

SPREADING HOLIDAY CHEER: QUEER HOUSTONIANS GIVE BACK

Pg.38

DEC. '20

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

OutSmart

INSIDE:

YEAR in REVIEW

Ryan Leach
Dissects 2020

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BODY-POSITIVE IMAGES

Steven Tilotta
Looks through
an Affirming Lens

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FAMILY TIES

HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR **RUTH STEINFELD**
WAS A STRONG FORCE IN
GRANDSON **BRANDON MONTANO'S**
JOURNEY TO SELF-ACCEPTANCE

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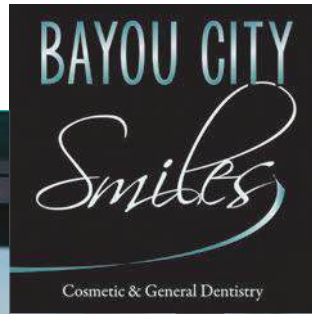


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"I LOVED MY DENTIST SO MUCH, I MARRIED HIM!"



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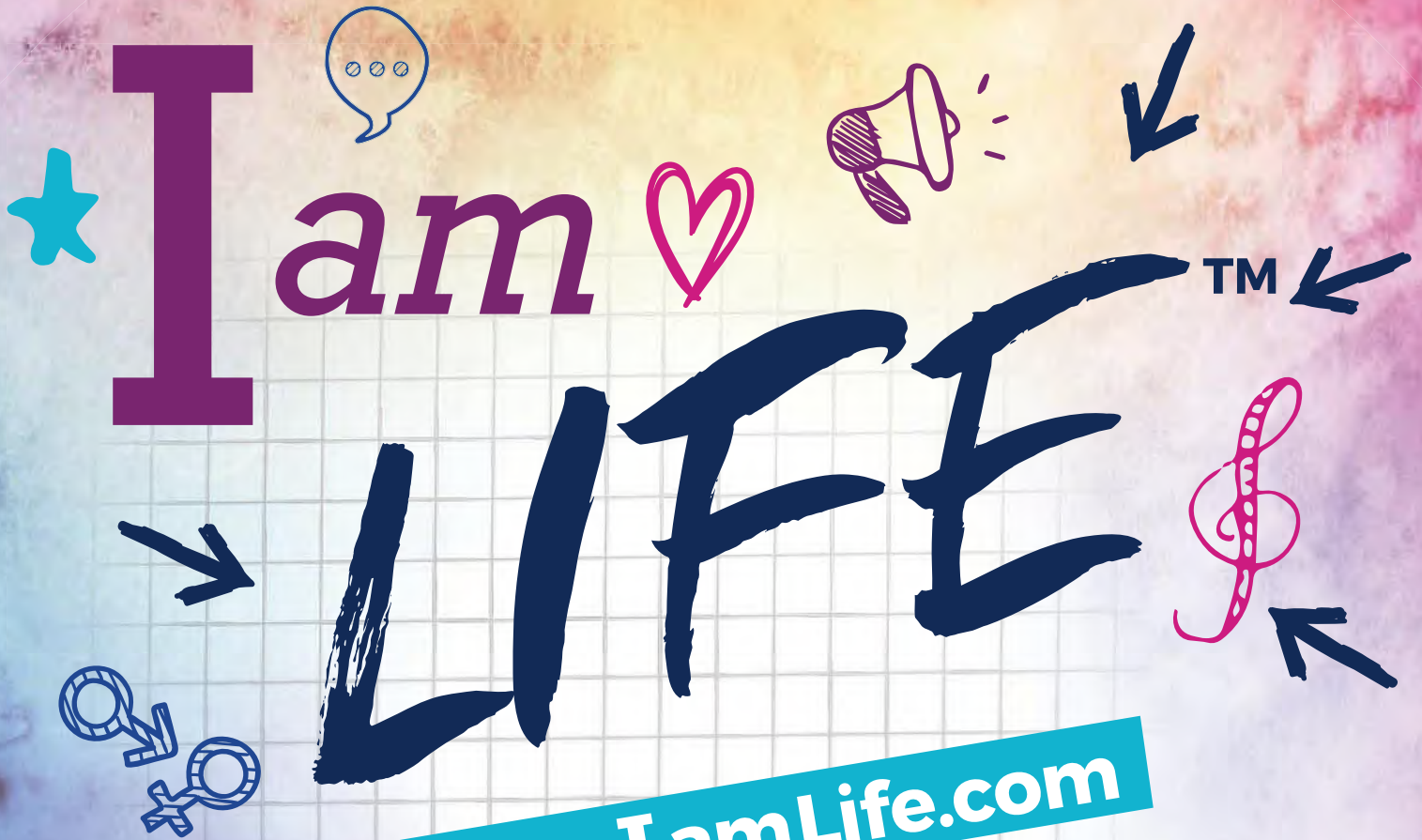
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FAMILY TIES

Holocaust survivor Ruth Steinfeld was a strong force in grandson Brandon Montano's journey to self-acceptance. *Photography by Alex Rosa for OutSmart*



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While every year is marked by a few defining moments, 2020 has been jam-packed with world-changing events. From the worsening climate crisis to a pandemic and the global push for racial justice, many long-standing problems finally came to a head this year.

"It has been a year of tremendous losses and tremendous wins. No one will come away from 2020 unchanged," notes writer Ryan Leach. His sixth annual list of Things to Leave in 2020 (and Keep for 2021) urges us to remember the vital lessons we've learned in 2020 by getting rid of things

that aren't working and starting off the New Year mindful of the progress that was made.

Elsewhere in our December edition of OUTSMART, columnist and psychiatrist Daryl Shorter also encourages us to look on the bright side by stopping to reflect on the things we can be thankful for. "From that perspective, the idea of an enjoyable holiday observance may not seem quite so far-fetched," Shorter writes.

Because COVID-19 is still surging, we've all had to rethink how we're celebrating the holidays this year. OUTSMART caught up with six notable queer locals—Rabbi Gideon Estes, Marcus Handy, Dylan Godwin, Gianna Navarro, Taylor DiMartino, and Dylan Carnes—to find out how

their positive energy and ambitious projects are helping to keep the holidays merry and bright.

LGBTQIA+ Houstonians are resilient. If you need further proof of that, get to know our cover stars, Holocaust survivor Ruth Steinfeld and her openly gay grandson Brandon Montano. Writer Zach McKenzie chats with the duo about the power of unconditional love and acceptance.

Also in this issue, learn more about the record-breaking number of queer-focused holiday films coming out this month. Writer Alys Garcia Carerra and I give you a rundown on these groundbreaking flicks that you can stream this winter.

And don't miss writer Gregg Shapiro's interview with Henry

Golding. The longtime LGBTQ ally and *Crazy Rich Asians* star plays a gay man in Hong Khaou's *Monsoon*, which is available for streaming now.

Lastly, this December edition marks one full year of writer Sam Byrd's Wiggling Out column. This month, Byrd interviews Regina Dane about the drag shows she loves to host for charity fundraisers. To look back on past Wiggling Out features (and all of OUTSMART's 2020 print editions), visit outsmartmagazine.com/in-print.

See you next year!

Lourdes Zavaleta
MANAGING EDITOR



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Caribbean Cruise	Jan 10 - 17, 2022
Costa Rica Resort - <i>Andaz Papagayo</i>	Jun 5 - 12, 2022

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Japan / Land of the Rising Sun - <i>Land Package</i>	May 23 - Jun 4, 2021
Prague & Danube River Cruise - <i>Amadeus Imperial</i>	Aug 16 - 25, 2021
Bucharest to Budapest Danube River Cruise - <i>Amadeus Queen</i>	Sep 4 - 13, 2021
Vietnam & Cambodia / Mekong River Cruise - <i>Mekong Jewel</i>	Oct 14 - 26, 2021
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Panama Canal - <i>Royal Clipper</i>	Nov 20 - 27, 2021
Africa Safari & Tour	Nov 22 - Dec 2, 2021
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Club Atlantis Lux - <i>Club Med Miches Playa Esmeralda</i>	Nov 28 - Dec 5, 2021



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Anti-Trans Violence at an All-Time High

Houstonian **Asia Foster** was at least the 38th murder victim this year.

By STAFF REPORTERS



One year after Asia Foster took part in a vigil for her murdered transgender friend Tracy Single, Foster's friends and family attended a memorial following her own murder.

Foster, another 22-year-old Black trans woman, was identified as the victim of a fatal shooting at 3400 East Greenwich Drive on November 20. Friends and family mourned her death at the Montrose Center two days later.

"Asia was here last year when Tracy was murdered. She was working for me [at that event]," said trans activist Dee Dee Watters, who organized both vigils. "It's crazy that at this point in time, we're now honoring her."

Foster was an active member of Houston's LGBTQ community, and spent time at Montrose Grace Place (MGP), a drop-in shelter for housing-insecure youth of all

genders and sexualities. Single was also one of MGP's clients.

"Asia was outgoing, funny, and she could put together a read that left everyone around her scrambling to pick up their jaws," MGP wrote on Facebook. "We're saving a seat next to Tracy for you, Asia. We love you."

According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), Foster is the first known trans person to be murdered in Houston in 2020. She is also at least the 38th trans or gender-nonconforming person to be murdered in the U.S. this year—the nation's highest number of deaths since the organization began tracking these murders in 2013.

"Asia's death is reported to have occurred on Transgender Day of Remembrance, a day on which we honor those in our community we've lost to fatal violence," said Tori Cooper, HRC's director of community engagement for the

Transgender Justice Initiative. "The fact that we marked the most violent year on record, only to be met with another tragedy, is unacceptable."

At least 202 trans or gender-nonconforming people have been murdered since 2013, HRC reports. Two-thirds of the victims have been Black trans women, and nearly 60 percent of the incidents involved gun violence.

Police investigators say that Foster's body was found by a man walking near Skyline Drive in Southwest Houston. Friends said the area was close to Foster's home, and police believe her body was dumped after being shot. The circumstances leading up to her death remain unclear.



Anyone with information about Foster's murder should call Crime Stoppers at 713-222-TIPS (8477).

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Returning to Reality

Will Trump's next term be "15 to life"?



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BLASE DISTEFANO

Okay, I can breathe now. Biden and Harris won. I can promise you it will be better having a reality-based president who doesn't make up everything on the spot—including scripture, his crowd sizes, and his net worth. He is Twitter's problem now. Hell, even Fox News dumped him.

If you've managed to keep a loose grip on the facts through the Trump years, you'll notice that the first few weeks after he lost this election were like the first few days after he won in 2016. You know, back when he was snorting about how he had more people at his inauguration than had ever shown up at any inauguration in the history of the world. Combined. Seriously, he insisted (add them all up) that Lincoln, Grant, both Roosevelts, Hoover, Truman, Eisenhower, Turner (are you still counting?), Caesar, Person, Woman, Man, Camera, TV... whatever that total is, Trump says he had more.

So you go look at his inauguration photos again (for the seventh time, because it never seems like you can see that many people) and ...wait, President Turner?

That's how he does it! He sneaks in things and you accept them as fact because your mind is mangled by the absurd premise of his original tirade. So last month, he was counting votes instead of people standing around outside of the Capitol.

I think Trump's biggest fear is that the only thing keeping him out of jail (or the bottom of some lake in Russia, wearing concrete shoes) is his presidential immunity and his Secret Service protection. And after he exposed 130 Secret Service agents to COVID, they've decided to give him two guys named Fast Eddie No-Last-Name and Gus 'The Elbow' Frontage to cover him when he's out of the White House.

Honey, the most that Trump can hope for

now is "herd impunity."

A full week after the November election, I saw a guy in Conroe, Texas, (right up the road, mind you) still proudly flying those Trump flags in the bed of his pickup truck. "Honey," I hollered at him, "you have to fly those at half-mast now. It's the law." He didn't think it was near as funny as I did.

I would have also suggested he could raise a few white flags (since I was sure he already had some white sheets in his closet), but I was in Conroe and didn't want to start dodging bullets.

You can imagine my disappointment when it became obvious that Trump would only serve one term. Of course, he could still get another term, most likely when a judge announces it'll be "15 to life."

I'm a Southern girl, so when I saw Mitch McConnell, John Cornyn, Lindsey Graham, and Ted Cruz holding a joint press conference to accuse Democrats of cheating to win the election, I knew one thing was for certain: these can't be the men that Dolly Parton begged Jolene not to take. Jolene can have these suckers, and we'll even throw in clean underwear for 'em.

And of course, thoughts and prayers go out to Jared and Ivanka as they pack up and head off for their own first season of *Schitt's Creek*.

With any luck, we'll all be celebrating the

end of an awful year this month. Maybe we can even start using 2020 as a swear word, as in "What a stinkin' load of 2020," or "Don't 2020 me!" or "Abso-2020-lutely!"

Six things to look for when 2020 is gone and Trump is not president:

- Trump's tweets will sound more and more like the Wicked Witch terrorizing Dorothy, but his flying monkeys will be impotent and have colitis.
- Brussels sprouts will taste better. (Still no hope for kale, however.)
- Life will be discovered on another planet. But before you get your hopes up, they elected Joel Osteen as their president.
- Pussies will start grabbing back.
- "Believe me..." is the new international phrase to signal that whatever you say next is a lie.
- In the good old days, the probability that you would be watched was directly proportional to the stupidity of your act. But now you're being watched all the damn time, so don't waste any stupid!

Until next month, be sure to keep some mistletoe handy, because you never know who you'll need to kiss. Also remember that anything is possible when you don't know what you're talking about. ▼

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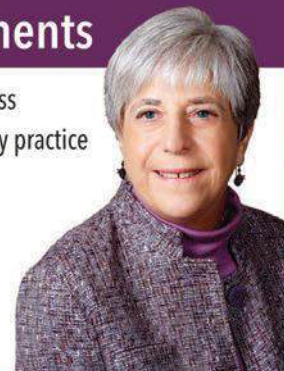
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What's New with Social Security?

Next year's policy changes could affect even those who haven't retired yet.



If you're currently collecting Social Security retirement income benefits, or if you soon will be, it is important to have a good understand-

ing of how the program works, as well as the various methods for maximizing this incoming cash flow.

Similar to most other retirement and health care-related programs, changes to Social Security (and Medicare) usually occur at the end of every year when the Social Security Administration (SSA) announces the updates that will take effect the following January.

Going into 2021, there are several revisions to be mindful of—whether you have actually started receiving Social Security benefits or are still paying into the system as a worker.

Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA)

As the price of goods and services goes up, it is important to generate additional income in order to maintain your lifestyle. According to the SSA, an average retired worker in 2020 receives \$1,520 per month, and an average retired couple brings in \$2,563. Typically (but not always), Social Security recipients will receive a cost-of-living adjustment, or COLA. For 2021, benefits will increase by 1.3 percent. This equates to \$20 per month more for individuals, and \$33 more for the average retired couple. The maximum monthly Social Security benefit amount for recipients who are at full retirement age will go from \$3,011 to \$3,148 in 2021.

Higher Earnings-Test Limits

If you decide to collect Social Security income

benefits prior to reaching your full retirement age and you are still working, you could be subject to the Social Security “earnings test” and have some of your benefits reduced by \$1 for every \$2 that you earn, up to a set annual amount. For 2021, this Social Security earnings test limit will be \$18,960, which is up from \$18,240 in 2020.

Increased Medicare Part B Premiums

For those who are covered by Medicare, the premiums for Part B (which covers doctors' services, some outpatient procedures, and medical supplies and equipment) are deducted directly from your Social Security income each month. It was anticipated that the COVID-19 crisis would lead to significantly higher Medicare Part B premiums, but that turned out not to be the case. So even though Medicare premiums will go up, the amount will not be as high as initially expected.

Social Security Updates for Current Workers

In order to qualify for Social Security retirement income benefits, you need a total of 40 “work credits” that you accumulate by earning

a certain amount of income each year. You can accumulate up to four work credits per year.

If you're still working and paying taxes into the Social Security program, you would need to earn at least \$5,880 in 2021 in order to add the maximum four Social Security work credits to your tally.

Social Security and Same-Sex Couples

If you are married, your partner may be able to collect Social Security spousal benefits, even if he or she did not work and pay taxes into the program. The spousal benefit can be as much as half of the qualified worker's primary insurance amount (PIA), based on the spouse's age when they file.

Following the Supreme Court's 2015 overruling of the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, same-sex married couples are no longer prohibited from receiving federal benefits (including Social Security retirement income as well as disability and survivor benefits).

Prior to the overturning of DOMA, marriage was defined as “a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word ‘spouse’ referred only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife.”

While some states recognized same-sex couples prior to 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that the 14th Amendment to the Constitution requires all state laws to recognize same-sex marriages going forward.

Therefore, the Social Security Administration now recognizes same-sex couples in all states, as well as some non-marital legal relationships, for the purpose of determining entitlement to Social Security benefits. The same holds true for entitlement to Medicare and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

If you are already receiving Social Security benefits, it is important that you contact the Social Security Administration to inform them of your marriage (or divorce), as this could have an impact on the amount of your total household income from Social Security.

For instance, you may now be eligible for a new initial benefit determination based on what SSA defines as a "life-changing event." Likewise, if you have changed your name following a marriage, the SSA also recommends that you report this so that your lifetime employment earnings (which determine the amount of your benefits) can continue to be properly recorded.

In order to proceed with any type of Social Security benefit change or update based on being married or divorced, you will need to provide proof of your marriage (in the form of a marriage certificate) to the Social Security Administration.

How to Maximize Social Security Income

With multiple strategies and time frames available for collecting Social Security retirement income, narrowing down the best method for you could seem a bit overwhelming, especially if you want these benefits to coordinate with other sources of retirement income you're eligible for, such as a pension, annuity, and/or interest and dividends from personal savings and investments.

Working with a Certified Financial Planner practitioner who is also well-versed in Social Security can help. That way, you can take a look at the whole picture, rather than just individual income sources.

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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Persevering through the Pandemic

Finding a new perspective on celebrating the holidays.

By DARYL SHORTER, MD

Take a deep breath in. Sigh it out. You have survived what has arguably been one of the most challenging years in modern history.

For many, the holidays and the end of the year can be a time of tremendous stress, as well as a stark reminder of what is missing or has been lost. But in spite of that added angst about the past, milestone moments such as these also invite us to pause, reflect, and plan.

A Cause for Celebration

Finding reasons to celebrate requires us to develop some perspective. A mental review of this challenging year creates an opportunity to incorporate gratitude into our overall practice of health and wellness.

Perhaps there is a person in your life who helped you make it through your darkest days. Is there someone who offered you an encouraging word or a shoulder to lean on? Even if you're not in perfect health, you can still be grateful for your ability to use your body. Relationships, meaningful work or activities, and admirable character traits can all serve as foundational elements for your personal gratitude practice.

Ask yourself: what three accomplishments am I grateful for today? And how did I personally contribute to those accomplishments? For example, you might consider how you nurtured a particular relationship or began an activity that was enjoyable and meaningful. "Owning" such accomplishments by connecting to the role you played in them can deepen your appreciation of the growth process.

One of the many lessons we've learned from this past year is that nothing should be taken for granted. Gratitude encourages us to stop and reflect on how truly fortunate we are. Not because we compare ourselves to those who may be less fortunate, but because we acknowledge all the things that are present to and for us. Cultivating a space for gratitude can deepen our celebratory spirit. From that perspective, the idea of an enjoyable holiday observance may not seem quite so far-fetched.



Holidays, COVID-19 Style

Celebrations that follow the current pandemic protocols come with their own set of challenges, so details need to be worked through. And for a variety of other reasons, you may be unwilling or unable to be with family or friends this year. So how can you approach holiday gatherings both creatively and safely? This is a great opportunity to re-examine old traditions, ditch those that have not served you, and create new ones. The use of technology to connect with loved ones both near and far can be an important way to minimize the holiday doldrums.

Nothing New under the Sun

As we take stock of the past year's events, we can see that many of the problems and issues have been around since forever. While COVID may have poured gasoline onto the systemic forces of injustice, it would be wildly inaccurate to suggest that the pandemic created this moral crisis.

The events of the past year served to illuminate and magnify what has always been

here. Thanks to widespread media coverage, the problems of racial injustice, violence against LGBTQ people, and mounting mental health concerns are now being seen more clearly than ever before.

Perhaps there is some comfort to be found here. The conversation around these things can shift. We can move toward greater honesty with ourselves and others, creating a space for response and action. Ask yourself: what new ways can I get involved? What projects can I work on or rededicate myself to? How can I build relationships with my friends, family, and community in a more deliberate and intentional way?

2020 has shown us just how resilient we are. Although we may feel tired and beleaguered, remember that we are still here. The fact that you are still standing is a testament to your strength and perseverance.

In 2020—maybe more than any year in recent memory—it is important that we celebrate. So take a deep breath in. Sigh it out. You made it.



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Isabel Longoria Becomes Harris County's First Elections Administrator

Out activist was sworn in on November 18.

By RYAN M. LEACH

National news outlets turned their attention to Harris County (the largest county in Texas) during the 2020 election season because of its huge voter turnout. The fact that Texas went from one of the lowest voter turnout states to one of the highest is due in large part to the efforts of Isabel Longoria, a 32-year-old lesbian and Montrose native who was recently appointed by the Commissioners Court to be the very first elections administrator for Harris County.

Longoria was sworn in by Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo on November 18. Voter registration and elections administration will now fall under Longoria's purview. The first election that she will oversee is the December 12 municipal runoffs.

"My passion is to serve Harris County, advocating for voting rights and developing policy that redefines what it means to be a public official. To say serving Harris County as the first elections administrator is a dream job is an understatement. It's the position of a lifetime," Longoria says. "My commitment to the voters and future voters of Harris County is to serve each and every resident with the integrity and innovation this office deserves—to create an office that merges elections and voter registration seamlessly and puts people first.

A Nonpartisan Position

Over the summer, Longoria worked closely with outgoing County Clerk Chris Hollins to help prepare Harris County voters for an election season like no other. Before becoming the elections administrator, she was serving as the county's "Special Advisor on Voting Rights and Access." Longoria's new role is a nonpartisan job created to combine two important duties that had been split between two elected officials: the Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector, and the Harris County Clerk.

"We've carved out elections administration and voter registration and combined them



into one department. This aligns more closely with what voters thought was happening. Now, with both of these departments together under one roof, you can do awesome things," Longoria says.

One of those things is recruiting more young people to become poll workers. During the pandemic, many older poll workers were unable to participate due to their increased risk for COVID-19 complications. Many of those young people who stepped up to fill the void are now more connected to the voting process. Longoria hopes to have these young people become voter-registration deputies and register their 18-year-old classmates who are newly eligible to vote. The idea is to create a cycle of voter participation by weaving new

voters into the fabric of civic engagement.

Controversy at the Drive-Thru

"The most important thing that happened under Hollins was [the way] we started. He told us to throw out everything we know about voting and ask ourselves what we would want to see happen as a voter," Longoria recalls.

That brainstorming led to some innovative solutions like 24-hour voting, a redesign of the mailed ballots to ease confusion, tripling the number of early-voting locations, and—most controversial of all—drive-thru voting.

"People do so much from their cars. They use the drive-thru at McDonald's and at the bank, so why not a drive-thru to vote?" Longoria wondered.

Drive-thru voting, in particular, caught the ire of some in the Texas Republican Party. They sued Hollins, claiming that it was a violation of Texas election law—despite the fact that county officials worked closely with the state in developing the process and ensuring its legality well in advance. At one point, the plaintiffs asked that the 127,000 voters who used drive-thru voting have their ballots tossed out. Although a federal judge denied that request, county officials still decided to close down all but one of the drive-thru polling locations on Election Day.

Longoria also considered the needs of Houstonians who, due to their jobs or familial responsibilities, often cannot find a time to vote. This was where Longoria came up with the idea to provide 24-hour voting locations.

“We had seven percent of voters go between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. It wasn’t just two college kids late at night going to the polls. I heard story after story about welders getting to vote early before their shifts started. Medical workers getting to vote after their late shift ended. People using it throughout the night, for various reasons. That participation showed us that when we provide more opportunities for people to vote, they will use it,” Longoria says.

Hometown Hero

Although Longoria already had an advisory role for this election cycle, she was selected for her new position only after the county conducted a nationwide search. Her biggest strength was her deep roots in Houston. She graduated from St. Agnes Academy before attending Trinity University in San Antonio to study sociology. She then got her graduate degree in public affairs from the University of Texas at Austin. When she returned to Houston, Longoria focused her career on civic engagement and politics, having worked for former state representative Jessica Farrar and former state senator (now U.S. congresswoman) Sylvia Garcia. Longoria was also one of the original members of Mayor Sylvester Turner’s LGBTQ Advisory Board, as well as a board member for the League of Women Voters.

Most recently, Longoria came within just 16 votes of ousting Houston City Council Member Karla Cisneros. However, Longoria’s loss in that District H race was the county’s gain when she and the rest of her team were sworn in by Hollins on June 1. That’s when they got busy with their history-making election administration work.

Longoria told the *Houston Press* in November, “My pitch is I’m the hometown kid. I think what I brought and what I will bring to the Elections Administrator’s Office is I know exactly what it means to vote at Juergens Hall versus Moody Park. I know the differences in those communities. I know what they need, voter registration-wise [and on Election Day]. I want to bring that spirit of someone who loves Houston so deeply to every part of voting.”

Longoria is hoping to work with the Texas Legislature during the 2021 Legislative Session to implement more broadly some of the ideas that were successful in Harris County. Her primary focus is truly nonpartisan, and she is deeply committed to getting people engaged in shaping their community through the power of their vote. Longoria hopes more Texans will use that power to create better opportunities to be successful.

Her message to Harris County voters is simple: “When we do something that you like, please show us you like it by using it and voting. It helps us to be more innovative in the future.”

 Keep up with Isabel Longoria on Facebook at facebook.com/LongoriaForH.



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Important Facts About DOVATO

This is only a brief summary of important information about DOVATO and does not replace talking to your healthcare provider about your condition and treatment.

What is the most important information I should know about DOVATO?

If you have both human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) and hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection, DOVATO can cause serious side effects, including:

- **Resistant HBV infection.** Your healthcare provider will test you for HBV infection before you start treatment with DOVATO. If you have HIV-1 and hepatitis B, the hepatitis B virus can change (mutate) during your treatment with DOVATO and become harder to treat (resistant). It is not known if DOVATO is safe and effective in people who have HIV-1 and HBV infection.
- **Worsening of HBV infection.** If you have HIV-1 and HBV infection, your HBV may get worse (flare-up) if you stop taking DOVATO. A “flare-up” is when your HBV infection suddenly returns in a worse way than before. Worsening liver disease can be serious and may lead to death.
 - Do not run out of DOVATO. Refill your prescription or talk to your healthcare provider before your DOVATO is all gone.
 - **Do not stop DOVATO without first talking to your healthcare provider.** If you stop taking DOVATO, your healthcare provider will need to check your health often and do blood tests regularly for several months to check your liver.

What is DOVATO?

DOVATO is a prescription medicine that is used without other HIV-1 medicines to treat human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) infection in adults: who have not received HIV-1 medicines in the past, or to replace their current HIV-1 medicines when their healthcare provider determines that they meet certain requirements. HIV-1 is the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It is not known if DOVATO is safe and effective in children.

Who should not take DOVATO?

Do not take DOVATO if you:

- have ever had an allergic reaction to a medicine that contains dolutegravir or lamivudine.
- take dofetilide.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before using DOVATO?

Tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:

- have or have had liver problems, including hepatitis B or C infection.
- have kidney problems.
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. One of the medicines in DOVATO (dolutegravir) may harm your unborn baby.
 - Your healthcare provider may prescribe a different medicine than DOVATO if you are planning to become pregnant or if pregnancy is confirmed during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.
 - If you can become pregnant, your healthcare provider will perform a pregnancy test before you start treatment with DOVATO.
 - If you can become pregnant, you should consistently use effective birth control (contraception) during treatment with DOVATO.
 - Tell your healthcare provider right away if you are planning to become pregnant, you become pregnant, or think you may be pregnant during treatment with DOVATO.
- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. **Do not breastfeed if you take DOVATO.**
 - You should not breastfeed if you have HIV-1 because of the risk of passing HIV-1 to your baby.
 - One of the medicines in DOVATO (lamivudine) passes into your breastmilk.
 - Talk with your healthcare provider about the best way to feed your baby.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

Some medicines interact with DOVATO. Keep a list of your medicines and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist when you get a new medicine.

- You can ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for a list of medicines that interact with DOVATO.
- **Do not start taking a new medicine without telling your healthcare provider.** Your healthcare provider can tell you if it is safe to take DOVATO with other medicines.

What are possible side effects of DOVATO?

DOVATO can cause serious side effects, including:

- Those in the “What is the most important information I should know about DOVATO?” section.
- **Allergic reactions. Call your healthcare provider right away if you develop a rash with DOVATO. Stop taking DOVATO and get medical help right away if you develop a rash with any of the following signs or symptoms:** fever; generally ill feeling; tiredness; muscle or joint aches; blisters or sores in mouth; blisters or peeling of the skin; redness or swelling of the eyes; swelling of the mouth, face, lips, or tongue; problems breathing.
- **Liver problems.** People with a history of hepatitis B or C virus may have an increased risk of developing new or worsening changes in certain liver tests during treatment with DOVATO. Liver problems, including liver failure, have also happened in people without a history of liver disease or other risk factors. Your healthcare provider may do blood tests to check your liver.
Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the following signs or symptoms of liver problems: your skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow (jaundice); dark or “tea-colored” urine; light-colored stools (bowel movements); nausea or vomiting; loss of appetite; and/or pain, aching, or tenderness on the right side of your stomach area.
- **Too much lactic acid in your blood (lactic acidosis).** Lactic acidosis is a serious medical emergency that can lead to death. **Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the following symptoms that could be signs of lactic acidosis:** feel very weak or tired; unusual (not normal) muscle pain; trouble breathing; stomach pain with nausea and vomiting; feel cold, especially in your arms and legs; feel dizzy or lightheaded; and/or a fast or irregular heartbeat.
- **Lactic acidosis can also lead to severe liver problems,** which can lead to death. Your liver may become large (hepatomegaly) and you may develop fat in your liver (steatosis). **Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the signs or symptoms of liver problems which are listed above under “Liver problems.”** You may be more likely to get lactic acidosis or severe liver problems if you are female or very overweight (obese).
- **Changes in your immune system (Immune Reconstitution Syndrome)** can happen when you start taking HIV-1 medicines. Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections that have been hidden in your body for a long time. **Tell your healthcare provider right away if you start having new symptoms after you start taking DOVATO.**
- **The most common side effects of DOVATO include:** headache; nausea; diarrhea; trouble sleeping; tiredness; and anxiety.

These are not all the possible side effects of DOVATO. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects.



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Where can I find more information?

- Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist.
- Go to DOVATO.com or call 1-877-844-8872, where you can also get FDA-approved labeling.

August 2020 DVT:4PIL

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ME TO DO MORE THAN I'M
DOING NOW, AND SEEING
MY FULL POTENTIAL."**

—Brandon Montano

THE POWER of PERSEVERANCE

Holocaust survivor **Ruth Steinfeld**'s life-long resilience empowers her grandson **Brandon Montano** to live freely as himself.

By ZACH MCKENZIE
Photos by ALEX ROSA

Coming out as LGBTQ can be a stressful and lonely experience for young people who can't lean on family members for support. Brandon Montano, a 25-year-old physical-education teacher who coaches elementary students in Houston, discovered that he could be his authentic gay self, loudly and proudly, thanks in large part to his grandmother, Ruth Steinfeld. She is a Holocaust survivor, public speaker, author, and retired hairdresser whose life experiences set her on a path of practicing forgiveness and encouraging others—like Montano—to do the same.

The close bond between this grandson-grandmother duo perfectly demonstrates the power of unconditional love and acceptance.

Montano's voice is steady and fearless as he recalls his coming-out journey. "When I was little, I always knew that I felt different than other boys. I remember having a crush on a friend in preschool, but I didn't know what that meant at the time. But by the age of 16, I realized that I was emotionally and physically attracted to men. I've never been a person to hide or not express myself. I'm creative and artistic, and I'm not afraid to be who I am. I'm super-proud to be openly gay and a member of the LGBT community."

Steinfeld, who Montano affectionately refers to as "Mimi," had a much different upbringing—a narrative pulled straight from the history books. "My life has been one of different experiences that people in America are lucky to not know," she explains. Steinfeld was a seven-year-old when her family was taken by the Nazis to Gurs, a French internment camp. "I lost my whole family in World War II. My

life was about never talking about the past. I never told my children about my life in the concentration camp, and then being hidden so I could survive."

Steinfeld jokes that at her age (she's sharp and witty at 87 years young), memories are hazier than they once were. Nevertheless, she vividly recalls the moment she was rescued from the camp as a child, and how her mother's selfless choice to save her and her sister's lives has always resonated with her. "A French Jewish humanitarian organization told my mother that if she would let them [take my sister and me], we would have a greater chance to survive. [They promised] to do everything they could to make sure we did," she recalls. "My mother must have been some kind of woman to do that. I remember getting on a bus and waving goodbye to her. I had been screaming and crying, saying that I would be good and do whatever she wanted me to do, but she insisted I get on the bus. That's the last time I saw my mother. We went into orphanages and foster homes, and eventually went to live with a French family."

In 1981, Steinfeld learned more information about her parents and their ultimate fates in the French internment camps. "I looked at how lucky I was to have a mother who gave us away so that we could live. Because of that, I've been very open about talking about my past," she explains. "When I saw that so many millions of children had been murdered [during the Holocaust], I made a solemn commitment to start speaking about my experience, and speaking for those millions that didn't have a chance. I was very shy, but I had that commitment so I started doing that." Steinfeld worked as a public speaker, traveling the country and internationally to share her story. She also penned a memoir titled *Forgive But Never Forget*, which was released earlier this year.

Steinfeld's career as a hairdresser allowed her to better connect with her grandson. "She was a hairdresser for many years, so she's always been surrounded by members of the LGBT community," Montano explains.

Her strong relationships with members of the gay community gave Steinfeld a clear outlook on LGBTQ rights. "My best friends are gay," she explains. "I always tell Brandon about one particular couple that has been together for 40 years. I told Brandon it's possible that we can all have good relationships. How many heterosexual people get divorces, you know?"

On the topic of love, Steinfeld shares, "My husband and I were married for 60 years, and there were always issues we had to work through. I told Brandon that being gay is difficult, especially when you first come out. I told him, 'I was engaged three times before I got married, so don't worry about it,'" she admits with gut-busting laughter.

Montano knows he is lucky to have a grandma who is so open and loving. "When I told her I was gay, she was really happy for me. I was in a relationship, and she was super-supportive and always wanted to know my friends and to get to know more about me. She's always been a huge support," he says of his Mimi. "I've always felt comfortable telling her things. We've had such a great relationship. She's taught me so much about forgiveness, especially being that she is a Holocaust survivor. I thank her from the bottom of my heart for teaching me about so many aspects of life, like acceptance, being who you are, and expressing your individuality."

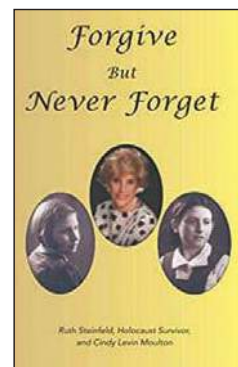
The life lessons that have trickled down from Steinfeld's experiences during World War II are taking root through her family members. As Brandon puts it, those lessons have made him who he is today. "Because →

of my grandma, I've learned how to not judge others. She taught me not to judge others based on skin color, body type, or religion. I'm half Mexican and Jewish, and I'm super-proud to tell others I'm Mexican, Jewish, Caucasian, and gay. It's who I am today, and it's part of me."

Steinfeld concurs as she brags about her grandson. "He's a beautiful young man. He is so dedicated to what he does. His sexuality was none of my concern, and if he is happy being who he is, then I'm happy, too," she explains. "He's a wonderful young man, he really is. I admire him."

Montano and Steinfeld's bond is one rooted in love, acceptance, and mutual admiration. "She is the strongest woman I know today," Montano says. "She had to work her ass off to get to where she is today. Learning English, building a home, raising a family, the experience of losing her husband—she has overcome so many battles. A lot of my problems now seem pretty minor. I admire her for always pushing me to do more than I'm doing now, and seeing my full potential."

Steinfeld gets the last word when she describes Montano as "genuinely, truly good." It's no wonder Montano is as brave, courageous, strong, gentle, and driven as he is. His Mimi



Forgive But Never Forget by Ruth Steinfeld is available for purchase on Amazon.

is a force in his life, and a force of nature in the lives of many people she has touched. After so much reflecting on her life, she concludes with a chuckle: "I'm an old lady, and I have no idea how I've survived all of this. Brandon has always been there for me. When I travel to give my talks all over the world, he's always supported me. After I wrote my book, I asked him if he had read it yet. He said, 'Mimi, I *know* your story!'" ▼



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'Tis the Season for Giving

Four local LGBTQ nonprofits distribute meals, gift cards, and more.

By LILLIAN HOANG



Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, many Houston service organizations have had to change their holiday plans. But even in the face of adversity, the Montrose Center, Montrose Grace

Place, Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce, and PWA Holiday Charities are determined to give back to the community this month. These local LGBTQ nonprofits recently shared their 2020 holiday plans with OUTSMART.

The Montrose Center

The Montrose Center, a nonprofit that offers LGBTQ-affirming services ranging from counseling to education, will host a socially distanced HATCH Youth holiday party for youth ages 7–20. The center is also partnering with the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce to deliver holiday meal boxes to LGBTQ seniors.

At the HATCH Youth event in the Montrose Center's parking lot, program participants will get the chance to pick up gift bags filled with candy, stuffed animals, art and school supplies, and other donated items. People can donate art supplies, candy, stocking stuffers, and more through December 11 by emailing info@hatchyouth.org.

Montrose Center's chief development officer, Kennedy Loftin, says the party is significant to the youth for many reasons. "There are no longer any physical safe spaces at school like the gay-straight alliance clubs, so they're having a hard time finding other LGBTQ youth to connect with who can help them during this time," Loftin says. "Our socially distanced parking-lot distribution is so important because, for a lot of these youth, this is their only LGBTQ safe space right now."



To donate or volunteer, visit montrose-center.org/hatch-youth/.

Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce

The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce will hold a holiday food drive to support LGBTQ seniors who are part of the Montrose Center's SPRY program. Holiday boxes will be filled and delivered to the seniors beginning December 7.



Volunteers for the Montrose Center

Recipients will get to choose either a holiday meal box featuring a turkey and all of the fixings (cranberry sauce, stuffing, veggies, and more) or a week's worth of shelf-stable food boxes that will include other donated holiday treats.

People who wish to contribute to the Chamber's food drive can drop off food on December 4 from 8 a.m. to noon at SignatureCare Emergency Center, 1007 Westheimer. Individuals can also donate to the Chamber's virtual food drive through December 11.

Tammi Wallace, Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce's co-founder, president, and CEO, says the Chamber is sponsoring the Montrose Center's holiday meal boxes because there is a great need among LGBTQ seniors, especially during the holidays.

According to SAGE, a national advocacy and service organization committed to LGBTQ elders, the pandemic "led to a spike in food insecurity among seniors" who cannot leave their homes to eat meals at senior centers and participate in other programs they've grown accustomed to.

Loftin says the Montrose Center especially wanted to continue the annual tradition of giving holiday meal boxes to seniors after they had to shut down the SPRY Diner, a congregational lunch program at the Montrose Center that provides meals and community for older LGBTQ adults.

"Members of our community relied on these food boxes to help them throughout the holiday season, even before COVID. That puts into perspective how great the need is right now," says Loftin, noting that the Montrose

Center's emergency food-pantry distributions have tripled since the start of the pandemic. "We know this is going to be a tough holiday season for a lot of our community, and we want to help with these food boxes."

In addition to food insecurity, Wallace notes that LGBTQ seniors may also face discrimination, economic hardships, and a lack of support from their families of origin—issues the pandemic has exacerbated.

"One out of five LGBTQ seniors live in food poverty, and that was before the pandemic. So we believe that we have to step up during this time and help those that are most vulnerable in our community during the pandemic," Wallace says.



For more information on the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce's Holiday Food Drive and a donation link to the virtual food drive, visit houstonlgbtchamber.com/food-drive/.

Montrose Grace Place

The Montrose Grace Place (MGP), an LGBTQ-affirming nonprofit that provides homeless youth ages 13–24 with food, resources, and community, is hosting a socially distanced holiday party as well as its fifth annual gingerbread house competition.

Folks can enter the online competition by buying a ticket and submitting their decorated confectionery by December 7. The gingerbread decorating competition's award ceremony will be livestreamed on December 12 via Zoom, along with a virtual silent auction featuring donated goods and packages from local businesses.

The nonprofit's holiday party will take place in December. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, MGP will decorate the front porch area where the youth can pick up their holiday dinners, distribute gifts, and play games, all at a safe distance. MGP volunteer Karen Breitbeil will distribute her holiday stockings and baskets filled with gifts such as McDonald's cards, socks, and other donated items.

"Just like everybody else, even with COVID, we're still working really hard for our youth," says MGP Executive Director Courtney Sellers. "Our fundraiser and donations help us make sure that we can brighten our youth's holiday season."

 *Individuals can help these homeless youth by donating at montrosegroceplace.org/donate.html.*

PWA Holiday Charities

PWA Holiday Charities, a nonprofit that raises and dispenses funds for men, women, and children living with and affected by HIV and AIDS, will host and livestream its 32nd Annual Christmas Show fundraising event. PWA will also give holiday gift cards to individuals living with HIV and AIDS.

Hosted by Regina Dane, the Christmas Show officially starts at 6:30 p.m. on December 13 at Tony's Corner Pocket. Local drag performers Crystal Rae Lee Love and An'Marie Gill will perform at the event, while Amanda Anne Houston emcees. People can watch the performance in person or online. For more information, visit PWA Holiday Charities' website and Facebook page.

"[We are hosting this event to help those] who are less fortunate during the holidays," says PWA Holiday Charities Executive Director and Vice President Don Gill. "This year is a struggle for everybody, but big hearts always help out in this community."

PWA Holiday Charities will also distribute about \$12,000 in Kroger and Target gift cards to at least 60 people living with HIV/AIDS so they can buy and prepare their own meals for the holidays.

In keeping with the holiday spirit, the nonprofit granted \$3,000 to the Bering Omega Day Treatment Program, which provides financial counseling as well as rent, mortgage, and utilities assistance to people living with HIV. PWA Holiday Charities has also paid Netflix's yearly subscription fee on behalf of Bering Omega and Omega House, which provides hospice care to people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

"We lift the spirits of people living with HIV and AIDS during the holidays, and we are not willing to let the current world circumstances prevent us from meeting our goals," Gill says.

 *Individuals can donate to PWA Holiday Charities at pwaholidaycharities.org/Donate.php.*

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THINGS TO LEAVE IN 2020

AND KEEP FOR 2021

This year has been full of unexpected surprises for the world, for the country, and for Houston. It has been a year of tremendous losses and tremendous wins. No one will come away from 2020 unchanged.

Although we're all happy to see the last 12 months fading in the rearview mirror, there are still some vital lessons to be learned. So in my sixth annual list of Things to Leave in 2020 (and Keep for 2021), I want to start by emphasizing the things we need to keep throughout the coming year:

By RYAN M. LEACH

KEEP FOR 2021:

1. KEEP MAKING HARRIS-TORY

If your name was Harris, then 2020 was your year. Of course, the most obvious example of this was the election of Kamala Harris to the vice presidency. She is the first woman to be elected to this office, and the fact that she is also the first Black and Indian American person to hold a nationwide office sets an important precedent. When she walked onstage in Wilmington, Delaware, on November 7 to give her victory speech, she wore an all-white pant suit—a nod to the women's suffrage movement and those history-making women who wore white as a sign of



solidarity. The fact that this happened exactly 100 years after women first got the right to vote in 1920 was poetic, but still long overdue.

Harris County also made history. People turned out to vote in Texas' largest county like never before, and it actually buoyed the state from the lowest nationwide turnout ranking to the highest. This is thanks in large part to County Clerk Chris Hollins, who made voting more accessible than ever before. His office's implementation of drive-thru polls was so popular that it frightened state and national Republicans into thinking that Texas might finally turn blue. It didn't, but it did show thousands of Texans how to vote for the first time, which means they are more likely to vote in the future.

2. KEEP JUDGE LINA HIDALGO

Hidalgo doesn't have time to worry about the haters who keep trying to prove that she is not up to the job. She is too busy doing what voters elected her to do in 2018—namely, to lead. While Houston City Council Member Greg Travis was busy making videos complaining about a “nanny state” in early March, Hidalgo was talking to doctors and preparing her Harris County Commissioners Court for what



would be the worst pandemic in a century. Her leadership set up the county for success as the virus peaked over the summer.

Abbott tried to undermine her mask mandate early on, only to see Hidalgo reinstate it. He tried to undermine her restrictions on gatherings, only to see them reinstated. It turns out that masks and social distancing are great tools for saving lives! It wasn't easy or comfortable for Hidalgo to stand in opposition to virtually every powerful man in the state, but she did it and she was right. Imagine how much worse it could have been if she had whined and played politics instead of worked to save lives. She deserves a second term in 2022.



3. KEEP YOUR MASK ON

It just isn't that complicated. The sooner we all wear a mask and follow the upcoming Biden health guidelines, the sooner we can get back to normal (or to whatever "normal" means to you). It is the only option we have until a vaccine brings the infection rate down to near zero. There are just no two ways about it. Please, wear a mask.

4. KEEP SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Monica Roberts died unexpectedly on October 5, 2020, at the age of 58. She was a Houston icon and a national hero. News of her passing was reported all over the world by media

outlets that included the *New York Times*. Her blog, *TransGriot*, which she started in 2006, was one of the first to cover transgender issues. It eventually became a go-to trans resource for the mainstream media. Monica described herself as "a proud, unapologetic, Black, trans woman speaking truth to power and discussing the world around her."



Monica was also a monthly columnist for OUTSMART magazine, and appeared on the June 2019 cover as one of Pride Houston's honorary grand marshals. OUTSMART again honored her last month with a cover feature in remembrance of her passing. Monica died before she was able to cast her vote in the 2020 election, a painful irony for those who knew of her deep commitment to getting people to vote for trans-affirming politicians. Commenting on her passion for creating a better and safer world for the transgender community (and especially for Black trans women), her close friend and fellow Houstonian Dee Dee Watters told the *New York Times*, "Monica really wanted to make sure that the younger kids coming up would have some kind of life—easier than what we went through when we transitioned. That was the real goal. It brought her joy seeing younger trans people being able to exist in their whole selves."

Rest in Power, Monica.

5. KEEP HOPE AND CHANGE ALIVE

In spite of all of the challenges, hardships, death, and injustices we saw in 2020, things do



appear to be looking up. In early November, a viable vaccine from Pfizer was announced that should be available early in the new year. The 2020 election also promised a return to normalcy after four years of political chaos. The holiday season will certainly be different as COVID-19 continues to require social distancing. But eventually, this too shall pass. We can hope for the best, certainly, but we also have to fight for change if we want to get there. Life is for living, after all. And if we want things to get better, we need to be better. Hope and change—that's catchy. Now where did we last hear that?

LEAVE IN 2020:

6. INCOMPETENCE

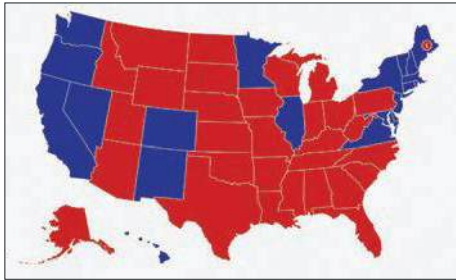


Governor Greg Abbott and Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick appeared to be in a race to the bottom when it came to handling the pandemic. Whether the winner was Patrick (an early advocate for sacrificing our grandparents to the pandemic) or Abbott (who never quite seemed to know what to do), it was the people of Texas who suffered the most. The fact is that the pandemic, as challenging as it is for the front-liners and the people who are losing loved ones, should be easy for state leaders to navigate. It comes down to following the science to keep Texans safe, and giving them the resources they need to weather the storm. Instead, Texas became the first state to surpass one million cases of COVID-19 in early November. We do things bigger in Texas, but not always better.

7. DIVISION

We learned from the November election that approximately 28 percent of LGBTQ voters went for Trump. That is a shocking revelation. We can make assumptions about exactly who cast those ballots and why, but this is still a problem. The LGBTQ →

community, once a monolithic voting bloc, is showing fractures. Republicans have focused primarily on white, cisgender gay men as a key group, which dilutes our community's collective voting power. And as it turns out, dividing key communities is a great strategy for winning elections. We cannot let them do it. We have a responsibility to lift each other up. The fight for marriage equality is going to seem like a walk in the park compared to the work that is now ahead of us. I am talking about racial justice, reproductive freedom, transgender rights, and (oh, by the way)



preserving the rights we have already won. Let's remember our responsibility to each other, and not let politics take our eyes off of what we collectively value: equality.

8. IMPATIENCE



2020 was trying to tell us something: we need to slow down and smell the roses, disengage from our devices, and engage with inner peace. It didn't help that on top of one of the most painful years in world history we also had to endure weeks of uncertainty and turmoil when Republicans refused to acknowledge the Biden win after Pennsylvania finally awarded him the Electoral College votes that put him over the top. It was difficult to bear, but worth the wait.

9. INJUSTICE

2020 was a year of reckoning. the brutal murder of

George Floyd was the spark that reignited the national outcry over police brutality against the Black community. Black people have long been the victims of a system that views their existence as something to be controlled rather than respected, but Floyd's callous murder forced many white people to acknowledge that there is a problem with racism and white supremacy in this country. This ugly truth, which is rooted in our country's original sin of slavery, is one that white people must work to overcome. It is inexcusable that we brand ourselves as a bastion of justice and equality when that has never been completely true. But it can be. It must be. We can do it together, but the primary responsibility falls on white people to do the work. That, I fear, could be an insurmountable task.

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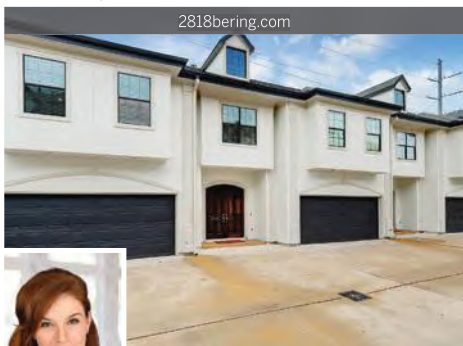
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Spreading HOLIDAY CHEER



We've all had to rethink the holidays this year. And while COVID-19 may be keeping us away from friends and family, we're adapting to ensure that we're still around to celebrate in 2021. OUTSMART caught up with six notable queer locals whose positive energy and ambitious projects are helping to keep the holidays merry and bright...

First, Rabbi **Gideon Estes** leads his queer-affirming Jewish congregation into a virtual Hanukkah season. Then volunteer **Marcus Handy** discusses his commitment to serving housing-insecure youth at Montrose Grace Place. Next, **Dylan Godwin** takes us behind the scenes of Alley Theatre's virtual

staging of *A Christmas Carol*, while chef **Gianna Navarro** is making it easy to order plant-based tamales to-go for holiday meals. Decorator **Taylor DiMartino** shows off his jaw-dropping Christmas tree display, while confectioner **Dylan Carnes** is offering a new menu at her unique vegan bakery.

Finally, don't miss our roundup of **six queer holiday rom-coms** that debut this season.

Revolutionary Rabbi

Gideon Estes leads his LGBTQ-affirming congregation into the Hanukkah season.

By JENNY BLOCK



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

Openly gay rabbi Gideon Estes is aware that religious institutions have harmed many members of the LGBTQ community. That's why he leads Houston's Congregation Or Ami with a queer-affirming focus.

"I try to help create space for people to see the [positive force] that organized religion can be if someone freely chooses it," says the 39-year-old Jewish scholar. He has helped organize queer-affirming programs at Houston Hillel for students and young professionals, participated in Pride prayer services, and is an active member of the LGBTQ organization Keshet Houston.

In a more general sense, he says, "I look for ways to be welcoming to members of our community at the synagogue, and speak in community forums to show how religion can be affirming and celebratory for the LGBT community."

This holiday season, Congregation Or Ami is hosting a few programs for Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights that takes place December 10 through 18. The logistics for these events are still in the works, but Estes plans to host a socially-distant celebration called Menorah Madness on December 17.

"We are still working on the details," he says. "Additionally, we are planning a Hanukkah Havdalah over Zoom with our religious school's families on December 12."

Estes grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and after his sophomore year in college decided that being a rabbi was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. His epiphany came during a summer program at Camp Ramah, which sponsors an intensive six-week Jewish Study Program for 18- to 26-year-olds. "It was my first time truly living my life to a Jewish religious rhythm, and I loved it," he recalls.

One Shabbat afternoon, Estes was looking

out on a hill filled with kids sitting in circles, all studying the same Jewish texts. "I was moved, and resolved to God then and there that I wanted to dedicate myself to [becoming] a rabbi. That was my eureka moment."

He received a bachelor's degree in Jewish studies with a concentration in Jewish history at UCLA in Los Angeles. "I graduated in 2003, cum laude," he says. Estes then moved to New York to attend rabbinical school at the Jewish →

Theological Seminary of America, with a concentration in pastoral care. He was ordained in 2020. "I find the work as a 'pastor/spiritual guide/companion' incredibly rewarding."

Estes began working at Congregation Or Ami in July 2010. "This congregation is a great fit. I was worried when I decided to come out five years ago. I thought I might lose my job. Instead, I was greeted with love, acceptance, and celebration. Congregation Or Ami is a community that welcomes all people, no matter how they identify. I also want to say that the Jewish community in Houston is very welcoming and affirming."

He is very passionate about his work, and about the traditions and values of Judaism. "I love teaching and talking about it. I can talk about it for hours." Because of being a congregational rabbi, he also enjoys interacting with people in many different contexts. "I enjoy being able to listen to people and accompany them on their spiritual journeys, or give support in their times of struggle."

The one thing Estes wishes more people knew about Judaism is that it celebrates and encourages curiosity. "We are a people who thrive on questions both big and small." He also likes to remind people that a rabbi is not

"I TRY TO HELP CREATE SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO SEE THE POSITIVE FORCE THAT ORGANIZED RELIGION CAN BE IF SOMEONE FREELY CHOOSES IT."

—Rabbi Gideon Estes

an intermediary between people and God. "A rabbi is a teacher who shares knowledge with others."

He also emphasizes that Judaism is not simply another religion. "There is also an ethnic and cultural aspect. A lot of this is shaped by our history of being persecuted. However, it is also a beautiful thing."

Estes admits that loneliness is one of the biggest challenges he faces as a single rabbi. It's a common issue faced by unmarried clergy. "One needs to maintain distance with one's community on some things. At times, that can be hard. However, the rewards are worth the challenge."

Additionally, Estes notes that being a rabbi

means taking on a huge responsibility regarding pastoral work. "A clergy person may conjure up people's fears or wants in relation to God. I do not take that responsibility lightly."

When it comes to the challenge of thriving as humans—even in the current political climate of hatred and division—Estes believes we need to put first things first. "Remember to breathe and practice gratitude. If we find things to be thankful for every day, it will lead us to feeling better."

Another important step, Estes explains, is to take care of ourselves. "Rabbi Hillel, a sage from the first century CE, would teach that 'if I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for my own self, what am I? And if not now, when?' This teaching [from the Pirkei Avot] reminds us that we need to advocate for ourselves [as well as to] be concerned for the broader world."

As for the future, Rabbi Estes is certainly open to the possibility of romance at some point. "If you know any nice Jewish guys who like Jewish guys, feel free to play matchmaker," he laughs.



For more information on Congregation Or Ami, visit oramihouston.org.

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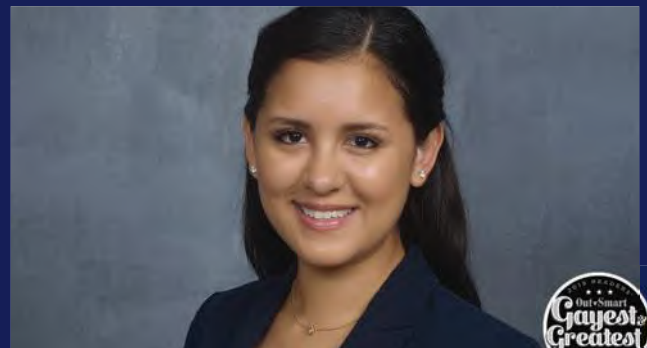
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Valuable Volunteer

Marcus Handy serves housing-insecure youth at Montrose Grace Place.

By LILLIAN HOANG

Marcus Handy, a 33-year-old Houston native, has always felt a special calling to take care of others who are facing hardships. When his mother was diagnosed with cancer, the dedicated community volunteer even returned home right after graduating from college to assist her.

He stepped up again to serve local LGBTQ youth after the Pulse nightclub massacre. “It hurt me to my core because I could see myself in their position, with the bars and clubs I go to in Houston,” Handy says, recalling the 2016 shooting. Fifty-three people were wounded and 49 people were killed at the Orlando Latinx gay club. “After that, I was really inspired to do something with the community.”

For the last four years, Handy has volunteered at Montrose Grace Place (MGP), a local LGBTQ-affirming nonprofit that provides homeless youth ages 13–24 with food, supplies, and healthy relationships during their Monday and Thursday Youth Night gatherings (6 p.m. at Kindred, 2515 Waugh Drive).

At least 25 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, according to a 2015 study by Houston researchers. About 50 percent of MGP’s clientele are LGBTQ.

At MGP, Handy’s duties include mentoring, interacting, and giving out essential resources to the youth. He also makes sure that they are fed and feel safe enough to talk about their experiences. “They talk about what they’re going through, and sometimes it can be a lot to emotionally take on,” Handy admits. “But I’m happy to offer them support and mentorship, and hopefully brighten their day.”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

Traditionally, Youth Night features a family-style meal and activities. But due to the COVID-19 safety precautions, MGP can only hand out to-go meals and other resources on Monday and Thursday nights. While Handy misses the extensive heart-to-hearts he used to have during Youth Night meals, he still shows up twice each month to greet the youth with a friendly (masked) face.

“Even if it’s not what they’re used to, the short interactions mean a lot for the youth,” Handy says. “It’s still important to recognize that any kind of interaction with a familiar face that has been supportive of you is better than not having it at all.”

MGP Executive Director Courtney Sellers describes Handy as a funny, kind, and caring volunteer who shows up for the youth no matter what. “He always makes it a priority to make it to Youth Night. [It’s easy to see] how much he cares for the youth.” According to Sellers, Handy was also instrumental in

developing MGP’s annual gingerbread house competition, which is now the nonprofit’s largest fundraising event.

This year’s gingerbread decorating contest is happening online. Individuals can enter the competition by buying a ticket and their own gingerbread house to decorate by December 6, with participants submitting photos of their decorated houses to MGP by December 7. Guest judges will look over the decorated houses and announce the winners via Zoom on December 12. To raise additional funds, a virtual silent auction featuring donated items from local businesses will happen alongside the gingerbread house competition.

Handy says volunteering at MGP has been both a humbling and fulfilling experience. When he started at MGP, he was working at a stressful and thankless job that took a mental and physical toll on him. Connecting with the youth at MGP helped him focus on finding a purpose bigger than himself. MGP showed →



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him that there was more to life, and that he deserved to do what made him and others happy.

“Everybody strives to find the thing that makes them feel whole and good about the energy they’re putting into the world. Volunteering at MGP gave me that,” he says. “MGP gave me the confidence to believe in myself.”

And according to Nick Wolny, Handy’s boyfriend of over four years, Handy has had as big of an impact on MGP as the organization has had on him. Wolny describes the MGP volunteer and board member as committed, loving, and capable of inspiring others through his passion.

“People turn up and get excited about MGP year after year because of Marcus,” Wolny says. “We have friends who actually became volunteers at Grace Place not because he asked them to, but because he shared his experiences at MGP. I feel like he’s [played a big part in MGP’s growth], and it comes from people being attracted to his energy and his positive light.”

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PEOPLE NEED TO REALLY
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OR DONATING TIME
AND MONEY TO CAUSES
THEY’RE PASSIONATE
ABOUT.”**

—Marcus Handy

Handy graduated from Texas A&M University in 2009 with a bachelor’s degree in business administration and a focus in marketing. He has volunteered for the Montrose Center, Habitat for Humanity, and United Way. When he’s not volunteering with MGP, Handy works as a supply-chain manager at BH Cosmetics. He’s also a thrill-seeker who loves roller coasters, the outdoors, and drag shows.

His love of adventure is as strong as his passion for taking care of folks, especially in this time of crisis. “Now more than ever, people need to really care about each other, whether it’s through volunteering or donating time and money to causes they’re passionate about,” Handy says. “It’s important to champion something bigger than ourselves, no matter how large or small the contribution may seem.”

➔ For more information on the Montrose Grace Place, visit montrosegaceplace.org.

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Digital Dramatics

Dylan Godwin stars in Alley Theatre's virtual production of *A Christmas Carol*.

By **CONNOR BEHRENS**



As the old saying goes, “The show must go on.” Due to COVID-19, the Alley Theatre decided to cancel this year’s live performances of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and opt for an online production.

That does not mean the show will be any less magical, however.

“The show is shot inside the actors’ own homes, [which allows] us to connect with the audience in a way that we have not done in the past,” says openly gay cast member Dylan Godwin. “It is a cool way to have a deeper connection with our audience.”

For this free streaming production, available to view online from December 4 to December 27, The Alley’s resident actors will be joined by additional Houston-area actors. After the costumed cast members record their individual parts in their homes, the show will be edited together.

This digital production of *A Christmas Carol* is being adapted by Doris Baizley and directed by Alley’s Associate Producer & Casting Director Brandon Weinbrenner. The cast includes Elizabeth Bunch as Ghost of Christmas Past/Mrs. Cratchit, Dylan Godwin as Ghost of Christmas Present/Clown, Shawn Hamilton as Mr. Fezziwig/Jake the Fence, Chris Hutchison as Bob Cratchit, Mack Hutchison as Tiny Tim/Prop Boy, Melissa Pritchett as Charitable Woman/Mrs. Fezziwig/Mother-in-Law, David Rainey as Scrooge/Stage Manager, Jay Sullivan as Fred, Raven Justine Troup as Belle/Mrs. Fred, and Todd Waite as Marley/Director.

Godwin is no stranger to *A Christmas Carol*. Having participated in the annual production for about ten years, he believes the

play is more relevant than ever, and he hopes the timeless themes of hope and redemption will resonate with audiences on an even deeper level this year.

“With everything that is going on this year, I cannot stop thinking about *A Christmas Carol*,” he says. “It is a story about someone coming to terms with their life. It is about choosing to live life in a better, happier way.”

Despite being quite familiar with the show, this year’s digital production process has been anything but normal for the veteran actor.

“We are all stage actors, so performing in front of a camera is obviously very different,” he says. “It is a whole other beast. It is taking how you would usually perform for a 795-seat house and doing it for this camera that is filming right in your face. It is new territory for all of us.”

But that is precisely what will make the show even more appealing to viewers.

“While it is still fully costumed and fully designed, it is a different version from what people are used to seeing us do,” he says. “We have an amazing production team at The Alley. They have been delivering props, lights, cameras, wigs, costumes, and makeup to our homes. My apartment looks like a film set. That makes it a challenge, too. Usually, you can leave your work at the theater and come home. Well, we are, like, living in our work

right now! It is something new, which is cool. It’s a fun challenge.”

Due to COVID-19, live theater companies worldwide have taken a hit. Even New York City’s Broadway productions are shuttered until next year, so Godwin feels grateful to get work as an actor right now.

“This has been a tough year for everyone,” he says. “It’s a shame to see our theater industry so fraught right now. It is an odd feeling, and a sad feeling. I feel really lucky to be working on something—to be able to create something. I feel really hopeful that the rest of our theater community will be able to return to work soon.”

Ultimately, Godwin hopes that after a year filled with so much isolation and political division, *A Christmas Carol* can provide audiences with some form of connection.

“I think at the beginning of this, everyone [missed] connecting with one another,” he says. “With the setting of this show being so personal, I am really hoping people can get a connection out of it. I just want to come away from this feeling a little bit closer to audiences.”



To view The Alley’s digital production of *A Christmas Carol*, register on the Alley Theatre’s website at alleytheatre.org.





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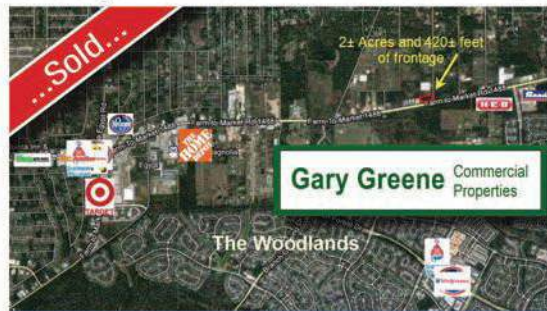
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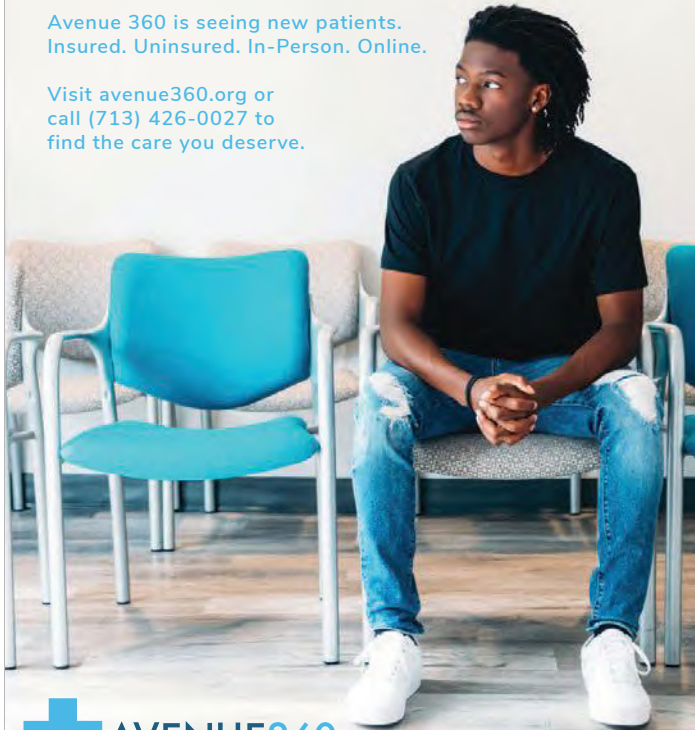
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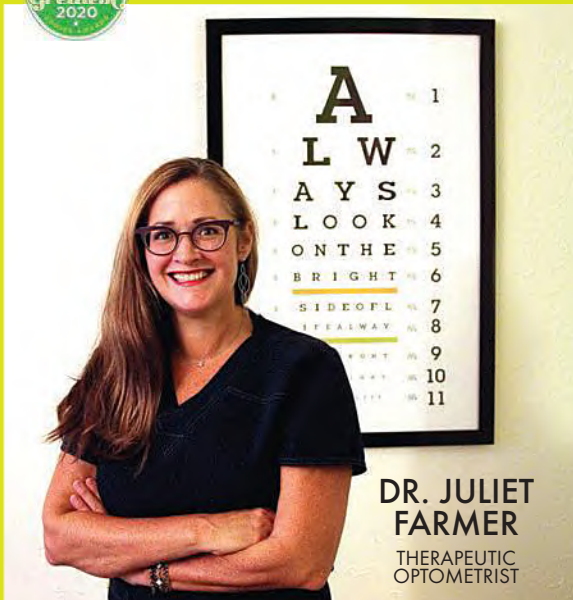
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Food for the Soul

Chef **Gianna Navarro's** plant-based cuisine is inspired by traditional Mexican recipes.

By **LOURDES ZAVALETA**

Gianna Navarro was working as a photographer three years ago when they began to experience the onset of Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare condition in which the body's immune system attacks the nerves. One year later, they were diagnosed with chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (CIPD), a more severe form of the same illness.

"I started to become paralyzed from the hips down," recalls Navarro, a queer and gender-fluid Houstonian who uses they/them/their pronouns. "The nerve damage spread to other parts of my body as well. I lost my job and had to learn to do a lot of everyday things, like walking, all over again."

Spending time preparing favorite dishes soon became a healing practice for Navarro. Using cooking tools helped them relearn and regain some motor skills, and adhering to a vegan diet kept the symptoms of CIPD at bay. "The loss of my abilities comes and goes in waves, but the symptoms have been lessened by my physical activities and overall health," they say, adding that working with plant-based food also allowed them to experiment with different traditional Mexican-inspired recipes.

After Navarro's friends and fellow chefs asked them to help cover a pop-up vending event in October 2017, Somos Semillas vegan kitchen was born. "I always thought it would be cool to serve food to people, but it always just seemed like a dream," Navarro admits. "Being that I was in a wheelchair at that point, I never thought it could happen. But within two weeks of finding out about that pop-up opportunity, I developed three flavors of tamales that we still use today."

The first event was a great success, and they've continued to serve meals at local pop-ups. Their next appearance takes place at Finn



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOURDES ZAVALETA

Hall with Papalo Taqueria on December 11. "I really did not know we would grow in such a way," Navarro says. "I definitely struggled to maintain a business with my physical limitations, but thankfully I've always been able to sustain it through help from community, friends, and my partner, Blue, who helps with the business a lot."

As of late last month, fans can also enjoy Somos Semillas' tasty and colorful comfort food every Tuesday and Wednesday for dine-in or takeout at Houston's Grand Prize Bar in Montrose. A frozen take-home version of Navarro's tamales is also available at Henderson & Kane General Store, VegSide Mkt, and Sauce Co. Shoppette. Large holiday orders can be placed on these individual retailers' websites.

All of Somos Semillas products are made from locally grown vegetables and other regional ingredients. "We don't really use meat or cheese substitutes in our cooking," Navarro says. "We stick to whole foods and plant-based ingredients combined with spices and herbs in flavorful ways. People tend to say, 'We didn't think about this being vegan. It's just good food.' One of the most rewarding things is showing people that vegan food can taste good without it feeling like it lacked something."

Food presentation also plays an important role in the Somos Semillas brand. The shop's Instagram-worthy meals are often colorful and plated with leafy greens, bright sauces, and pink and purple flowers. "It's inspiring to work with plants because they're so vibrant," →

The top section of the poster has a dark red background. On the left, a red ribbon is tied in a loop. On the right, a lit red candle sits on a dark surface, casting a warm glow.

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Navarro says. “We use their colors any way that we can. One of our meats, Jamaica Asada, is even made out of marinated flowers.”

That faux hibiscus “meat” can be found in Somos Semillas’ Empanada de Jamaica, a fried corn masa empanada served with escabeche (pickled serrano, cauliflower, and carrot) and salsa verde. Other tasty options include Papa a la Mexicana Empanadas, Tamales de Hongos, and Tamales de Tomatillo.

Navarro says that one motivation for starting a business was to showcase vegan substitutes for meat and dairy products in favorite dishes from other cultures outside of the mainstream American market. “When I would go to vegan events, I felt very isolated. It was hard to find any food that felt familiar, and I didn’t see many people I could identify with. I think it can be a deterrent for people to not see anyone who looks like them [in these spaces].”

Another driving force was to create a healthy, safe, and enjoyable work environment for people of color, LGBTQ folks, and people with differing abilities. One day, Navarro hopes to start an all-inclusive cooking co-op that provides access to an affordable kitchen space and other tools to help grow a business. “Kitchen culture can be racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist. I want to create



Comfort Eats

Somos Semillas’ take-home tamales are now available for pickup and pre-order at three local retailers.

spaces where people don’t have to deal with any type of harassment. Work should be a place where we’re all able to celebrate each other.”

Despite all of the adversities that Navarro has faced, Somos Semillas has continued to thrive. The name of the business, which derives from a Spanish proverb, is a reminder of those challenges: *Quisieron enterrarnos, pero les olvido que somos semillas.* (They tried to bury us, but they forgot we were seeds.)

“This saying has always resonated with me,” Navarro says. “My personal journey has

come with so many challenges, but I’ve always been able to stay resilient through community support. Being nurtured, held, and supported has helped me not only grow my business, but also my own sense of self.”

➔ For more information on Somos Semillas, visit facebook.com/somos.semillas.htx. To purchase a holiday order of tamales, visit tinyurl.com/y3hp3sgs (Henderson & Kane), tinyurl.com/y2pdrpsx (VegSide MKT), and tinyurl.com/y3u3x9nk (Sauce Co. Shoppette).

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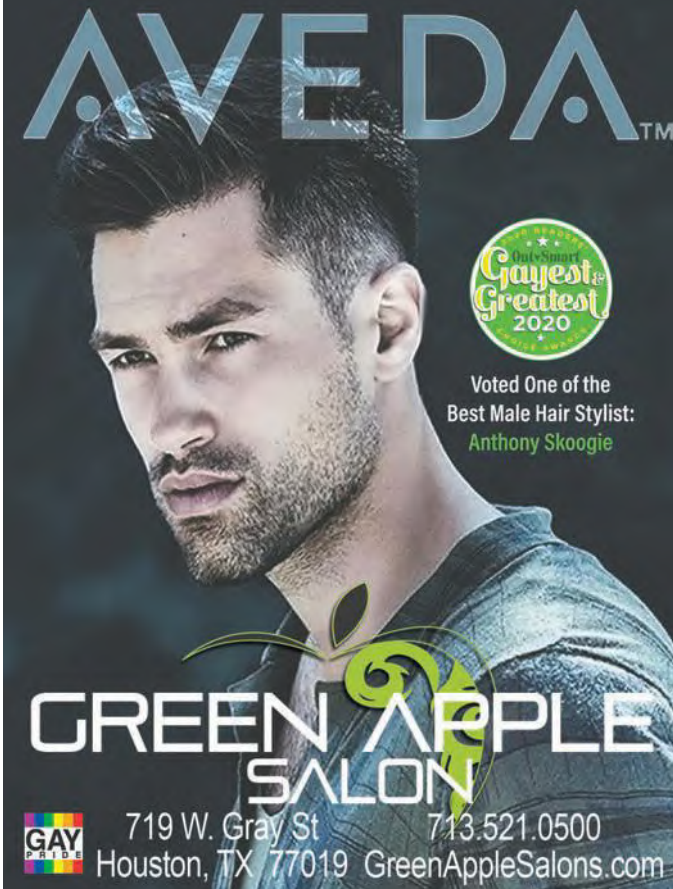
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The George R. Brown Convention Center is taking “deck the halls” to a whole new level this year. Holiday trees of all themes and sizes are lining the building’s expansive windowscape

facing Discovery Green as part of the Alley Theatre’s annual Deck the Trees fundraiser, on display through January 3.

Over the past decade, the Alley holiday spectacle has become a Houston tradition that doubles as a fundraiser for the theater’s education and artistic initiatives. The Christmas trees are all sponsored by generous donors and decorated by Houston’s premier interior designers.

This year’s signature tree was created by decorator Taylor DeMartino of DeMartino Design Group. “It’s 18 feet tall and 10 feet around. It’s a beast; it’s definitely an undertaking,” he says. “I was able to see *Frozen* on Broadway, and I was impressed by the set design. There was a scene when huge ice shards shoot out from stage right and the trap doors below, and it was a really cool moment. I loved the angular shapes of it, and I wanted to mimic that in the tree.”

To create the effect, DeMartino’s group crafted metal ice shards and wrapped them in micro lights. The tree already had 8,000 lights in it, and they added another 15,000 lights to

Pandemic Party Planner

Taylor DeMartino keeps it glitzy in spite of the restrictions.

By SAM BYRD

maximize the sparkle.

“It’s almost like an ice castle forming out of this tall Christmas tree, and the rest of it is adorned with lights, glitter, silvers, and chromes. We filled up the interior of the tree with mylar sheeting, so at night you see the reflection of all the lights. It looks like ice glistening inside of it. We have two-and-a-half-foot snowflakes on the tree. It’s a really cool look,” he explains.

The tree is indeed a showcase for the decorator’s abilities. DeMartino Design Group is a full-service special events, production, floral, and design firm specializing in corporate events, galas, weddings, and social soirees.

DeMartino, who is originally from Beaumont, has worked in the events business for

more than a decade. After moving to Houston, he worked for other established vendors who taught him the skills and secrets of the trade. After working on both local and national events, he fell in love with the industry and decided to open his own operation.

“I knew there was a place in the Houston market for affordable luxury, and that’s what brought me to where I am today. We use all the knowledge I learned from my mentors, past employers, and past team members to create incredible artistic projects. But we also design with a budget in mind. It’s a good balance between luxury and affordability,” he notes.

DeMartino’s business has already made a name for itself, due in large part to his work on a high-profile Super Bowl event in 2017. “We

were able to represent the city for all the celebrities and ambassadors who came into town. We transformed the cafeteria level of the Hess Tower overlooking Discovery Green into this incredible guest space," he says. "People thought they were walking into a hotel lobby when they arrived. We made custom carpets, custom furniture, and custom acrylic work. It was a flagship, banner experience."

He recently wrapped up Theatre Under The Stars' Lights Up Houston fundraiser, and he is working with the Houston Symphony on its upcoming Wine Dinner and Collector's Auction at The Astorian.

While COVID-19 has caused a slowdown in parts of his business, DeMartino has been able to pivot from larger events and cater to his clients who are still hosting small private parties.

"We have some great intimate weddings we're working on, and I absolutely love it. The clients are dialing down on their guest counts right now, so we can get creative with hand-curated menus and tabletop decorations and

Taylor DeMartino (top center) and his design team created a *Frozen*-themed signature tree for Alley Theatre's 2020 Deck the Trees fundraiser.



entertainment. We can create unique experiences because we don't have massive guest counts, and we're really enjoying flexing that side of our abilities right now," he says.

Creating a cohesive and high-quality experience every time is not easy, but DeMartino has a troupe of co-workers to assist him—all of whom are members of the LGBTQ community.

"I didn't plan for that to happen. Two employees are drag queens, and my husband works with us. We occasionally bring in freelance labor, and they're LGBTQ, too. We get the work done and have a great work ethic. It's been a great fit, and I've just stuck with it. It's a fun environment."

With business keeping steady, DeMartino has his eye on the future. "I've always said I have a 10-year goal to do the Met Gala in New York City. That 10 years is a moving target, obviously," he laughs. "Our goal is to be that true boutique operation in Houston that has impeccable taste, great inventory that no one else has, great customer service, and a product you don't see every day."

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Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice

Baker **Dylan Carnes** vegan confections brighten up the holidays.

By MARENE GUSTIN | Photo by MIKAH DANAÉ

Despite the pandemic, things are going well at Houston's Sinfull Bakery, and owner Dylan Carnes has big plans for the holidays.

"Times are interesting right now, so I don't know what to expect in December," she says. "We have a lot of new things happening at Sinfull."

The bakery has sold vegan treats for more than a decade, and recently opened a storefront at 1714 Webster Street in Midtown. This month, Carnes' shop is set to begin selling coffee and hot food in addition to a full holiday menu.

"I'm pretty excited about what this will

hold for Sinfull's future, since we have been a wholesale operation until now," Carnes says. "For Christmas, Sinfull Bakery is taking pre-orders for our holiday pies and savory items. And for one day only, we are bringing back our Mint Double Chocolate Cookies!"

Eleven years ago, Carnes, a queer Houston native, was living in Port Angeles, Washington, when an idea came to her during a hike to her favorite lighthouse: create a vegan bakery with all of the deliciousness and none of the sin. (She now remembers that moment of inspiration every time she looks down at the lighthouse tattoo on her right arm.)

So Sinfull Bakery—the first vegan bakery

in Houston—was born. "I decided to give up my career and become a vegan baker. I was only 24 and had never baked in my life, so I was a bit crazy. However, I have been cooking since I was seven."

When Carnes was 14, she became a vegetarian. Living in meat-loving Texas, her parents were hesitant about her diet change and had no idea what to cook for her. This is when her cooking interests really took a new direction. "I still think about how, in the first year of my business, my dad couldn't say 'vegan' correctly because he hadn't really heard much about it at the time," she laughs.

It was rough going at the start, but it didn't

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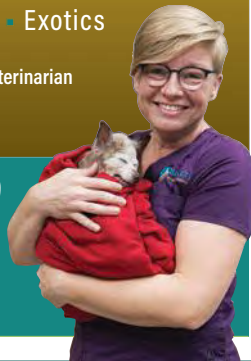
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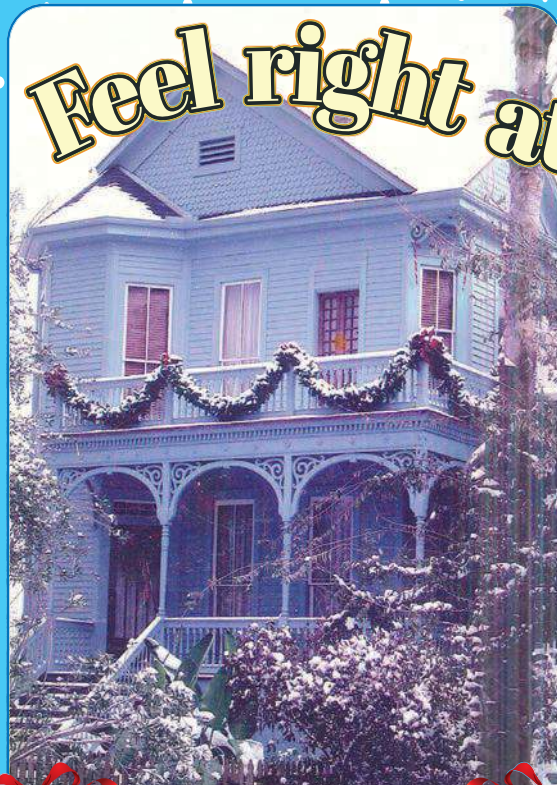
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take long for Carnes' business to take off. "When I moved back to Houston, I had a DBA, two full journals of recipes, a few dollars in my pocket, my last amount of money on my food-stamp card, and two parents willing to let their daughter use their kitchen 24 hours nonstop. That's exactly what I did."

Within six months of moving back to Houston, Carnes' products were being mass-produced in commercial bakeries and sold at Whole Foods Market. "At that time, they only sold my sweet-fill, Czech-style kolaches (which were, of course, the size of Texas) and my sweet loaves," she recalls. Unfortunately, those tasty treats—the first commercial vegan kolaches to hit the market—are no longer sold at Whole Foods. "I decided to keep those local and make different varieties, mostly savory, exclusively for our Houston storefront each week."

Whole Foods, H-E-B, and other local businesses currently sell Sinfull Bakery's Everything Bars, Coconut Dream Bars, cinnamon rolls, and, for a limited time, a selection of holiday pies.

The vegan bakery's treats can also be found at several shops in Austin. You can find all of the locations at sinfullbakery.com, along with a complete menu of prepared foods available at the storefront for curbside pickup.



Sinfull Bakery is selling seasonal pies for the December holidays. And, for one day only, the treat shop will bring back their Mint Double Chocolate Cookies.

In addition to her lighthouse tattoo, Carnes' left hand and arm is covered with tattoos depicting her childhood in Houston—complete with a bayou, downtown skyscrapers, and trees on her fingers that represent her parents and sister. Her family—including her little Shih Tzu dog, Joy—is as important to her as the bakery is.

"My belief with my products is 'the simpler

the better,' Carnes says. "And that's why I think people hesitate to believe [my baked goods are really] vegan. I also strongly believe in using mostly organic ingredients. When I started Sinfull, I was the only bakery in town using mostly organic ingredients."



For more information on Sinfull Bakery, visit sinfullbakery.com.

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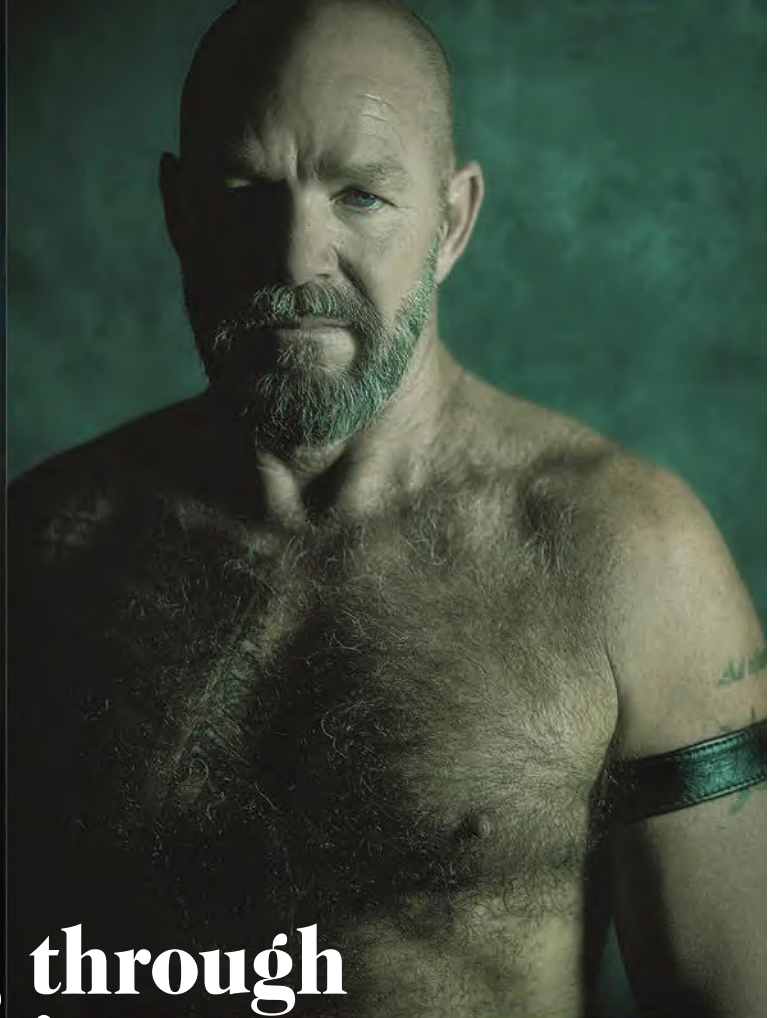
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Looking through an Affirming Lens

Steven Tilotta found his calling with
body-positive portrait photography

By **SAM BYRD**



Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and for photographer Steven Tilotta, that beauty is found everywhere he looks. Armed with a camera and determination, he's been capturing people's best sides for six years now.

"I see beauty in everything. I find it in [things as ordinary as] oil stains on cement or textures. It is all around us," his website reads. "I want to change the way we see ourselves."

Tilotta's portrait images have indeed changed the way people perceive their less-than-ideal physiques.

"I feel that we've been forced [ideas about] what is attractive by advertisers and marketers. It's wonderful if someone spends all that time in the gym [to get the perfect body], but most guys don't look like that. I want to show 'real' men. That's how all of this started," he says.

"A lot of my work deals with lighting and color grading. I believe that everyone has a light and a dark side. Most people stay in the middle, not wanting to go too good or too bad. I'm captivated by shadows and light, and how they play across people," he says.

Considering all of the time and energy he has invested in his business, it's shocking to think that this was a career path he almost didn't take.

Tilotta always had a passion for working behind the camera. But in his first photography class in college, his instructor told him that he was not good at it. Tilotta immediately stopped shooting, and he wouldn't pick up a camera again until he was in his 40s.

"It's horrible for an educator to tell someone they're not good at it. When it comes to art, there aren't any rules," he says.

It was when he started caring for his father, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, that his interest in photography was rekindled as a way to keep busy. Now, his days are filled with photo shoots and conversations with people volunteering as models for his upcoming projects.

Tilotta has his fair share of muscled men who pose for him, but he likes to feature all shapes and sizes in his work.

"I mostly photograph guys who are bigger and heavier. It's an amazing feeling when they say, 'Wow, I didn't know I could look like that.' It's a great feeling to make them see themselves as attractive or beautiful," he adds.

Several years ago, he started assembling his images to create annual calendars. It was mostly a passion project, but the calendars caught on and some of his best images are now immortalized annually. The limited-run editions sell fast and have become somewhat of a collector's item. They also show Tilotta's growth through the years, both in terms of talent and notoriety.

"It's funny for me to look at an old calendar and see how my work has evolved. When I first started doing photography, I pretty much begged people to let me photograph them. I'm also very shy. It was hard at first to find models, but as time went on, people found me,"

he says. "I had someone fly in from Australia to work with me. [Another model] found me on Instagram. I think guys are just seeking me out through word of mouth. I'm glad I have that problem."

While Tilotta says his 2021 calendar will be his last one, he leaves open the possibility of a 2022 edition. After all, he swore off making the 2021 calendar that is currently being published.

One project his fans can count on is his book *AS IS*, to be released this month. The 210-page publication, featuring a forward by his friend O.T. Porter-Fisher, is true to the Tilotta aesthetic and filled with a variety of body-positive images.

"We should accept people 'as is.' It's not just women who have body dysmorphia issues; men do, too. I photograph guys with six-pack abs, and they're just as sensitive as guys who are overweight. In a time of inclusivity, it's wrong to focus on just one body type," he notes. "I hope it's motivational. I hope everyone will find something they can relate to."

Never one to let the dust settle, Tilotta is already in the planning stages for a book he hopes to release in 2021.

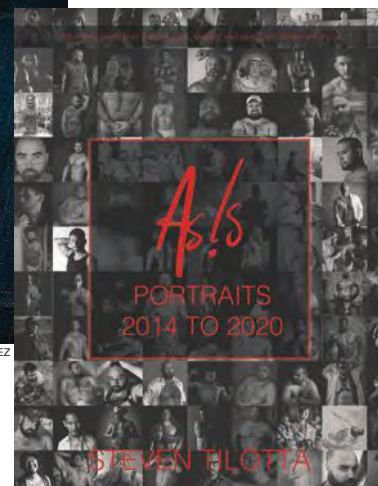
"What I want to do next is



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERNESTO RODRIGUEZ

"I MOSTLY PHOTOGRAPH GUYS WHO ARE BIGGER AND HEAVIER. IT'S AN AMAZING FEELING WHEN THEY SAY, 'WOW, I DIDN'T KNOW I COULD LOOK LIKE THAT.' IT'S A GREAT FEELING TO MAKE THEM SEE THEMSELVES AS ATTRACTIVE OR BEAUTIFUL."

—Steven Tilotta



themed 'red chair confessions.' Everyone will pose with a red chair at different locations, and it won't just be men. There will also be women, drag performers, and transgender people," he says. "In each portrait, they'll confess something. It can be funny, dark, or something they've never told anyone."

For information on Tilotta's limited-edition 2021 calendars, as well as his book *AS IS* and his portrait sessions, visit tilottaimages.com.

The Year of Queer Holiday Rom-Coms

An all-time high of six LGBTQ films debut this season.

By ALYS GARCIA CARERRA and LOURDES ZAVALA



It's the most wonderful time of the year to binge holiday movies, and 2020 brings a record-breaking six new winter-themed films that focus on LGBTQ romance—relationships that are often overlooked by the media giants.

Compare this gusher of queer holiday movie releases to last year, when the only holiday flick to feature an LGBTQ love story was Chris- tin Baker's *Season of Love* for the lesbian-media streaming service Tello Films. (A few 2019 holiday movies, including Netflix's *Let It Snow* and Freeform's *Ghosting: The Spirit of Christmas*, featured queer characters in supporting roles within their larger heteronormative plots.)

In the past, LGBTQ activists have criticized media powerhouses Hallmark and Lifetime for never having spotlighted a same-sex or trans storyline, despite releasing dozens of holiday films each year. These media networks and others were determined to make a difference in 2020 by finally releasing seasonal movies with queer plotlines.

And best of all, the sudden surge of LGBTQ holiday films does not mean that any of them are lacking in quality. Each of these movies highlights a unique queer experience. So be sure to stock up on hot cocoa and schedule a movie marathon, because these films are either available now or coming soon to a screen near you.



The Christmas House

Hallmark was under fire from religious activists in 2019, when the cable network aired a wedding commercial featuring a same-sex couple. But the channel decided to double down on its efforts to showcase LGBTQ characters by creating *The Christmas House*, its first-ever queer holiday film.

In the movie, openly gay *Mean Girls* star Jonathan Bennett plays Brandon, whose parents are having marriage troubles. They summon Brandon and his brother home to New York for what might be the last Christmas in their childhood home. Brandon and his husband, Jake (portrayed by Brad Harder), make their way home for the festivities, but their visit is filled with anxiety as the couple

awaits a call about the adoption of their first child.

Written by and starring Robert Buckley, a longtime LGBTQ ally whose brother is gay, *The Christmas House* is out now, and co-stars Treat Williams, Sharon Lawrence, and Ana Ayora. For more information, visit hallmarkchannel.com/the-christmas-house.



The Happiest Season

This Hulu Original, written and directed by lesbian icon Clea Duvall (and starring out actress Kristen Stewart), has been highly anticipated since it was announced.

The Happiest Season follows young lesbian couple Abby

(Stewart) and Harper (Mackenzie Davis) as they travel to spend the holidays with Harper's conservative and wealthy family, where Abby plans to propose. But upon their arrival, Abby finds out that Harper has yet to come out to her family. The film promises laughter, tears, and a seemingly happy ending—all the components of a holiday classic in the making.

And if that isn't enough, the movie also features a star-studded cast including out *Schitt's Creek* star Dan Levy (who was recently named Sexiest Man Alive by *People* magazine), Aubrey Plaza, Alison Brie, and Victor Garber. To stream *The Happiest Season* now, visit hulu.com.

The Christmas Setup

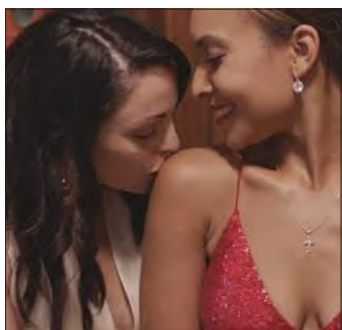
Last year, Lifetime's *Twinkie All the Way* featured the network's first same-sex holiday kiss. Now, the TV channel debuts its first holiday film centered on gay romance, and stars real-life married couple Blake Lee and Ben Lewis.

When New York City law-



yer Hugo (Lewis) returns home to Milwaukee to celebrate the holidays with his family, his mother, Kate (Fran Drescher), plays matchmaker by aligning the stars so that her son crosses paths with his old high school friend and crush Patrick (Lee). Hugo and Patrick quickly connect, but then Hugo learns that he's up for a promotion that would require him to relocate to London. Hugo is forced to decide whether to take the promotion or stick around to see where his relationship with Patrick goes.

The Christmas Setup airs on Lifetime on December 12 at 8 p.m. For more information, visit mylifetime.com/movies/the-christmas-setup.



nifer's guardian angel, Azrael (Cooper Koch), appears and creates an alternate world in which Jennifer's father and Gabrielle are still alive, and Jennifer gets a second shot at love with Gabrielle.

A New York Christmas Wedding is streaming now on Netflix.com.



Dashing in December

Paramount is hoping to make the yuletide gayer with *Dashing in December*, a gay cowboy film starring Peter Porter and Juan Pablo Di Pace.

The film tells the story of New

York City financier Wyatt (Porter), who visits his mom's ranch for the holidays to try and convince her to sell this winter wonderland attraction. While visiting, Wyatt meets Heath (Di Pace), a handsome ranch hand who loves working on the property, and the two soon begin to have feelings for each other.

Dashing in December is set to premiere December 13 on Paramount TV with simulcasts on Logo, Pop, and TV Land. For more information, visit paramountnetwork.com.

I Hate New Year's

Out filmmaker Christin Baker's second LGBTQ holiday movie for Tello Films focuses on the New Year's Eve holiday. This indie production features adventure, friendship, and (of course) romance.

When rising music star Layne (Dia Frampton) heads home to Nashville for New Year's Eve to

break her writer's block, she finds inspiration—and love—where she least expected it. After a mysterious palm reading, Layne decides to rekindle an old relationship with the help of her best friend,



Cassie (Ashley Argota), who, unbeknownst to her, is harboring more than platonic feelings for Layne. Promising and sweet, this film looks to be the perfect way to ring in the New Year.

I Hate New Year's is available for streaming on Tello Films and all other streaming platforms beginning December 4. For more information, visit TelloFilms.com.



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Good as Golding

An interview with actor **Henry Golding**.

By **GREGG SHAPIRO**
Photo by **TIM PALEN**



In a relatively short period of time, actor Henry Golding's star has ascended, making him one of the most recognizable names and faces on film. Beginning with the double whammy of

2018's *Crazy Rich Asians* and *A Simple Favor*, and continuing with 2019's *Last Christmas* and *The Gentlemen*, Golding is a hot commodity.

In addition to these high-profile movies, Golding has also ventured into the world of independent features with *Monsoon* (Strand Releasing), written and directed by gay filmmaker Hong Khaou (who also directed 2014's *Lilting*). In *Monsoon*, Golding (a straight LGBTQ ally) plays Kit, a gay man who left Vietnam for the UK with his parents when he was a young boy. He returns, 30 years later, to scatter their ashes. While there, he meets and begins a relationship with American expat Lewis (Parker Sawyers, who played a young Barack Obama in 2016's *Southside with You*).

Golding was kind enough to answer a few questions in advance of the November release of *Monsoon*.

Gregg Shapiro: What was appealing to you about the character of Kit in Hong Khaou's *Monsoon* that made you want to portray him?

Henry Golding: I think for me, it almost mirrors my personal journey in a sense. I grew up in an expat community in Malaysia until I was about eight. Then I moved from Malaysia to Surrey in the UK, just south of London. I grew up there, pretty much, for the rest of primary school and secondary school, up until I was about 21, when I made the decision to move back to Malaysia and try to get into broadcasting. I landed in Malaysia and was just kind of dumbfounded with how alien I felt. [I assumed] that because I'm half Malaysian, I'm going to feel right at home and it's going to feel great. [Laughs] But it's often a very sharp slap in



the face—"Yeah, you're definitely not used to this type of culture." When I was reading the screenplay for *Monsoon*, that experience really resonated with me. Kit's story has much more of a personal trajectory, in that his parents never told him much about Vietnam. He has so many questions bubbling inside him that his parents didn't answer before they died. So he went on a mission of trying to figure out a little bit of his past. At the same time, he wasn't really expecting the experience that he got.

Had you previously seen any of Hong's previous films such as *Lilting*, starring Ben Whishaw?

Yes, I watched *Lilting* pretty much immediately after I read *Monsoon*. I loved it! I think one of the things that drew me to working with Hong was his subtlety and beauty in being. That's what he wanted from Kit. These moments of self-reflection, these moments of inner turmoil, and these questions just whirling around like a vortex in his head. There's this look on his face when he just kind of phases out. He'll be in the middle of a street in Vietnam somewhere with all this traffic, and he'll just have a moment to himself. He's [been in] this sort of safety bunker within himself, growing up, and you see glimpses of that. To see him and his journey through the movie, and have him

come out of his shell, I think it's such a beautiful thing.

Like *Lilting*, *Monsoon* addresses loss, grief, and family. For fans who know you well from comedies such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Last Christmas*, and *A Simple Favor*, how do you hope they'll respond to you in such a serious role?

Hopefully, they'll find that they enjoy it. I finished *Crazy Rich Asians* and I just got back from *A Simple Favor*, which we filmed in Canada, so I was [at a place] in my career where I had just gotten started. I had nothing that the world had seen. I think at that stage, I loved the idea of [having] a much more personalized experience while filming a movie. That's what an independent film allows you. So the collaboration between myself, co-producer Tracy O'Riordan, and Hong taught me so much. But yes, I think people are going to be surprised. Hopefully, they see the range that I have as an actor. I have *Snake Eyes* coming out next year—[another] little glimpse into this world before I'm in another studio film. I think I've had a taste of the nectar, to be honest with you. It was such a lovely experience to be so involved in a movie like that. It's difficult, because you have people to answer to when there's a big budget and a lot of opinions. But when you're just →

making a movie for yourselves, it's beautiful.

Monsoon doesn't shy away from the subject of Kit being a gay man. It includes intimate scenes with Kit and Lewis, as well as a scene with a guy that Kit picks up while he's in Hanoi. Can you please say something about the challenges and rewards of playing a gay character?

For me, it was wonderful. Hong has a way of telling these stories. His sexuality wasn't the driving factor, or the driving attribute, of Kit's personality or this story. It really centered around his personal identity struggle. I think he's so secure in his sexuality that [being gay] takes a back seat, in a way.

That's right, his sexual orientation seems to be secondary.

Exactly! I've had a lot of messages from people who have watched the film, especially young, gay Asian men who have never seen that type of movie where [the character's orientation] is not even taken into account. It's so normalized, which it should be. It's so strange and amazing to see what [audiences perceive as "normal"] on the big screen. It just shows that there are communities out there that are starved for representation. I think Parker Sawyers and Hong approached it respectfully and with a

collaborative spirit. There was real love on that set. There was so much trust, so there was never a question of "should we be doing this?" It just felt so natural, in a way.

It comes across that way. Kit returns to Vietnam after 30 years to scatter his parents' ashes, even though, as you mentioned, his parents left the country and never expressed any interest in ever returning. Do you think Kit was doing the right thing?

I think we juggled the script a little bit to [show that] he realizes this, so you can see glimpses of this in the finished film.

Kit had an understanding that he was bringing them home, [even though] Vietnam had not been their home for 35 years. Their home was where his family was in the UK. We often do that as immigrants. [Your geographic] home is just a distant memory. Home is really where the heart is. I think he comes to that realization: "I never needed to bring them back, but I needed to come back."

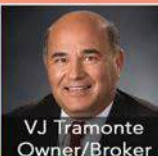
While in Saigon, Kit meets up with Lee (David Tran), an old childhood friend. Do you have a childhood friend that you haven't seen for many years that you hope to reunite with someday?

Yes, from my time in Malaysia, when I was growing up in an expat kind of community. My dad worked on helicopters for the oil rigs, and stuff like that. We had a very close community, and we were all around the same age. Mark was one of my best friends. I think they were a South African family. I haven't seen him since we left when I was eight or nine years old. I think they moved to the UK as well. Often, we have these best friends that we grew up with, and we lose contact. Sometimes it's how life is. It goes in chapters, doesn't it? But it doesn't mean the chapter is closed. It's not the end of the chapter, it's kind of open-ended.

Your tattoos—including the one on your thigh, the one on your tricep, and the ones on your shoulders—are all visible in the movie. Do you have a favorite tattoo?

I think the most personal ones for me are my shoulder tattoos. I'm from the Iban tribe in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. That tattoo is the strongest identifier for our tribe. It is given to a young man who's come of age; after that, they go out into the world. Back in the day, if you came across people in the jungles [with] these identifying tattoos on them, you could easily recognize them as Iban. It's almost to help you travel through life with safety, and to bring you home from those journeys. ▼

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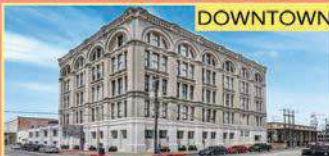
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WEDDING GUIDE

By JENNY BLOCK | Photos by AMANDA DEBUSK

Opposites Attract

Annette Fiszer and Nalani Callico's differences make them a perfect match.



Oak Forest residents Annette Fiszer and Nalani Callico met through a friend, took it slow, and then fell hard. It's the kind of love story most people

can only dream of. For Annette and Nalani, it became a long-hoped-for reality.

Annette, 51, an office manager for Texas Endocrinology Group, was born in Laredo, Texas. Except for a few early years living in Florida, she's called Houston home since the age of seven. Nalani, 54, was born and raised in Houston and is a trial coordinator for Judge Robert Schaffer in Harris County's 152nd District Court.

The two met six years ago through a mutual friend. Nalani later invited Annette to a group happy hour at La Boheme. "It was an instant attraction, but a very slow move into anything more than friendship. We seemed to be such opposites. Nalani loved to be around people, and I'm more reserved," Annette says, adding that being in a group situation that night helped take some of the pressure off.

Nalani says she purposely invited as many people as she could because she was so nervous. "I tried to be cool and not just lock Annette into a private conversation," Nalani recalls.

It wasn't long before Nalani knew Annette was the one. "I knew she was my forever the day we were sitting inside Annette's garage, watching it rain and having a couple of drinks. It was a Sunday, and we were both dreading that I would be going home and wouldn't see her until later that week. At this point, being away from her for just one day was torture. I remember saying something like, 'I hate Sundays because I know I have to go home.'

"And that's when Annette said, 'Well, what if you didn't have to go home?' I looked at her in complete shock and said, 'What?' This was her asking me if I wanted to move in with her. I was over-the-top excited! To this day, I cherish her original house key [she gave me] that says 'Home' on it."

After living together for the past four and a half years, Nalani managed to pull off a surprise drive-by proposal in May with the help of a lot of friends. "I remember telling our →

Annette Fiszer (l)
and Nalani Callico

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friends, “If she doesn’t cry, then I didn’t do this right!” Thanks to her neighbors and a planned distraction, Nalani said she had just enough time to turn their driveway into a beautiful space to propose.

“Annette slowly approached me as I stood proudly inside a heart of petals with our two pups by my side. She was completely surprised, as planned! Once she was close enough to hear me, I asked her to marry me. She cried the entire time as cars were passing through to congratulate us. So I think I did it right,” Nalani says.

Annette only remembers two things from that day: saying yes, and asking “Who is that?” several times as people drove by to congratulate them. “I didn’t recognize so many faces behind their masks, and I was in shock,” Annette explains.

The couple was married on October 17, 2020, by Judge Schaffer (Nalani’s boss) six years to the day from when they met. “We had always known that we wanted to get married on our anniversary date,” Nalani says. Friends and family gathered downtown at the Sabine Street Bridge to watch the ceremony from a safe distance, wearing custom-made masks and waving rainbow colored wedding wands.

Nalani recalls that the most special moment of the day for her was simply seeing Annette at the other end of the bridge. “It was as if the whole world stopped and it was just the two of us on that bridge, walking toward each other. The joy in my heart at that moment is impossible to describe. I was about to marry the absolute love of my life.”

Annette felt the exact same way about their ceremony in the shadow of Houston’s skyline. “It was the first time that I had ever seen her in a dress. She took my breath away,” Annette recalls.

There wasn’t much that was traditional about their wedding, thanks to COVID-19. “Most important for us was to have our moms, who are no longer alive, with us in spirit that

day. We both had lockets with their pictures in our wedding bouquets,” Nalani notes.

“Our photographer, Amanda DeBusk, who is a friend I’ve known for many years, actually traveled from Indianapolis to shoot our wedding. Being a part of the LGBT community herself, she was so taken aback by my experience. She just knew that she had to document our day.” Sadly, DeBusk graciously stepped in after two local photographers refused to work with the couple after realizing that this would be a same-sex wedding.

To keep their guests as safe as possible, the couple changed their venue twice and made multiple reductions to the guest list. “In the end, we chose to have our wedding [outside on a bridge] so our friends could witness our exchange of vows from afar,” Annette says.

Because of the ongoing pandemic, they’re putting off the honeymoon until they feel more comfortable with traveling. In the meantime, Nalani explains, they had a “familymoon” instead. “We rented a four-bedroom house in the Hill Country and spent some quality time with our nieces and their families. Since both of our parents have passed, we have become very close to our nieces and their kids.” They hope to be able to celebrate with their friends and extended family in the near future.

One of the reasons Annette fell in love with Nalani was her ability to share her love so easily. “She sees the absolute best in everyone. Her kindness is part of what makes her so beautiful—along with that smile.”

And Nalani says she loves Annette’s ability to communicate effectively with everyone. “No matter how uncomfortable a topic may be—whether it be political, social, or any other topic—Annette is never afraid to speak her mind if she feels that it can be a teachable moment, or can help someone in some way.” ▼



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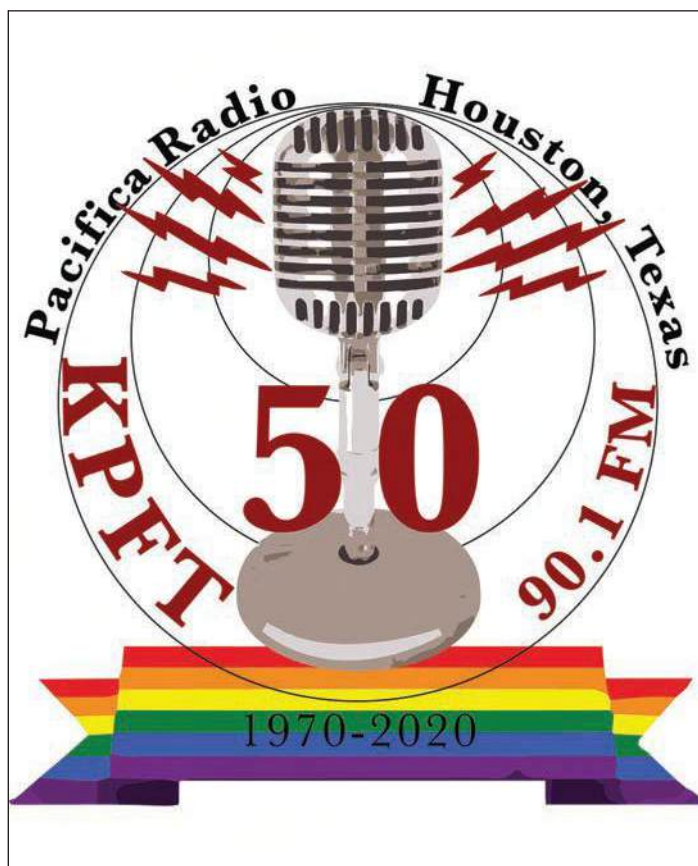
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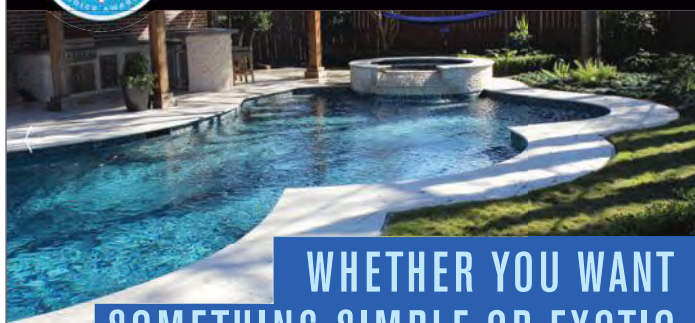
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Thinking in New Directions

A great month to start making change.



We are finally finished with the slow times we've trudged through for most of 2020. This is a great month to start your new projects, focus on being safe, and feel like you can do something about the problems in our society. There is still a great deal of tension with the planets, and that will keep us on our toes through early January. And let's not forget about the solar eclipse in Sagittarius on the 14th. This will have a strong impact on the mutable signs of Gemini, Sagittarius, Pisces, and Virgo. This can be a time for your thinking to be stimulated in new directions! In mid-December, both Jupiter (our planet of hope and growth) and Saturn (our planet of structure and long-term security) enter the sign of Aquarius. Both of these planets will have a big impact on the fixed signs of Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius. For those of you born in these signs, the new year is going to be a very busy time for new career opportunities to open up.

Good days this month are December 5, 11, 19, 25, and 27. The difficult days are December 6, 9, 13, 14, 21, 23, and 30.

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19) This is going to be a month of action and decision-making that will continue through mid-January. Action needs to be taken to secure your career direction and set up new long-term goals for your partnerships. The forces that have been altering your career path and forcing you to adapt to changing conditions will finally begin to wane. Friends and business-support organizations can be very helpful in opening you up to look at career alternatives. You will also want to make sure that you and your partner are working toward the same goals. Problems can come up, but this is a great month to address those difficulties and make a plan to move forward. In the early part of December, you are more socially active. Career and long-term security concerns become more important toward the end of the month.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20) Starting in mid-December, you'll be seeing a big shift into a time of decision-making. You've been exploring your options for a while now, so this is finally the month to take action. Your career and security sector is being activated for the next two years, and especially throughout 2021. For some, this is a time to take the next step and start your own business or take on a leadership role. For others, it's a time to just get off the grid. Finances play a big role this month, and you are making sure that you are

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21) Happy Birthday to the Centaurs! This month is your personal yearly cycle that allows you to review the past and set new goals for the future. The Sagittarians have been looking to add more content and spiritual development to their daily lives. You have been exploring way outside of the box, so making choices and actually putting them into play is more difficult. The eclipse on the 14th should be a stimulating time that helps you move forward with your ideas. This eclipse cycle will remain with us in May/June and November/December of 2021. Finances continue to be uppermost in your mind this month, even with the upcoming holidays. You will need more time for yourself in early December, but you'll be more social and ready to put yourself out there later in the month!

as free of financial constraints as you can be. This is also a very good month for you to review both your personal and financial investments. Relationships have been playing an important role in your life over the last several months. As we move forward in December, you will be looking to improve or increase your level of commitment. This is a busy time for you!

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) Relationships are very much the focus for you as the month begins. This would be an excellent month to consider future plans for commitment, reconnecting with your existing partner, or, if you are single, making yourself more available. The eclipse on the 14th will also trigger your relationship energies very strongly. With all of this activity, relationships that aren't doing so well will have to be strengthened. Otherwise, you will need to consider other alternatives. This is also a very good month to get back into your work and health routines. You have been missing those for the last month, and that has made it harder to stay focused on long-term goals. Friends and colleagues could be very helpful with ideas and inspiration, so think of them as a resource. You may also be considering going back to school, upgrading your skill set, or working on your social-media blog. It's a busy month.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) Action is the name of the game this month after the holding pattern you've been in since the end of August. This is the time to put your ideas and plans into action. This strong and confident energy will be with you through the middle of January. You are ready to move past your fears and limitations, and make those new plans a reality. This is a great month to create some new routines that address your changed work environment. You will also be more conscious of what you eat and how much you are exercising. This is a big time for you Cancerians to be reviewing your relationships. You are looking to set new

goals in existing partnerships and make sure that there is improved communication in both your business and personal partnerships. This is a time of commitment for some of you, while others will need to separate and move on from partnerships that have come to an end. You are more realistic about your relationships this month.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22) December represents a big shift in direction for your commitment and long-term security goals. You will be taking your life choices more seriously as you revisit previous choices that no longer serve you or have outlived their usefulness. You will be looking to make life choices that are more enduring. In relationships, this is a great time to reconnect with your partner and find new things that you have in common. Relationships that are too demanding, or give back too little, will be on the chopping block. You will also want to get your life back on track by starting some routines that you can maintain. This could mean making permanent changes in where and how you work. This is a great time to get back into a good health program after neglecting that routine because of the pandemic. This will be a month of making decisions!

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22) Your attention is being drawn to communicating your ideas and viewpoints with others. You are also focusing on home and family ideals during the holidays. This is an excellent month to promote yourself or your services on social media. Your words are powerful this month, and what you say will have an impact on others, even if that is not your plan! The eclipses on November 30 and December 14 are really activating your career sector for the next 18 months. Get ready to make some changes in that area, if you haven't already started. By the end of the month, you will be in a more creative time after feeling more relaxed through the

December holidays. You are still needing time to yourself for meditation and relaxation. This can be very strong with the eclipse on the 14th. Pace yourself, and focus on the things you like—you will get a lot more done that way.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23) This month ends the slow and draggy period you have been in for the last four months. As with the other cardinal signs, Aries, Cancer, Capricorn, as well as Libra, this month begins a time of decision-making and taking action on your plans. You will be more ready to really commit to what you want, and you will stop overthinking things and feeling stuck. As the month begins, your focus is on your home, family, and traditions. And because of the pandemic restrictions, these traditions will be seeing some big changes! This can be a time to free yourself from your negative beliefs about your abilities and self-worth. Relationships will definitely need some attention, and you need to be having more fun with them! Lighten up and do something spontaneous.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21) Now that Mercury, our communicator and organizer, is no longer retrograde in your sign, you are more than ready to move forward on your new path for the future. This month highlights your ongoing process of reviewing your career and social goals. For some, this is a time of reaching your goals and setting a new agenda to renew your passion for life. For others, this can be a time of endings as you take some time for yourself and work on projects that you really enjoy (imagine that!). You had been exploring many options over the last year, but you weren't ready to make any decisions. That all changed last month, and mid-December will only emphasize the need to move forward. Some of you may remodel your home, downsize, start a new business, retire, or move away to a place with more peace and less noise. The holidays will be busy!

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19) This has been a crazy year for you as all of the disruptive planets (the ones creating the economic and pandemic problems) have been moving through Capricorn! This alignment is slowly beginning to break apart, so your burdens should feel somewhat lighter by midmonth. Normally, you are more reserved right before the Winter Solstice, but more open to the holidays in late December. This year will be no exception, as you feel ready to commit to new plans for the future. The need for security will still be your strongest driver. You are taking more control and limiting your dependence on old systems that have outlived their usefulness. The holidays will require you to be more spontaneous and adaptable! Partnerships become the focus toward the end of the month.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18) December is a time of fundamental shifts for you. Two of the outer planets (Jupiter, planet of mental growth and personal expansion; and Saturn, planet of structure, career, and focus) both enter your sign. Jupiter visits for a year, and Saturn for two-and-a-half years. While Jupiter opens doors, provides new opportunities, and looks for the fun, Saturn is the decider who makes decisions based on what has the best chance of living up to our expectations. The last time Saturn was in Aquarius was 1991, while Jupiter was

in Aquarius in 2009. You can expect some similar experiences to occur this time around. In the early part of the month, you are more social and ready to connect with friends and family. By the end of the month, you will need to find a balance between being social and taking time for yourself. Holiday traditions are being reimagined, so you can be the one who invents your family's plan for the holidays!

PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20) December is usually a good time of the year for you. There is activity in your career sector as well as your social and friendship sectors. You are still adjusting to your new work and social schedules, and bringing more technology into your home and workplace. At work, this is always a good time of year for you to take a leadership role. You have the enthusiasm and the ability to motivate people. You are continuing to look for deeper satisfaction via your work, relationships, and friendships. You are not willing to settle, because you are paying more attention to what's best for you. The creative doors are opening. You will want to do more with your natural talents so they can bring you recognition and improved finances.

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Persistent Performer

Even in the face of adversity, nothing stops **Regina Dane**.

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



Ain't no stiletto high enough or blouse cut low enough to keep a determined drag queen from the stage. In Regina Dane's case, not even a broken back could sideline this seasoned trouper. After suffering a broken vertebra this year, she endured surgery and two hospital stays. Yet, as soon as she was in the clear she was lighting up the clubs and back to her shenanigans raising money for charity while entertaining the masses. That's perseverance in its truest form.

Pronouns?

All of the above. I come from a different generation where he, she, girl, and sister were interchangeable. I have friends who call me Regina even when I'm out of drag. I'm not sure they know or remember my given name.

Hometown?

Native Houstonian.

Inner avatar?

I tell everyone I'm a true Gemini. I definitely have two personalities—one in drag, and one out. These twins are fraternal opposites, and absolutely *not* identical.

Discuss your charity work.

This year, I am celebrating 30 years of dedication to charity community fundraising. I was Empress 9 of ERSICSS, and we're currently on Reign 36. You do the math! In 2011, I received a proclamation from Mayor Annise Parker honoring my fundraising efforts. At that time, I had helped raise over a million dollars for local nonprofit organizations. In October, I was Legacy Community Health's Mint Julep 2020 honoree during their virtual show. I am also a charter member of PWA Holiday Charities, and I continue to help them raise funds to lift the hearts of those in need during the holidays and throughout the year.



For more Regina
and her Christsmas Show fundraiser:
facebook.com/regina.dane.58

#TeamDonnaSummer or #TeamCher?

I grew up on disco! I adore Cher, but I will always be #TeamDonnaSummer.

Inspiration behind the name?

Regina is the Latin word for "queen." Dane has a twofold meaning. My given family name is Danish in origin, and when I started doing shows, Taylor Dayne was my favorite artist to perform. I took the Y out because I didn't want to be obvious.

Guilty pleasure?

Tacos. Anyone who comes to my show knows how much I love tacos.

Who or what would you be reincarnated as?

My inspiration has always been the glamorous Hollywood icons, and most especially Elizabeth Taylor. It would be fantastic to be a celebrity dripping in fashion.

Most embarrassing

moment on stage?

Once while hosting a show, I got stuck in a trash can that was being used as a tip bucket. And during a LUEY weekend parody skit, I consumed the majority of a dozen cream-filled doughnuts.

Drag icons?

Before I started doing drag, I went to shows at The Copa and sat on the floor to watch The Fabulous Four. Naomi Sims, Tasha Kohl, Donna Day, and Hot Chocolate will always be icons to me.

Holiday traditions?

For the last 10 years, I have been hosting the PWA Holiday Charities Christmas Show. This year, I am presenting a show on Sunday, December 13, at Tony's Corner Pocket called A Very Special Christmas: An Intimate Holiday Celebration. Please check out my Facebook event page for more details and information about our virtual broadcast of the event.

Thoughts as we wrap up 2020?

Is it over yet? I'm ready to just breathe—and not in a panicked, stressed-out way.

When we're not socially distancing, where can people see Regina perform?

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