We want to be able to provide the LGBTQ community with those programs and services that are in greatest demand.

Switching gears—in some ways, this position totally dovetails with the professional work you’ve done for a long time. But you also have a great love for the arts, and I don’t know if that’s true of nonprofit leaders across the board.

I do! I have a wonderful love for the arts. I myself, as a musician (he has played baritone at both Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center with college ensembles), have been very fortunate to have had wonderful experiences as a performer. I also like to skydive—so you know, I have a broad series of likes.

But I think my love for the arts ... anybody who has an appreciation for the arts, it gives you a deep sense for beauty. Whether it’s music, or dance, or painting, or opera—whatever it is. And when you appreciate beauty and look for beauty in things around you, I think that for me personally drives my desires and my work.

When I am talking with a client, for example. They may have become suddenly homeless, or they’ve lost their job, or they were in an abusive relationship—it could be anything. And I see that beauty within them, even though they can’t see it in themselves. And that is so important, because we are to be a mirror for our clients. If we can see that beauty within when they cannot, because of the circumstances that they’re in, it’s such a game changer for them. It gives them a deep sense of hope, and hopefully allows them to start seeing that beauty in themselves again.

When you’ve been a victim of sexual assault, or you’ve been kicked out of your home, or whatever the circumstances, it’s so easy to turn and redirect that shame. And we lose that sense of self and the beauty within. And so if I and the staff and the volunteers can be that mirror for them, so they can see that they’re beautiful and that they are loved, even though it may not seem that way, it is a key, key gift that we can share with those clients.

That’s what I enjoy so much about this job. It allows me to really be present for them in a way that no one else is.

Was this your first Pride In The Park?
Yes! It was amazing.

Tell me what made it so amazing for you.
As you may be aware, about four days prior to the event, someone vandalized our signs. They wrote the word “shame” over the Pride In The Park banners. And they also burned cigarette holes in the face of one of the African-American performers. It really helped galvanize my personal resolve. But more importantly, the community’s resolve.

We are very proud to come out and support the LGBTQ community, and the shame is actually on the person who did that. It was great, because it allowed us to again be a voice in the community. To say: Look. Fifty years ago, the Stonewall Riots occurred in New York City. You look at where we were in 1969, and you look at where we are in 2019, and we are still having to go out and say, “no more.” We will not stand for hatred and discrimination. And “no more,” we’re not gonna be quiet.

Even though over the past 50 years we’ve made incredible strides as a community, you still see these types of people out there in the world. They don’t see beauty. They don’t see beauty. And so that’s what they do. They believe that we’re “shame,” when we’re exactly the opposite.
We're a wonderful asset to the community. I'm saying “we” — the royal “we,” speaking for the LGBTQIA community.

I'm also very big about creating opportunities for families, particularly children, to have a chance to come and get to know the LGBTQ community in a fun and safe environment. And that's why this year, we created our first ever “fun zone.” We had bounce houses and face painting and hula hoops and drag queen story time, and it created this fun environment where families could come out and have their children be a part of this great LGBTQ event, and get to know them.

Like, “mommy, what's that person over there?” “Oh, we'll that's a drag queen!” Or “why are those guys holding hands over there?”

You know? Just allowing them to ask questions. Kids are the best observers. And the parents are there and they can say “Oh! Well those two women, they're in love with each other and that's why they're holding hands. They love just like we do.”

It opens a conversation. A dialogue. They're having a fun time, and so that's really important for me, because when I was growing up, this was never discussed. We would have never gone to event, nor would there have been any event, like this in Texas. It would never have happened.

And so, it's just a really wonderful way for the whole community to come together ... and it just happens to be centered around Pride.

What did you see there that really excited you about being back?

It's just amazing here in Connecticut that there are so many families that are open and really wanting to introduce their kids to a whole breadth of things, so they can really get the chance to know the broader society, and the world really.

There was this place I lived in Texas for a while, it was almost all Anglo. And so these people lived in a bubble, and then they send their kids off to college, and they [the kids] have no experience with interacting with people who are not wealthy and Anglo. What a terrible disservice they have done to those children.

And here in Connecticut, I observe a deep commitment from the broader community and also individual families that want their children to interact with people from different countries, from different socioeconomic backgrounds. And as we are with LGBTQ, with different sexual orientations and gender identities and all this type of stuff.

It's so refreshing for me, and it really motivates me. It's so progressive and so committed to LGBTQ rights, and that's so refreshing. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to be here. I personally wanted to be in a community like this. And Fairfield County is an amazing community.

I want to dig deeper on two things you said. The first, and I'm paraphrasing, is that we are 50 years out from...
Stonewall and still have a long way to go.

It’s not so much that we have a long way to go—we have to keep sustaining and pushing forward. I’m going to use Congressman [Jim] Himes, I’m going to paraphrase him, because we just had the flag raising [of the Pride flag] in Stamford. I had talked about Connecticut being on the forefront of so many wonderful things. He said: “You know, we have been on the forefront. But if we don’t keep pushing on, we can slide backwards.”

We can’t say “oh well, now we’ve got this, time to move on.” No! We always have to be there advocating for it, just like any group. If you don’t continue to advocate for protections, equality, respect … we have to sustain it.

In that advocacy that you mentioned is my other question! How are you hoping to engage folks now, given your years of advocacy work in HIV and AIDS?

I did not do advocacy work. I volunteered directly at their centers, in their HIV clinics. That was one of the things that brought me great joy, was having the chance to visit with people. Because when someone’s coming to a testing clinic, they’re not there for fun. They’re there because they believe they have had a risk of exposure, or maybe a risk of exposure, and it’s serious business.

So I would basically be the receptionist. It was fun, because people would come in, I would get to talk to them, get to know them, we’d joke around, try to lighten the mood as much as we could so they would feel relaxed and comfortable and safe.

It always made me feel good when the case managers would say “oh, this person was in here and said they appreciated you making them feel so relaxed.” I felt that that was sort of a calling that I had, to be there to help people. Most importantly, it allowed me to really get to hear people’s stories. Even though they might invite me into their life for that 20, 30 minutes while they’re waiting, I felt that it was my job to be available to them in any way they needed.

If someone is frightened or has a bad experience, they may never come back to a testing site. And then, they may become positive and not know it. So I did not do advocacy work. I was there on the front lines with the clients.

I find it interesting that you don’t think of that as advocacy work. I’m an advocate for the organization that I’m volunteering for, and for the importance of testing. Like, people would come in there to get their HIV test, and I’d be like “Oh! Well are you also interested in some of our STD testing, like checking for syphilis? Did you know that in our local community, there’s been a huge surge in syphilis? It’s over 50 percent increase over the last couple of years. While you’re here, just takes an extra 30 seconds and we’d be happy to test you for that.”

I talked to them about it and things like that. I don’t see that as advocacy so much as promoting health and wellness.

Within that idea of hearing and telling stories—that’s a very fundamentally human thing—what is the story that you want to be telling about TCC?

We are here to give hope when people can’t find that anywhere else, and we do that by truly caring [for] and loving our clients, and giving them the services and programs that they need. So out message is of hope, but it’s also of action. Because if we give someone that glimmer of hope, and then we don’t follow up with action by providing them with the support they need, that hope is going to fade. And that’s the difference with TCC.

I just recently got a note from a former client, and now she has written a book. And it simply said—when I had nowhere else to go, TCC was there for me. That’s what it’s all about, because we gave her a sense of hope when she had none. We took the action that she needed, and now look where she is. So, I guess hope and action. Or maybe hope in action is really what defines TCC, now and always.

If you read any of our recent stuff, you’ll see something that I put in all of my letters and in anything I talk about. It’s the phrase “always remember, at TCC, you’re family.” I think that’s so important for everyone to know. So often, people in the LGBTQ community are isolated, they feel alone, that people don’t love them or maybe they don’t have a close relationship with their family because of who they are. When you come to TCC, you are family because we are your family.
Dragapalooza 2019

The fourth edition of this popular fundraiser, which features more drag performers in one night than any other event in the state, supports two charities each year. This year supported APNH: A Place to Nourish your Health (formerly AIDS Project New Haven) and Y2Y New Haven.

Photos by Lucy Gellman
Hot Night at Dragapalooza Raises $3k for APNH, Y2Y

by Lucy Gellman

Originally published in the Arts Paper; used with permission.

A State Representative transformed into a high-heeled wonder, then ended the night in her stocking feet. A trans man came out onstage. A handmaid got out of Gilead, and into a New Haven bar. Paris burned, and burned, and burned some more.

And at the end of the night, thousands had been raised to make sure homeless kids, many of whom are queer, have a safe place to stay.

A celebratory, often political tone defined a sweat-soaked Dragapalooza Saturday night, as the annual fundraiser rolled into 168 York Street Cafe for the third year in a row and fourth overall. Established by New Haven-based queen Dandy Lions in 2015, the event is a statewide fundraiser by the Imperial Sovereign Court of All Connecticut for two beneficiaries that change each year.

This year, funds went to A Place To Nourish Your Health (APNH; formerly AIDS Project New Haven) and Y2Y New Haven, a youth-led homeless shelter slated for the city’s Wooster Square neighborhood. Despite steamy weather, the event raised over $3,000 in just under four hours. Over 20 queens, some from Long Island, New York City, and Rhode Island participated for a packed house. Like many of the court’s charity events, net proceeds go directly to APNH and Y2Y.

“We need to be there for the youth because they’re the future,” said Kiki Lucia, who co-hosted the event with Lions and Moana Cash. “In 10, 20, 50 years, when I’m too old to go do drag every day and fight at the State Capitol, it’s the youth right now that are going to replace me. We have to make the world better for them and we have to give them opportunity.”

Lucia explained that she also sees Y2Y’s mission as both a New Haven issue and a distinctly queer one (her boy self, New Haven Pride Center Director Patrick Dunn, is on the organization’s advisory board). Across the country, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely than their peers to struggle from housing insecurity. In Connecticut, 40 percent of the state’s homeless population between 18 and 25 identifies as LGBTQ+, according to the Trevor Project. As part of its work, Y2Y pairs youth who are struggling with housing insecurity with youth who have housing security, to problem solve with peers.

“It’s going to be this incredible resource for LGBTQ youth that nobody else in Connecticut and most of the U.S. are doing,” she added. “It’s youth helping youth, which will make the world a better and safer place.”

Throughout the night, performers championed LGBTQ+ voices, some lightening a relentlessly hot, sweaty mood while others pointed a middle finger straight at the White House. Chuleta Divine, the current reigning empress from the Imperial Sovereign Court of New York, turned her routine literally sweet as she threw prepackaged cookies, brownies, and bags of potato chips at attendees to Eileen Barton’s “If I Knew You Were Comin’ I’d’ve Baked a Cake.”

Lions went for an evolving staple, the crowd singing along as she revived a black-and-white dress for a galvanizing “This Is Me.” Later in the evening, longtime queen Robin Banks went for deep belly laughs, mixing Moana’s “How Far I’ll Go” with clips that channeled robocalls, the Book Of Mormon, Adele’s “Hello” and Banks’ own funny mock-dependency on technology, which included stopping during her routine to take a call that ostensibly came in.

Some seemed to channel
the youth angle of Y2Y, tapping into recent nostalgia that got the audience screaming with delight, some members singing along. In town from Hartford, bearded queen Myst Oppor Tunity gave a rhapsodic and raucous performance as the Pokémon character Ash, pulling squishy Pokéballs out of her bra to a sped-up, auto-tuned version of the theme song.

But others dedicated their performances to protest drag and LGBTQ+ voices that are still underrepresented in the mainstream, testing out both quiet and not-so-quiet approaches. Taking the stage early in the evening—and in a wool coat that earned her a bucket overflowing with tips—Rory Roux Heart began an understated routine to “Journey To The Past,” from the 1995 Disney version of Anastasia.

As the words landed one by one—“Arms will open wide/I'll be safe and wanted/Finally home where I belong”—she seemed to get lost in them. Then she let the coat drop to the stage in one swoop, revealing a dress in blue, white, and pink, the same colors as the transgender pride flag. The audience cheered. Heart lifted her arms above her head one more time, then reached for a mic that Lucia held out like an offering.

“Hi, I'm Rory Roux Heart, and this performance was me coming out as a transgender man,” they said. The audience cheered even louder as she scooped up her coat, and stepped off the stage.

Strutting out before an audience that included the Connecticut drag icon Bubbles, Sylvia Heart opened her set with a clip from Paris Is Burning dedicated to the art of reading—or as the film describes it, “the real art form of insult.” As those voices from the past halted, Alaska Thunderfuck's cutting, sure vocals rose over the speakers. Suddenly, attendees were somewhere between a hot bar in New Haven and a RuPaul-sculpted dreamland.

Sylvia Heart paused long enough for the audience to recognize “Your Makeup Is Terrible,” then broke into an exquisite voguing routine, hands a blur as she worked the area in front of the stage. In the easy, calculated bend of her legs was an extraordinary homage to the history of drag, and the fact that it is still here, living, in an administration that has tried to legislate and pray the gay out of America.

That sense of resistance and pride kept the night going. Midway through the first act, East Hartford State Rep. Jeff Currey appeared not as Jeff Currey at all but Bianka Merica, the drag brainchild of Kiki Lucia and a several hundred dollar campaign (all of which went to the beneficiaries) to get Currey to perform for charity.

Taking a mic in front of the crowd, Merica recapped LGBTQ+ wins in the most recent legislative session: legislation creating a LGBTQ Health & Human Services Network, removing parental consent for youth access to PrEP, banning the gay and trans panic defense, and passing paid family leave with the addition of one's chosen family.

“We had the gayest legislative session in
Connecticut history,” Curry/Merica said to screams, claps, and pumping fists from the audience.

But she didn’t just stand there—she got ready for her music, and slayed. Watching as the tips rolled in just to get her to perform (“That’s a real five!” Cash exclaimed at one point to peals of laughter), Merica jumped into a routine with Whitney Houston’s “Queen Of The Night.”

She worked it to Beyoncé's "Get Me Bodied," crossing the patio and catching on a long red cape that matched her heels. No problem: without missing a beat she picked herself up, and continued to “I Am A Woman,” Aerosmith’s “Dude Looks Like A Lady,” and selections from Lady Marmalade and Madonna's “Vogue,” inspired by New York's drag balls and not the other way around.

That tone kept going for much of the night, but never so loudly as in the final piece. Creeping onto the stage to the trailer to The Handmaid's Tale, Kiki Lucia pressed her hands into her body as if she was in physical pain, looking up at the audience to reveal a red X painted over her lips and mouth.

As the trailer ended, a different voice crackled to life: Chaka Khan's “I'm Every Woman.” The audience began clapping along.

She canvassed the stage, the music switching up as she brought the routine. Donald Trump’s voice cut in—"Grab em' by the pussy!" he exclaimed—but was cut off by Halsey, and again by Cher, belting “This Is A Woman's World.”

In the audience, it was hard not to cry and cheer at the same time. As Cher commanded “All the women in the world/Stand up come together now,” some did, unsure what exactly they were supposed to do. Back close to the stage, Lucia was picking up speed. The cape came off, revealing a wonder-woman like red leotard underneath.

“My body/My choice,” read her legs in thick, red lipstick. During the event, representatives of both APNH and Y2Y said that they were excited to have been chosen for this year’s event. Barry Walters, media outreach manager at APNH, said that the organization will be putting funds toward the organization’s “Caring Cuisine” program, which provides meals to people and families affected by HIV who may be unable to travel or grocery shop.

“It’s such an honor for us,” said Y2Y Co-Founder Sam Greenberg. “This [the Imperial Sovereign Court] is a community that has come together again and again to support all folks in the LGBTQ community who need assistance in all sorts of different ways.”

“This is choosing to support young people who are experiencing homelessness who disproportionately identify as LGBTQ,” he added. “The fact that this is a group that has such an incredible legacy of doing so makes the honor even greater for us.”

Drag performer Bonnie Petit sings live during Dragapalooza 2019 at 168 York Street in New Haven.
SAMESEX Stuns at City Lights

by Lucy Gellman

*Originally published in the Arts Paper; used with permission.*

Daisy won’t look at the camera because she has better things to do. Between two fingers on her right hand, she tightens her grip on Dennis Cooper’s *The Sluts*, its orange-red cover almost enough to distract from her face. Almost. Her lips push together and relax with the words. A bathrobe hangs, belted, over her frame. In her left hand, a huge mug beckons with a pumpkin blooming across the side.

But who is Daisy? Why are we supposed to care so much about her?

Kevin Cox’s “Daisy In Real Life” is one of over 100 pieces now on view at City Lights Gallery as part of SAMESEX 2019, a group show of over 30 LGBTQIA+ artists who have come together for Bridgeport Pride celebrations. After opening July 18 as part of the ninth annual Bridgeport Pride and SAMESEX Variety Show, the exhibition runs through Aug. 30.

SAMESEX pulls viewers in from the moment they enter the gallery, asking them to take a closer look at what they understand as LGBTQ+ art. On a far wall, Cassandra Mendoza’s *Trust Your Struggle* series looks out at the viewer, inviting them to come closer. In a photograph at the bottom right corner, the subject looks the viewer head on, eyes sliding just slightly to the right without ever drifting away. It’s not a pugnacious look so much as a question, like hey, are you going to ask my name? Or maybe hey, what are you doing in my dressing room?

In another, the same face has shifted, lips somewhere between a smile and pout. Eyes travel downward, to a corner of the room we can’t see. Hands rake through hair. A tattoo snakes across the collarbone with the simple direction: *Trust the struggle*. Viewers are left to figure out exactly what that means for the subject, and for them.

That closer look—often head on—defines many of the works in the exhibition. Not far from Mendoza’s work, Luis Lopez’ *Midnight At Trevi Lounge* series takes over a section of white wall with bright acrylic on board compositions, each depicting Lopez’ friends (sometimes in multiple shots and poses) during their time at Lopez’ local gay bar. They pull the viewer in with an immediate familiarity: we may not know these men but we want to, with their broad grins, laughing cheekbones and close-up, piercing eyes.

“Using portraits to bring you up close and personal with some of the people you may find there on a regular night, the intention is to trip the over-sexualized nature of bodies in order to get a more intimate conversation with these individuals, something that can be primal and sexy in its own light,” reads an accompanying label.

That’s true of Cox’s work too, hung salon-style on a nearby wall. Images from his *This Is Me* series are particularly intriguing: the artist has found subjects through their photographs on social media, and reimagined those same people in the real world. Gone is the schmaltzy
pose and self-confidence of the selfie, replaced with how they might look if stumbled upon unexpectedly.

In “Daisy In Real Life,” that juxtaposition is front and center, placing the subject in a frumpy bathrobe as she’s trying to get some reading done. Here is someone who has spent time on their appearance: nails painted, lips full, hair streaked with blonde. But the curtain has been pulled back: Daisy just wants to read her book and drink her coffee too.

In another room of the gallery, Sarah Stinson-Hurwitz’s work (pictured above) beckons to the viewer with a spray or bright color, then takes their breath away with “Trying To Remember The Ones I Never Knew: A Memorial To The Lives Lost At Pulse.”

Commemorating several of the victims of the 2016 shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Flo., Stinson-Hurwitz has chosen simple materials for elegiac pieces: acrylic paint and canvas fabric, frayed at the edges like a funeral shroud. Her subjects—all of whom are so young that it is hard to imagine them not full of life—look out at the viewer.

“This work is my general effort to place attentions on remembrance, love and support of those who lost their lives at Pulse,” she writes in an accompanying label. “Our community was attacked, and we need to continue to commemorate those who were lost.”

Other images reference the history of craft and process, drawing from folk arts to stark, startlingly clean portraiture. On the far end of the gallery, Nancy Moore is cheeky and smart in her mixed media “Blanket Statement,” a kind of crocheted homage to LGBTQ+ and particularly trans rights that is also a literal baby blanket.

Moore is not sexualized, even as it dips into his smooth buttocks. Instead, it's a body that doubles as a study in light and shadow. So too his “Ensnared,” as a model looks out at the viewer from what appears to be a fishing net. There’s no cause for alarm here, he seems to assure them: his arms are pulled calmly around his legs, feet flat on the ground.

“We live in a society where we are often discouraged from being ‘naked’ to the world around us,” the artist writes in his statement. “But is that really who we are? What about our deeper selves – our ‘naked’ selves – that which makes us weep with abandon, laugh out loud, or that which gives us reason to rise each morning? What are our passions? What is it that makes us vulnerable? Can we share these parts of us?”

Like the photographs, SAMESEX bares all without ever seeming overwrought. Its greatest strength may be its role as a group show, where voices emerge in a jumble, and get behind a narrative of acceptance and visibility. Each offers something slightly different: a reframed viewpoint, a personal anecdote put to paper or canvas, a vignette or five that dive into love, sex, joy, and beauty.

Welcome, the gallery says from every single vantage point. We’re so glad you’re here. Come exactly as you are. SAMESEX 2019 runs through August 30 at City Lights Gallery, 265 Golden Hill St., Bridgeport. Visit them online at https://www.citylightsgallery.org/ for hours, directions or more information.
SAMESEX 2019 Braves the Rain

by Lucy Gellman

Originally published in the Arts Paper; used with permission.

The skies opened up and the flash mob got cancelled. The march turned into an umbrella-clad stroll. The dressing room flooded. Drag queens worried about melty, smudged makeup and braved puddles in very high heels. But the show went on. There was never a question that it would.

Thursday evening, driving rain was no match for SAMESEX 2019, Bridgeport's ninth annual pride march, art exhibition and variety show at City Lights Gallery and the nearby Bijou Theatre. The event was organized by artist Ricky Mestre, City Lights' Director Suzanne Kachmar and longtime LGBTQ+ advocate Kenneth Hopkins, whose drag persona Dolores Dégagé emceed the variety show portion of the event.

“Tomorrow is going to be our 10th year, and we want to blow it out of the water!” said Dégagé at the Bijou. “This is Bridgeport, the biggest city in the state! We can do this!”

And indeed, the night unfolded as a show of joy and resilience, channeling both the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and unstoppable spirit of celebration that has always lived in SAMESEX. As rain began to fall in sheets around 7 p.m., attendees congregated beneath a tent outside the Downtown Cabaret Theatre, laughter filling the space.

Close to a check-in table, one attendee handed out heart-shaped stickers patterned with rainbows, covering everyone at least once by the end of the night. A couple walked around in tie-dye shirts that sported a list of events that had taken place in 1969, including both Woodstock and Stonewall.

At another, Brian Cobb (pictured at top) had painted himself into a sort of human Pride Flag, his chest emblazoned with the words “50/Stonewall/1969-2019.” Working his way through knots of people, he posed by a pride flag that hung at the tent's opening, his body a thrill of rainbow on rainbow.

“This is special, because it’s me,” he said of the body paint, for which he and his sister Alicia have become celebrated around the city and the state. “Like, I'm gay.
and I get to show that."

Next door at City Lights, art filled almost every square inch of wall for the annual SameSex Exhibition.

A speaker crackled to life at one point, dancer Luis Antonio marking off a circle on the gallery. Slowly, the tinkling piano intro to "This Is Me" rang out over the space. Keala Settle's voice rose, conversation falling to a hush as dancers multiplied.

The song, which has become an unexpected LGBTQ+ staple since its release last year, was meant to score an outdoor flash mob on the city's brightly painted stairs—but plans changed when the stairs started collecting water. Antonio shrugged it off, rain coming off of his hair as he danced. The show had to go on. Even if that meant going on amidst hundreds of people in an art gallery.

Inside the Bijou, performers refused to let the rain dampen spirits—or costumes, as the dressing rooms flooded and clothing was moved onto tables before getting soaked. As the lights went down on the variety show, Dégagé strutted out to Ike and Tina Turner's "River Deep Mountain High," images of the late Sassie Saltimboca stretching across the screen behind her. Around her was the blue and silver mantle Saltimboca wore for performances before her light was snuffed out by cancer in 2015.

"If I lost you would I cry/ Oh how I love you baby, baby, baby!," Tina Turner belted from a speaker. Dégagé roocked to the words, lifting her arms, spinning in a dazzling red gown, and wrapping herself as she closed and then reopened her eyes.

The performance set a galvanizing, propulsive, sometimes funny and emotional tone for the evening ("I wasn't going to turn around, because I didn’t want to cry," Dégagé later said of Saltimboca, her late partner). Dancers from Les Ballets Eloelle lifted the mood with their U.S. premiere, dropping physical comedy even in pointe shoes.

In a live drawing and multimedia number, artist Ricky Mestre turned country music on its head—and then some—reimagining films Brokeback Mountain and Blazing Saddles as he completed a drawing of two cowboys in love—on an easel on a man's back, while everyone on stage gyrated.

The founder of the My City Initiative, performer Netta Walker (pictured below) championed Bridgeport as she took the stage. Just a few months ago, she told the audience, she learned that a song she had produced had been featured on the TV series Younger, which plans on TV Land. The audience clapped and whooped in response.

"I found my passion here," she said. "We’re doing great things and we’re putting this city on the map."

A political tide rose as the night wore on. Performer and statewide trans advocate Casey Fitzpatrick got the crowd cheering as he performed against a blue-and-pink background that read WE ARE VALID in huge, blocky letters.

Dancer Philip Galbert mesmerized the crowd as he took the stage and transformed into a blur, pausing just enough for the audience to read his shirt—Trump, squinting and decked out in rainbow gear—and laugh at the irony in a summer where Trump has killed Obama-era Pride celebrations, forbidden U.S. embassies from flying the rainbow flag, and told four women of color that they are effectively not welcome in a country in which they have fought to rise.

Final performances kept that riotous, fighting spirit going, fueling SAMESEX on the eve of its tenth year. One of the last acts of the night, DJ and musical artist Ephraim Adamz rocked the crowd, drawing cheers as he shouted out trans femmes, mourned the Pulse Nightclub shooting, and raised his fist in a show of resistance, his body pointed skyward from head to toe.

In a dazzling number that came close to 11 p.m., Rory Roux Heart took a different approach, celebrating the centenary of the German film Anders als die Andern (Different From The Others), a queer landmark produced during the Weimar Republic. As she danced before the screen, a century of gay protagonists and LGBTQ+ icons appeared, from Love Simon's titular character to the voguing heads and limbs of Paris Is Burning, perpetually in motion.

By the time artists and performers poured out of the Bijou, the sky had cleared completely. The streets were cool for the first time in weeks, with no hint of Friday's heat and humidity yet in sight. The rain was over. But Trevi Lounge beckoned; the party was just beginning.
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