

OutSmart

NOV. '20

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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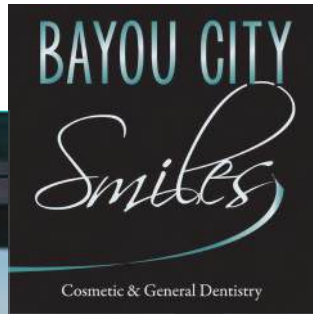
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NOVEMBER 2020

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Unapologetically Trans

Remembering Monica Roberts' legacy of trailblazing journalism and activism

Photography by Ashkan Roayae for OUTSMART magazine

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In 1969, transgender women of color paved the way for LGBTQ equality at the Stonewall

Inn. But in the decades that followed, civil-rights activists and the mainstream media focused almost exclusively on white cisgender gay and lesbian issues. Frustrated by this long-standing injustice, Black trans activist Monica Roberts launched her GLAAD award-winning blog *Transgriot* in 2006 to tell the stories of her people.

This November issue of *OUTSMART* highlights the life and legacy of Monica Roberts, who passed away from natural causes at age 58 on October 6. Writer Brandon Wolf recounts Roberts' courageous journey, which included becoming nationally recognized for providing accurate

information on transgender homicide victims who are often misgendered in police reports and media coverage. Roberts would often pressure news outlets to accurately report on trans stories—a progressive change that has positively impacted the worldwide LGBTQ community.

There is a sad irony about Roberts' death occurring just a month before the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) on November 20. Many LGBTQ organizations used Roberts' *Transgriot* blog as their primary resource to learn about and acknowledge the murder victims commemorated at each TDOR. At least 33 trans or gender-nonconforming people have been killed this year, according to the Human Rights Campaign, and a majority of these victims are Black and Latinx women.

We too often recognize trans people only after they have died,

says The Mahogany Project's Joelle Bayaa-Uzuri. In order to shift this narrative, the local organization is hosting a virtual Black Trans Empowerment Week November 13–19. Writer Lillian Hoang sits down with leaders Verniss McFarland III and Bayaa-Uzuri to preview their lineup of online events.

The Montrose Center also hopes to uplift Houston's trans community by hosting its annual TGiving event. Wolf interviews the event's organizers, who discuss the community's long-standing tradition of providing displaced queer folks with a Thanksgiving celebration.

The holidays can be especially difficult for LGBTQ people, so this November edition highlights three Houston mental-health workers who share some valuable holiday survival tips. Writers Sam Byrd, Jenny Block, and Ryan Leach chat with Ty David

Lerman, Tara Bates, and Dr. ky Stanley, respectively.

Finally, if you're looking for more ways to stay entertained while socially distancing this month, don't miss our previews of two upcoming events: Rice University's *Faces in the Pandemic* exhibit, and the 12th annual Houston Cinema Arts Festival. Both events are offering virtual and in-person options to stay engaged while staying safe.

Have a happy Thanksgiving!



Lourdes Zavaleta
MANAGING EDITOR



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Protections for LGBTQ and Disabled Texans Restored

Social workers will no longer be allowed to discriminate against the two marginalized communities.

By EDGAR WATERS, THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

After backlash from lawmakers and advocates, a state board voted Tuesday to undo a rule change that would have allowed social workers to turn away clients who are LGBTQ or have a disability.

The Texas Behavioral Health Executive Council voted unanimously to restore protections for LGBTQ and disabled clients to the Texas social workers' code of conduct just two weeks after removing them.

Gloria Canseco, who was appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott to lead the behavioral health council, expressed regret that the previous rule change was "perceived as hostile to the LGBTQ+ community or to disabled persons."

"At every opportunity, our intent is to prohibit discrimination against any person for any reason," she said.

Abbott's office recommended earlier this month that the board strip three categories from a code of conduct that establishes when a social worker may refuse to serve someone.

The governor's office recommended removing language that prohibited social workers from turning away clients on the basis of disability, sexual orientation or gender identity. The reason, Abbott's office said, was because the code's nondiscrimination protections went beyond protections laid out in the state law that governs how and when the state may discipline social workers.

That set off an immediate firestorm of criticism from social workers, LGBTQ advocates, and advocates for people with disabilities.

Tim Brown, a social worker on the Behavioral Health Council, complained that he had been the subject of much criticism after the board's earlier vote on Oct. 12. He said the board made its vote not because it wanted to permit discrimination but because it was stuck between the "proverbial rock and a hard place."



The Texas Behavioral Health Executive Council voted to undo a rule change that would have allowed social workers to turn away clients who are LGBTQ or have a disability.

"We're opposed to any form of discrimination," Brown said.

State Sen. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, and state Rep. Jessica González, D-Dallas, urged the board Tuesday to undo its vote and said they would file legislation next year aimed at preventing discrimination against marginalized groups.

"Sometimes when you're put in a position of leadership, it can be a very lonely place, and at times you're being put in a position where you're being asked to do something that you have to push back against," Menéndez told the board.

The board also voted to seek an opinion from Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office about the legality of its rule change, though the board has previously indicated that Paxton's office would likely oppose explicit protections for LGBTQ Texans and Texans with disabilities in the social workers' code of conduct.

Darrel Spinks, the council's executive direc-

tor, said earlier this month that he had already sought an "informal" opinion from the Texas attorney general's office about the rule change, and that the attorneys agreed with Abbott's interpretation. "Your rule needs to match what the statute is," Spinks said at the time.

Paxton, a Republican, has historically opposed expanded protections for LGBTQ people. Spinks estimated it would take 90 days or more to get a formal attorney general opinion.

"We are so grateful for the vote to keep the anti-discrimination protections in place," said Will Francis, executive director of the Texas chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. "This is a recognition of the key principle that a social worker's personal beliefs must never impede a person's right to self-determination or access to services."



This article originally appeared in The Texas Tribune.

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Empowering Black Trans Lives

The Mahogany Project hosts a week-long event to strengthen the community.

By LILLIAN HOANG



Joelle Bayaa-Uzuri (l)
and Verniss McFarland III

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

November 20 marks the Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR), an international annual observance that honors the trans people who have been murdered due to hate crimes. While they are supportive of this memorial, some activists question why trans people are only being recognized after they have died.

“We never highlight [trans people’s] wins; we never celebrate them in life,” says Joelle Bayaa-Uzuri, communications director for The Mahogany Project, Inc. (TMP), a Houston nonprofit that uplifts LGBTQ communities of color.

To shift this narrative, TMP is hosting a weeklong digital event to celebrate the Black trans community. Black Trans Empowerment Week: “When We Rise” takes place November 13–20 on the organization’s Facebook page, and features entertainment, resources, socializing, and more. “This week really highlights the different facets of the Black trans community,” Bayaa-Uzuri says.

The virtual event kicks off on November 13 with a screening of *Man Made*, a documentary

that focuses on trans masculine people who participate in bodybuilding competitions. The following day, TMP will conduct an awards ceremony to recognize activists and organizations that work to improve the lives of Black trans people.

At a November 15 event titled Dear Marsha, individuals can thank and highlight inspiring

LGBTQ historical figures through spoken-word poetry and performance. The event will also feature a tribute to the late pioneering trans journalist and activist Monica Roberts, who used her award-winning Houston-based blog *Transgriot* to provide accurate information about trans victims of fatal violence. →

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Food and Friendship for the Holidays

Montrose Center provides Thanksgiving
meals to transgender Houstonians on November 24

By BRANDON WOLF

Due to stigma and judgment, some transgender people are unable to celebrate the holidays with their biological families, according to Houston activist Atlantis Narcisse. "It is our chosen families that remind us that we are not alone and that we are valued members in the community," she notes.

In order to provide displaced queer folks with a Thanksgiving celebration, the Montrose Center hosts an annual dinner event for trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals. Traditionally, this event is an in-person potluck dinner, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, this year's TGiving on Tuesday, November 24, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. will be drive-thru style to ensure everyone's safety.

The Montrose Center has hired a private caterer to prepare and seal individual meals, which will then be distributed by volunteers to people's cars. In addition to the Thanksgiving dinner, attendees will receive shelf-stable food boxes, comfort/care packages, personally written Thanksgiving cards, COVID-19 resource information, and raffle tickets.

The Center has also produced a Zoom video that folks can watch while eating their meals. A variety of transgender community members will speak about how the community can still come together in spirit this year, even though they can't meet in person.

Matty Gracia, a nonbinary Houstonian, says that attending TGiving in 2018 helped them find a sense of belonging. "I was taken aback by being in a room filled to capacity with other transgender and nonbinary community members, and I was inspired by how nurturing and inspiring our community is," they say. "Now, more than ever, because of social distancing, it is essential to host this event to provide hot meals and care packages to our community, so they know they are being thought of and taken care of during the holiday season."

TGiving is part of the legacy of the late Brenda Thomas, a local trans activist who

began hosting an annual trans-affirming Thanksgiving Day celebration in her home beginning in the mid-'90s. After Thomas passed away in 2006, local trans organizations took over the effort by holding their own potluck dinners.

In 2018, those organizations decided to hold a joint dinner at the Montrose Center. Kent Loftin, the Center's chief development officer, says last year's event served more than 125 people. "It's one of the Center's favorite events," he says. "People love to cook and prepare for it."

While reflecting on the evolution of TGiving, George Zemanek, who volunteers each year and runs the Be Free transmasculine support group, notes that this thriving dinner tradition began with about 10 friends. "I believe that Brenda Thomas would be so happy that we have continued what she started so long ago," Zemanek says. "This year, there was concern that COVID-19 would put a halt to our beloved Thanksgiving potluck. I am infinitely grateful that the good folks at the Montrose Center have found a way to make this event happen."

While TGiving is an event specifically for trans individuals, any member of the LGBTQ community can sign up to help with the distribution effort. Loftin says a total of about 25 volunteers are needed this year, and their tasks will range from prepping and moving meals to loading cars and providing cheer to attendees in the parking lot.

Narcisse, founder of Save Our Sisters United, Inc., a Houston organization that serves trans women of color, has already signed up as a volunteer. "I will enjoy taking part in the Transgender Thanksgiving Dinner drive-thru, because it is important for our transgender community to visibly see and feel unity within the community."



To register for a TGiving boxed meal, visit bit.ly/mctgiving2020 (English) or bit.ly/tgivingesp2020 (Spanish). To donate items for the care/comfort packages through Amazon, go to bit.ly/montrosecenterwishlist. To volunteer at the event, register at montrose-center.galaxydigital.com.

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Turning Anger into Action

Staying politically active beyond November 3.

By DARYL SHORTER, MD

For about two weeks last month, it was entirely legal for Texas social workers and counselors to discriminate against LGBTQ and disabled people by ‘opting out’ of providing mental-health services to them.

Acting on the recommendations of Texas Governor Greg Abbott, the Texas Behavioral Health Executive Council (BHEC) and the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners (TSBSWE) voted unanimously on October 12 to erase disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity from the nondiscrimination clause of its code of conduct.

The potential for damage from this ruling was quite considerable, since mental health disparities are of particular concern among LGBTQ folks. Members of our community are at increased risk of being diagnosed with mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety, while they are simultaneously less likely to receive care. For example, according to a recent national survey by the Substance Abuse Mental Health and Services Administration (SAMHSA), over 40 percent of LGB young adults (18–25) and 30 percent of LGB adults with serious mental illness received no treatment.

Conditions of despair such as substance abuse and suicide are also more common among LGBTQ people. LGBTQ folks are more likely to recreationally use alcohol and drugs, have higher rates of substance use disorders, and are more likely to continue heavy drinking later in life. Individuals who identify as LGBTQ are also at increased risk of developing suicidal ideation or making a suicide attempt, a trend of particular concern among LGBTQ youth.

Full and equal access to mental health services is absolutely critical for LGBTQ people, so it was no surprise that the Board’s decision was met with significant opposition. Fortunately, in response to a tremendous statewide and national backlash, there was a swift reversal of the ruling and a reinstatement of the agency’s nondiscrimination policy on October 27.



Combat Discrimination at the Ballot Box

This episode serves as a stark reminder that marginalized and oppressed people are frequently targeted through legislative and policy attacks. Systemic injustice is perpetuated by the discriminatory policies and practices rooted in many of our institutions. Anti-LGBTQ sentiment is now being legalized under the guise of ‘religious freedom’ or ‘individual rights’—the latest buzz words being used to codify discrimination into law.

To combat these forces, we must continue participating in the electoral process now more than ever by voting in every election. Voting matters because prejudice continues to impact both public-policy decisions and our personal lives. While our national elec-

tions every four years certainly get the bulk of attention, local elections also provide us with a vital opportunity to shape the civic and judicial landscape in our neighborhoods and communities.

Processing Feelings around the Election

The past four years in our country have felt particularly divisive. While Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ folks are all too familiar with the challenges of racism, homophobia, and transphobia, there is a collective sense that things feel much worse than ever before.

It is quite common to feel a measure of sadness, despair, or anger in response to such deep-seated and psychologically taxing con-

flict. Emotional estrangement from friends and family members with differing views (and who vote against your interests while claiming to love and support you) creates a sense of disequilibrium and confusion. And a sense of disconnection and mistrust can set in when people who claim to be allies refuse to examine their privilege or acknowledge their blind spots.

2020 has already been a challenging year, and with the 24-hour news cycle constantly bombarding us with polarizing information, the desire to just “check out” is greater than ever.

Getting Mad as Hell

When someone directly harms us, there is a clear focus for our anger and we know exactly where to direct our frustrations. But when we are attacked by institutional and systemic forces, or by the pervasive negativity and toxicity of our public discourse, it is much harder to find the right place to effectively channel our emotions. This can leave us feeling angry about “no one and everyone” at the same time!

When looking for an outlet for our anger, we sometimes turn to social media just to find people and politicians who will further ignite our outrage. So ask yourself when engaging with certain news or social-media outlets: am I doing this because I’m seeking information and connection, or am I really just looking for a target for my anger?

Transforming Frustration

The truth is, you don’t always need a particular face to aim your anger at. What you need is a plan. How can you mobilize to fight injustice? Perhaps it’s blogging or writing about your experiences. Perhaps it’s a Facebook Live event, a YouTube channel, or a podcast. Sharing your experiences as an LGBTQ person has value, particularly for those who might be struggling with loneliness, isolation, and self-acceptance.

Taking action by exercising our right to vote and participating in community events and the political process not only advances LGBTQ equality, but provides an important outlet for us personally. These are the things that can carry you through November and beyond, regardless of any single election’s outcome.

How will *you* continue the work of advancing LGBTQ equality and empowerment beyond November?

Daryl Shorter, MD, is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and is board certified in both general and addiction psychiatry. His clinical practice focuses on veteran care, and he lectures widely on LGBTQ mental health.

The Masculine Eros

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Dealing with Dementia

Plan wisely for the cost of long-term care.



With today's increased life expectancy, it is possible that you could live a much longer life than your parents and grandparents. But those additional years may not

necessarily be spent in good health.

As we get older, we tend to require more health-related care, which can range from 24-hour skilled nursing services to occasional assistance with everyday activities like cooking and paying bills.

One health condition that has increased dramatically, and will continue to grow, is dementia. Although this disease often starts out slowly, it can become much more debilitating over time, and the necessary care can be extremely costly. So even if you are currently in good health, it is important to plan ahead financially.

The Odds of Developing Dementia

According to the Alzheimer's Association, 5.8 million Americans age 65 and older are living with Alzheimer's dementia in 2020. This equates to roughly 1 in 10 people in this age group, and this figure is expected to grow to nearly 14 million by the year 2050.

Dementia doesn't only affect those who are older, though. While many people start to show signs of Alzheimer's in their mid-60s, the early onset of this disease sometimes occurs in your 30s. The chances of developing dementia also double every five years going forward. So your odds of contracting Alzheimer's dementia are higher than you think, particularly if you are in one or more of the following categories:

- Female. Nearly two-thirds of Americans who have Alzheimer's disease are women.
- African American. Older African Americans are approximately twice as likely to have Alzheimer's or other types of dementia.



- Hispanic. Those of Hispanic descent are around 50 percent more likely to have this condition.

Many health conditions like dementia can impact family and friends as well, so even if you aren't the patient, you may need to provide care for a loved one who is. This role not only requires a great deal of time, but it can also be costly from a financial standpoint.

Planning for the Cost of Care

Long-term care services are expensive, particularly when someone requires regular cognitive assistance (or "memory care") either at home or in a care facility. According to Genworth's 2020 Cost of Care Survey, the average price for just one month in a private room at a skilled-nursing facility is more than \$8,500. The cost of a semi-private room is approximately \$1,000 less per month, but that still equates to over \$90,000 per year.

Home care is often less expensive, depending on how much and how often care is needed. Even so, the average price (in 2020) of a non-medical home health aide is more than \$4,200 per month. So without a plan in place, the cost of Alzheimer's care can quickly deplete your savings.

You Can't Rely on Medicare

Many people believe that Medicare will pick up the cost of Alzheimer's care and other long-term conditions. Unfortunately, that is a misconception. In fact, Medicare pays very little for dementia care and other long-term conditions.

One reason for this is because your health condition must be considered "recuperative." Unfortunately, that's not typically the case with Alzheimer's. However, there are other treatable conditions that also cause memory loss, such as strokes and tumors, as well as a vitamin deficiency or a reaction to certain medications.

Even if you do qualify for Medicare coverage, you could still find yourself paying out a hefty sum for deductibles and coinsurance. For instance, if you are covered under Original Medicare (Medicare Part A and B), your portion of the price tag (in 2020) could be:

Days:	Your Cost:
Days 1 – 20	\$0
Days 21 – 100	\$176 per day coinsurance
Days 101 and beyond	All costs

Even if you have built up a sizable nest egg, the cost of a long-term care need could quickly deplete everything you've worked so hard to save. On top of that, if symptoms are such that you are no longer able to work and earn an income, the overall cost can compound exponentially.

Insurance Options to Consider

Stand-Alone Long-Term Care Insurance: Some insurance companies offer individual long-term care coverage that will pay for some or all care that is received in a facility or at home. While these plans can certainly offer

CONTINUED ON PAGE 53



Brandon Tho Harris



Antonius Tin-Bui



Victor Ancheta

Faces in the Pandemic

Queer Asian American artists
address COVID-19 at a new Rice University exhibit.

By LILLIAN HOANG

LGBTQ Houstonians are doing their part to uplift the community as COVID-19 cases rise and the fight for equality intensifies. To inform and inspire audiences, local Asian American LGBTQ artists Victor Ancheta, Antonius Tin-Bui, and Brandon Tho Harris partnered with Rice University's Houston Asian American Archive (HAAA) to produce an art exhibit about the Asian American experience, the coronavirus disease, and racial inequality.

The exhibit, *Faces in the Pandemic*, features 10 Asian American artists and runs through November 15 at the Fondren Library on the Rice campus. Individuals can see the exhibit in a virtual walk-through on YouTube (tinyurl.com/y2llpjks) or view it in person by reserving a time on Calendly (tinyurl.com/y3pfwbe4).

Victor Ancheta, a gay Filipino American

artist, says he is grateful to be given the opportunity to serve the community through his art. "When the pandemic happened, things were just bleak, so working on [my pieces] gave me the chance to share a little bit of my story and help my community," he says.

Ancheta's work explicitly explores mortality, the COVID-19 pandemic, and police brutality. His painting *The Good Hour* features a masked man lying on his deathbed beside George Floyd, one of several Black Americans who was killed by police this year. The piece was designed to remind audiences of the growing number of people who have died and will die from both the coronavirus disease and police brutality.

His resin sculpture *Escape* features a hijabi, a Black person, an Asian person, and a white person connected by a red string (a metaphor for the red blood coursing through our veins). These figures are sitting on birds

trying to fly away from the coronavirus disease. Ancheta created this to emphasize how our survival depends on one another.

"We're all connected; we all have to work together to solve [these problems]," Ancheta says.

He hopes people will engage with his works and ultimately recognize the inherent humanity in immigrants.

"Immigrants are people, too," he says. "We experience the same things that other people experience—the failures in life, the joys in life. We also have feelings. We're not just something abstract that does not count."

Like Ancheta, Antonius Tin-Bui, a queer nonbinary Vietnamese American who uses they/them pronouns, also works to highlight oppressed and overlooked groups. However, unlike Ancheta, Bui's practice is largely inspired by their sexuality and gender identity, which pushes them to create in multiple media and question the status quo. They perform,

photograph, and laser- and hand-cut paper to “unearth history that is often erased, forgotten, and silenced.”

Determined to highlight the Asian American perspective on the Vietnam War, Bui created a series of customized Zippo lighters. According to Bui, nearly every American soldier fighting in Vietnam had a personalized Zippo lighter engraved with text ranging from sexual to patriotic. In response to this trend, they crafted a set featuring words by Vietnamese American writers, lyrics from the Vietnam War era, and popular slogans used to protest the war. Bui’s art challenges the U.S.’s imperialistic interpretation of the war and expands the viewer’s understanding of the two-decade conflict.

In their 2016 laser-cut paper series *Re-Model Minorities*, Bui provides glimpses of a queer future founded on beauty and questioning. In this collection, they reclaimed the traditional cut-paper design found across East Asia to emphasize pop-art text such as “YELLOW PERIL SUPPORTS BLACK POWER” and “NOT YOUR SUBMISSIVE BOTTOM.” They wanted to fight against stereotypes about Asian Americans, who are often framed as silent, submissive, and apolitical.

In the end, Bui hopes that the Faces in

the Pandemic exhibit sparks reflection on our place in history. “[I want people to feel] recharged, go back into the world, and enact the change they want to see,” they say. “We’re inundated with messages nowadays, and I just hope everyone takes the time to really be with themselves and reflect on how they want to contribute to the future.”

Brandon Tho Harris, a gay Vietnamese American interdisciplinary artist, agrees with Bui. He hopes viewers will reflect and understand that Asian Americans are people who deserve respect and fair treatment.

Harris also wants to see Asian American communities and other marginalized groups work together in the fight for equality. He manifested this desire in his mixed-media exhibit piece titled *Not Your Virus*, a hand-sewn work of art made of traditional Vietnamese garments (áo dài), conical hats (nón lá), and gold thread.

“It’s important as a minority group to stand together to be stronger,” he says. “It’s also important that Asian groups address the history of internalized anti-Blackness, because if we look back through history, the Black Panthers always stood up for Vietnamese refugees when we were coming to

America. I think that we should stand in solidarity with them.”

In *Not Your Virus*, Harris explores “motifs of queerness,” or themes of community, resilience, and the dream for a better future. The artwork was a labor of love that highlights the strength of a united Asian American community in Houston.

Like Ancheta and Bui, Harris hopes audiences understand that being a refugee is not a choice, but an act of survival. “Everyone in America came from somewhere, and we need to look at the history of the Vietnamese refugees [so we can] better understand the current refugee crisis here in America,” he says. “We’re just like you; we’re all the same.”

For more information on Rice University’s Houston Asian American Archive’s *Faces in the Pandemic* exhibit, visit haaa.rice.edu/faces-in-the-pandemic. See more of Harris’ art at brandonthoharris.com, and follow him on Instagram @brandonthoharris. Check out Ancheta’s works at victorancheta.com. Learn more about Bui’s pieces at antoniusbui.com, and follow them on Instagram @monsterbui.



The TRANSGRIOT

Trailblazing journalist and advocate **Monica Roberts** stood at the intersection of transgender history's past, present, and future.

By **BRANDON WOLF**

Monica Katrice Roberts, 58, an unapologetically Black transgender journalist and advocate, died of natural causes at her West Houston apartment complex on October 6. She is survived by her mother, brother, two sisters, and her extended family of choice.

Roberts was the founder and editor of *Transgriot*, an award-winning blog launched in 2006 to tell the stories of Black trans people, whose issues were often ignored by the media. She was also a founding member of the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition and a leader of both the Transgender People of Color Coalition and the Texas Transgender Nondiscrimination Summit. She became a fixture at the State Capitol in Austin as she lobbied Texas lawmakers to pass pro-LGBTQ legislation.

When Roberts' close friend and fellow trans activist Dee Dee Watters announced the news of Roberts' death via Facebook on October 8, hundreds of folks took to social media to offer their condolences and describe how Roberts' legacy of civil-rights activism had personally impacted their lives.

"I would not be where I am without her," tweeted Janet Mock, a Black transgender writer and director. "She was a big sister who told it like it was, who centered the Black trans [community's] brilliance and history unapologetically."

Roberts had often worked alongside local media outlets to help them accurately cover trans stories, and they reported on her death and her legacy with generously detailed stories. Nationally, her passing was covered by CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Out* magazine, and others.

On October 24, Roberts was laid to rest after a homegoing service at the University of

Houston's Cullen Performance Hall. Organized by Watters and funded by Black Transwomen Inc., the service was officiated by Rev. Marveta Walker and directed by trans activists Trenton Johnson and Jessica Zyrie.

In addition to the dozens of friends and family members at the service, there were also several elected officials in attendance. Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner spoke, and declared October 24 to be Monica Katrice Roberts Day in Houston. He also mentioned his goal of enacting citywide protections for LGBTQ people.

In 2014, City Council passed the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), which prohibited discrimination based on gender identity and expression (in addition to more than a dozen other characteristics). However, anti-LGBTQ groups used misleading anti-trans attack ads to convince voters to repeal the ordinance in 2015. And while several advocates have called for a HERO 2.0, that legislation has yet to be created.

"Let's finish our work [to end discrimination]," Turner said during Roberts' memorial service. "Monica's work is not finished, but we are here—at least while I'm mayor—to make sure we carry on her legacy."

On October 25, social-justice organizations Black Lives Matter Houston and Houston Rising hosted a Get Out The Vote rally at City Hall in honor of Roberts. Rally speakers noted that Roberts' final social-media posts urged her followers to participate in the November 3 election. Several political leaders and LGBTQ activists spoke at the event, including organizer Brandon Mack, who vowed that Houston's next nondiscrimination ordinance would be named after Roberts.

"One of the things Monica wanted to see was HERO," Mack said. "She fought for that ordinance with the same vigor that she fought against discrimination for everyone. It passed, only to be repealed because of the transphobia

that the opposition used. Now I'm calling for the Houston City Council to pass what we used to call HERO 2.0, [but will] now forever be known as the Monica Roberts Ordinance."

Roberts' Journey to Activism

Roberts was born in Houston on May 4, 1962. Her mother, Mable, was a school teacher, and her father, Rick, was a well-known radio host. Roberts graduated from Jesse H. Jones High School in 1980, and from the University of Houston in 1984.

In the '90s, Roberts was working as a gate agent for Continental Airlines when she began her gender transition. She dealt with discrimination from coworkers who tried to get her banned from the women's employee restroom. The group failed, and two other employees came out as trans after Roberts led the way.

In a 2019 interview, Roberts told *OUTSMART* that she originally had no intention of becoming an activist. But in 1997, when a local organization published *Transgender Tapestry*, a series of articles profiling 100 out trans people, she noticed that none of them looked like her. The only Black people even mentioned in the articles were RuPaul and Dennis Rodman.

Frustrated, she began to get involved in local and national trans organizations. Trans activists Phyllis Frye and Sarah de Palma mentored her. In 1999, she began lobbying Austin legislators to include trans people as a protected class in the James Byrd Hate Crimes Act.

For most of the 2000s, Roberts lived in Louisville, Kentucky, and worked for an activist organization. During that time, she also served on the board of Southern Comfort, the largest trans conference in the country. She wrote a regular trans-focused column for *The Letter*, a Louisville-based LGBTQ newspaper. That column was eventually canceled due to a conflict with an advertiser who opposed her viewpoints. →



Monica Roberts protesting a bathroom bill at the Texas Capitol in 2017 (Twitter).



Speaking at the GLAAD Media Awards in 2016 (Kimberly White/Getty Images).



Rallying at the National LGBTQ Task Force's Creating Change conference in 2020 (Devin Rowland)



In the Committee Hearing Room in the State Capitol building (Twitter)



Accepting the Susan J. Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement (Devin Rowland).



Monica Roberts delivering a speech at the Educate Out Loud research symposium hosted by the University of Texas.

On January 1, 2006, Roberts published her first *Transgriot* blog post. The term “griot” (pronounced gree-ow) is a West African term that refers to a storyteller and historian. Roberts used her blog to tell the stories and chronicle the history of Black trans people, but also to report on trans homicide victims who are often misgendered in police reports and media coverage.

Horried by the rate of violence against trans people—which disproportionately impacts trans women of color—Roberts began to compile statistics on *Transgriot*. Whenever a murder occurred, she wrote a tribute to the victim. Her blog became a vital source of information for both local and national media whenever they reported on trans murders.

Because of her vast number of contacts and connections, Roberts was often able to assist law-enforcement officials as they worked on anti-trans murder cases. She also made it a point to attend as many of the victims’ funerals as possible.

“Far too often, trans people who have been murdered are then misgendered and dead-named by law enforcement and the media,” Roberts wrote in 2018. “That’s one of the major reasons I spend so much time trying to tell the stories of our fallen trans siblings and give them the respect they are due.”

A Lasting Legacy

Roberts returned to Houston in 2010, and within a week she was attending the Texas Transgender Nondiscrimination Summit at Rice University.

While living in Space City, Roberts regularly traveled to Austin to testify against anti-trans bills and take part in “trans lobby days” with other trans activists. She was a popular and sought-after speaker for political rallies. “She was greatly respected,” says Dee Dee Watters.

Roberts told OUTSMART that her proudest moment was helping pass HERO in 2014 after she had participated in public hearings for the nondiscrimination ordinance. During a right-wing rally to rescind the ordinance, Baptist

preachers were yelling scripture quotes at attendees who supported HERO. “Monica started reciting Bible verses right back to them,” Watters remembers.

Roberts’ work was acknowledged through numerous local and national human-rights awards. *Transgriot* received the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Blog in 2018, and she was nominated four other times. In 2019, she was selected as a Pride Houston Honorary Grand Marshal. In January 2020, she was given the National LGBTQ Task Force’s Susan J. Hyde Award for Longevity in the Movement. In May, she was included as one of *The Advocate*’s Women of the Year. Just weeks before her death, she received the Houston GLBT Political Caucus Lifetime Achievement Award.

Roberts also wrote a regular column for OUTSMART magazine. In her November 2019 column, she shared the key reason for her activism work: to empower generations of trans folks who would come after her.

“We do all of this not for ourselves, but for the trans kids,” Roberts wrote.

Landon Richie, a 19-year-old trans activist, remembers the first time he met Roberts in 2014, just two months after he came out. “In that moment, I knew I was home and safe,” Richie says. “For me and so many others, Monica was a testament to the beauty, power, and resilience of trans people. She made it possible for me as a trans kid to imagine a world where trans people could not only survive, but thrive as our authentic and unapologetic selves.”

Roberts was well aware of the impact she had on others. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve run into some trans millennial who tells me that my blog inspired them to do this or inspired them to do that,” she said. “At least five times, people have told me that reading my blog posts is what kept them from committing suicide. So every time I sit down and write a post, I keep that in mind—that what I’m writing may inspire someone who does not want to persevere.”



To read Monica Roberts’ blog *Transgriot*, visit transgriot.blogspot.com.

“Monica’s recent passing was a true loss. I remember meeting her and then coaching her over 20 years ago. She was a terrific advocate against the violence done to trans women of color.”

—Phyllis Frye, Houston’s first openly transgender judge

“Monica was a warrior, friend, and sister who stood at the intersection of our past, present, and future. Saying she will be missed is beyond an understatement.”

—Atlantis Narcisse, founder of Save Our Sisters United, Inc.

“For decades, Monica had been a fierce leader—bringing light to the injustices that transgender people face, especially Black transgender women.”

—Alphonso David, Human Rights Campaign

“Words alone won’t capture the impact she had on so many people—her work, her mentorship, and her phone calls. She made genuine connections with so many people.”

—Emmett Schelling, Transgender Education Network of Texas

“Monica was a leading civil-rights activist of our time. She had a global impact. I’ve received condolences from people as far away as the United Kingdom and Kenya.”

—Diamond Styles, Black Transwomen, Inc.

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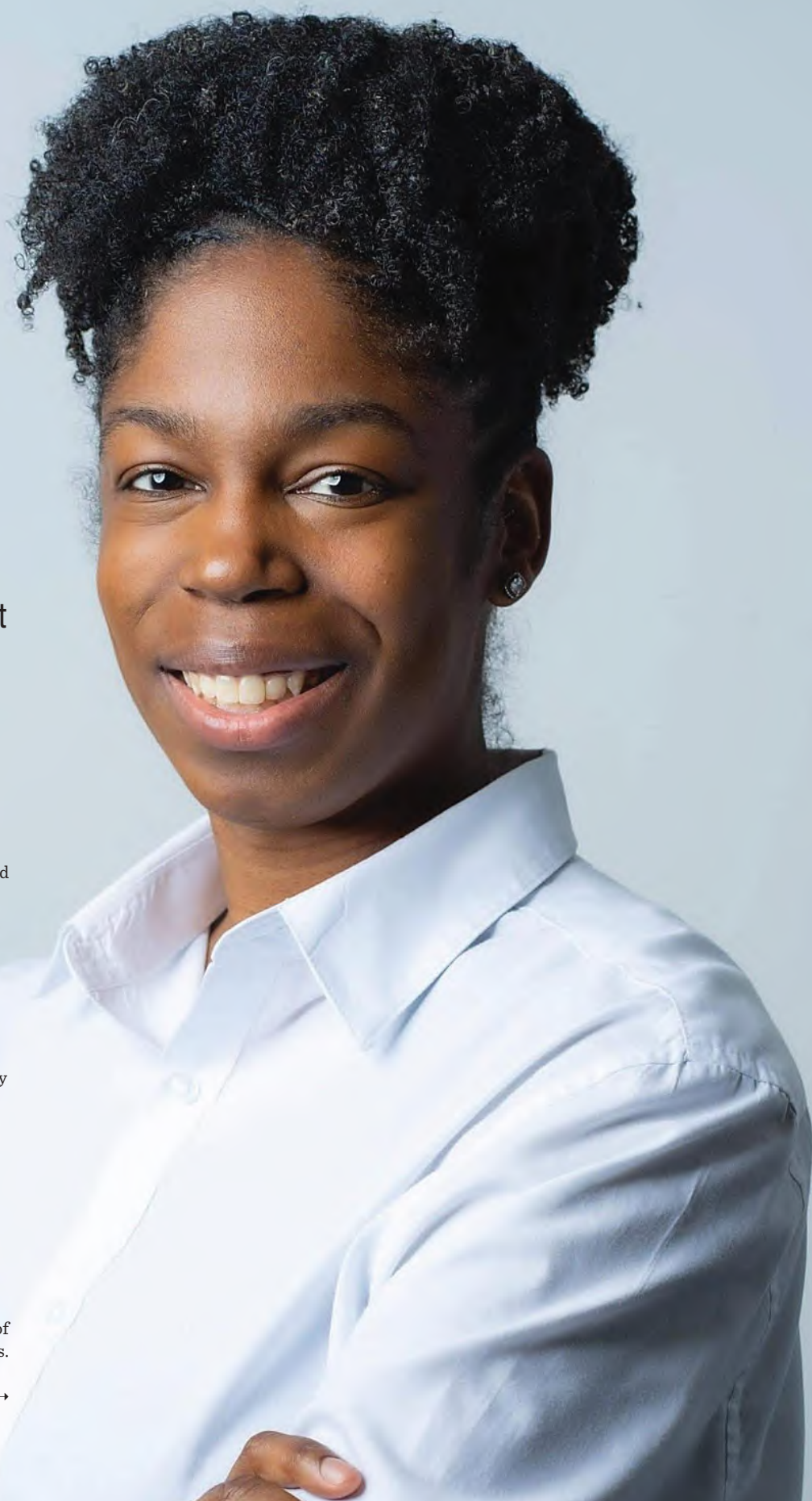
Raising the Bar

Pride Houston's new president **Thasia Madison** hopes to take the organization to new heights.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Pride Houston's events lineup looked quite different this year due to the ongoing pandemic. Looking ahead to 2021, the organization's newly elected president, Thasia Madison, notes that even more changes are on the way. With the launch of Pride 365, Madison's team will be working diligently throughout the year to strengthen, embolden, and support the LGBTQ community beyond the standard celebrations that usually take place exclusively in June.

A proud graduate of Prairie View A&M University, Madison is no stranger to Pride Houston. The IT professional and steadfast community volunteer has been with the organization for three years, beginning as a volunteer before joining the board of directors as outreach director and secretary. "[As president,] I am most excited about working with the board in setting the goals and vision of the organization," the New Orleans native says. "Utilizing my skills as outreach director over the past three years, I plan to implement that →



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vision by unveiling a new Pride 365 model and taking the organization to new heights.”

Regarding the new year-round programming, Madison explains that Pride 365 is all about supporting the community and broadening the scope of the organization. “Pride 365 will culminate in a rebranding of Pride Houston from a celebration organization to a year-round service and advocacy organization,” the out lesbian explains. “[We will accomplish this through] our scholarship program, community engagement initiatives, a human-rights conference, [more] special events for marginalized communities, and an expanded outreach using new platforms and channels, including podcasts, newsletters, and more.”

The organization also seeks to incorporate teamwork and support for other organizations into their plans. “Pride Houston will be standing in support of our sibling organizations in the community. In doing these things, I hope to make us a more well-rounded organization for all people in our community.”

Madison explains that her organization embodies what the LGBTQ+ community has known all along: “For all of us, Pride is a way of life that is unique to each of us, every single day. We are not LGBTQIA+ just one month out of the year. Houston deserves a Pride [organization] that reflects that and celebrates that year-round.”

Breaking down the immediate goals of the organization, Madison highlights “diversity and inclusivity for all—and this only happens when we become more active in voter registration, in tackling human-rights issues, increasing social activism, and investing in and welcoming smaller organizations like Huntsville Pride into the fold, for example.”

She also notes that there are even rumblings about the possibility of Houston applying again to host World Pride.

With Houston being the most diverse major city in the nation, Madison is adamant that its Pride organization should reflect that. She explains that a goal of Pride Houston is to blend intentionally with marginalized communities. “Our staff is beginning to reflect the diversity of the community we serve, as is our programming. An aspect of this is incorporating more trans and nonbinary experiences,” she says. “This past year, the community helped make that so by selecting our first-ever trans grand marshal.”



“AS PRESIDENT, I AM MOST EXCITED ABOUT WORKING WITH THE BOARD IN SETTING THE GOALS AND VISION OF THE ORGANIZATION.”

—Thasia Madison

Providing another example of how Pride Houston aims to include all people, Madison continues, “Something I am particularly proud of is Rights Are Human, Pride Houston’s inaugural human-rights conference that I created, which took place at the end of this summer. This was brought to life in a safe, virtual space with workshops [that addressed] the rights of LGBTQIA+ people who are immigrants, students, and aging, as well as a workshop for trans rights, with attendees from across the nation.”

With Pride Houston now firing on all cylinders, Madison emphasizes that now is the perfect time to get involved with the volunteer-run organization. “Apply to serve on the board of directors, volunteer and serve on our production team, come to our town halls to give us feedback on what the community needs are, or become a donor,” Madison says. Donors are given the option to make one-time or monthly contributions, and they can also donate toward a specific cause.

Pride Houston’s fearless and enthusiastic new leader explains that spreading the gospel of Pride Houston is imperative to keep the organization alive. “We need our community to help spread the news about the actions we’re taking to improve the lives of queer people. Tell your friends and your family about it, and ask them to come volunteer,” Madison emphasizes. “Much of our new content, programming, in-person events, and multimedia is posted directly to our social media. Spreading the word about Pride Houston can help someone who needs the services we’re offering, and also increase our ability to give back to the community. It’s as simple to do as clicking a button.”



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PICTURE PERFECT

LGBTQ Community Vision Award recipient **Dalton DeHart** uses his photography to document a thriving community.

By **JERRY SIMONEAUX**

Photo by **ALEX ROSA** | Hair and Makeup by **JOHN WILMORE**



If you've been to any LGBTQ event in Houston over the past 35 years, you've probably run into Dalton DeHart. The photographer has taken more than one

million photos of community gatherings, and has used about 20 different cameras to do so.

In order to preserve and share this pictorial history, DeHart formed the Dalton DeHart Photographic Foundation in 2015. The non-profit's fundraising efforts have allowed him to digitize more than 300,000 photos taken with film and build a website to share the photos free of charge. In all, daltondehart.com will soon have over 750,000 searchable photos available to the public.

DeHart's commitment to preserving local LGBTQ history has earned him this year's Montrose Center LGBTQ Community Vision Award—a high honor that has only been awarded to seven other high-profile Houston activists and public servants. DeHart will be presented with the award during the Center's Out for Good virtual holiday gala on December 3.

"Dalton has been instrumental in capturing our community's history for decades," says Meleah Jones, community project specialist for the Montrose Center. "We could think of no one better to honor with this year's LGBTQ Community Vision Award."

DeHart's event images include everyone who makes community social events possible, from the hosts and major donors to the servers and janitors. Every person in attendance and

behind the scenes is equally important to him.

As we all know, DeHart makes it a point to get to know each one of his photo subjects while asking them to move closer together and smile. But what do we know about him?

DeHart grew up in the tiny East Texas town of Buna, a city of just under six square miles situated somewhere between Beaumont and Jasper. He often lovingly refers to it as "Greater Buna," a clever reference to *Greater Tuna*, the mythical and quintessential East Texas small town brought to life in live-theater comedy productions throughout the 1980s.

Dehart was the second-youngest child in a family of six boys and five girls. In high school, he enjoyed drama and was president of his senior class.

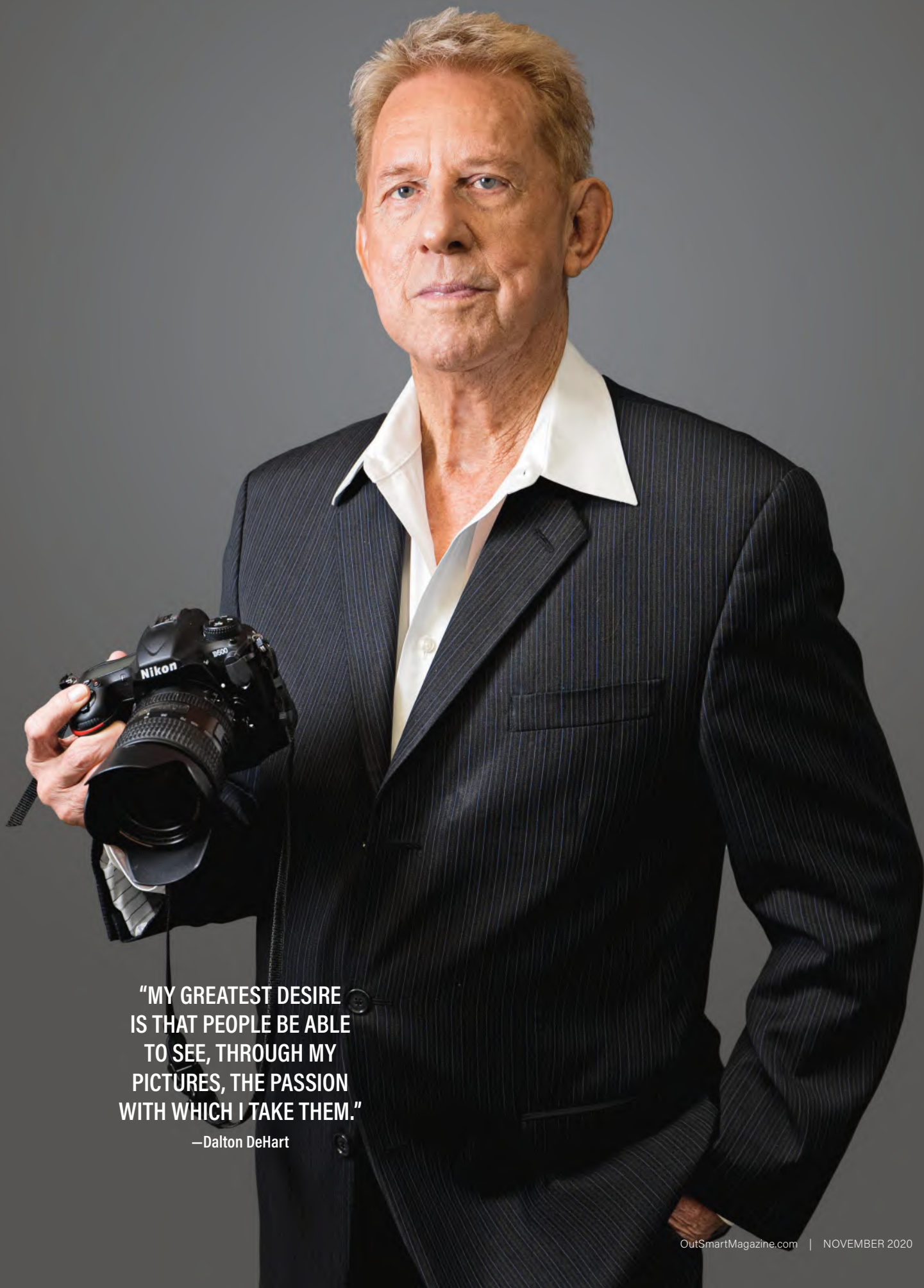
DeHart left Buna to attend Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, majoring in speech and drama with a minor in English. While there, he joined the ATO fraternity and participated in many academic and social activities, including serving as the emcee for several of the Miss Sam Houston Pageants. It was during his time at the university that DeHart began to document school events and social gatherings with a small, inexpensive camera.

Photography soon developed into a lifelong passion for him. "I enjoy taking photos because it allows me to elevate people and encourage them to be the best that they can be," DeHart says. "My greatest desire is that people be able to see, through my pictures, the passion with which I take them."

After graduating college, DeHart joined the U.S. Army, taking a camera with him everywhere. DeHart would reach the rank of captain before finishing in the reserves. At the end of his tour of duty, he returned to Buna to teach high-school English for a few years. Realizing then that teaching was his professional calling, he went back to Sam Houston to earn a master's degree in English and started teaching at Lamar University in Beaumont. Wanting to continue his education even further, DeHart set out for Northern Illinois University in DeKalb to enter a doctoral program. Sadly, his mother died just before he completed his dissertation, forcing him to return home to Buna.

Now back in Texas, DeHart found a part-time job teaching at San Jacinto College in Pasadena, and completed his doctorate in education at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Soon after becoming Dr. DeHart, he began teaching full-time at "San Jac," as it is affectionately known. Within six years, he became chairperson of the Language Skills Department—a position he would hold until his retirement in 2006. That was also the year he received the prestigious Minnie Stevens Piper Professor Award from the well-funded foundation that recognizes 10 Texas professors each year for their outstanding academic, scientific, and scholarly achievement, and for their dedication to the teaching profession. As a retired teacher, DeHart continues to advise local teachers on curriculum issues at Tanglewood Middle School.

"After committing my entire life to the profession of teaching, receiving that award →



**"MY GREATEST DESIRE
IS THAT PEOPLE BE ABLE
TO SEE, THROUGH MY
PICTURES, THE PASSION
WITH WHICH I TAKE THEM."**

—Dalton DeHart



"I JUST WANT PEOPLE—NOT ONLY NOW, BUT IN THE FUTURE—TO BE ABLE TO VIEW THE HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY THROUGH THE VARIOUS PHOTOS I'VE TAKEN OVER THE LAST 30-PLUS YEARS."

—Dalton DeHart



Dalton DeHart with friends at several recent community events. For earlier photos, visit daltondehart.com

validated my dedication to students' personal as well as academic development," DeHart says. "It was one of the greatest honors I've ever received."

While at San Jac, DeHart regularly took photos at school basketball games as well as many other athletic and social events. It wasn't long before friends would also invite him to take pictures at their special events.

Seeing how much DeHart enjoyed photography, two of his colleagues at San Jac in 1989 asked if he might be interested in joining the Executive and Professional Association of Houston (EPAH), an LGBTQ social and networking organization. In short order, DeHart was taking photos for EPAH, the Montrose Softball League, AIDS Foundation Houston, and many other LGBTQ community

organizations.

Since launching the Dalton DeHart Photographic Foundation in 2015, DeHart now works with four volunteers who help him take photos of local LGBTQ events, some of which occur simultaneously. He and the volunteers often take notes with names, numbers, and emails so they can share the photos later with those who ask.

Over the years, DeHart has become a highly respected photographer. He has received numerous awards from the organizations he has photographed events for, including being named a Pride Houston Grand Marshal in 2008 and receiving the Kindred Spirits Community Treasure Award in 2014, the Diana Foundation Award in 2015, the Houston Transgender Unity Committee's

Transgender Archive Award in 2015, and several OUTSMART Gayest & Greatest Favorite Male Community Photographer awards.

Nevertheless, he was stunned to learn that he had been chosen to receive this year's Montrose Center LGBTQ Community Vision Award. "I was truly surprised and honored that I was selected," he says, reflecting on the mission of his Dalton DeHart Photographic Foundation. "I just want people—not only now, but in the future—to be able to view the history of the community through the various photos I've taken over the last 30-plus years."

What: Out for Good virtual gala
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Coping with Crisis

Dr. Ks Stanley offers emotional support to LGBTQ Houstonians.

By RYAN M. LEACH
Photo by VINYL BEAR PHOTOGRAPHY

Every LGBTQ person needs a little help working through the challenges that come with being in the minority. This is where Houstonian Ks Stanley, Psy.D., PLLC, comes in.

"I'm a clinical psychologist, and consider myself a generalist because I enjoy working with diverse folks who have diverse concerns," Stanley says. "I specialize in LGBTQ+ mood disorders, trauma, and suicide. Because I am an out, transgender psychologist, I am often sought out by trans and nonbinary folks. I consider [my area of expertise to be] trans mental health."

Stanley received his training from Pepperdine University in 2009, and opened his solo practice after moving back to Houston in 2015. He has developed a supportive and affirming practice that has grown larger since the onset of COVID-19.

"Since COVID, I have had a surge in new patient requests. People are wanting and needing more services than before. My current clients are asking to be seen more often, and I have found myself in more frequent crisis-response situations. That is challenging as a

solo practitioner," Stanley admits. "People are grappling with depression and anxiety, and coping in various healthy and unhealthy ways. People have lost jobs, health insurance, and have rescheduled gender-affirmation surgeries. Also, COVID has created a conundrum for many LGBTQ+ folks who are quarantining with family members who are not LGBTQ+ affirmative."

LGBTQ people are generally in need of more quality mental-health care than their straight or cisgender counterparts, according to the latest report by Mental Health America. Stanley understands his patients' unique needs because he has personally experienced many of the same problems.

"A lot of well-intentioned mental-health clinicians are not adequately trained in LGBTQ+ mental health, especially trans and nonbinary mental health. Many are also not aware of their own personal biases, or the ways that they 'microaggress' against their clients. I believe that having very visible LGBTQ+ clinicians, practices, and clinics is necessary, because we live in a society that discriminates against and oppresses LGBTQ+ people. Particularly with what is going on socio-politically in America, it is very important to have clinicians who have a

nuanced understanding of the role that LGBTQ+ minority stress plays in mental health," says Stanley.

With COVID-19 already complicating things for patients, Stanley notes that the holidays are likely going to amplify already-stressful situations.

"The holiday season tends to bring with it plenty of stress and depression as it is. With COVID, these problems will [increase] as we negotiate how to gather with people. You also might be coping with the anxiety of contracting the virus. These are all human reactions and they are real, and it is important to process them. I strongly recommend that people consider seeking therapy or counseling of some kind," says Stanley.

Although 2020 has been an unprecedented year in many ways, there have been some positive developments emerging from the overwhelming negativity.

"Life is paradoxical in that it is both awesome and terrifying, good and bad. It's both. Even a pandemic that has caused unprecedented devastation can yield positive things," says Stanley. "I've seen people reconnect with old friends and loved ones, get creative about being quarantined with a partner 24/7, form better

habits, reevaluate their priorities, develop better boundaries with people, and find a new direction in life.”

Stanley says there are other aspects of self-care that people can focus on if therapy is not an option. He has four helpful recommendations.

Tips for Surviving the Holidays:

1. Attend to the basics: sleeping, eating, hygiene, and physical movement. “It’s amazing how much we neglect those things, even before the pandemic. Also, make sure to start your day strong with a healthy routine, and have structure in your day. Punctuate your days by scheduling time to read a book or do a mindfulness exercise.”

2. Go outside and be in touch with nature. “If you have pets, really take time to enjoy them and connect with them. I have learned so many funny things about my three cats and two dogs since I began working from home.”

**“I BELIEVE THAT HAVING
VERY VISIBLE LGBTQ+
CLINICIANS, PRACTICES,
AND CLINICS IS
NECESSARY, BECAUSE WE
LIVE IN A SOCIETY THAT
DISCRIMINATES AGAINST
AND OPPRESSES LGBTQ+
PEOPLE.”**

—Dr. ks Stanley

3. Help each other. “Another thing that helps with wellness is taking care of others. Offer support to your family or friends who might be having a hard time. I’m a firm believer that helping another person will make you feel better.”

4. Turn off the news. “Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to the news. I’m also a big fan of social-media breaks. If you think about it, we constantly inundate ourselves with upsetting reminders.”

 For more information on Dr. ks Stanley, visit kstanleypsyd.com.



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Surviving Seasonal Depression

Social worker **Tara Bates** helps LGBTQ folks combat recurring end-of-the-year sadness.

By **JENNY BLOCK**
Photo by **LESTER JOHN**



"YOU ARE THE EXPERT IN YOUR LIFE, AND A COUNSELOR IS JUST A PERSON THAT YOU ARE ALLOWING TO PARTNER WITH YOU."

—Tara Bates

Now, more than ever, people may be finding themselves in need of help from a counselor. Fortunately for Houstonians, Tara Bates, MSW, LCSW, is here to help.

The licensed clinical social worker is the owner of Bates Counseling LLC, a new Space City practice that she launched in February. Bates, who identifies as lesbian, is committed to serving a diverse roster of clients, including fellow members of the queer community. "About half of the clients that I get to serve are LGBTQ," she says.

For those who may be unsure about starting therapy, Bates says it's not as scary as you think it is. "You are the expert in your life, and a counselor is just a person that you are allowing to partner with you. If you see a therapist and they don't fit your personality, go see a different one. Don't let one bad experience be the thing that stops you from getting help."

Bates studied social work at the University of Houston. Prior to finding her calling, the 35-year-old Heights resident received her bachelor's degree in communication at UH-D.

During her time as an undergrad, one of her professors suggested she should look into social work. At the time, Bates thought that social workers were "the people who took kids away and put them in foster care with Child Protective Services. I had no idea that social workers are basically superheroes."

The social-work profession is very broad and encompasses activism, case management, consulting, counseling, and anything else a person might need help doing, Bates says. "Social work encourages diversity and acceptance. There aren't too many career fields that welcome everyone, and that is how I knew it was really my 'thing.'"

But getting to the place where she is now was a bit of roller coaster. After completing graduate school, Bates went on to work in HIV services for four years. Then she landed a job doing social-science research in the villages of

Northern Afghanistan. "Crazy, right? After I came back to the States, I started doing therapy on a part-time basis—after work and on weekends, while I worked in homeless services for four years, then transitioned to the Public Health Department." Just before COVID-19 hit the U.S., she took a major leap by starting her own practice and becoming a full-time therapist. "I get to be my own boss. It's the best decision I could have made."

Not to mention that she gets to do it all with the woman she loves. Bates and her partner, Zeljka Mijic, have been together for four years.

Mijic does all of the billing, scheduling, and administrative work for Bates Counseling LLC, in addition to offering those management services to therapists in other states. "It's been an awesome four years, and we truly are blessed to be able to support each other with both of our businesses. The coolest part about working for ourselves is being able to travel whenever we want."

Bates says that by far the best part of her work is seeing the growth and development of her clients. "It's really amazing to be allowed to partner with someone as they work through the good and the bad that life throws at them. Social workers usually only work with people for just a snapshot in time. It's such an honor to be trusted enough to sit with a client and join them on their life journey."

As fall turns into winter, Bates notes that seasonal depression and holiday sadness greatly impact many people, especially LGBTQ folks who face additional stress and anxiety near the end of the year. Bates has some great advice to help those who are suffering.

Tips for Surviving the Holidays:

1. If you aren't out, or you're not accepted by your family, try reaching out to the friends who you are out to and doing a Zoom call before or after major holidays.
2. Make your own traditions with the people in your life who do love and appreciate you unconditionally.
3. Don't forget to get out and help others. It can be as simple as making some cookies and dropping them off for your neighbors, sending holiday greeting cards to people in nursing homes, or paying for the person behind you when you are in the drive-thru at Starbucks.
4. It's so easy for us to sit in a slump and feel stuck. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves of the great things we do have in our lives. Next time you notice yourself feeling down, try replacing your negative thoughts with three things you are grateful for. It helps to put things in perspective.
5. If the holiday family gatherings get tough, remind yourself that every moment in time has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even if something feels uncomfortable or bad, it will eventually end.
6. If you feel like your family is purposefully hurting you or trying to gaslight you, just leave. You are an adult, and you have the right to remove yourself from a harmful situation.

 For more information, visit batescounseling.com



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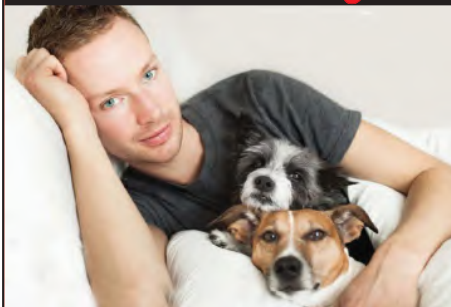
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Helping Couples through the Holidays

Mental-health therapist Ty David Lerman shares his family survival tips.

By SAM BYRD
Photo by CHIP GILLESPIE



The holidays can be draining, especially for couples who are having a hard time coping with the stress of the season. Thankfully, therapist Ty David Lerman has some

advice for couples trying to survive the holiday crunch while attending family gatherings during the pandemic.

Lerman credits his upbringing with his decision to journey into psychology, and specifically into working with the LGBTQ community.

“When I came out to my parents, they said in unison, ‘So what?’ I realized that was unique,” he recalls. “When I settled into psychology as my career path, I really wanted to create that space for other people in the coming-out process, so that they would have a safe place and [be supported by] people who can look past their sexual orientation and see them for who they are.”

Lerman spent a year interning at Legacy, and after earning a master’s degree from University of Houston-Clear Lake he went to work

at the Montrose Center for eight years. His early experiences at Legacy and the Montrose Center clarified his desired path in counseling. “I realized, through my service, that I was largely working with gay men or the LGBTQ community at large, and it’s impossible to perform counseling with our community and not talk about sex,” he says.

Now he has his own practice and is licensed as a supervisor for LPC interns who are in pursuit of terminal licensure. He’s also a certified sex therapist and hypnotherapist, and is working on his doctoral degree in clinical sexology with a specialty in LGBTQ and non-traditional relationships therapy. He has also earned three OUTSMART Gayest & Greatest awards for Best Male Mental-Health Therapist.

Lerman hopes his doctoral degree will further his ability to support his clientele and equip him with the tools to remain relevant as he deals with the issues facing LGBTQ populations.

“There is a difference between affirming therapy and competent therapy. Affirming therapy says, ‘I see you, I acknowledge who you are, I affirm who you are.’ But that doesn’t mean

a therapist has specific training in that area. That is so important as a provider. You’re not just saying, ‘Oh, good job,’ you’re saying, “Have you thought about X, Y, and Z? These are considerations that are common in situations that people like you are going through,” he explains.

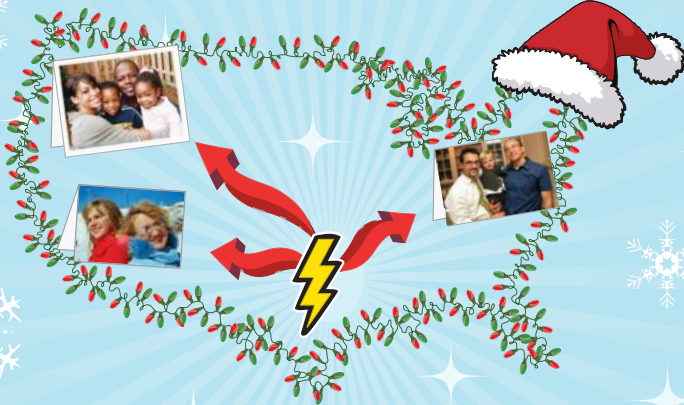
“The LGBTQ community is ever-evolving. It’s constantly changing in terms of standards of care, terminology, and identity. If you haven’t been taking classes and continuing your education, then I would say you’re not [keeping up as a] competent therapist [for this population]. That’s why I chose this track, and I do stay on the forefront of the latest standards of care. That sets a competent therapist apart from an affirming therapist.”

Lerman suggests that couples dealing with family pressures during the holidays take four pieces of advice:

Tips for Surviving the Holidays

1. Choose your battles. “We don’t have to [address] every small infraction. There may be times when it’s appropriate to speak up when we need to be seen for who we are and not get →

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mired in lies. But that's not every single time, especially with family members who may not be accepting or open to discussion."

2. These are your holidays, too. "You don't need to sacrifice your own celebration of the holidays for your family's celebration. If you need time and space, take it. We all have traditions we grew up with in our family, but we get to reinvent ourselves as adults. We may continue family traditions, or we can choose to do our own thing."

3. Public displays of affection are OK. "Part of not sacrificing yourself is being able to be yourself with your partner, so showing a few moments of affection is acceptable. It could be holding hands, sitting next to each other, leaning into each other, or putting your arm around your partner's shoulder. Live your life without worrying about other people. If others are not okay with it, that's on them."

**"WHEN I SETTLED INTO
PSYCHOLOGY AS A CAREER
PATH, I REALLY WANTED
TO CREATE THAT SPACE
FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE IN THE
COMING-OUT PROCESS, SO
THAT THEY WOULD HAVE A
SAFE PLACE."**

—Ty David Lerman

4. Leave if you need to. "If you ever feel threatened or you can't be yourself, you have the power to walk away. You don't have to sit through an incredibly uncomfortable scene. Whether it's an argument that is escalating or a family environment that doesn't feel safe, you can choose not to show up or to leave."

Since the holiday season is when people typically experience more frequent mental-health issues, Lerman urges everyone to seek help if they need it. "If you do experience Seasonal Affective Disorder or struggle with family issues around the holidays, it's absolutely appropriate to seek out a therapist."



To learn more about Ty David Lerman Counseling, visit tdlcounseling.com.

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Ammonite

Queering the Silver Screen

This year's Houston Cinema Arts Festival showcases four LGBTQ films.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



The Houston Cinema Arts Festival (HCAF) is returning for its twelfth season November 12–22, spotlighting four queer filmmakers and offering both

in-person and virtual programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year, the festival will screen films both online and at drive-in locations, and will feature 20 films (four of which have an LGBTQ focus), Q&A sessions, performances, workshops, and more.

One of the LGBTQ highlights will be the premiere of *Pier Kids*, which follows several queer and trans homeless youth of color living at Christopher Street Pier in New York. The film, directed by Elegance Bratton, will be available virtually for 72 hours starting Thursday, November 19, at 7:30 p.m.

Writing in the *Hollywood Reporter*, film critic Keith Uhlich felt that the subjects of *Pier Kids* “live in a perpetual state of precarious-

ness. In calling attention to their struggles, Bratton honors their endurance and celebrates their existence. *Pier Kids* is comprised of many such off-handed, hard-hitting moments—scenes that constantly frustrate the easy readings of both the ignorant and the sanctimonious.”

Stonewall-era activist history will take the spotlight during the festival with the 2020 documentary *Cured*. The film focuses on the activists who took over the 1973 American Psychiatric Association Convention and successfully lobbied to remove “homosexuality” from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

The film, which contains several interviews with the doctors and activists who battled the American Psychiatric Association, will be available virtually for 24 hours starting Tuesday, November 17, at 4 p.m.

Hollywood Reporter contributor Stephen Farber writes that the film “recounts a fascinating part of history and definitely benefits from having so many vibrant and articulate participants to recall their part in a battle

that did a great deal to change longstanding (and not yet extinct) prejudices.”

Another highlight of the festival will be a new restoration of Laura Dern’s first film, *Smooth Talk*. Dern, who became a gay icon after playing the lesbian who coaxes Ellen DeGeneres out of the closet in the groundbreaking television series *Ellen*, has gone on to have a lengthy career, recently winning an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. In *Smooth Talk*, Dern plays 15-year-old Connie, who spends the summer before her sophomore year fixating on getting male attention.

Writing for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert observed that the film is “almost uncanny in its self-assurance, in the way it knows that the first hour, where ‘nothing’ happens, is necessary if the payoff is to be tragic, instead of merely sensational.”

The film will be available to stream for 48 hours starting Saturday, November 21, at 7:30 p.m.

A film that’s likely to get the attention of local viewers will be the documentary *Friday I’m in Love*, which explores the fascinating→



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history of Numbers nightclub, a countercultural Montrose landmark on lower Westheimer. The club originally opened as a dinner theater in 1975 before being reinvented in 1978 as Numbers, a gay disco.

As producer Jeromy Barber notes, “This story is vital for so many who grew up in Houston. I approached this project as a beloved fan of Numbers with a genuine curiosity and respect for that which came before me.”

A portion of the documentary will be livestreamed Friday, November 20, at 7:30 p.m.

Finally, the 2020 film *Ammonite* will make its Houston premiere during the festival.

The film tells the story of acclaimed palaeontologist Mary Anning (Kate Winslet) who works alone in 1840s England. When a wealthy visitor entrusts Mary with the care of his wife, Charlotte Murchison (Saoirse Ronan), she cannot afford to turn down his lucrative offer. An intense bond develops, and the two begin to have a passionate affair.

Writing for RogerEbert.com, Brian Tallerico says, “It is a story of connection—something we all seek, even after our lives seem to have made [connections] impossible to find.”

The film will screen Thursday, November 19, at 7:30 p.m. at the MoonStruck Drive-In in Houston.

The 2020 Festival Theme

In the last 12 years, the Houston Cinema Arts Festival has created a name for itself by focusing on films by and about artists. This year will be no different.

The festival’s 2020 theme is “Urbana,” a



celebration of the intersection of film, music, literature, performance, new media, and the visual arts. The theme was inspired by the global Spanish-language music genre *Musica Urbana*, which shares influences from Africa and slavery.

The theme encompasses celebration and tragedy, artistry and the everyday, local and global, and the confluence of cultures. In addition to the films, programming around this theme will include live music, dance, and participation by artists including filmmakers

Cecilia Aldarondo and Loira Limbal.

Ultimately, despite the complications caused by COVID-19, it was important to keep the festival going and expand it, Unger notes. “We are still here. Since it’s virtual, we decided we didn’t want to be so rigid. We decided to spread it out and have this longer experience.”

For a schedule of programs and individual ticket information, visit cinemahtx.org/hcaf/schedule. To purchase passes, visit cinemahtx.org/hcaf/passes/.



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According to the Human Rights Campaign, at least 33 trans or gender-nonconforming people have been fatally shot or killed by other violent means. The majority of those victims were young Black and Latinx trans women. “More than one in four transgender people have lost a job due to bias. One in five transgender individuals have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives,” the National Center for Transgender Equality found.

At TMP’s resource fair on November 16, participants can find information on accessing hormone therapy and correcting their name and gender markers. The event is also an opportunity to learn makeup tips and speak directly with potential employers. The next day, Black Trans Empowerment Week will offer an online yoga and meditation session. Then on November 18, participants can take part in a livestream of *In Living Colorz*, TMP’s biweekly podcast. That podcast episode will feature community members from Houston and across the U.S. who will discuss what is needed to build a better more inclusive community that values trans people.

On November 19, TMP will host a community mixer. Black Trans Empowerment Week concludes on TDOR (November 20) with an

“EVEN IF IT’S JUST ONE PERSON, I WANT BLACK TRANS PEOPLE TO KNOW AND SEE THEIR COMMUNITY IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT, AND SEE THE RESOURCES AND EXTENDED NETWORK WE HAVE TO OFFER.”

—Joelle Bayaa-Uzuri

observance to commemorate the trans people who were murdered this year.

Bayaa-Uzuri describes Black Trans Empowerment Week as “a family reunion”—an opportunity to meet other members of the community and expand participants’ understanding of the Black trans community. “Even if it’s just one person, [I want Black trans people] to know and see [their] community in a different light, and see the resources and extended network we have [to offer].”

Although the event was supposed to happen in person, TMP’s executive director Verniss McFarland III and other event organizers are doing their best to create a safe space where

people can unite and form long-lasting bonds. “It’s our hope that the work we do at The Mahogany Project and the Black Trans Empowerment Week will provide people who are looking for a family with a home,” McFarland says.

The first Black Trans Empowerment Week took place in 2018, a year after McFarland held a party to honor the life and legacy of trans people who have fought and are still fighting for LGBTQ rights.

When Chyna Doll Dupree, a Black woman, became one of at least 21 Black trans people killed in 2017, McFarland decided that it would take more than a one-day event to acknowledge Black trans lives. The TMP founder launched Black Trans Empowerment Week to celebrate the community while highlighting the issues that its members face.

“We must empower the community and individuals who live these experiences by honoring them and acknowledging their hardships. We want them to live long, full lives,” McFarland says.

 For more information on Black Trans Empowerment Week, follow The Mahogany Project’s Facebook at facebook.com/Mymahoganypro/.

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For example, a combination life insurance and a long-term care plan can pay out a monthly amount from the cash value to use toward nursing home or home health care needs. Because the policy also includes a death benefit, it can still be beneficial for loved ones even if you never need to use the money for care.

There are also combination annuity and long-term care policies available in the marketplace whereby you can receive regular funds for cognitive and/or physical care needs, or you could receive a regular income payout to supplement your other retirement income sources.

Are You Protected?

Dementia and memory loss can come about in a variety of ways. So if you start to notice symptoms in a spouse or other loved one, it is essential to be patient and understanding while also letting them know that there is hope. Likewise, spending quality time with loved ones is priceless.

Even if you and your spouse or partner are currently young and healthy, unexpected illnesses can and do occur. So it is essential to prepare for the cost of care ahead of time, because if you wait until you actually need long-term care, it will be too late to buy insurance that can protect your savings.

Working with a financial professional who is well-versed in long-term care planning is a great way to make sure that potential costs are covered so that your current savings can remain in place for its originally intended purpose.

Sources

- Alzheimer’s Association: alz.org
- Dementia Action Alliance: daanow.org
- Genworth 2020 Cost of Care Survey: genworth.com/aging-and-you/finances/cost-of-care.html
- National Institute on Aging: nia.nih.gov Medicare.gov

Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a Certified Financial Planner practitioner with experience in helping LGBT individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com.



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Hometown Hero

Bryan Washington's 'Memorial' highlights LGBTQ life in Houston.

By BRANDON WOLF
Photo by ALEX ROSA



At the age of 27, award-winning Houston author Bryan Washington already has an amazing list of accomplishments. His best-selling short-story collection *Lot*, which focuses on Space

City's underrepresented queer communities, was named one of President Barack Obama's favorite books of 2019. It also appeared on best-of-the-year lists from *Time* magazine, NPR, *Vanity Fair*, and more.

The bar has been set high for his new novel *Memorial*, which debuted last month. Fortunately, the book has already been met with tons of praise—and a TV show deal. “Washington shows readers more of the unforgettable Houston he introduced in his stories, and comfortably expands his range,” according to *Publisher's Weekly*.

Memorial tells the story of Benson and Mike, a young gay couple in Houston. Benson is a Black day-care teacher, and his boyfriend, Mike, is a Japanese American chef who works at a Mexican restaurant. The two men have been happy together for several years, but now they are not entirely certain why they're still a couple.

When Mike moves to Osaka, Japan, to get to know his estranged father who is dying, his mother moves in with Benson, making for a domestic relationship that grows far beyond what either of them might have expected. Both men's lives are changed, and they begin to view their relationship from a different perspective. *Memorial* celebrates the concepts of family and love in all of their strange yet joyful forms.

“I wanted to write something that I would enjoy reading,” Washington tells OUTSMART. “I also wanted to create a love story featuring queer characters that didn't capitalize on their trauma. I wanted for them to have love and joy, and to laugh at things and be sad, and to enjoy each other's company.”

Washington's novel has done exactly that. And after a summer of negotiations, A24 (the powerhouse production company behind *Euphoria*, *Moonlight*, and *Lady Bird*) announced that *Memorial* would be developed into a television series produced by Scott Rudin and Eli Bush. Washington will adapt his novel for the screen.

“This is a gift in a lot of ways, especially when there's enough interest for this to happen,” Washington says. “It's certainly not

anything I ever expected to happen, but I'm excited to work with A24 and the producers because their primary concern is to create something that's just great to watch. I'm really excited.”

Growing Up Queer in Houston

Washington was born in Kentucky and moved with his parents and brother to the Houston area when he was three. “The city was attracting lots of people, especially because of the low cost of living,” Washington says. His father worked in the technology industry, and his mother was a nurse.

The family settled in the suburbs just outside of Katy, where Washington attended school. He immersed himself in his twin passions—language and cooking—throughout his school years before graduating from James Taylor High School in 2011.

Washington says he knew early on that he was gay. He also knew enough about it to know it was not something to be shared with his peer group. Sadly, he didn't know enough to realize there were thriving communities of gay men just like himself in every major city.

“I never formally came out,” Washington says. “By high school it was an open secret—people knew, but didn't talk about it.”

After high school, Washington entered the University of Houston (UH), studying English and creative writing. He lived on campus for two years, then found a place of his own between Montrose and the Third Ward.

During those early college years, he began to explore Houston's LGBTQ community. He attended most of the Pride parades between 2011 and 2015, and circulated through the local bars until he found Ripcord, which became →

“I WANTED TO CREATE A LOVE STORY FEATURING QUEER CHARACTERS THAT DIDN'T CAPITALIZE ON THEIR TRAUMA. I WANTED FOR THEM TO HAVE LOVE AND JOY, AND TO LAUGH AT THINGS AND BE SAD, AND TO ENJOY EACH OTHER'S COMPANY.”

—Bryan Washington

his favorite.

“My favorite thing about Montrose is the diversity by default,” Washington says. “But I also love the community, and the different ways people find to come together.”

Becoming a Writer

Washington graduated from UH in 2015. He says that his writing skills advanced thanks to one of his instructors who took a special interest in him and encouraged him. “That was especially supportive, since I was writing about queer communities,” he says.

After UH, Washington moved to New Orleans and spent three years earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing at the University of New Orleans. He developed his unique style by reading lots of literature, fiction, and poetry.

The Awl website served as his outlet for demonstrating his literary abilities. One of the first breaks he got was being asked to write for a *New York Times* column. He focused on being a queer youth growing up in a Jamaican family. His work continued to be noticed, and numerous other media sources approached him. Since then, Washington has written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Buzzfeed*,

Vulture, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *One Story*, *Bon Appetit*, *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (GQ), and *Catapult*.

After earning his master's degree, Washington moved back to Houston and now lives in the Chinatown area around Bellaire Boulevard. He also works as a professor at Rice University, teaching fiction and creative-nonfiction courses.

Washington's emergence on the mainstream literature scene came with his collection of short stories, *Lot*, which brought to life many of the underrepresented cultural groups within Houston's larger LGBTQ community. The book was received with great critical acclaim.

Among the literary honors Washington has received are the National Book Award's 5 Under 35 prize, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award, the Earnest J. Gaines Award for Literary Fiction, and a Lambda Literary Award. He was a finalist for NBCC's John Leonard Prize, the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize, and the Aspen Words Literary Prize.

Memorial took three years to write. Washington says the story began as a series of notes that later developed into a short story. When

he showed the notes to his editor, she encouraged him to expand it into a full novel.

While the novel is not entirely autobiographical, it does include some of Washington's personal “emotional spaces” that his fictional characters inhabit, and Houston is their playground. There are several local references made in the book, including a shout-out to OUTSMART magazine.

“When we were editing the book, my editor said, ‘You know, nationally, a lot of people might not get the reference to OUTSMART,’” Washington laughs. “But I said fuck it, let's put it in!”



 **Memorial** by Bryan Washington is available now on Amazon. For more information on the author, visit brywashing.com.



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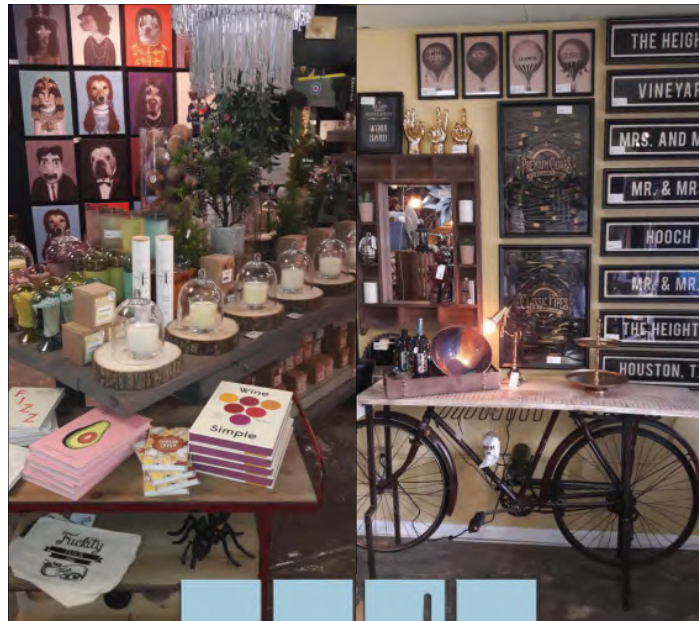
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Picking Up Where 'Little House' Left Off

R. Lee Ingalls pens a book about
his famous prairie family.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **DALTON DeHART**

Sharing a famous last name garnered R. Lee Ingalls lots of questions about his relationship to the children's book author Laura Ingalls Wilder, best known for her *Little House* series. The only glitch was that he didn't know a thing about

Laura, who was his great-grandfather's cousin.

"When I was in grade school, one of the kids asked me if I was part of the Ingalls family from *Little House on the Prairie*. I didn't know, so I asked my mother. She said, 'Yes, in fact you are,' he recalls. "It planted the seed that I would one day write a book [like she did]."

He has followed through with that commitment, and *Ingalls on the Prairie: The Gene and Fern Ingalls Story* is now available for purchase online.

The original *Little House* story is a multi-book series based on the elder Ingalls' childhood in the Midwest, with a chronology that starts in 1870. It spurred stage and screen adaptations, but is most widely recognized as the television series that aired from 1974 to 1983. Lee Ingalls' book picks up as a continuation of his family's history from 1929 to 1972.

"[People] wonder what happened with that family. Well, we're still here, so that's part of why I wrote the book. I thought it would answer those questions for people who grew up with the books or the TV series. We're still part of the fabric of America and living as everyday people, just like my ancestors did in her time," Ingalls adds.

Lee Ingalls' book covers the story of his parents, Gene and Fern, as they raised a family in the Midwest during the ever-changing American landscape of the 1950s and '60s. The book offers a short history of his parents' ancestors, their own childhoods, how they met, and finally their marriage that resulted in bringing eight children into the world. From the time they were wed until their older children began to leave home, they experienced more tragedy and happiness than most couples do in a lifetime.

Ingalls says the book is ultimately about the story of his parents' dedication to each other.

"The one thing my mom and dad were known for was their love for each other. They were very committed to each other. They had some hiccups in the road, just like every other couple, but their love was a constant in their life. It's a love story, but from a different perspective," he says.

The book took nearly a year to complete, and it was officially finished last month. After retiring from a 36-year career at AT&T, and spurred on by the down time that COVID-19 provided, Ingalls was able to complete the book this year. It didn't come without its complications, though, as his mother had to assist him in recalling some murky memories from his childhood.

"In the [characters'] early years, I kind of knew the story line but not the details. I'd write a chapter and send it to her. Then she'd take a few days to review it and make her notes. We'd talk, and I'd correct my story line," he explains. "It took quite a while because she doesn't have anything electronic; everything was hardcopy. It's easier for her to make her notes that way."

Ingalls has plans to publish more books, and he hopes his second book will carry on the family tradition of documenting more of an autobiographical history.

"Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote her first book when she was one year younger than I am. There was nothing about her family that stood out from any other family at that time. The difference is that Laura documented it. We were able to get a glimpse of what it looked like for regular Americans during the late 19th century. It's an extraordinary period in our nation's history," Ingalls says. "My story will be similar—a gay kid raised in the upper Midwest, and the struggles we had."

"PEOPLE WONDER WHAT HAPPENED WITH THAT FAMILY. WELL, WE'RE STILL HERE, SO THAT'S PART OF WHY I WROTE THE BOOK. I THOUGHT IT WOULD ANSWER THOSE QUESTIONS FOR PEOPLE WHO GREW UP WITH THE BOOKS OR THE TV SERIES."

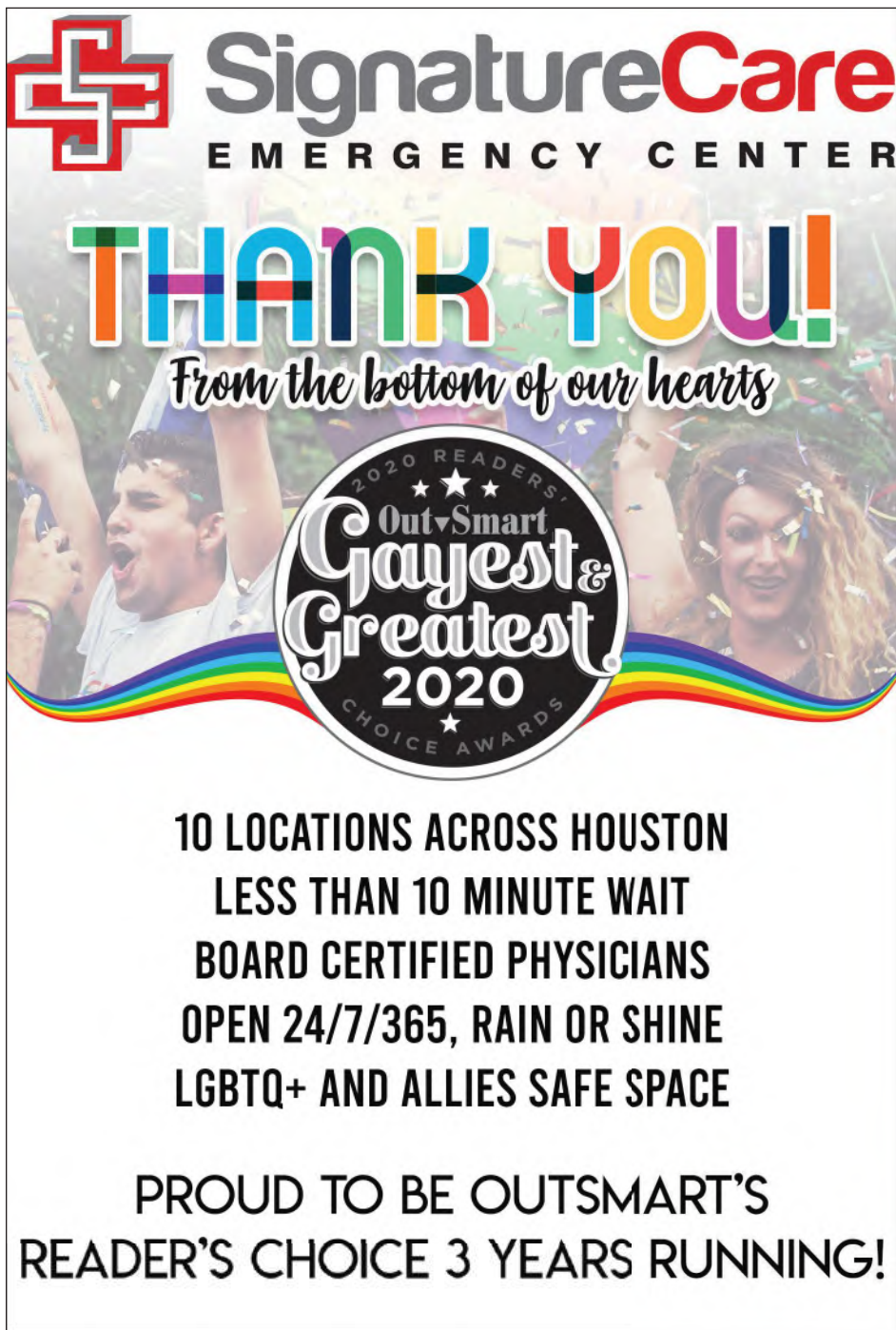
—R. Lee Ingalls

Like his famous ancestor, Ingalls did in fact grow up in the Midwest, but his vocation eventually landed him in Houston.

"I was a dancer in my first career. I danced with several dance troupes in the Midwest, and was recruited by the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre. I was their principal dancer for a few years. I then moved to Houston to dance with the Houston Ballet, but by then I was approaching 25 years old. Dance is a young man's career, and I thought I needed to make a change."

Ingalls then found work as a project manager and, like his parents, he also found his own love story. He met his partner, Brett Cullum, 15 years ago, and they have been married for six years. They now reside in the Montrose area.

 Ingalls on the Prairie: The Gene and Fern Ingalls Story is available on Amazon on both Kindle and paperback. \$9.99 to \$17.99.



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An Artistic Activist Legacy

Dr. Matthew Jones'
new book recounts the life
of a pioneering AIDS activist
and musician.

By ZACHARY MCKENZIE



Call it fate, or call it luck. Whatever it was, Dr. Matthew Jones isn't questioning it. A seemingly random YouTube interaction led to a connection that

ultimately gave Jones unprecedented access to the archives of activist, musician, and AIDS self-empowerment evangelist Michael Callen. In his new book, *Love Don't Need a Reason: The Life and Music of Michael Callen*, Jones explains how Callen's lessons and legacy are still at work today.

"The thing that motivates everything I do as a scholar and writer is telling untold or unknown LGBTQ stories, specifically about music," explains Jones, a Houston-based musicologist and historian. "I learned about Michael Callen when I was in graduate school ten years ago. Michael was always listed in footnotes during my research, and I always wondered who this person was."

After poking around on YouTube, Jones discovered Callen wasn't just a staunch AIDS activist, but a fine musician as well. "I left a comment on a clip of a Callen interview someone posted, and asked for the rest of the clip," Jones recalls.

What he didn't realize was that the clip was from Callen's surviving partner, Richard Dworkin. "I had no idea it was him!" Jones laughs. "He wrote back asking why I was asking about this. I explained I was doing research for a seminar paper, and he eventually invited me to his home in Queens."

Shortly after arriving in New York City, Jones started rifling through Callen's materials that the musician left in Dworkin's possession, as well as other collections that he had assembled before his death.

"Richard also introduced me to Michael's friends, his biological family, his queer family of choice, and his musical family. All of these people enthusiastically signed on to share stories about Michael and his life. It was stupid luck," Jones admits. "I've never been the right person in the right place to tell a particular story before, but in that moment I knew I had to write this. Callen's life is so compelling, his activism is important, and his music is so good."

Jones suggests starting with the album *Purple Heart* to get a taste of Callen's music.

The out scholar was equipped with every possible resource to write his book. "I love digging through archives and reading letters that people write. I'm 42, so I grew up in the shadow of the AIDS epidemic and I've long been interested in its impact on gay male communities, [as well as its significance in] the larger LGBTQ+ context."

Jones notes that almost everyone he interviewed said that most of their friends from that era are dead. "It was a challenge to keep going, [but] Michael had an abundant amount of hope and positivity. Part of Michael's activist agenda



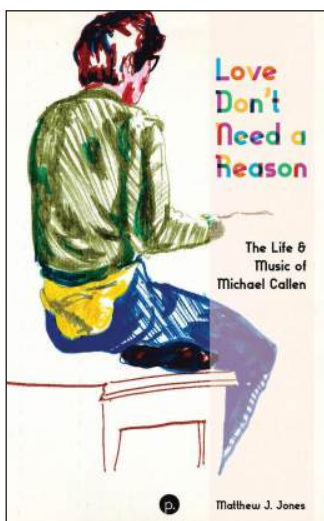
Historian and writer
Matthew Jones

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

was to avoid the propaganda of hopelessness. So I was able to avoid the hopelessness of the activism that I want my work to achieve.”

Today, Jones considers Callen’s inner circle to be his own friends. “Richard and I talked about what I envisioned this project would turn into, and he started tearing up,” Jones recalls. “He took my hand and said they had been waiting for someone to tell Michael’s story. That was one of the moments that solidified my friendship with Richard.”

The love, admiration, and fierce protection of Callen that Jones saw in his friends highlighted the importance of getting the book right. “Michael was treated very badly by some of the AIDS activist organizations and LGBTQ groups, so the people who knew him are fiercely protective of him and his legacy. Building trust with those people was really important,” Jones says. “Becoming friends with them has been one of the most beautiful and rewarding parts for me. Building intergenerational bonds [is so rare] in our community. The people who remain from the Stonewall era, they’re all pushing 70 or 80, and they aren’t going to be



with us forever.”

Jones hopes that readers will come to appreciate Callen’s impact on queer culture, both as an artist and activist. “I hope that people reinsert him into the history of homosexuality, queerness, and HIV/AIDS in the late 20th century. The other thing I want readers to know is that a queer person can change the world,” Jones says. “Michael Callen co-

authored a book in 1983 called *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic: One Approach*. That book introduced the idea of “safe sex.” Back when no one knew what the main cause of AIDS was, he wrote this book that introduces the idea that gay men should use condoms to avoid transmitting known infectious bodily fluids. That continues to shape the way people have sex to this very day.”

Gleefully looking forward to his book’s release by the queer-owned publisher Punctum Books, Jones reflects on his subject’s legacy: “I hope some young LGBTQ person reading this book realizes we are people making history and shaping history. Our communities have been driving forces in so many things, and our accomplishments are often recognized [without mentioning that they are *queer* accomplishments].”

 *Dr. Matthew Jones’ book Love Don’t Need a Reason: The Life and Music of Michael Callen is available for purchase beginning in November. For more information, visit tinyurl.com/y4ggm2ln.*

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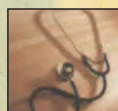
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Confronting His True ‘Selves’

Ste7en Foster comes to terms with his different personas in his new memoir, *The Last Alias*.

By DAVID ODYSSEY

After a rich career as a writer and director in the world of anime, Houstonian multi-hyphenate Ste7en Foster has created a new universe of expressive, archetypal characters—and they’re all in his head. In his debut memoir *The Last Alias*, Foster explores 22 distinct personas from within: “The Survivor,” “The Fool,” “The Freak of Nature,” “The Sexual Carnivore,” and many more. In the process, he examines painful episodes involving mental health, gay identity, and familial strife while casting off hang-ups about sexuality and expression and embarking on a new path of self (or perhaps *selves*) awareness. OUTSMART spoke with Foster about his long path to *The Last Alias*.

David Odyssey: What was the genesis of this memoir?

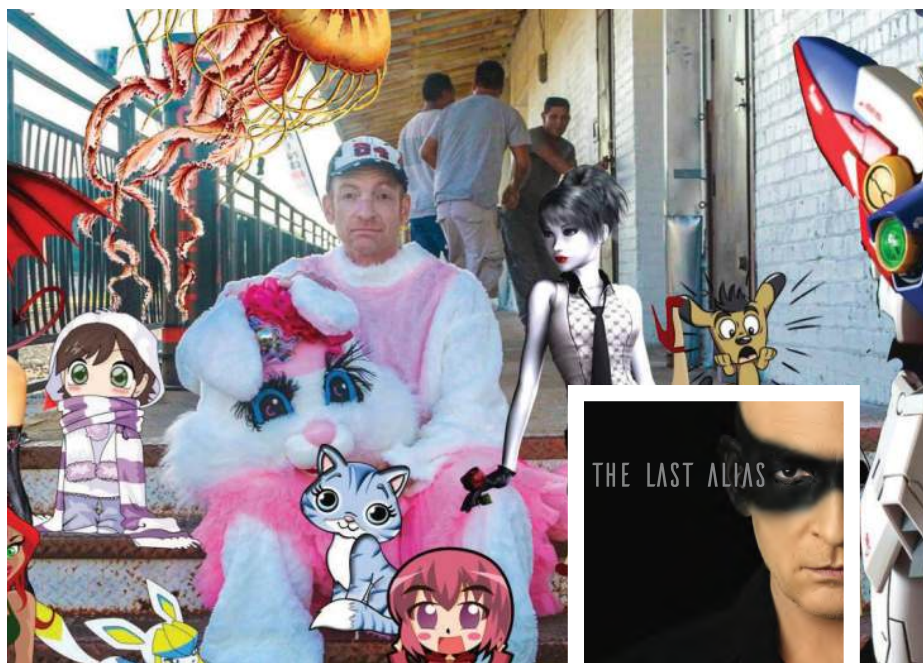
Ste7en Foster: About four years ago, after I left my anime career, I had what Lemony Snicket would call “a series of unfortunate events.” That’s what shook my world up. It was a breakdown, and I had to figure out what my new world looked like by looking at the old world.

How did you come to these “selves” that you explore in the book?

These were the stories that wouldn’t let go; the stories that needed to be told. I was in a time of self-examination and self-discovery, and I wound up looking at how one story set off the other, and one dovetailed into the other. I just followed the stories where they led me, and they helped me find out who I was as a person again.

When did you feel like you were ready to start assembling and sharing these stories?

I thought that if I could help just one person, and [even if it’s] only one person, then it will make all that I went through a little bit easier to swallow. Because if that’s not the case, I’m left with “God’s a dick,” and I don’t want to believe that. So I thought that maybe if I tell these stories, they could help people accept or understand parts of themselves more, or go through



what I went through more easily, or let their family know what they were going through. I had to swallow my own ego and just be honest about [my experiences]. There were stories I wish weren’t in the book for that reason, but if I was going to be honest, I had to put them in.

What was the hardest part about writing this book?

You’re asking questions that I should know the answers to. It was an organic thing; I was doing this because I didn’t know what else to do. I wrote these stories, and then they kind of formed a structure in memoir. I could then see that this could be something like Sloane Crosby, or Samantha Irby, or Michael Arce-neaux, or something like that. I did that same kind of structure, but I was maybe a little more vulnerable.

When you were discovering these different aspects of yourself, did you go through a sort of “coming out” process? Did this book help you introduce these versions of you to the world?

There were parts of myself that I didn’t like admitting [were there]. It’s universal, but I’ve

been able to put it into words: I think we’re all incredibly critical of ourselves, to [our own] detriment. Especially gay people. That’s what I liked about the book. If anybody knows about showing only certain sides of ourselves and “acting out” as a character, it’s gay people. If we put a spotlight on *this* persona, then we’re good. But we can’t show [straight people] that persona, because they wouldn’t handle *that*. And you just have to be able to focus on all of it, and admit it to all of your selves. I had to look at whether I’m a good father or not. A lot of people would look at my life and think I’m a terrible father, and other people may think I’m a good father. I just feel that if you’re gay, it’s harder for you to know yourself in terms of how the rest of the world sees you. We can’t separate the gay part of ourselves from any other part. It’s not conceivable. It’s who we are, just like how we can’t change any other thing about us. When we expose our real selves to the outside world, being open and honest about who we are, it’s then judged, and [that judgment is] based on an



outside point of view. We don't get to stand on our own and go, "This is me! Here I am!" It's got to be subjected to the world's mores and morals, and the world's point of view. Gay people don't get to say "free to be, you and me" like the rest of the world does. [The world doesn't judge being] straight like they judge being gay. If you want to have a family, they don't judge that part of you. But if you're gay, they say that you might not be fit to have kids. We're just different.

Did going through this process of confronting your different selves lead you to confront any moral hang-ups or judgments you had about yourself? Did you get to reclaim any aspect of yourself that society may have deemed "unfit?"

I had to look at myself really honestly, and that was good and bad. I looked at myself and realized that I'm more of a hero than I ever thought I was. I never thought of myself as a brave person, or someone who would go to battle. But *I am* that person! Sexually, I had to ask myself: Is this dysfunction, or is this what I like? I remember I got into a fight with my sexual counselor. She was trying to say that sex doesn't define us, and I said it doesn't define us but it's a very big part of who we are. Maybe I'm talking about men more, but not in blanket terms. But we're driven by sex—sex

interests us, sex propels us. And we have so many more hang-ups about that, because from our first sexual inkling on, we were branded "bad." If you're straight, you don't get that. You want to play house with Susie next door, and that's totally fine, and everyone is cool with it. But if you want to do that with Billy next door, you find out that that's not really cool, and that's not what it's supposed to be. That's your first introduction to it as a child: expressing yourself is bad. And [it's the same for] our first sexual experience, or our first romantic experience. We're told that our very nature, and the very thing we're driven to, our very desire, is wrong, and we're wrong. We have to fight that the whole rest of the way, which means that it magnifies every little kink we have. Do we accept it? Do we embrace it? Does it make us more ourselves?

Are there any sides of you that were previously hidden and now get to be embraced and brought into the world?

Yes! It's often the uncomfortable parts that I need to embrace—parts of myself that I'm not proud of. Why is that? That's old culture, and all these old religious or sexual mores putting themselves on me that I'm still constricted by. The challenge is to embrace that part of me. The part that is... well, who I am. There's a

story about sex in the book, and I put a warning on it saying the story is very sexually graphic and uses sensitive language that may not be appropriate. There are very graphic sex scenes, and it's almost up to the reader to decide if this is positive, or negative. Is this his fucked-up sexuality, or is this his romanticism? I left that up to the reader to decide.

It sounds like it comes down to reclamation.

It was about analyzing who I was—accepting the good parts and the bad parts, and embracing them both. With the ones that were poisonous, I need to know that I can keep a closer rein on them and not let them take over, which is what they're likely to do. There's one called "The Punisher," and he's always willing to take the lead. And the fact that I'm aware of that now gives me power over it. Then I can go forward and be stronger and not so critical, and I can shine that light on those parts of me. It's like knowing the bad parts of you is what gives you power over them, so you can control them more. And then the good stuff can come in. It blows you away, and you're like, "Holy shit, I didn't think I was this good of a guy, and I am. It's amazing."



The Last Alias is available at amazon.com

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The Aggie and the Ecstasy

An interview with filmmaker Catherine Gund.

By GREGG SHAPIRO

Lesbian documentary filmmaker Catherine Gund has an exceptional eye for subject matter when it comes to her movie projects. Of course, it helped that she was already familiar with gay performance artist Ron Athey, the late lesbian Mexican singer Chavela Vargas, and lesbian choreographer Elizabeth Streb. And she's especially well acquainted with the subject of her new doc *Aggie* (Strand Releasing/Aubin Pictures), which is about art collector and philanthropist Agnes Gund, who is also Catherine's mother.

Agnes' name may be familiar to some readers from her tenure as president of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Others may recall her incredible act of generosity when, after selling a piece of art from her private collection in 2017—Roy Lichtenstein's *Masterpiece*—for an estimated \$165 million dollars, she donated \$100 million dollars from the sale to establish Art for Justice, a grant-making organization “focused on safely reducing the prison population, promoting justice reinvestment, and creating art that changes the narrative around mass incarceration.”

Can you even imagine a subject more worthy of a documentary? Of course, that was director Catherine's greatest challenge, because her mother prefers to stay out of the limelight. Nevertheless, you'll be glad that Catherine prevailed, because *Aggie* is a truly delightful and eye-opening work of art.

Catherine Gund was kind enough to chat with OUTSMART before the film's release.

Gregg Shapiro: Catherine, you have a history of making docs about undeniably fascinating people, including Chavela Vargas, Ron Athey, and Elizabeth Streb. What is involved in your decision-making process when it comes to the subjects for your films?

Catherine Gund: I love this question about how to identify fascinating people, because I never set out to profile someone or make a movie about someone. It's always been somebody who's al-

ready in my life, and then it sort of develops into this story that I feel is always much bigger than that person. You're absolutely right, Ron Athey was the first feature-length film documentary that I made. That was another scenario where we were friends. I was friends with most of the people in the film before I made the film. This art, and this living—for me, it's [about the] experience. It's “let's make food, let's make a movie, let's make love, let's make happiness, let's make something together.” A lot of these relationships have already been established in that vein and then we move on, and making a movie just becomes an obvious outlet. Each case was something like that.

Aggie, your new doc about your mother, Agnes Gund, is an especially personal project. Why was now the time to make a movie about her?

As a documentary filmmaker, many people in her world have said to me, “Your mom's great! When are you going to make a movie about her?” I've always said, “Never, never, never.” [Laughs] I was very clear about that. But then she did this incredible [philanthropic] thing. She didn't talk about it, she didn't say she should do it, she just did it! In the French Revolution, they called it “the propaganda of the deed.” I just needed to add to that, to amplify that as something for all of us to aspire to. Nobody can do exactly what she did. Nobody can do what you do. Everyone can do something, and we don't have to be constrained by the mainstream media or advertising or tradition. We can actually use our imagination to do something different, that responds to our gut instincts, that responds to our intuition. We can follow our intuition to places where the mainstream media, advertising, the education system, and other things won't lead us. Art, to me, is what can lead us there. I want to share. I want everyone to feel the same way I do about art. I feel like art is our salvation as individuals, as a community, and as a society. It needs to find a path forward, both to heal past wrongs and current wrongs, as we're experiencing right now in our government—the legacy of

slavery, the history of anti-Black racism, and the violence that this society was founded on. It is such a violent society. We need to be able to heal, and then to move to something that's more just and beautiful.

Fairly early in the movie, you ask your mother if she wants to see a rough cut of the documentary. Has she seen it yet? If so, what does she think of it?

[Laughs] As in, does she still not want anyone to see it?

It was very funny when she said that to you in the car.

It's absolutely what she said! I think she understands this part. I think there are moments when I can speak about the bigger picture, or other people speak about it. She obviously is an exceedingly humble and shy person who shuns the spotlight. That's just a fact. It made making a film about her extremely difficult, because here I was saying, “You're a good person, you should have a film made about you,” but the reason you're good is that you don't want the film made about you. So that was a challenge. I feel like I tried to foreground in the film and make it clear that she doesn't want the film made. But she deeply believes in the end of mass incarceration, that this [moment in history] requires a reckoning, and that she can speak to that. To anyone who is listening, even if it's a small group, even if it's just me, even if it's a few friends. We all know it's bigger than that. She does have a voice, and she can use that voice to create a world that would benefit everyone.

The movie is full of examples of your mother's delightful sense of humor. The interview scene with filmmaker John Waters, for example.

[Laughs] That was the best, the very best!

Do you share her wit, or would you consider yourself to be more serious?

I think we have very different senses of humor. I definitely think hers is much drier and wittier.

I laugh freely and I crack jokes constantly. You wouldn't believe how many of those little clips in the back seat of the car there are. In a way, her priorities are right, but that means that they're not always the same priorities as yours. Here I am, trying to get her to speak and be interviewed, to tell me about X, Y, and Z. She spent so much time in the conversations with people, asking them questions.

Were you aware when you were growing up of what, exactly, your mother had hanging on her walls?

I was and I wasn't. When she moved to New York City, I was out of the house. I will say that is when it became clearer, certainly to me. Maybe because I was older. I think with her being in New York, she was freer to do it. There are certain pieces that I know were in the house when I was little. They're just burned into my psyche. The Mark Rothko piece has been in our house my whole life. I knew it was there, and I loved it. I felt a connection to it. Also the Hans Hofmann, which is in the Museum of Modern Art show. It's a very colorful block-color piece. That was always there while I was growing up. There was art around, for sure. We moved several times, but I can remember where the Rothko piece was in every single house. This was when things didn't change as much as they do now in her house, where art is being loaned out constantly and new art is being hung. It's just a beautiful, living gallery. Growing up, there were fewer pieces and the thing that changed would be the Christmas tree. A Christmas tree would come, and some furniture had to be moved. We would decorate the Christmas tree, and I would always think of that in relation to the art that was still on the walls.

Aggie's [interest in] philanthropy and activism is equal to her talent for art collecting. Did you inherit your mother's activist spirit?

I certainly am an activist, and have been from a young age. It's hard to know when and why those things happen. I'm sort of a 50/50 person. You're 50 percent nurture, 50 percent nature. I think that's just the default when we don't know the answer. I was raised with three siblings, and they're not like me. Did I inherit a gene that they didn't necessarily inherit? I think a lot of it came from being queer, [where] you are always having to understand the language of the mainstream as well as that of your own perspective and your own view of things. [You have] experiences which you know to be different from the mainstream story you're being told. I think that allowed me, right away, to know that there was something else. I think art is a portal as well. Whether it was nature or nurture, I did inherit from my mother [the ability] to see the world



Agnes & Catherine Gund



through art. That is a way toward understanding, a portal [through which we can see] a different path forward, and then to understand injustice. She was always a feminist, although she wouldn't use that term. [Laughs] I still don't think she would, even though I've argued with her (probably once every 10 years), "Go ahead, say you're a feminist." "But why?" Even this action of Art For Justice, she wasn't going to talk about it, she just wanted it to change. She wanted to get funding and support to the people who are doing the work, who knew what was wrong and are systematically solving it. Art For Justice is so different as a funding mechanism because it prioritizes art and activism together. That's my sweet spot. That's where I live, where art and activism are the same thing.

Because this is such a personal film, what are you hoping the audience takes away from it?

It is a really personal film, and for that reason I feel like I partly had to make myself vulnerable. But I also feel like there's not really an argument

with inspiring people to think about their community and their relationships within their family and in their country and in the world. I think that's what I want people to take away. Like these conversations show, you talk to people who you don't know everything about, or who you don't agree with on everything. Also, the way she sees the world through art. People have said to me, "I thought artists were just old dead white guys. That was the definition I was given." It's horrifying to realize that that's still what people are taught. If you go to museums, you're still going to see Picasso and Matisse and Renoir and Rembrandt. All these old dead white guys. These are the names that will come up if you say "artist." People aren't thinking of Faith Ringgold, Hank Willis Thomas, Glenn Ligon, or Teresita Fernández. So many older, younger, and established artists. Some are performance artists and some are sculptors and some are painters. Julie Mehretu's artwork is very abstract, although she will say each piece is about an experience that is very concrete to her. Mark Bradford's work hangs on gallery walls. It's incredibly powerful because there's an energy that goes into it, and that spirit reflects right back out at you. It's not about what the pieces are. I'm looking around the room I'm sitting in now, and I see all these different pieces that mean so much to me. One is made by my daughter, one is made by a friend, one is an image that everybody really loves and connects to in our family. The piece doesn't matter. It's the idea of having that energy in the room and having that as a part of our language. Our ability to communicate is based on a language of seeing. What do we see? That then dictates what we know. It's a cycle. I would love people to think of art that way.



For more information on Aggie, visit aubinpictures.com/aggie.

Traveling during a Pandemic

How to stay safe while navigating COVID-19

By JOAKIM GUSTAVSSON

Although some would argue that we have “turned the corner” on the pandemic, I still talk about travelling “during” the pandemic since many regions around the globe are experiencing their second and third waves of the coronavirus.

Regardless, I want to dispel some of the travel myths I have heard by sharing my recent experiences with traveling across country and abroad.

My first trip to Florida was in June, and I *really* geared up for it by wearing long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, gloves, face mask, and face shield. My personal sanitization process in the airport would go something like this: pick up luggage, vigorously wipe luggage, change gloves, and liberally apply hand sanitizer. Repeat these steps whenever the luggage was out of my hands. As soon as I arrived at my destination, my clothes went straight in the washer and I stepped into the shower.

Although I’ve eased up on the glove changing, I still wear a face mask, a face shield, and I bring extra hand sanitizer to use as I go through airports. Since then, I’ve made several trips to Florida and Pineapple Point Guest House. I have also flown to Colorado and back. When I return home to Houston, I take the precautionary measure to self-quarantine for 10 to 14 days and have a rapid test before I reunite with my family.

Watching the safety measures and protocols that Pineapple Point has put in place made me realize that we all have the power to make our own choices when armed with the facts,



Dave Gervase (l), Team VACAYA's Randle Roper, and Ted Schouten

regardless of whether we are at home or traveling. I also realized that each of us has varying levels of risk tolerance. As individuals, we are responsible for our own choices regarding our exposure to the coronavirus, just like the responsibility we take when making financial decisions and investments.

During a recent trip to VACAYA's UNICO resort south of Playa del Carmen (my first LGBTQ vacation since pandemic travel restrictions were put in place), it was interesting to read the conversations among members of the Facebook group that was created for this trip. Mainly, the travel-shaming. One member said that anyone going on a trip at this time was “irresponsible” and “a health risk.” Those anti-travel members were on the extreme end of the risk-tolerance scale. But I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that from my perspective the trip was as safe as going to my local grocery store. Many of those on the trip got a rapid test

the week before departure.

This resort has a capacity of over 800, but there were only around 250 of us due to hotel capacity regulations and the restrictions imposed by the Mexican government. The resort staff appropriately wore their masks for the entire week, and the guests were requested to wear masks or face shields when moving around the resort. In the pools, people kept their distance except those who were there with close friends—and even then, some groups wore masks. Upon arrival, everyone got to choose a lanyard to wear that held their room key and indicated their social-distancing preference with color codes. Red indicated “keep your distance and wear a mask at all times while around me,” and green meant “you can wear your mask around me, or not.”

The parties and entertainment were all outdoors, and people would dance in their groups. Everyone knew to keep their distance



VACAYA's Oasis at UNICO

from those who were wearing a red-colored lanyard. At the restaurants each night, temperature checks were required before anyone was seated.

Of course, we had some additional excitement during our week with the Category 4 Hurricane Delta coming our way. As it approached, we were moved to the conference center of the resort to spend one night on mattresses set up by the staff. VACAYA put on a show for us, and staff members who stayed there were gracious and hospitable. The resort was built in 2017 to withstand a Category 5 hurricane, so at no point did I feel unsafe. There were a few nervous guests, but absolutely zero drama. Truthfully, deep down most of us were excited about the extra-ness of it all!

Fortunately, Delta made landfall north of us as a Category 2 storm and passed within two hours. We passed a bucket and collected an additional \$7,800 in tips for the staff's generosity, and we also gave them a standing ovation. Right after the storm, and before bus service was restored to rotate the staff, many of the guests pitched in to help put the sun chairs and umbrellas back outside. It was the least we could do, and soon we were ready to go back to relaxing in the beautiful Mexican weather.

Personally, I felt safer during that VACAYA trip than I sometimes do in Houston. Nobody needed to preach about wearing a mask or how to wear them correctly, and social distancing was easy to maintain at the pools, in the restaurants, and at the bars.

From my perspective, life must go on and we must keep living. Yet, we all have a responsibility to avoid exposing others to risks that are beyond their comfort level. For me, the most important part of the week was connecting with my friends from all over, even in the unconventional circumstances.

When your personal risk-tolerance level is at a point where you feel you're ready to venture out into the world for a vacation, you will first need to research the specific restrictions in place for your destination. Luckily, Mexico was pretty relaxed about visiting Americans, but that may not be the same for every country. You don't want to get caught in a place where the government is likely to impose sudden restrictions that could ruin your travel plans.

Wherever you decide to travel, know that the local hospitality professionals at your destination of choice are going beyond the call of duty to ensure your health and safety throughout your stay.

 **Joakim "Kim" Gustavsson** is an avid traveler and an international business consultant to several Fortune 100 companies. He and his husband, Charles, own Concierge Travel, an agency specializing in LGBTQ travel.



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Caribbean Cruise	Mar 3 - 10, 2022
Costa Rica Resort - Andaz Papagayo	Jun 5 - 12, 2022

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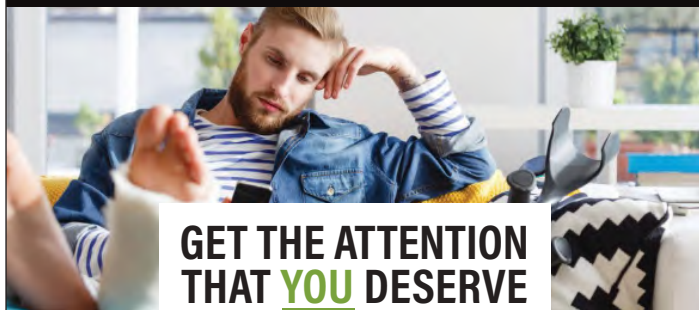
Amazon Cruise & Machu Picchu Discovery - Delphin III	Apr 11 - 23, 2021
Paris, Normandy & The Seine River - The Amadeus Diamond	May 12 - 19, 2021
Japan / Land of the Rising Sun - Land Package	May 23 - Jun 4, 2021
Prague & Danube River Cruise - Amadeus Imperial	Aug 16 - 25, 2021
Bucharest to Budapest Danube River Cruise - Amadeus Queen	Sep 4 - 13, 2021
Vietnam & Cambodia / Mekong River Cruise - Mekong Jewel	Oct 14 - 26, 2021
Amazon Cruise & Machu Picchu Expedition - Delphin III	Nov 7 - 19, 2021
Panama Canal - Royal Clipper	Nov 20 - 27, 2021
Africa Safari & Tour	Nov 22 - Dec 2, 2021, Dec 8 - 18, 2021
Enchanting Egypt - Nile Adventurer	Mar 3 - 11, 2022
Jordan & Petra / Wonders of the Desert	Mar 11 - 16, 2022
Burgundy & Provence - MS Amadeus Provence	Sept 3 - 15, 2022
Royal Clipper Mediterranean Sailing	Sept 15 - 24, 2022
Scotland's Royal Majesty Cruise & Exploration - Lord of the Highlands	Oct 5 - 17, 2022
Vietnam & Cambodia Mekong River - Mekong Jewel	Oct 13 - 25, 2022
Nepal & Bhutan Exploration	Oct 14 - 24, 2022
India & the Ganges River - RV Ganges	Oct 24 - Nov 6, 2022

ATLANTIS EVENTS

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Virgin Caribbean Cruise - Scarlet Lady	Apr 11 - 16, 2021
Club Atlantis Cancun - Club Med Cancun	May 1 - 8, 2021
Venice to Athens Cruise - Oceania Riviera	July 9 - 18, 2021
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WEDDING GUIDE

By JENNY BLOCK | Photos by MIGUEL CHARRIÉ

Third Time's the Charm

Lydia Meadows and Crystal Murley met three times before finally hitting it off.



Crystal Murley (l) and Lydia Meadows



For Lydia Meadows and Crystal Murley, good things come in threes. The couple first met at JR's Bar & Grill eight years before they met again online through Match.com. JR's was a non-starter, Lydia says, "Crystal was my bartender and I offered to buy her a drink. She politely

declined. Then a few weeks later I saw her bartending again, so I slipped her my number on the bar tab. Never heard from her. Later, I found out that bartenders don't really look at those tabs."

Luckily, Match.com knew the women needed to meet even if Crystal didn't get the hint at JR's. The pair said they connected immediately over email once they matched on

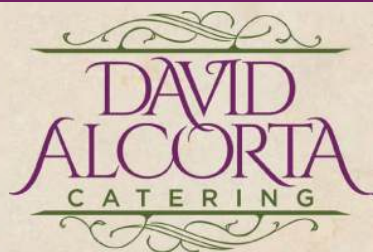
the site in 2015. When they finally decided to go out, they went for barbeque at Gabby's on North Shepherd and were shocked to discover that they lived only two blocks from one another. "Lydia owns a home on the opposite side of the same street, and has for years—and we never crossed paths! Now that's just crazy. The universe was laughing at us!"

When they got their barbeque and sat down, Crystal says she was in for a very big surprise. "I don't know how to explain this, other than to say that Lydia began inhaling her food—both hands going, shoving food in her face as if she hadn't eaten in a week. She would catch a breath and then go at it again. The moment was surreal to me." Crystal loved it. She figured if Lydia could be totally herself and not put on the "first-date show" that so many people do, she had to be as self-assured and down-to-earth as a girl could be.

"In my head I thought, 'I'm going to marry this girl,'" Crystal says. "Then I thought, 'What the heck is wrong with me? This is our first date!'" But it was indeed that very first date when Crystal knew Lydia was the one.

Lydia says she knew she wanted to marry Crystal the day that marriage equality was passed into law. That morning, she says, "I had been texting my friend Chelsea about Crystal and told her that I knew I was going to marry her. Once the announcement came, I met Crystal for lunch. We both got a soda with our lunch, and hers said 'Share a Coke with Your Soulmate.' I mean, come on, universe! I hear ya! So that was that."

Lydia decided to propose to Crystal at the mouth of the Grand Canyon. Despite being involved in a major car accident, Lydia flew to Las Vegas with Crystal to celebrate their four-year anniversary. "Crystal thought I was →



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going to propose at dinner that evening. When it didn't happen, I think she was surprised, but she understood."

The next morning, they drove to the Grand Canyon. "Crystal did a majority of the driving through mountains and curves, which she hates."

When they arrived at the park, Lydia tried to find a private spot—one that was "away from the edge of the canyon, in case either of us dropped the ring." They ended up on a little overlook near the main path. Lydia said, "Babe, open this. I have a question."

Crystal responded, "Ummm, okay. Wait, is this real? Are you for real?"

"Yes. You are my one. Will you marry me?"

Still unconvinced, Crystal repeated, "For real?"

"Of course," Lydia said. "For real."

The couple was married on February 29, 2020, in their backyard. "We had originally wanted to get married at the courthouse with a small dinner afterward with family. Once we looked at venues and prices, the guest list kept growing to where it was turning into a full-blown ceremony." That's when they realized the perfect spot would be their very own backyard. "It was amazing, once we made the decision, how everything came together."

The ceremony also included Crystal's oldest canine son, Bailey, who Crystal had had since he was a puppy. Gratefully, he held on long enough to be their ring bearer on the big day. The pointer and pit bull mix even got his very own boutonniere. "He grew up in the studio with Crystal and went everywhere with her. His approval was more important than anyone else's," Lydia says. Sadly, he passed away three months later.

The couple said they kept the whole wedding simple and sweet. "We left out the walking down the aisle part, and I really liked that. When our guests arrived in our backyard, we were there to greet them and visit before we cut the music and started the ceremony."

One thing they knew they wanted for sure was roses and irises. "Roses represented Crys-

tal's grandmother, and irises represented my grandmother," Lydia explains. Their vows, on the other hand, were not part of any plan. "We decided to ad lib our vows, [which made for] some pretty hilarious moments. And our officiant, Leslie Jenkins, found a wonderful reading about hands, and how we will continue to hold each other up and support one another for the rest of our lives."

Their wedding cake was a unicorn cake made by Crystal's sister-in-law that combined red and purple paintbrush strokes. And Dolly Parton's "Pure and Simple" was their first dance song. Parton's Pure and Simple Tour was one of the best concerts the pair says they ever attended together. "That concert made us feel like we were sitting on Dolly's front porch, laughing and singing with her," Lydia says. That night, they knew "Pure and Simple" would be their first dance at their wedding one day. "At the end of the night, we looked at each other and said this is exactly what we had wanted: a big party where we just happen to get married in the middle," Lydia says.

When things "settle down" on the COVID-19 front, the couple says they will take off for a honeymoon in Greece. "Island hopping on the Greek Isles sounds like the perfect way to relax and enjoy the variety of things that the islands have to offer," Lydia says.

If Crystal had just one chance to share with the world what makes Lydia so special, she says she would exclaim, "Lydia is an amazing woman on every level, and an incredibly talented actor. I am blessed to have such a wonderful woman as my wife."

And Lydia is at no loss for words when it comes to explaining how she feels about Crystal. "Crystal is so compassionate. If someone needs help, she asks how she can help, and she shows up if she says she will do something. Her heart is one of the many things I treasure about her." ▼

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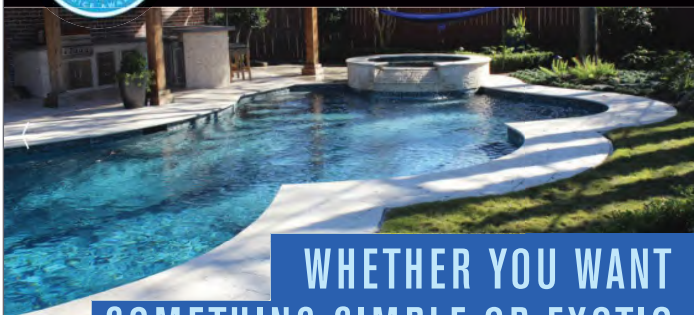
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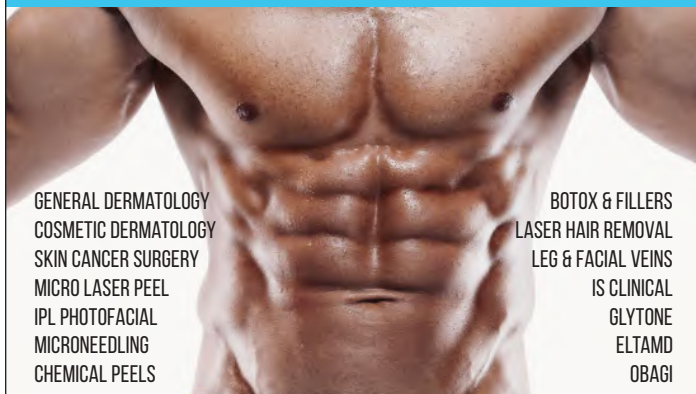
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A Period of Delay

Make sure you take time for yourself.



November is a very busy month this year. Mercury goes stationary direct on Election Day, November 3, and this often means a delay in getting election results, as it has in the past. Mercury will be fully direct by November 10. We are still under a period of delay, as Mars is also retrograde and not direct until December 2. We will slowly begin to move forward with new energy as we get into December, although the tensions will remain high through the beginning of the year. We have an eclipse on November 30 in Gemini that can bring light, awareness, and change for Geminis and Sagittarians. This month is edgy, and will require us to be on our toes. Days of tension are November 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 15, 17, 19, 22, 27, and 29. Make sure you take time for yourself, especially on these days.

The sun begins the month in Scorpio and eventually enters Sagittarius on the 21st. Mercury begins the month retrograde in Libra and re-enters Scorpio full direct on the 10th. Venus enjoys her journey through Libra, her home sign, and enters Scorpio on the 21st. Mars continues his journey through Aries, while Jupiter, Saturn, and Pluto continue to plow the ground in Capricorn. Uranus opens our eyes as she travels through Taurus, and Neptune enjoys floating in her watery sign of Pisces!

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19) This continues to be a highly energetic time for you. You are continuing to take life more personally, so you'll have some sleepless nights and need some exercise to burn off excess energy. It is harder to be patient with the delays you encounter. Relationships can be more volatile, even with good communications. You are reassessing your skills and resources, and exploring new ways to define who you are. Work and career directions are still up in the air, and that's likely to continue through January. Focus on taking care of current projects, and don't add anything new until after December 2. You will begin to feel a bit lighter by the end of the month.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20) Creating change, reinventing yourself, and generating greater trust in your relationships is all part of your November. With relationships, this is a great time to get out of town with your partner and rediscover the magic that drew you together. Your partnership needs some attention, and old problems can arise that need to be addressed or your relationship may come to an end. With your work, you are slowly starting to get a better handle on the direction you might take. Work decisions are best delayed until December, but this is an excellent month to analyze your data. New opportunities are opening up on the career front, but they may not be available until midmonth.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) As the month opens, you are trying to get yourself back on your schedule and the

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21) Happy Birthday to the Scorpions, Eagles, and Phoenixes! This is your personal yearly cycle when you get to review what you did last year and set new goals for yourself this year. With Mercury retrograde in your sign, this is an especially introspective time for you. Mercury continues retrograde until November 10, and that should help you become clearer about your ideas. It will be best to wait until December 2 before putting your fence posts in cement. In your partnerships, you are looking for freedom of expression and friendship. This is also a good time to write, promote yourself, and become more involved in social media as a moneymaking outlet. For some of you, this is the time to completely change your career direction or even retire. Spend time focused on you—your pleasures, and what excites you the most!

routines that have been out of whack for most of 2020. This is an excellent month to restart any exercise or healthy-eating programs, reorganize your office space and your kitchen pantry, and take care of the projects you have been avoiding. Don't put yourself in a box by overcommitting. Mercury, your ruler, is retrograde through November 10. After that date you can begin to explore new projects and adventures, but it may be best to wait until December 2 before you start anything. Relationship energies get a big boost at the end of the month with the eclipse occurring in your relationship sector. This can help to reinvigorate your current relationship, or open the door to something new!

CANCER (June 22-July 22) The next couple of months will be a big period of change for the Moon Kids. You are definitely rethinking your career choices and directions, but you are holding off on taking action until after December 2. Relationships continue to need time, nurturing, and some upgrading to keep them in line with your path and goals. In the early part of this month, you will want to make your home more comfortable and beautiful. You are also in a more creative period, so take more time for artistic expression or just some time with your kids. They will help loosen you up! Toward the end of the month, you are ready to put your plans into action.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22) Career and home are especially active this month. On your career path, you may feel bored with your current direction unless you find something that excites the passion in you. At home, you are trying to generate some order as you try to adjust to new agendas and schedules. This is a good time to explore new remodeling ideas, but wait until December 2 to start anything. Communication needs to be as clear as possible this month, especially with family and co-workers. Double-check all messages and plans, particularly with the holidays coming up. You are looking for new ways to express your traditions this year, and you may even decide to skip them altogether. Focus on making the holidays fun for you!

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) Your ability to express yourself clearly continues to improve. This month is very

good for writing, working with social media, or promoting your services in a unique way. Despite your adaptability, you can do better by focusing on what satisfies you, rather than always using your energy to support others. Watch your impulse-spending this month—you will be drawn to the shiny and expensive items! Your relationship needs and goals continue to change as you explore new ways to connect with your partner. Relationship energies improve in December, even if you are single. By the end of the month, you are more focused on your home and family. Keep your family-visits schedule very flexible during the holidays so you can change your plans to suit your mood.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23) This continues to be an active and energetic month for you, despite the demands and obligations that you feel you must tend to. Home, family, and traditions are really highlighted this month with Thanksgiving just around the corner. You will miss the traditional gatherings, but you can reinvent that tradition to suit our current crazy environment. Relationships are still very active, but they need attention to make sure they are fun and enjoyable. The problems that arise are old issues that can finally be resolved. This can be a challenge to your partnership, and it could come to an end without a resolution. Finances will have a strong focus this month. You are looking at upgrading your skills with new training, or by shifting your direction toward a new career. You will be better prepared to make these decisions in December.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21) As the month begins, you are in a time of rest and retreat, despite the demands that are being placed on you. Finances and the economy have your full attention this month as you work to relieve yourself of debt and other financial obligations. Friends and social support groups are especially important in the early part of the month. Your work environment this month is a bit edgy, as people are impatient and freaked out because of the pandemic and the economy. Focus on projects that you like, rather than just the obligatory ones. You are looking to step away from your usual holiday traditions this month and find a little more inner peace. Your creative energies rebound at the end of the month.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) With all of the planets in Capricorn over the last couple of months, you could easily be feeling stuck or just overwhelmed by the decisions you need to make. This gets easier as we get to mid-December. Friends and business-support organizations can be helpful by offering alternative solutions to broaden your options. November may have you on edge as you try to deal with the drama that your family is creating. You want to keep them safe, but you may be trying to do that all by yourself. Relationships are a bit demanding, as you need to focus your energy on yourself and the future. Look to friends for emotional support—a shoulder to lean on, a listening ear, or help with finding more time to focus on *you* so you'll feel more appreciated. As the holidays get closer, you will need some time for rest and relaxation.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18) Change, decision making, and redefining your long-term goals are all on the table as we meander through November. You are working on setting better boundaries for yourself and those around you. With work, you are looking to take on a leadership role or possibly start your own business. You definitely need something new to keep your brain active and excited. You will want to wait until after December 2 before you put new plans into action. Relationships also get better by the end of the month. If you are involved, this is a great time to have some time together. If you are single, this is a much better time to meet new people for friendship and long-term relationships after the holidays!

PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20) This is a month of mixed energies for you. A part of you is ready to step back and retreat as the holiday energy begins to build. But another part of you is looking to the future and what you will be doing next. You are having mixed feelings about the holidays in general, since they seem so far from the idyllic scenes of years gone by. This is a very creative time for you, and it could include writing, teaching, publishing, and getting your ideas out there. You are looking at the previous work you have done as a way to motivate yourself for your future. Watch your spending, as impulse-buying is a big problem during the holidays. Work and career seem clearer toward the end of the month. Relationships are flowing along, but you are setting boundaries about what you will do and what you won't do. Make sure all communications are clear, and double-check any documents you need to sign.

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Approaching 30 years of drag entertaining, including everything from competing in pageants to hosting weekly shows, Lana Blake makes her presence

known via her unforgettable quick wit on the microphone as well as her unabashed political musings on social media. She's also known for her signature red hair, which matches her fiery attitude. Learn more about how this local loudmouth earned her nickname.

Pronouns?

She/her

Hometown?

Born and raised in Pasadena, Texas.

Inner avatar?

Since we're coming off of election season, I would say Bernie Sanders. He's resilient and articulate, and when people realize what he was trying to do, I think they will erect monuments to him.

Tell us about singing live.

Growing up, I wanted to be a professional singer, but I thought I had a snowball's chance in hell to "make it." Drag became my way of modifying my dream and still being famous. I remember running for Miss Texas USofA years ago. I decided to sing live as Cher. It was also the anniversary of Elvis' death, so I sang "Walking in Memphis" and finished in the Top 12. I knew I couldn't put the genie back in the bottle after that, so now I host karaoke and try to incorporate live singing at almost every show.

Share more about your very opinionated social-media posts.

I tell people who thank me for my social-media presence that I'm self-employed, so my boss really doesn't care about my mouth. I know a lot of people who are unable to speak out about things that bother them, for fear of losing their jobs. I like to think of myself as the voice of the people.

The Mouth of the South

Lana Blake is well known for her outspoken attitude.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **ALEX ROSA**



Any thoughts about Transgender Awareness Week (November 13–19)?

I have to commend two individuals in the trans community who have impressed me so much this past year. Taryn Taylor is Miss Texas USofA, and she has completely changed the game for anyone going forward. She was on social media with a historical retrospective the likes of which I've never seen. I would relish reading a new history lesson each morning [that she would post about] the system and its legacy. Also Tommie Ross, who is Pride Houston's 2020 Female-Identifying Grand Marshal. She's not only been active on social media, but I saw my beautiful sister on the 6 o'clock news recently. That's truly historic for a trans woman of color to be spoken about in such a positive light, especially in the South.

Any Thanksgiving traditions?

Thanksgiving is a time for reflection and giving thanks for what we have. But this year we don't have much, financially. So I'm thankful for my health, my tenacity, and my resilience, even through this is a very difficult year. As for tradition, I usually end up at friends' houses enjoying a great meal, conversation, and libations.

What do you do outside of drag?

I have several hobbies, and I love TV. But I'm also a business owner. I have been doing hair for as long as I've been entertaining! My salon is Alex Burton Studios, located at 6100 Westheimer in Houston. I do cuts for all genders, color and highlights, and waxing (from the neck up). My prices are very reasonable.

I'm in a private suite, so my studio is very safe. I clean and disinfect between every client, and masks are required for service. If you're interested in an appointment, contact me through social media or my office number: 281-804-8304.

When we're not practicing social distancing, where can people see Lana Blake perform?

Barcode on Sunday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights. Hopefully I'll be back at Michael's Outpost on Friday and Saturday nights again soon. ▼

Follow Lana on Facebook and on Instagram @thelanaBlake.

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