PRIDE ON THE ISLAND: QUEER GALVESTONIANS

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JULY '20

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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Local Leaders Champion the Movement
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Photography by Alex Rosa/OutSmart magazine

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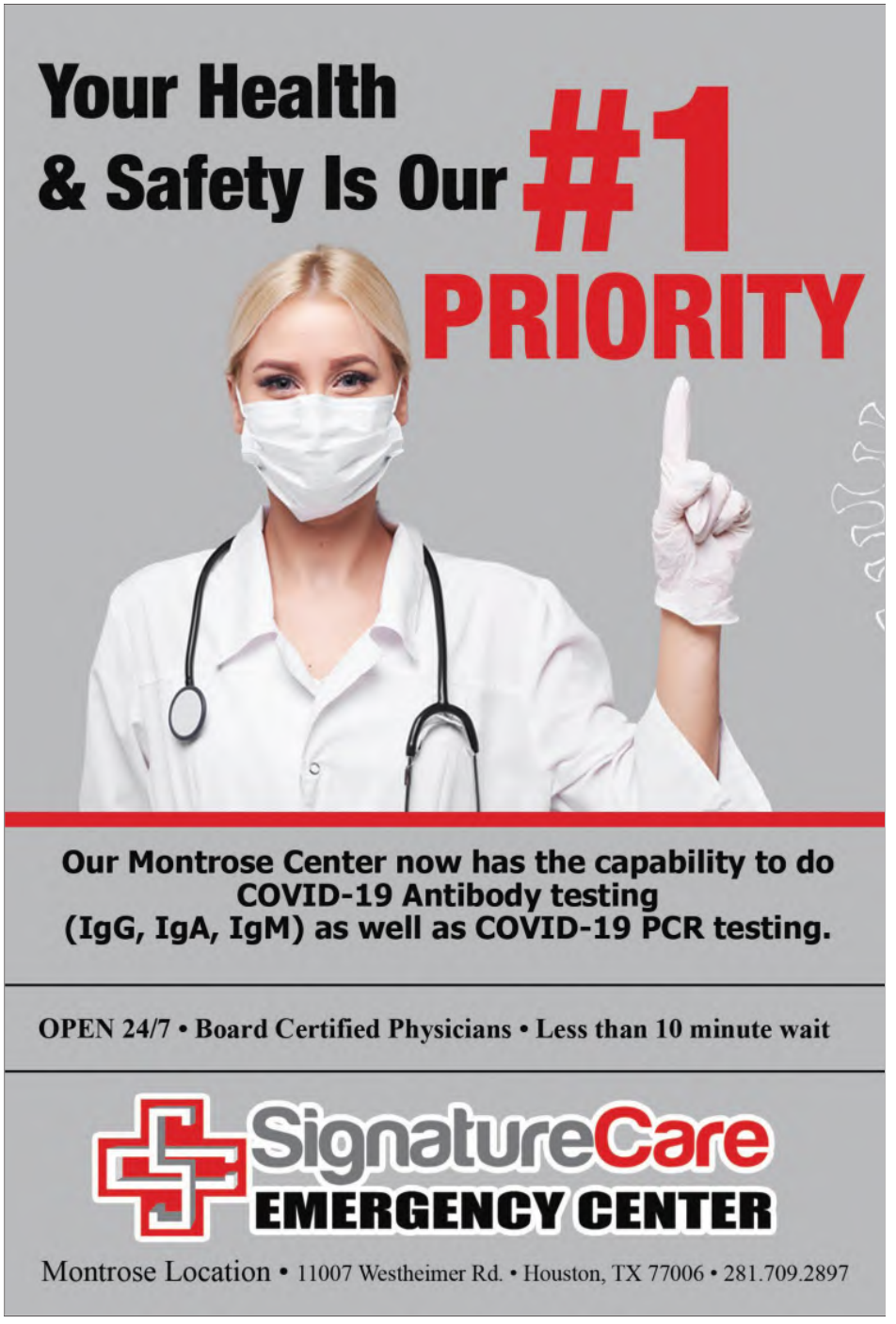
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The horrific murder of George Floyd on May 25 has sparked a passionate civil-rights movement throughout the nation and around the world. People of every race and background are joining with Black Americans in their ongoing work to end police brutality and systemic racism in America.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), an organization and campaign to empower and uplift Black voices, was founded in 2013 by three Black women after the heartbreaking acquittal of the Florida man who murdered 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Since then, activists around the country have established local BLM chapters and other racial-justice groups.

Our July OUTSMART cover story highlights the local LGBTQ leaders spearheading Houston's BLM movement. Writers Lillian Hoang and Terrance Turner chat with Ashton P. Woods, Kandice Webber, and Brandon Mack, the organizers of Black Lives Matter: Houston (BLMHOU), who discuss their work and encourage others to get involved.

Our regular columnist Daryl Shorter explains what those in the LGBTQ community can do to support the fight for racial justice. One action Shorter suggests is to acknowledge that racism and other forms of bigotry exist within the LGBTQ community. Having these conversations is hard, but it is necessary. For that, we commend Monica Roberts, who, in her Unapologetically Trans column, opens up about the isolation she has experienced due to the racism and transphobia in Houston's Montrose gayborhood.

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair," said Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to serve in the United States Congress. This sentiment rings true with many Black and Brown LGBTQ activists, including T.R.U.T.H. Project founder Kevin Anderson. Writer Martin Giron interviews Anderson about his organization, which fills a gap for queer people of color in need of social and mental-health support. On a similar note, writer Zach McKenzie introduces you to Sis, a Houston actress and advocate who has launched the Next Generation Project to empower the Black trans community.

Other artists are also using their gifts to promote social justice. Writer Bill Arning explores the life of artist Violette Bule, whose work illuminates the plight of this country's "essential workers." In another July story, writer Gregg Shapiro talks to historian Eric Cervini about his new book, which brings pre-Stonewall civil-rights history to life.

Finally, we encourage you to continue doing your part to keep Houston strong as we combat the dual crises of racial injustice and the COVID-19 pandemic. Keep making your voices heard—while also wearing your masks, washing your hands, social distancing, and staying safe!



Lourdes Zavaleta
MANAGING EDITOR



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Supreme Court Confirms Protections for LGBTQ Employees

Job discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is now illegal.

By **LISA KEEN, KEEN NEWS SERVICE**

In what is perhaps the most stunning U.S. Supreme Court victory in history for LGBTQ people, the nation's highest court voted 6 to 3 on June 15 that a federal law barring employment discrimination on the basis of "sex" also prohibits discrimination based on "sexual orientation" and "gender identity."

The court's decision in three cases testing the reach of Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act came in one 33-page opinion consolidated under *Bostock v. Clayton County*. In words that will no doubt be highlighted for many years to come, Justice Neil Gorsuch (a Trump appointee who replaced the late conservative Justice Antonin Scalia) wrote:

"Ours is a society of written laws. Judges are not free to overlook plain statutory commands on the strength of nothing more than suppositions about intentions or guesswork about expectations. In Title VII, Congress adopted broad language making it illegal for an employer to rely on an employee's sex when deciding to fire that employee. We do not hesitate to recognize today a necessary consequence of that legislative choice: An employer who fires an individual merely for being gay or transgender defies the law."

"This is a huge victory not just for LGBTQ people, but for our country," said Shannon Minter, legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights. "The decision will be remembered as a watershed in the history of LGBTQ rights, even as our country continues to grapple with the brutal legacy of racism."

"The Supreme Court agrees with the straightforward reading of the law that we've been advocating for years," said Jenny Pizer, senior attorney for Lambda Legal. "The [Title VII] words on the page say 'no workplace discrimination because of sex.' There's no way to understand those words [in a way] that excludes sexual orientation or gender identity. It means essential job protection for millions of LGBTQ people. That's more important than ever now, as we grapple with the ongoing health pandemic

and related economic challenges. For half a century, the law has promised workplace fairness. The Court today agrees—that promise protects LGBTQ people like everyone else."

While this landmark decision only interprets the reach of Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ruling is widely expected to be applicable to many other federal laws prohibiting discrimination based on sex. Among those laws are Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, the Fair Housing Act, the Equal Pay Act, the Equal Credit Act, and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act that bars discrimination in healthcare and health insurance.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Actprohibits employers who have more than 15 employees from discriminating "because of sex." The question was whether courts should interpret "sex" to encompass sexual orientation and transgender status. The court took up the issue in two separate oral arguments: one dealing with sexual orientation, and one dealing with transgender status.

The sexual orientation cases were *Altitude Express v. Zarda*, from New York and the Second Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, and *Bostock v. Clayton County*, from Georgia and the Eleventh Circuit. Both involved gay men who were fired after acknowledging they were gay. The Second Circuit ruled that the employer's firing of parachute-instructor Daniel Zarda did violate Title VII. The Eleventh Circuit, however, dismissed Gerald Bostock's lawsuit, saying the court was bound to conform to the Eleventh Circuit's earlier ruling that Title VII does not cover sexual orientation.

The transgender-status argument came through *Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC*, from Michigan and the Sixth Circuit. It marks the first time the U.S. Supreme Court has taken up the issue of whether a transgender person is protected by Title VII. The Harris case involves a funeral director, Aimee Stephens, who worked at the funeral home for years identifying as a male, because that was the gender assigned to her on her birth certificate. But Stephens sincerely believed, since a young age, that her gender was female. When she finally summoned the courage to live true to her gender identity, she told her boss that she would begin transitioning to live life as a woman. Harris Funeral Homes then fired her, and Stephens filed a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC ruled that Harris Funeral Homes' action violated Title VII, and the Sixth Circuit agreed.

Only 21 states have laws to prohibit discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation and transgender identity. Legislation to establish protections nationwide has been pending in various forms for more than four decades, but has yet to clear Congress.

Aimee Stephens, the funeral home employee who brought the transgender complaint to the EEOC, died of kidney failure on May 12 at her home in Detroit. She was 59. Donald Zarda, the plaintiff in the Altitude Express case, died in 2014 in a parachuting accident. He was 44.

Gerald Bostock, 56, said his job with Clayton County, where he advocated for child abuse and neglect victims, had been his "dream job." The county fired him for "conduct unbecoming" after he joined a gay softball league. The firing also caused Bostock to lose his health insurance, just as he was recovering from prostate cancer. Reached recently, Bostock said he is currently working as a mental-health counselor for a Georgia hospital.

Title VII in Context

The month of June has often brought Supreme Court decisions of monumental importance to the LGBTQ community. For many years, with

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STAY SAFE

By **SUSAN BANKSTON**

Our Little Secrets

Conspiracies, rumors, and other business as usual.



BLASE DISTEFANO

I read last week that two-thirds of Americans think Donald Trump has increased racial tensions in this country. But half of those two-thirds think it's a good idea that Trump did it, and the other half are watching *Tiger King* and can't be bothered.

I am willing to give Trump credit where credit is due. In less than one term in office, he broke all of the Ten Commandments and the whole Bill of Rights, except maybe that one part about housing troops in your home. No, no, wait, I'm being handed a note. Yeah, I'm being told that he did that, too.

He tried to invoke the Third Amendment during the Washington demonstrations, assuming nobody knew what the Third Amendment says. But thankfully, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg is still alive and she knows things. All things.

Honey, the world has gone nuts and some days it feels like the nuts have a stronghold and a damn virus. I'm usually pretty good at understanding, and when I look at things I can semi-acknowledge what I am seeing. But for starters, Antifa stumps me. They tell me it means "anti-fascist." I guess my dad was one, because he fought in World War II and I'm pretty damn sure that fascists were shooting at him.

Nobody can seem to explain to me what in the fool tarnation Antifa is, and why it does terrible things in secret. I don't get that secret thing. How does that happen? There are supposedly thousands of Antifas all over the country who silently operate in complete unison. I know for a fact that's not possible.

Take Thelma, for example. Thelma, who works at my beauty salon and is known as The Texas Chainsaw Manicurist, knows every damn secret in this town. And although she can keep a secret like it was her grandma's heart, if you offered Thelma a fully equipped pink Winnebago with the Dolly Parton interior package, a date with any surviving member of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and $10,000 cash money, she'd tell you everything she knows.

People can't keep secrets. And if you don't believe that, look at the Trump administration. Everybody he's hired at the White House eventually rats him out.

As further proof, I offer this: there's a suspicion in Texas that there's no such thing as a live armadillo. Nobody has ever seen one—all you see are dead ones in the middle of the damn road. Somebody out in West Texas goes all over the state leaving dead armadillos in the road. It's their job. They do it for the tourists. Little-known fact: armadillos are born dead in the middle of the road. It's a big conspiracy, and I'm shocked that you haven't heard about it.

Which brings us back to Antifa. Texans can keep secrets pretty well. Hell, we didn't tell people from the Yankee states about the heat and humidity in Houston until they moved here and started spending their money. But I'm sure there's Antifa in Texas, and somebody's gonna tell.

The other day I read about someone who

said they are proudly Anti Anti-Fascist. Gee, if only there was an easier way to say that. I think Attorney General Bob Barr is working on it by acting it out.

Which brings us to Attorney General Bill Barr, who took his ample heinie to a news show to speak in rambling lawyer jargon to deny that chemical irritants were used on peaceful protestors at the White House. It went like this:

Margaret Brennan: There were chemical irritants. The Park Police have said . . .

Bill Barr: No, there were not chemical irritants. *Pepper spray is not a chemical irritant.*

I can see how he got confused. This was gluten-free, organic, natural, non-GMO, cage-free pepper spray. That ain't no damn chemical.

Everything is a chemical, Darlin', except ideas—like peace, love, empathy, and tolerance. Everything else is a chemical. In a restaurant (remember those?) some guy four tables over speaking very loudly is technically a chemical irritant.

Look, pepper spray ain't Agent Orange, but it's not Eau de Democracy either. If pepper spray is not a chemical irritant, maybe mustard gas is a condiment.

While Barr is the attorney general, pepper spray will be known as a spicy baptism.

And before I forget, Trump finally got his wall. It's around the White House, which makes 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue the world's largest and most expensive playpen.

Mr. Biden, tear down that wall!

Everybody noticed when Senator Lindsey Graham made a complete flip-flop on his opinions about Donald Trump. Graham went from saying Trump was a "xenophobic religious bigot" to now calling him the best president ever. It is rumored that the overnight opinion change came because Trump threatened to pull Graham kicking and screaming out of the closet. Yeah, that would be awful. If a case still pending in the Supreme Court doesn't get the right result, outing Graham would mean he'd lose his health insurance.

Lindsey Graham's spine is not worth the paper it's printed on.

Until next month, wear a mask and save the grandparents.

Susan Bankston lives in Richmond, Texas, where she writes about her hairdresser at The World's Most Dangerous Beauty Salon, Inc., at juanitajean.com.

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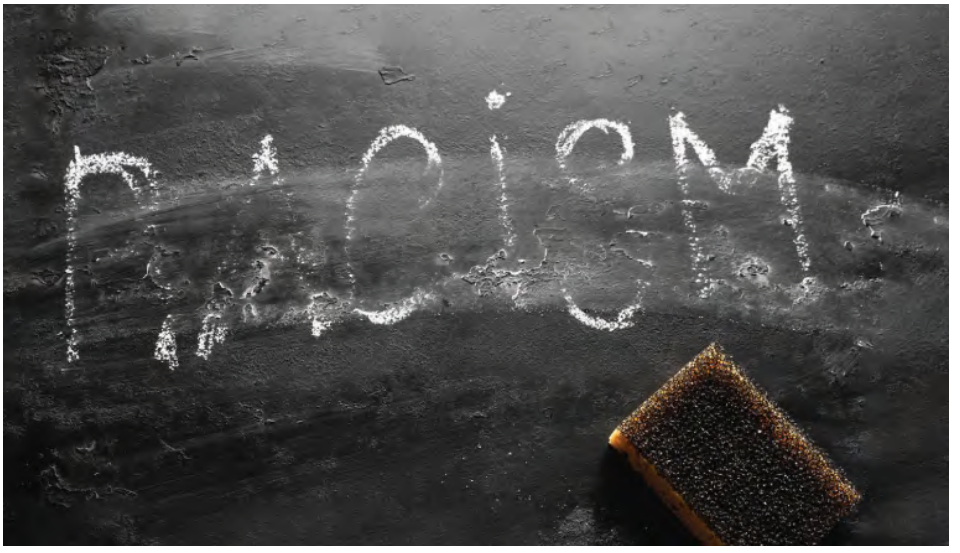
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By **MONICA ROBERTS**

Montrose, We Have a Systemic Racism Problem

The death-by-cop of George Floyd has led to people across our nation and the world having hard, honest, and necessary conversations about systemic racism.

One of those groups that needs to have some hard, honest conversations about systemic racism is our own TBLGQ-plus-one community. As members of this family, it is illogical for us to think that we didn't bring the baggage of systemic racism from the previous generation with us.



Last month, I had a conversation with Roxanne and Vanity Wilde on Roxanne's FB page concerning a post she wrote. In that post, she discussed (as a longtime entertainer extraordinaire in our community) the micro- and macro-aggressive racism she had faced and fought behind the scenes.

What micro-aggressive and macro-aggressive racism, you ask? Things like Montrose show-club owners ordering that no gospel or rap songs be played or lip-synched to. She talked about being barred from performing Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" because it was, in the club owner's opinion, "too racially charged."

She described the racism in pageant circles, and the discriminatory tactics used at the now-closed EJ's club. When it got "too dark" (their code words for "too many Black people in here"), they started charging any subsequent Black peeps that arrived at the door a $10 cover charge to hopefully persuade them to go somewhere else.

Vanity discussed being denied entry into Ripcord, JR's, and Montrose Mining Company. She also recalled an incident in which she was denied entry into Montrose Mining Company after being disrespectfully told, ''We don't want them soliciting our customers."

I ended up talking about the time that Isivi Ross and I were denied entry into Mother's, a gay white male hangout, just days after we had performed there at an AIDS benefit show. I found out later that Mother's actually had a policy to exclude transgender and Black customers, so I did the happy dance when it finally closed.

And yeah, there was also the time when I was in Cousins to support several friends competing during their Talent Night show, and I got called a "ni--er tr--ny." They saved that fool's azz from an automatic beatdown by putting three people between extremely-pissed-off me and him, and subsequently throwing his drunk azz out of Cousins.

I was ready to leave after that, so the only things that made me stay were the promises I made to my friends competing in Talent Night and the two free drinks I was offered.

And don't think that the racism in Montrose was just an '80s and '90s problem. Not long after I returned home in May 2010 from Louisville, Kentucky, I was asked by then Transgender Foundation of America (TFA) Executive Director Cristan Williams to join the board of the organization. It was all white at the time, and she felt TFA would benefit from my time in the movement and my perspective on what needed to happen to make TFA more diverse and welcoming to Black and other trans people of color.

My potential joining of the TFA board was derailed by a trans "Karen," who not only threw a fit about it, but also accused me of being "racist" because my TransGriot blog was focused on telling the stories of Black trans folks. She even went so far as to threaten to quit the TFA board if I was added to it. After reading her the riot act, I left and took my behind back home.

I stopped going to the TFA-sponsored Unity Banquet for several years, in large part because of that incident.

Until Lo Roberts took over as its CEO, Pride Houston was another org that Black TBLGQ Houston avoided like the plague. And don't think that the Houston Black TGLGQ community hasn't heard the shady comments that are being made about the Houston GLBT Political Caucus, now that its leadership board is predominately POC and its last three presidents have been a Black woman, a Latina, and a Black gender-nonconforming person.

The bottom line is that Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the country, and our TBLGQ community is increasingly going to reflect the diversity of the over five million people that call this part of Southeast Texas home. It's past time that our organizations and their leadership reflect that diversity.

It's also past time for us as a community to do the hard work necessary to erase racism in our rainbow-flag ranks. We need to be setting an example for the nation on how to do it, and build that beloved community that Dr. King so eloquently talked about.

But to get there, we'll need to have some hard conversations about the systemic racism in our community, and diligently work to eliminate it.

Monica Roberts is the founding editor of the GLAAD award-winning blog TransGriot.

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All Black Lives Matter

How can the LGBTQ community support the movement?

By **DARYL SHORTER, MD**



The horrific murder of George Floyd under the knee of a Minnesota police officer on May 25, 2020, illuminated for the entire world the pestilence of police brutality and systemic racism in America.

Sadly, it didn't end there. Since the death of George Floyd, there have been even more incidents of bodily harm and death visited upon Black and Brown people at the hands of out-of-control police officers.

Tony McDade, a Black trans man in Tallahassee, Florida, was killed on May 27. Sean Monterrosa, a 22-year-old Latinx man in Vallejo, California, was killed on June 2. Rayshard Brooks, a Black man shot in a Wendy's restaurant parking lot in Atlanta, was killed on June 12. And then there are the numerous documented and video-recorded episodes of physical violence directed against activists, protesters, and private citizens by police across the country.

These police-involved killings are not the only cause for outrage. In the last month, the lives of two Black trans women have been lost—Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells, age 36, and Riah Milton, age 25. According to the Human Rights Campaign, this brings the number of transgender or gender nonconforming people killed this year to at least 15. Black trans women are being disproportionately impacted by this violence.

And as if that weren't enough, attention has now turned to a suspicious pattern of hanging deaths among Black men, supposedly due to suicide. In all of the four known cases, the victims were found hanging from trees in plain sight. The body of a Houston Latinx man was discovered hanging from a tree limb on June 15.

Given the terrible legacy of lynchings in this country, it isn't hard to imagine why people might be suspicious of the details surrounding these recent hangings. At a minimum, it speaks to how the lens of racial identity can complicate our understanding of events. It also highlights the need to promote mental-health and wellness resources, as well as suicide-prevention hotlines, in marginalized communities.

What's Next?

This current iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement has developed against the backdrop of a community already reeling from the medical, economic, and psychological fallout of a worldwide pandemic. Now, with the near-constant focus on racial injustice, people are feeling 'all of the feelings'—overwhelmed, infuriated, exhausted, and terrorized.

LGBTQ people have been asking themselves what they should say and what more they can do to fight racial injustice. Despite our reluctance and fatigue, pressing forward with these conversations is vitally important. We must come to terms with the systemic racism that has festered within our schools, organizations, and companies as we work for real change, because lives are at stake.

While our LGBTQ+ community may have sidestepped conversations about racial injustice in the past, we are again being called to reckon with the ways that racism impacts us, both as individuals and as a community.

It is no longer sufficient to simply say that "I'm not a racist" or acknowledge the privileges from which we benefit. Frankly, this mere lip service is what has gotten us to this point. The work of anti-racism requires action. Ask yourself: What am I willing to do to actively dismantle the entrenched systems of racism?

Walking the Walk

I don't think it's a stretch to say that the Black community is exhausted from hearing so many empty promises made for so many years. Talk isn't enough. There are concrete steps we can

take to support the Black Lives Matter movement.

• White people should stop calling or texting Black people to ask them if they are okay. Simply put, they are probably not okay. Avoid telling them that you didn't know how bad the racism really is, or that you feel bad about the injustices. This creates additional emotional labor for Black people while they are doing the necessary work of coping with and healing from the actual traumatic events brought on by out-of-control racists.

• See color. Acknowledge that racism within the LGBTQIA+ community exists. And while you reflect on this truth, also acknowledge the sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, body shaming, and ableism that runs rampant within our community. We won't be able to truly address racism without addressing the ways in which so many members of our own community are also disenfranchised.

• Recognize that simply being LGBTQ is not enough to understand the full experience of bias and oppression that is a part of being Black in this country. Yes, there are no doubt similarities with the LGBTQ experience of systemic oppression. But practicing the radical empathy necessary to adequately appreciate the Black experience requires significant time, effort, and education.

• Many of us have made the important first step of acknowledging our various types of privilege. From not having to worry about public-restroom confrontations to being fully able-bodied and debt-free, privilege has been a topic of conversation for some time. But how can you leverage your privilege and make it work on behalf of those without it? How can you use your privilege for the benefit of others?

• Speak out against racist views that you hear being expressed by your friends and family. Oftentimes, offensive views expressed when Black people aren't around go unchecked. Rather than avoiding difficult conversations, think through ahead of time how you might engage someone who has offensive opinions about anyone who looks different. Silence is complicity, and merely "agreeing to disagree" contributes to the overall toxicity of racial injustice.

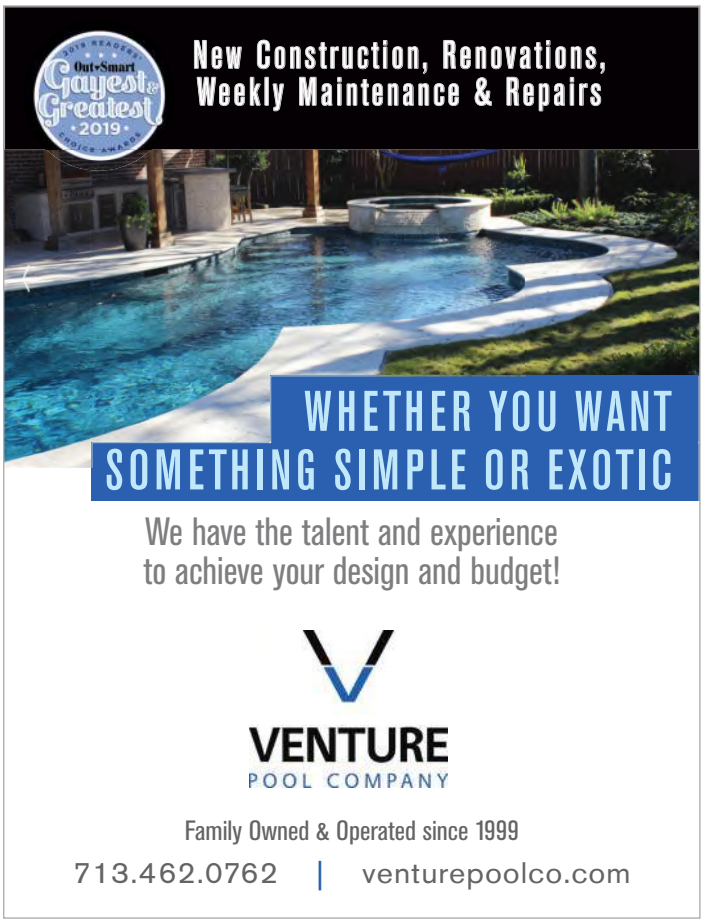
• Work against the sexual fetishizing or diminution of Black people. It is far from a compliment to glorify the Black cisgender female body or express sexual interest in a Black man by invoking demeaning sexual stereotypes. On the flip side, proudly stating that your romantic or sexual preferences completely exclude an entire ethnic group is a sure sign of white-supremacist leanings.

• Show up for the movement to support and protect Black trans women. Stop using offensive terminology regarding gender-nonconforming persons. Black trans men and women should not be forgotten in the fight for LGBTQ equality.

• Educate yourself, rather than asking your Black friends to educate you. Google first, then ask those Black friends for recommendations later. There is no shortage of books, movies, and podcasts that can provide us with the motivation and resources we need in order to dismantle racism and anti-blackness.

• In your everyday conversations, tell your friends that "all Black lives matter." And if speaking that phrase makes you uncomfortable, ask yourself why that is. It should not be a stretch to acknowledge the humanity of your Black friends and neighbors.





By **GRACE S. YUNG, CFP**



Social Security Benefits for Same-Sex Spouses

Will you need to fight for what's rightfully yours?

Over the past several years, the LGBTQ community has made some great strides when it comes to equality. And in May of this year, another historic win took place in Arizona for same-sex couples fighting to qualify for Social Security survivors benefits.

In the recent *Ely v. Saul* case, Michael Ely and James Taylor had been together for more than four decades, and they married in November 2014 as soon as their state of residence finally legalized same-sex unions. When Taylor passed away only six months later, the Social Security Administration denied Ely's claim for survivors benefits.

The reason? Because the two had not been married for the requisite *nine* months, even though the couple was was barred from satisfying that time requirement due to the state's unconstitutional gay-marriage ban.

But the LGBTQ advocacy group Lambda Legal stepped in and won their class-action lawsuit, with the U.S. District Court judge stating:

"Because same-sex marriage is a fundamental right, and the underpinnings of the duration-of-marriage requirement has relied on the unconstitutional ban on that right, it cannot be said to be rationally related to a legitimate interest to a surviving spouse such as Mr. Ely."

This win could help prevent countless other same-sex couples and surviving spouses from becoming financially destitute in their later years—which is one of the reasons why the Social Security program was created back in 1935.

What Are Spousal Benefits?

Today, one of the primary sources of retirement income for many people is Social Security. Even though this program was never meant to provide 100 percent of a retiree's income, the Social Security Administration estimates that for average wage earners, it will typically replace about 40 percent.

Social Security offers other benefits, too, such as retirement income for spouses and qualifying divorced ex-spouses, and income for a surviving spouse if the primary benefit recipient passes away.

Who Qualifies as a Surviving or Ex Spouse?

In June 2015, the United States Supreme Court's marriage-equality decision made it possible for same-sex couples to take advantage of various benefits that had always been provided to legally married opposite-sex couples.

The Social Security Administration now recognizes same-sex marriages in all states (as well as non-marital legal relationships such as some civil unions and domestic partnerships) for the purpose of determining entitlement to Social Security benefits, as well as Medicare and Supplemental Security Income.

With that in mind, if you are the widow or widower of a person who had worked long enough to receive Social Security benefits, you may qualify for the following:

- Receipt of your deceased spouse's full benefits at your full retirement age, or reduced benefits as early as age 60;
- Benefits as early as age 50 if you are disabled and your disability started before or within seven years of your spouse's death;
- Receipt of Social Security survivor's benefits at any age, if you have not remarried and you take care of your deceased spouse's child who is under the age of 16 or is disabled and receives benefits on your deceased spouse's record.

In addition, if you remarry after you have reached the age of 60 (or 50 if you are disabled), this will not impact your eligibility for Social Security survivor's benefits.

If you and your spouse have divorced, it may be possible for you to receive Social Security benefits based on your ex's work record, provided that you meet the following criteria:

- Your marriage lasted 10 years or longer,
- You are not currently married,
- You are age 62 or older,

• The benefit that your ex-spouse is entitled to receive based on his or her own work record is more than the benefit that you are eligible for, based on your work record,

• Your ex-spouse is entitled to Social Security retirement or disability benefits.

Maximizing Social Security Income

Many people believe that when they reach their "full retirement age" for Social Security, they should file for benefits. But the reality is that there are numerous Social Security filing strategies, and depending on which one you choose, you could increase the lifetime amount that you receive by tens of thousands of dollars.

Although qualified recipients can file for Social Security retirement income as early as age 62, the dollar amount of your benefit will be permanently reduced, even after you've reached your full retirement age. Alternatively, you could instead wait until after your full retirement age to file for Social Security. The longer you wait, the more your benefit can grow. For instance, the "delayed retirement credit" increases the dollar amount by approximately 8 percent per year, up to age 70. (You can still delay the receipt of Social Security benefits past the age of 70, but you won't gain any additional delayed-retirement credits).

If you choose to receive Social Security before your full retirement age, you could be required to pay income taxes on up to 85 percent of your Social Security retirement benefits if you have other substantial income such as wages, dividends, and/or self-employment pay in addition to your Social Security benefits.

For example, in the year 2020, taxes could be incurred on your Social Security retirement benefits if you file your federal tax return as an individual and your "combined income" is:

• Between $25,000 and $34,000. In this case, you may have to pay income tax on up to 50 percent of your benefits;

• More than $34,000. If this is your situation, you may be required to pay income tax on up to 85 percent of your benefits.

If you file a joint federal income tax return and you and your spouse have combined income between $32,000 and $44,000, you may have to pay tax on up to 50 percent of your benefits. For combined income above $44,000, up to 85 percent of your Social Security benefits could be taxable.

(Combined income refers to your adjusted gross income plus non-taxable interest earned plus one-half of your Social Security benefits).

Finding the Right Claiming Strategy

Social Security has many "moving parts," so it can oftentimes be difficult to distinguish between spousal, divorced spouse, and surviving spouse benefits. There are also hundreds of different Social Security retirement benefit claiming strategies, so there's no single method that is best for everyone. Rather, your ideal strategy will depend on factors such as your other retirement-income sources, your marital status, your retirement time frame, and your anticipated life expectancy. You will also want to ensure that Social Security benefits coordinate with other financial strategies that you will have in place during retirement.

Because of that, it is recommended that you discuss your alternatives with a financial advisor who is well-versed in retirement-income planning. And by working with a professional who is also knowledgeable about the LGBTQ community, you can better ensure that they are up-to-date on what is and isn't allowed in terms of the benefits you are eligible to receive.

Grace S. Yung, CFP ®, is a certified financial planner practitioner with experience in helping domestic partners plan finances since 1994. She is a principal at Midtown Financial Group LLC in Houston and was recognized as a "Five-Star Wealth Manager" in the September 2017 issue of Texas Monthly. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com.



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Jacques Davis (l), Dr. Monique Lee, and Kevin Anderson

Healing Houston through Art and Community

The T.R.U.T.H. Project's mission to support LGBTQ people of color in times of crisis.

By **MARTIN GIRON**

The Houston-based queer and Black-led T.R.U.T.H. Project has made providing social, mental, and emotional support for LGBTQ people of color its top priority, even in the face of COVID-19.

Founded in 2011, The T.R.U.T.H. Project (whose acronym stands for Telling Real and Unapologetic Truth through Healing) was initially funded through a program under AIDS Foundation Houston (AFH) before transitioning into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2015. CEO and founder Kevin Anderson, a Black gay man who is also the director for health and wellness at AFH, says the organization evolved from an open-mic night that revealed the needs of queer communities of color.

"For ten years I had an open mic called 'heART&SOUL,' and while it was a nondiscriminatory space that was open to all, the majority of support came from LGBT folk," Anderson says. "Two years in—after hearing experiences of having HIV for the first time, a mother battling her ex-husband over raising her kid with another woman, stories of depression and suicide—I realized there was truly a need for a healing space for artists, especially LGBT folks of color."

The T.R.U.T.H. Project offers that healing space for LGBTQ people of color and their allies, offering resources and facilitating mental, sexual, physical, and emotional health discussions and opportunities for the community to express themselves through a variety of social arts.

"Everyone walks around with a story that's affected us in some kind of way, especially in the LGBTQ community," says board chair Dr. Monique Lee, a Black lesbian woman. "So we bring everybody out and use the platform of art—visual art, dancing, poetry, everything—to [increase] awareness about what we deal with, whether it's STDs, abuse, violence, discrimination, or just day-to-day life. Our vision is to end the stigma that comes along with the LGBTQ community."

The organization currently has three primary support programs that focus on various aspects of health and personal well-being. R.I.S.E. (Reflect. Invest. Stimulate. Evolve.) offers LGBTQ people of color the chance to discuss their mental health and connect with others in the community, while P.L.U.S. (Providing. Learning. Understanding Support.) provides a safe, confidential space for people of color living with HIV to share their experiences and educate themselves and others about HIV issues.

The newest program, entitled One Mic One Voice, began last March and occurs virtually over Zoom, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Typically held on the last Friday of the month, each meeting focuses on a specific issue within the community and supplies artists with a platform to speak, sing, and dance. Following the senseless killings of George Floyd and other victims of police brutality, their May women-focused program was rescheduled in order to address the issue for Black and Brown folk.

"Because of what's happening with the death of Mr. Floyd, the deaths of so many others, and the protesting, I decided to create a space for our supporters to breathe together in silence for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, to really reflect on what next steps look like," Anderson says. "My whole goal as the founder and CEO is to stay as flexible as possible, because there's so much uncertainty right now on how to feel if you're a person of color in this space."

Though COVID-19 has caused some funding losses and scheduling setbacks, The T.R.U.T.H. Project has seen an increase in attendance since going virtual. The organization plans to maintain its virtual presence →

once in-person meetings resume, highlighting the benefits Zoom provides in giving Black and Brown LGBTQ folk the option to remain anonymous in group spaces if they feel more comfortable doing so.

In addition to enhancing their digital presence, the organization has engaged in a collaboration with the Mahogany Project in Houston during the months of June and July to raise awareness around trans visibility, the Census, and voting. The trauma-informed advocacy program is just one of many steps The T.R.U.T.H. Project plans to take in providing support and awareness for LGBTQ communities of color.

"We want to expand some kind of art therapy for groups, and we want to expand our youth program," says treasurer Jacques Davis, a gay Black man. "We also want to get into telehealth and hopefully have a counselor on hand to be available at any time of the month."

"My vision for the future, program-wise, is to pick up where we had to sit down," Anderson continues. "We had programs specifically targeting issues around aging, women of color (including my trans sisters), and holistic health that we want to continue."

"WE BRING EVERYBODY OUT AND USE THE PLATFORM OF ART TO INCREASE AWARENESS ABOUT WHAT WE DEAL WITH, WHETHER IT'S STDs, ABUSE, VIOLENCE, DISCRIMINATION, OR JUST DAY-TO-DAY LIFE. OUR VISION IS TO END THE STIGMA THAT COMES ALONG WITH THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY."

—Dr. Monique Lee

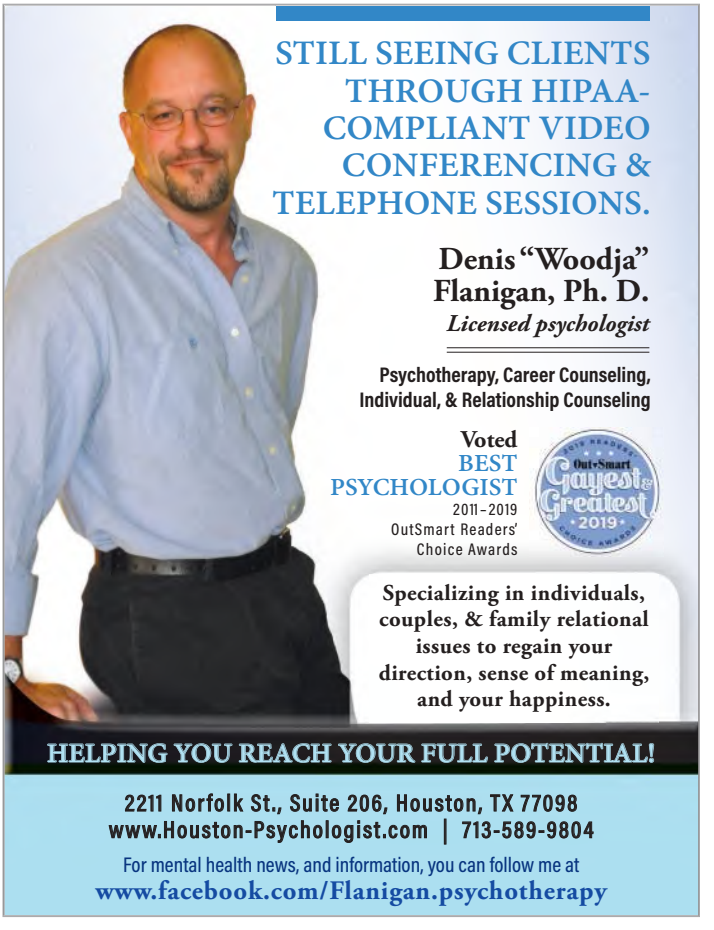
Currently located in the Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston (MATCH) building, The T.R.U.T.H. Project also plans to expand their physical space in order to provide free mental-health services to community members. "We're really looking to become a richer space and a solid home for the community, which means having a [permanent] physical space and resources available."

At its core, The T.R.U.T.H. Project aims to create resources and support spaces for expression within LGBTQ communities of color. For many queer Black and Brown folk, these spaces have become essential in the face of COVID-19 and police brutality, and Anderson encourages those who wish to help facilitate these spaces to reach out.

"Mobilizing takes on so many different forms, and sometimes you mobilize just to ensure people can breathe and get through the next day," Anderson says. "So for those who desire to be a part of something that really pours back into the folks that do—or *don't*—look like them, this is a space for that, and we could use the help."

To learn more about how to get involved with The T.R.U.T.H. Project, follow them on Instagram @truthprojecthtx, Facebook @thetruthprojecthtx, or their website at truthprojecthtx.org.







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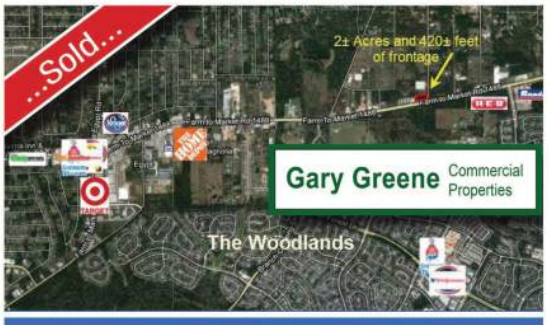


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Attorney Pete Makopoulos-Senftleber is the president of Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston.

A New Lease on Life

Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston helps transgender people correct their name and gender marker for free.

By **LILLIAN HOANG**

There are many barriers that transgender people face when their legal documents do not reflect their gender identity. Oliver Savoie, a 25-year-old transgender man from Beaumont, knows this firsthand.

Before he corrected his name and gender marker, Savoie often avoided places where he could get carded. He has even been denied service because his driver's license gender marker did not reflect his gender identity.

"I had to file a police report at work a few months into my transition, and the police gave me a hard time because they needed my ID, and it didn't look like me," he recalls.

The National Center for Transgender Equality's National Transgender Discrimination Survey confirms Savoie's experiences, noting that without accurate and consistent legal documents, trans people are at risk for "negative outcomes, from denial of employment, housing, and public benefits to harassment, and physical violence."

Savoie's encounter with the police, and the risk of continued harassment, pushed him to search for resources that would help him correct his legal documents.

In November 2019, he learned about Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston, a local nonprofit run by LGBTQ-affirming volunteer attorneys and paralegals who help streamline the name and gender marker correction process for trans folk by drafting their legal petitions.

After participating in two info sessions hosted by Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston at the Montrose Center and filing his petition in Travis County District Court, Savoie was able to update his legal documents by February.

"I'm extremely grateful for the Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston, and thankful that →

the process was so exceptionally easy," Savoie says. "The organization was really helpful, and they've made a difference in my life."

People can attend Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston's next Zoom video conferences on July 16 and July 18.

Before the pandemic, the organization helped clients in person at the Montrose Center. Although the clinic has moved online for the time being, its services remain the same.

Clients leave the clinic's info sessions with the paperwork (excluding personal documents) they need to file a petition and order to correct their name and/or gender marker. After acquiring the necessary personal documents, clients can correct their name and/or gender marker by filing online or in person through the Travis County District Court in Austin.

Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston's services are also free. Through grants, the organization helps pay or obtain waivers for transportation costs, administrative fees, and filing fees clients may face while acquiring their personal documents. If clinic volunteers cannot help, the organization will recommend additional resources where clients can get assistance.

Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston's president, Pete Makopoulos-Senftleber, a bisexual trans volunteer attorney, says the nonprofit is useful especially for people who are unfamiliar with the process.

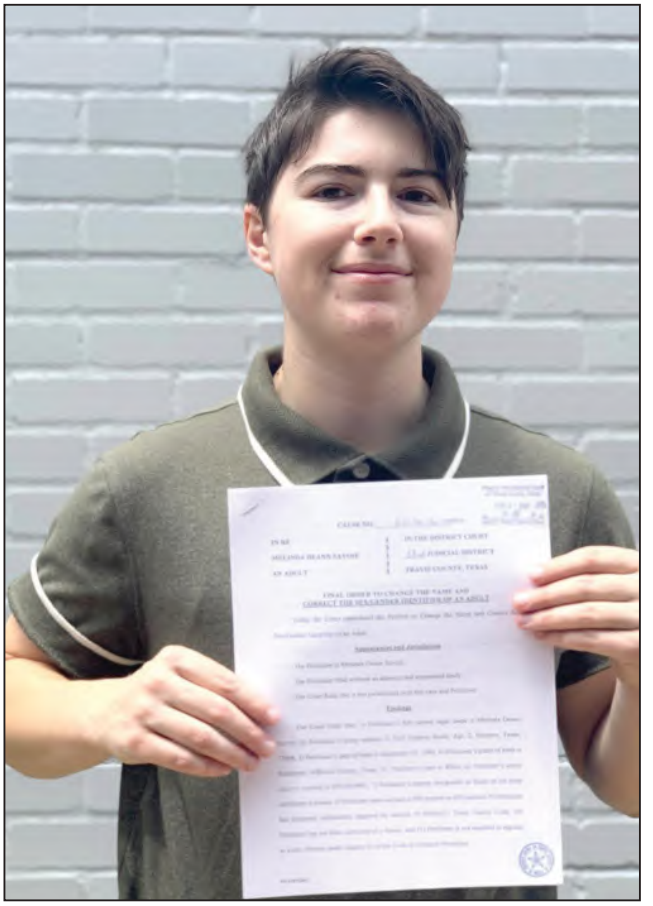
Makopoulos-Senftleber admits he was intimidated when he decided to correct his name and gender marker. Even as a second-year law student, he wasn't sure what he needed to file and whether he had to go in front of a judge.

"I had all these questions, and that's me as a privileged person who was in an educated position and could afford resources to get myself through the process if I needed to," he says.

However, legal jargon is not the only hurdle trans people face during the correction process. According to Makopoulos-Senftleber and several clinic volunteers and clients, it is difficult to complete a gender correction in Harris County District Court.

Travis County District Court has officially appointed staff who oversee the correction process. Petitions in Harris County District Court, on the other hand, are randomly assigned to one of the 11 family court judges. Being assigned to a judge who may be unfamiliar with the process makes it harder for applicants to get their marker corrected, Makopoulos-Senftleber says.

He adds that, while Travis county has never required any of Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston's clients to attend a hearing, Harris County District Court requires court hearings before a judge for all name and/or gender marker corrections.



Oliver Savoie corrected his name and gender marker with assistance from Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston.

"The degree of certainty is higher in Travis than in Harris County, especially with gender marker corrections," he adds. "Harris County District Court is reluctant to change and implement the same process Travis County has."

The obstacles that folks face when looking to correct their name and/or gender marker are not exclusive to Harris County. Trans Equality gave Texas an F rating for not having a trans-friendly driver's license gender-change policy. A-rated states like California offer gender-neutral options and do not require provider certification. Texas requires proof of surgery, and either a court order or an amended birth certificate to approve a driver's license gender marker correction, Trans Equality found.

Texas also has "no specific policy or practice" regarding gender marker corrections, so the judge or policy official ultimately determines whether a person's gender-marker is corrected, according to Trans Equality.

However, Makopoulos-Senftleber believes that change is possible. Advocates can start by informing Harris County's family courts of the public's demand for a more efficient correction process, and the undue burden they are placing on Travis County District Courts.

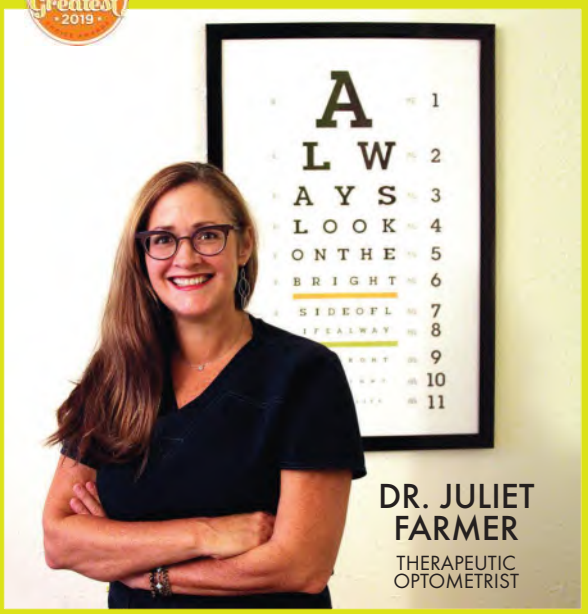
"We must coordinate our efforts to highlight the fact that trans and nonbinary citizens and other counties deserve a reliable process. The statute governing these corrections mandates it, quite frankly," Makopoulos-Senftleber notes.

Thanks to Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston, Savoie is living his best life. He is a full-time student at Houston Community College and plans to transfer to the University of Houston next spring to study dentistry.

"Since I've corrected my markers, the little moments people take for granted have changed for me," he says. "When I show my ID, they see my real name, and it's just more comfortable now. I didn't think I would get the chance to change my name and gender marker nearly this fast, so don't give up hope," Savoie says.

After its July clinics, Trans-Legal Aid Clinic Houston will host clinics via Zoom on September 17, September 19, November 19, and November 21. More information can be found at facebook.com/TransLegalAidClinicHouston.

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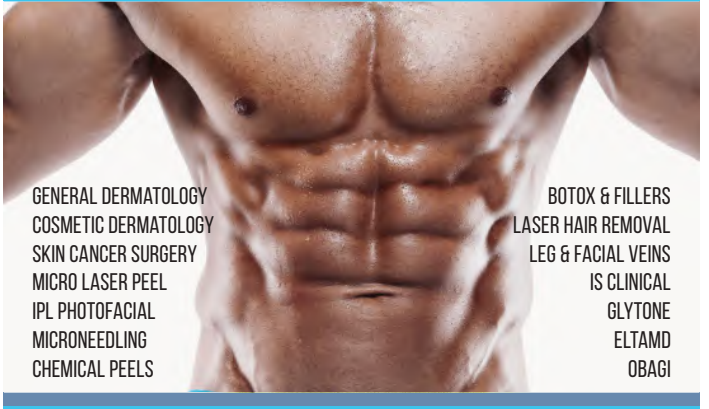
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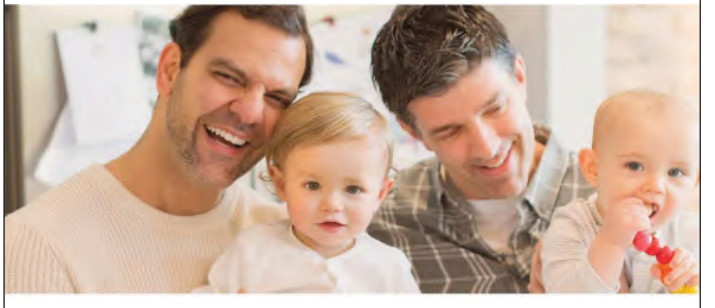
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Providing PrEP for All

AIDS Foundation Houston's SISTR program offers women new telehealth services.

By **MARTIN GIRON**

AIDS Foundation Houston (AFH) and the MISTR pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) delivery service partnered in May to create the new SISTR program, a low- to no-cost online platform that offers women PrEP options from the comfort of their own home.

In addition to PrEP, the once-a-day pill that is 99 percent effective in preventing HIV, the SISTR program also offers HIV and STI testing that can be completed at home. After registering for the program on SISTR's website, patients will receive a lab kit in the mail with video instructions on how to complete the sexual-health assessment, and what the next steps in the process are.

"Clients testing negative for HIV are eligible to receive PrEP for free if they do not have insurance coverage, and for little-to-no cost if they do have insurance," says Jeffrey Campbell, AFH's chief program officer. "For those testing positive for HIV, we can refer them to providers in their area through our service linkage program. And for those testing positive for an STI, they can come in to one of our offices for free treatment."

SISTR aims to reach women of all socioeconomic backgrounds and gender identities, with particular attention given to women of color. Dr. Teriya Richmond, chief medical officer of AFH and a Black woman, says there are many misconceptions and stigmas surrounding PrEP that they hope to address.

"We want women—both cisgender and transgender—to know that PrEP is not just for men," Richmond says. "We need prevention measures for women, particularly women of color, because we represent one of the demographics that are contracting HIV more than other populations, while having later-stage diagnoses."

"Even though most people accessing PrEP are men, we know that in the last 20 years, one out of four Houstonians diagnosed with HIV are women," says John Huckaby, AFH's CEO. "That's over 7,600 women. And of those women, 69 percent were Black and another 19 percent were Latina, so four out of five of those new acquisitions among women were among women of color."

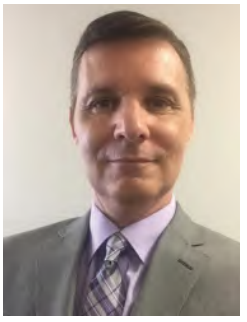


The telehealth service comes in the era of COVID-19, which recent data suggest has disproportionately impacted people of color, particularly among Black communities. The advent of telemedicine is crucial to reaching communities of color in these times of a pandemic, as Campbell notes that Black women are "11 times more likely than their white counterparts to have an HIV diagnosis, so it's very important to us that we get PrEP to these communities in need."

AFH, a nonprofit organization that provides a variety of services and resources for those living with HIV and AIDS, first partnered with MISTR (the program targeted at gay and bisexual men) last December. Then they modeled SISTR as a counterpart to serve women of all genders and sexualities. Through their telehealth collaboration, AFH is able to serve those in Houston and Harris County, as well as seven surrounding counties: Montgomery, Waller, Fort Bend, Galveston, Brazoria, Chambers, and Liberty.

After launching in 2017, AFH's PrEP Care Program began a clinic providing PrEP services during nontraditional hours to reach populations with higher rates of HIV diagnoses but low uptakes in accessing PrEP. Huckaby says the MISTR and SISTR programs offer even greater accessibility to people who face barriers to acquiring treatment.


Jeffrey Campbell


John Huckaby


Dr. Teriya Richmond

"Telemedicine is going to become much more of a standard of care, especially for those with barriers to transportation, mobility, or medical care, so [telehealth programs] like SISTR are going to help promote retention and care," Huckaby says. "By making care more accessible, more people will have a greater ability to receive and stay in care, and that's what we want."

In an effort to facilitate discussions around women's health, AFH hosted its first Facebook Live panel discussion on May 11 entitled Soul Talk: Conversations that Heal, where they first announced the launch of SISTR. Future virtual panel discussions will continue to cover different health topics each month, and are open for anyone to join. Roughly 2,000 viewers attended the first panel discussion.

Though AFH offices are open by appointment to those who wish to receive treatment in person, Campbell says the SISTR telemedicine approach is a big step forward in helping eliminate stigma around PrEP.

"There's no shame in being on PrEP, and with SISTR you can make appointments with a doctor from your home, your office, or even your car on your lunch break. All you have to do is want to be on PrEP," Campbell says. "Our attention to providing women with an accessible, confidential way to be on PrEP is intentional," Huckaby emphasizes.

Though a PrEP prescription typically costs around $1,500 a month, funding from the Gilead Patient Assistance Program for the Uninsured allows AFH and SISTR to provide lab kits and medication for uninsured clients at no cost. For those with insurance, the service still typically costs little to nothing out of pocket, making PrEP affordable for anyone who wishes to start the regimen.

"We are committed to eradicating HIV, and part of that commitment is making PrEP more accessible for anyone who thinks they may be at risk of contracting HIV," Richmond says. "I think this is going to revolutionize how we prevent HIV in women, particularly for women of color."

To learn more about the SISTR program, visit their website at heymistr.com/afh-sistr or AIDS Foundation Houston's Facebook @AIDSFoundationHouston or website aidshelp.org.





"BECAUSE I AM ONE OF THE ONLY 100 PERCENT BLACK- AND FEMALE-OWNED IT COMPANIES IN TEXAS, I HAVE TO BE EXCELLENT. I HAVE HIGH STANDARDS FOR MYSELF AND MY EMPLOYEES."

—Jeri Hardin

Breaking Business Barriers

IT company owner **Jeri Hardin** thrives in a male-dominated industry.

By **KIM HOGSTROM**

Most of us have that one friend who is constantly in motion and brimming with passion and energy while challenging the norms. Jeri Hardin is that kind of person.

As the owner of h.u.e. Technology (whose acronym stands for Houston unapologetic enterprise), Hardin is one of the only Black female owners of an IT company in the nation. As an out lesbian and book author, promoting acceptance of those who might otherwise be sidelined is her passion. She works tirelessly for 2nd Chances.Life, a Houston-based nonprofit that helps those who have been incarcerated find their footing after being released.

"Along with two other women, I wrote the first-ever reentry program to help people at Bryan Federal Prison Camp, a minimum-security facility. The program has been a huge triumph, and has helped thousands obtain life resources prior to release.

"With 2nd Chances.Life, I learned that many of the men and women on the inside were terrified of release, having no place to live, no income to start a new life, and no one to help," she notes.

2nd Chances.Life provides individuals with their own apartment, believing a solid foundation starts with a home. It then assists with job placement, life skills training, and continuing education. Recognizing the value of mental health, each candidate must commit to 18 months of counseling on release, a service often critical to help overcome the trauma of incarceration.

Quincy Moore had served 18 years of his 35-year sentence when he was released. With the help of Hardin, h.u.e. Technology, and 2nd Chances.Life, Moore is thriving today.

"2nd Chances has been wonderful for me. They helped with my interviewing skills, advised me on dressing, and encouraged me. Now I am working for Jeri as a cable-puller, and it's thrilling. I've learned that it is possible to prosper in the world and make a good living. Now I help others who are just getting out of prison to give back. Giving back is the very best way to say Thank you, he concludes with a twinkle in his eye.

Hardin began her IT career 25 years ago, and worked extensively in the oil and gas industry. In 2016, she decided it was time to take the leap into the entrepreneurial deep end. She jumped and never looked back.

"Today, our company is a full IT services company, providing WiFi access points, POS infrastructure, IT networks and IP camera installation—all the services known as 'Low Voltage' across Texas. Companies really appreciate what we bring to the table. We often work on building sites right along with construction crews, and it's not unusual for me to be the only woman there," she states, laughing.

Hardin admits that being a female in a male-dominated industry has been tough. But she's found her footing. "Because I am one of the only 100 percent Black and female owned IT companies in Texas, I have to be excellent," she says. "I have high standards [for myself and my employees]. Customers are always happy with our work. Indeed her list of loyal clients includes the City of Houston, Comcast, and Cornerstone Construction, among many others. Hardin is currently working on a 64-unit apartment development with Cornerstone.

"I was impressed when we first met with Jeri and her team," states Marlon Henderson, owner of Cornerstone Construction. "I really liked her enthusiasm, and my instincts were correct. H.u.e. has proven to be a real asset on the site."

Hardin has learned a lot on her journey, and she decided to share some of her insights in a book called How to Start a Business.

"I knew I was different early on in life," Hardin recalls. "I just did not know what my [identity] was called back then, and [LGBTQ people] were pretty much outcasts. Being a lesbian in the '80s did not appear to pan out for me back then. I had my daughter, Dawn Haygood-Walker in 1983."

The two women are best friends today, and Haygood-Walker is a successful insurance analyst in New York City.

"I have learned so much from my mother. I learned how to get back up when knocked down—how to keep trying and never give up. She has been a wonderful example for me. But mostly, I learned how to love," Haygood-Walker emphasizes.

So where does the passionate Hardin direct her energy when it comes to matters of the heart now?

"I have just discovered that I am a true romantic. My dream is to take care of someone, love her, and pamper her. I only recently arrived at this, and I look forward to exploring it further," Hardin says, laughing at herself. "It could be fun!"

For more information on h.u.e. Technology, visit hue-technology.com.

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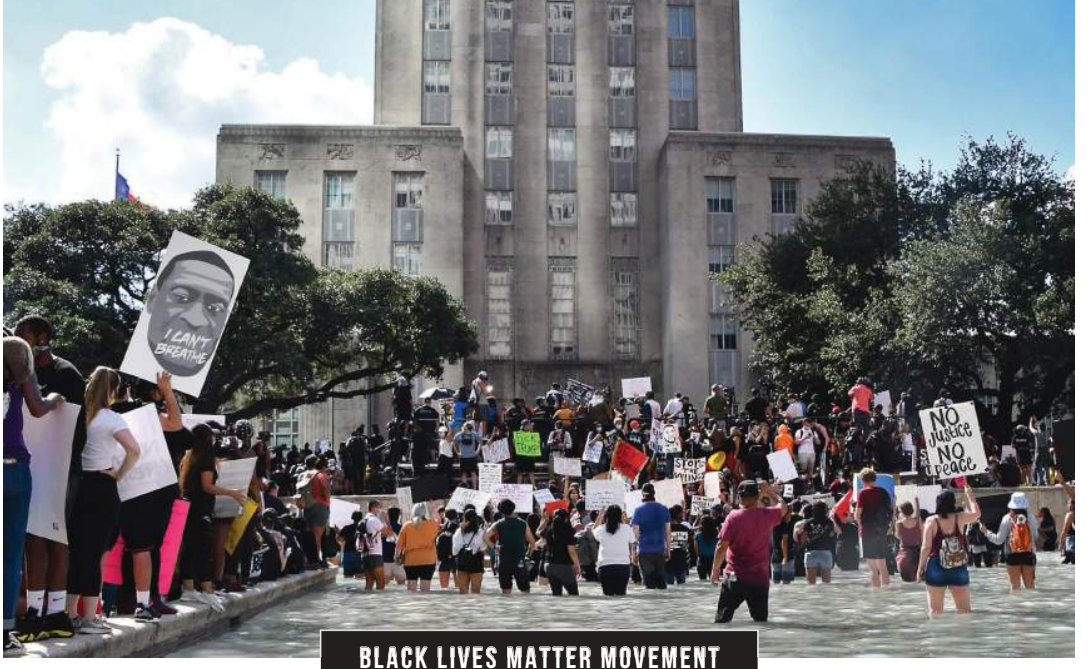
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BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

RALLYING FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

BLMHOU leaders discuss their work and encourage others to get involved.

By **LILLIAN HOANG** *and* **TERRANCE TURNER**

One year after Trayvon Martin, a Black 17-year-old, was shot to death in 2012 by 36-year-old George Zimmerman in Florida, Zimmerman was charged with and acquitted of second-degree murder. This clearing inspired people across the nation to take to the streets to protest and organize.

Three Black women—Alicia Garza and queer activists Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi—created the Black Lives Matter (BLM) organization and movement in July 2013 to affirm Black people's humanity and "end State-sanctioned violence, liberate Black people, and end white supremacy forever," according to BLM's website. Following in their footsteps, several racial-justice activists founded local BLM chapters to do the same.

Ashton P. Woods, a Black gay man, founded Black Lives Matter Texas in 2013. The organization later became Black Lives Matter: Houston (BLMHOU) following the deaths of Michael Brown, a Black 18-year-old who was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson, and Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old Black woman who died while in police custody in Texas, according to the organization's website. While BLMHOU focuses on Houston, its goal remains the same—to protect and uplift Black lives.

BLMHOU connects activists and supporters of the movement through social media by showing its more than 32,000 followers how to support the cause, from donating bail money for jailed protesters to participating in marches. BLMHOU also uses its platform to call attention to the violence Black people face, especially at the hands of police.

The organization made local headlines after hosting a march on May 29 in honor of Houston native George Floyd, a Black man who was killed on May 26 during an arrest by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

Police brutality against people of color is occurring at alarming rates all over the United States, including Houston. Between 2013 and 2019, 34 Black people and 20 Hispanic people were reportedly fatally injured by the Houston Police Department (HPD), according to the latest data by Mapping Police Violence. The research collaborative also reported that 99 percent of police killings during this period did not result in officers being charged with a crime.

Recently, six Black and Brown men died while in HPD's custody, and HPD has not released body-camera footage of these killings. Protesters confronted HPD Chief Art Acevedo at a protest on June 2, demanding the release of the footage. In a news conference on June 6, Acevedo and Mayor Sylvester Turner announced they decided to not release the videos out of concern and respect for the victims' families, among other reasons.

Along with Woods, BLMHOU is helmed by two other Black members of Houston's LGBTQ+ community: lead organizer Kandice Webber and organizer Brandon Mack. The group has shared information on—and organized demonstrations against—violence toward Black members of the LGBTQ+ community, including Black trans women such as Tracy Williams, who was murdered by her boyfriend, Joshua Bourgeois, in Houston in 2019. In the police report, an HPD detective misgendered and deadnamed Williams, who was one of many Black trans women killed in 2019. According to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), last year 26 transgender or gender-nonconforming people in the U.S. were killed, "the majority of whom were Black transgender women." BLMHOU also recently highlighted the police killing of Tony McDade, a Black trans man who was fatally shot by Florida police, and the murders of Black trans women Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells of Pennsylvania and Riah Milton of Ohio.

For more information on Black Lives Matter: Houston, visit blmhouston.com. Keep up with the organization on social media @blmhou.

BLMHOU's other efforts include providing mutual aid during disasters like Hurricane Harvey and the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization also works to correct or block xenophobic, racist, and nationalistic language in pending legislation, and has helped pass laws like the Sandra Bland Act, which was created to "divert people with mental-health and substance-abuse issues toward treatment, and requires that independent law-enforcement agencies investigate jail deaths," according to *The Texas Tribune*.

BLMHOU organizers speak with OutSmart about their current efforts to promote racial justice. ➡



"WOMEN AND LGBTQ+ PEOPLE IN GENERAL TYPICALLY GET ERASED FROM THE BLACK LIVES MATTER NARRATIVE. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT ALL BLACK LIVES MATTERING, NOT JUST SOME BLACK LIVES. ALL BLACK PEOPLE."

—Ashton P. Woods

SPEARHEADING THE MOVEMENT

ASHTON P. WOODS

35 years old | Founder

Ashton P. Woods, who identifies as "unapologetically Black, gay, and HIV-positive," is the founder of Black Lives Matter: Houston. He is a full-time local activist who currently lives in Southwest Houston and blogs about social-justice issues. Although he was born and raised in New Orleans, he became a Houston resident after Hurricane Katrina, which still has a profound impact on both Woods and his hometown.

In the summer of 2005, Woods was driving from Houston to visit his mother in New Orleans and surprise her for her birthday weekend. But as he made his way down Interstate 10, he received a phone call from his mother that stopped him in his tracks. She asked him to turn around after learning about a hurricane that was hurtling toward the city. Woods agreed and returned to Houston.

Just 48 hours later, his home in New Orleans became a shell of its former self, and he officially became a permanent Houston resident.

Woods remembers seeing former teachers, classmates, and people who looked like him walking through the flooded streets. He also saw National Guard troops, who were sent to help New Orleans, threaten Black nurses, doctors, bus drivers, and other community members. These experiences informed how he now operates as an activist.

"Our leadership and our policy makers don't see us as humans," he says. "They get away with taking too many liberties, and people die because of it. This really drives what I do today."

In late May, Woods helped organize a march from Discovery Green to City Hall in George Floyd's honor. Through social media, he coordinates and participates in similar events to highlight the violence that Black members of the LGBTQ+ community—especially Black trans women—face. "Women and LGBTQ+ people in general typically get erased from the Black Lives Matter narrative," Woods says. "We're talking about *all* Black lives mattering, not just some Black lives. All Black people."

He has also provided Austin legislators with input and helped develop bills that support justice reform by addressing and targeting systemic racism in Texas. He calls for reform throughout the City of Houston, and has criticized HPD for paying officers more than $21 million for working overtime at recent Houston demonstrations following Floyd's death. Woods argues those funds could be better used elsewhere, such as backing Black farmers and local health clinics that have been impacted by COVID-19.

Despite public calls to defund HPD, the Houston City Council increased HPD's budget by $20 million in the 2021 City budget. Police funding is a sticking point for Woods, who is calling for HPD's abolition without apologies. "The line has been drawn in the sand, and people need to pick a side," Woods says.

Woods wants to see more transparency from Mayor Turner. Although Turner has done well regarding COVID-19 policies, Woods notes, he has neglected to address homelessness and the racial disparities in housing and healthcare. (Black Americans are more likely to have pre-existing conditions, like diabetes and heart disease, that lead to worse outcomes for COVID-19. According to the APM Research Lab's analysis, Black people are 2.3 times more likely to die from the virus as white and Asian people.)

COVID-19 has only increased Woods' responsibilities. He and his BLMHOU team organized a gift-card drive and have been collecting and distributing personal protective equipment to medical workers in need. But this is nothing new to Woods, who helped Houston's underserved and overlooked communities following Hurricane Harvey in 2017.

When asked how others can support the Black Lives Matter cause, Woods says it's important for people to show up and be their honest selves.

"[Let people know] how you feel about this issue, especially if you're Black," he adds. "If you're white, be a comrade. Show up when you're needed. This fight is far from over, and I don't see this ending anytime soon."



"THE BLACK QUEER COMMUNITY IS GROWING. WE ARE UNIFYING AND UPLIFTING EACH OTHER'S EFFORTS. WE MEAN IT WHEN WE SAY, 'WE'VE WAITED LONG ENOUGH.'"

—Kandice Webber

AN ADVOCATE FOR BLACK WOMEN

KANDICE WEBBER

44 years old | Lead Organizer

As the lead organizer for Black Lives Matter: Houston, Kandice Webber, a Black lesbian and registered nurse who lives in Third Ward with her wife, manages community engagement, access to K–12 public education for Black children, and issues primarily affecting Black women.

As the lead BLMHOU organizer, she gathers relevant information and resources and presents her findings to the team. Then, as a group, BLMHOU develops a plan of action. The bigger the turnout, the more work that goes on. Organizing a march can take a couple of weeks, Webber says. But the goal remains the same—protecting Black lives.

"Whatever we do in the community, whether it's publicized or private, our first deep assessment is whether we're doing everything we need to do to protect Black lives, [which requires a strategy]," she says.

Before COVID-19, depending on the community's concerns and whether there was an immediate crisis, Webber conducted research on the current state of education in Houston. Then she met with people and organizations that have similar agendas to figure out how they can collaborate and work toward a shared goal. However, since the pandemic, she says it has become more challenging to organize since she can no longer knock on doors like she used to.

She has had to come up with different ways to target and reach various populations in the Black community, and has found success through social media.

Her career in activism started after the 2016 election. Webber says she was quiet about her contributions to the election and mostly acted as a donor. However, after Donald Trump was elected president, she says she realized giving money was not enough.

"I don't have the money to give to make huge changes, so I need to give my time, and that's [when my career in activism] started," she says.

Webber decided to dedicate her time to public education for children and issues affecting Black women. People were soon referring to her as an activist and reaching out to her as a reliable information source.

Ultimately, working for children in education and addressing issues Black women experience remains her top priority.

Webber is passionate about schooling because she was a product of public education, and believes she would not be where she is today without the access she had to established public schools.

"I'm not special or anything; I'm not brilliant. I'm just as capable as the person standing left or right of me," she says. "[Black people] need to be given the same opportunity to succeed."

She wants the same access to public education for Black children, especially with the closing of schools populated by vulnerable and underserved demographics, which opens the door to gentrification, charter schools, and food deserts. (Food deserts are urban areas where fresh, affordable food is difficult to find. According to Rice University's Kinder Institute, around 500,000 Houstonians live in United States Department of Agriculture-defined food deserts.)

"Black people do not want handouts," she says. "We want our own equal and fair opportunity. If we do not educate our children, we will constantly come up short and be reliant on compassion from people who have never shown us compassion."

Webber says her desire to support and help others comes from growing up around nurses. Her love of math, science, and education encouraged her to become a nurse. She stayed in nursing after witnessing how the healthcare system failed to treat Black men, women, and children.

"There is a huge need for Black and Brown healthcare professionals because Black and Brown people make up a large portion of patients, and they deserve to feel safe," she says. "We encounter racism in every arena we step into, and in healthcare, [that] could be life or death. Medical racism, negligence—these are a few reasons why I [am still a registered nurse]."

COVID-19 has also impacted Webber outside of her nursing job and as BLMHOU's lead organizer. As a full-time registered nurse in critical care, she has seen many Black and Brown people die from COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black and Hispanic (or Latinx) people have substantially higher death rates due to COVID-19 than white or Asian people. A Harvard study on COVID-19 this year found that Black Americans are up to nine times likelier to die from COVID-19 than their white counterparts.

"On a professional and personal level, that's hard to watch," Webber says. "We are grieving the people that have died in our community from the coronavirus disease just like everyone else, and we're trying to make sure that the people in [the] community have access to the PPE they need."

Advocates can help by fighting for equal access to healthcare and pay, Webber says. People can also show up for marches, as well as offer their skills and donate to local organizations in the Black community.

Webber adds that LGBTQ+ advocates should reflect on the thoughts they have about people of color, since the LGBTQ+ community also belongs to Black and Brown folks.

"It belongs to all of us, but we don't always feel welcomed in this community," she says. "Being gay does not mean that you're not racist. So interrogate that, and protect Black trans women. The Black queer community is growing. We are unifying and uplifting each other's efforts. We mean it when we say, 'We've waited long enough.'"



"THIS MOVEMENT IS NOT JUST IN THIS MOMENT, BUT CONTINUOUS. TAKE THE WAY YOU'RE FEELING AND RESPONDING, AND CONTINUE WITH THIS MOVEMENT. DON'T STEP OUT."

—Brandon Mack

CREATING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

BRANDON MACK

36 years old | Organizer

When Brandon Mack, a Houston native and gay Black man who lives near NRG Stadium, is not busy with his duties as the Houston GLBT Political Caucus screening chair, he is an organizer for Black Lives Matter: Houston. His position at BLMHOU focuses on LGBTQ+ issues and access to higher education for Black and Brown students.

Due to the organization's unconventional, decentralized structure, the responsibilities of BLMHOU members often overlap. Each BLMHOU member has a different focus, and they work together while avoiding the hierarchy of traditional systems of power, Mack explains.

"[Ashton, Kandice, and I] are all members of the LGBTQ+ community; we all work on criminal justice reform [and] LGBTQ+ issues," he adds. "While Kandice, being a Black woman, focuses on issues related to Black women, we all work with each other on these issues."

Mack has been an organizer at BLMHOU since its inception. He strives to make higher education more accessible for Black and Brown LGBTQ+ students by conducting research on LGBTQ+ support services, talking to students about the admissions process and learning opportunities, and working with Black students and organizations to improve educational access.

Mack is also part of the team that sets up stages for rally speakers, secures the routes for BLMHOU marches, and ensures megaphones are available and functioning, giving protest participants the chance to air their grievances.

Ultimately, he works to uplift often-ignored voices like his own.

Mack has always been passionate about justice, especially when it concerns Black members of the LGBTQ+ community. He became involved in activism to address the issues and hurdles that Black LGBTQ+ community members face. Essentially, he wanted his voice, and others like his, to be heard.

"In LGBTQ+ spaces, there have been few Black people at the table, and yet other people are talking about 'them' and what 'they' need," says Mack. "Why [isn't the LGBTQ community] reaching out to our community to ask us what we need and [how they can respond to] our issues?"

Mack is not a fan of the "ally" model, and instead prefers the terms "comrades" and "accomplices." He sees allies as people who step in and out of the movement as they please, and don't necessarily feel the Black community's losses. Comrades, on the other hand, are in it for the long haul, feeling the same losses as they join in the fight for change.

"This movement is not just in this moment, but continuous," he says. "Take the way you're feeling and responding, and continue with this movement. Don't step out."

People can help cause change in many ways, says Mack. For one, folks can reach out and offer to help organizations in need without co-opting them. He stresses "offering" rather than "co-opting" because he believes that Black LGBTQ+ issues must be addressed by Black LGBTQ+ leaders.

"Notions coming from [a legacy of] white supremacy and white privilege have no place dictating what goes on in this movement," he says. "Don't come into this space and say, 'This is wrong.' You need to listen and take the advice of those who are leading."

People can also help by contacting their representatives in Congress, on the Houston City Council, and on the Houston Independent School District Board, urging them to support policies that end police brutality and anti-Black violence. Folks can contribute to the fight by making their workplaces more equitable and friendlier for their Black colleagues.

Like Kandice, Mack says change can occur in the LGBTQ+ community when it addresses and tackles the racism he sees within that community.

"It starts with the way we view and treat each other," he says. "There shouldn't be any argument about the Black and Brown stripe added to the rainbow flag, but people argue about that, [and it shows me that] you don't see me and my Blackness as being a part of this community. Inclusion and equity start with us getting equity, even within our LGBTQ+ community."

Taking a Stand against Injustice

Queer lawyer **Tatiaunna Holland** defends those affected by police brutality.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **MARI JAXN**



Growing up, Tatiauna Holland knew the exact career path she wanted to follow. She was destined to become a lawyer.

"I was one of those weird, serious kids who knew what I wanted to do. I went straight from undergrad at the University of New Orleans to law school at Southern University Law Center. After graduation, I thought Texas would be a great place to work, and Houston was the best place to start. I was lucky enough to start with a job in immigration and lawsuits," she says.

The up-and-comer wasted no time in making her mark. For the first three years of her career, Holland practiced law at a firm where she worked on cases in several states and got lots of great experience. But over time, she felt herself being pulled toward a specific sector of the law.

"I was gravitating toward asylum, and I was interested in [helping] young women who had children and were taking children across the border," Holland says. "These women had been sexually violated, and there was no recourse for them. So, that's when I went into my solo practice in 2016."

Out of that desire, Holland Law Firm, PLLC was born. Headquartered in a Northside Houston office park, the firm represents clients with immigration issues including deportation

defense, asylum, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), citizenship and naturalization, and adjustment of status.

It's been a career choice that has kept Holland's schedule filled. She spends part of her time working pro bono to provide a voice to people who are unable to find an attorney or have been given false information about their rights by Customs and Border Protection agents.

"We try to explain the process, give them legal advice, and prepare them for the interview and process. Other times, we advise them [when] they don't have a good case for asylum. Asylum is a narrow form of relief. There's a low percentage of people who qualify for that. People typically suffer severe persecution and torture to qualify," Holland says.

Lately, her practice has turned its focus to the fight against police brutality. Following the nationwide protests seen in response to the death of George Floyd and so many other Black Americans, Holland's law firm began taking the cases of protesters who have been exercising their First Amendment rights to seek justice and reform. She has also partnered with firms in other cities to form a coalition of attorneys who represent people who have suffered wrongdoing at the hands of police.

Recently, the coalition took on the Dallas police. "There have been lawsuits for relief for people who have been harmed [by the police]," she says, referencing an injunction on Dallas police that her team enacted. "We stopped them from using rubber bullets or projectiles during peaceful protests as a means of crowd control. One person lost an eye; another lost mobility in their legs. But the protestors weren't harming the police. That's why it was so big."

The work hit close to home, too. Holland says she was excited when she first heard about the Houston protests, and she even became a legal observer. "There was a lot of talk about how peaceful [the Houston protests have been]. But it appeared that the Houston Police Department was rounding people up, which made me really angry," she says. "Then, I started getting calls. [There] were a lot of 20- and 21-year-olds who didn't know what the police could and could not do to them," she says.

Naturally, Holland is doing her part to help. "Right now, we're in the investigation stage in Houston. We're reaching out to the public to see if people have been harmed in local protests. Next, we'll be doing a bigger marketing push to see if we can find people who need legal representation," she says.

Helping people has always been in Holland's wheelhouse, and it's something she hopes to expand in the future. "I would like to push more for criminal-justice reform. It's unfortunate that it's started to intertwine with immigration. People are being detained for months to years with no resolution and no criminal charges. That's where my practice is going. We have to hold the people in power accountable. You can't lock up citizens because you don't like their look or voice."

For now, Holland feels her work is making a difference. She applauds people for utilizing their right to make their voices heard, and encourages others to help however they can.

"I think the people will continue to protest. This generation has been revitalized, and it's cool to see people from all demographics say 'Black Lives Matter' and show their support in different ways. Attorneys need to put themselves out there and dedicate their time to help, too," she says. "If you don't practice criminal law, partner with someone who does. As long as there are legal resources, people will keep fighting for social change."

Find out more about Holland Law Firm, PLLC by calling 832-328-7877 or visiting hollandimmigrationlaw.com.




Black
Lives
Matter

Empowering the Black Trans Community

Actress and activist Sis uses her platform to raise awareness and distribute resources.

By **ZACH McKENZIE**
Photo by **GAVIN CALAIS**

Pop culture is rich with single-named icons like Oprah, Madonna, Prince, and Cher. And in addition to Beyoncé, Houston has a second star to add to that list: the multi-talented Sis, who is using her talents to bring awareness, resources, and change to the trans community through The Next Generation Project. The project's mission is to make sure trans people of color, like herself, get the peace, love, and respect they deserve.

After making her mark on Houston's stages (including Miller Outdoor Theatre and The Alley), Sis moved to New York City in 2019 and began auditioning and working as a bartender at the famed Big Apple Circus. A chance Twitter interaction with acclaimed playwright Jeremy O. Harris, who was giving away a ticket to see his Broadway production of *Slave Play*, led to the "surreal experience" of seeing the show alongside the playwright, and even meeting Harry Styles. "It was so crazy," the 22-year-old laughs.

Today, in the midst of a pandemic, Sis has returned to H-Town to ride out the storm. "I work a full-time job at Target," she says. "I was about to perform in a regional theater production and had booked some TV projects, but I had to come back home to make some money." The vivacious performer explains that her next move was the result of seeing the disconnect between the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the fight for justice within the trans community. Pulling together a dream team, Sis co-founded The Next Generation Project. "I want to highlight that it's not just me doing the work. I've got my friend Eva (who is my co-founder), Deante, Yasmyn, and Jacob!"

"The Next Generation Project started out of my need to do something," she explains enthusiastically. "I was feeling helpless, and I'm the type of person that if I'm going to be an advocate for change, I need to be on the front lines. I wanted to find the best way to create change in the quickest way possible. For Black trans lives, that's through awareness."



After attending a recent protest in Houston with a friend, Sis was reminded of the lack of awareness about how the BLM and trans-rights movements connect. "[The Black and Brown trans community] is finding so much opposition because people don't know better. If you know better, you do better," she says, matter-of-factly. "At the protest, my friend suggested the trans fight and the BLM fight are different. I explained that since I'm Black and trans, my trans Black life matters. *All* Black lives matter. I wanted to work with BLM, while also supporting trans lives that are being cast out or senselessly murdered," the activist emphasizes.

The change-makers began selling T-shirts as a way to raise funds. "The tees have BLM and trans colors on the front, and the Black fist with a trans woman's hand (inspired by my own nails) on the back," she explains. Celebrities such as Lin-Manuel Miranda and MJ Rodriguez have already placed their orders.

"When I was in NYC, I wanted to go to Sephora and Forever 21 to feel affirmed in my womanhood," the fierce performer recalls. "So I thought, why don't we provide Black and Brown trans and nonbinary folks with self-care and mental-health resources. We are talking about ways to care for yourself when you are being misidentified all day, or if your family isn't supportive of you."

The organization also provides scholarships to college students. "Scholarships are currently $500, [to be awarded to] a trans woman, a nonbinary person, and a trans man. We have raised enough for one each, but we want to keep selling these shirts to pay half the bill for someone's first year of college." Sis explains the funds could be used to buy personal-care items. "They can buy things to set themselves up for success. All of these things come from personal experience. I want to make sure people don't have to go through what I, Eva, or others went through."

As for the future, Sis and her team have big plans. "We want to start a house. In ballroom culture there are houses, and we want to start our own brick-and-mortar home for Black and Brown folks to live, create, and exist in as themselves—something like a recreational center for the next generation," she says with no hint of apprehension in her voice. "The Next Generation Project's goal is to make the world better for everyone to feel comfortable and have space."

Follow The Next Generation Project on Instagram @weareteteproject. Keep up with Sis on Instagram @ucancallmesis.



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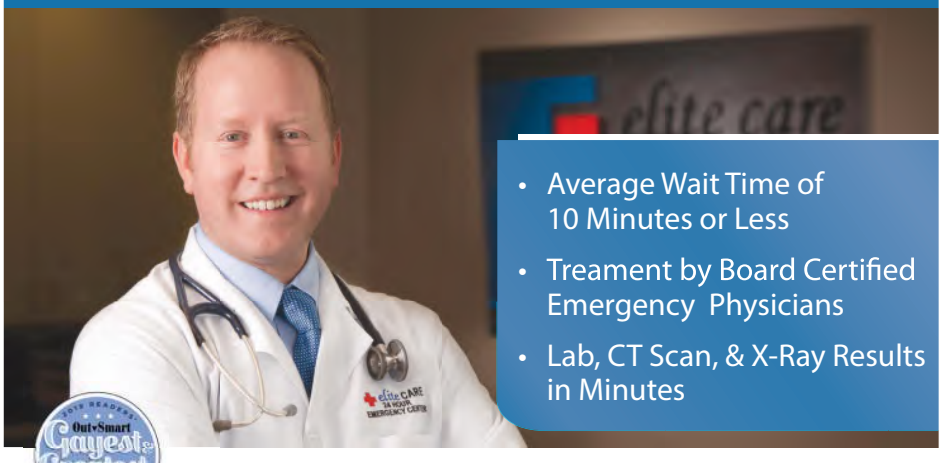
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the pivotal vote of then Justice Anthony Kennedy, the court ruled that states could not bar same-sex couples from marrying (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015), the federal government could not bar recognition of same-sex marriages (*U.S. v. Windsor*, 2013), and states could not bar same-sex couples from having intimate relations (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003).

Not all of the June LGBTQ decisions have been good ones, however. In 2017 (in *Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer*), the majority ruled that church schools should receive the same grants as state schools, even if they discriminated against LGBTQ people. In 2018 (in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado*), the court hinted it might be open to allowing small businesses to discriminate against LGBTQ customers by claiming a "religious exemption."

"This is a huge victory for LGBTQ equality," said James Esseks, director of the National ACLU's LGBTQ & HIV Project. "The Supreme Court's clarification that it's unlawful to fire people because they're LGBTQ is the result of decades of advocates fighting for our rights. The court has caught up to the majority of our country, which already knows that discriminating against LGBTQ people is both unfair and against the law."

"THIS IS A HUGE VICTORY NOT JUST FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE, BUT FOR OUR COUNTRY. THE DECISION WILL BE REMEMBERED AS A WATERSHED IN THE HISTORY OF LGBTQ RIGHTS, EVEN AS OUR COUNTRY CONTINUES TO GRAPPLE WITH THE BRUTAL LEGACY OF RACISM."

—Shannon Minter, National Center for Lesbian Rights

"Our work is not done," Esseks cautioned in his written statement. "There are still alarming gaps in federal civil rights laws that leave people—particularly Black and Brown LGBTQ people—open to discrimination in businesses [that are] open to the public, and [in] taxpayer-funded programs. Congress must affirm today's decision and update our laws to ensure comprehensive and explicit protections for LGBTQ people and all people who face discrimination."

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NO MATTER WHERE YOU COME FROM, THERE'S A SAFE SPACE ON GALVESTON ISLAND FOR YOU. THIS JULY OUTSMART ISSUE IS A TESTAMENT TO THAT, AS WE INTRODUCE YOU TO EIGHT LGBTQ GALVESTON TRANSPLANTS WHO NOW CALL THE COASTAL CITY HOME.

QUEER IN GALVESTON

First, we feature **Terry and Jamie Fuller-Waymire**, the husbands who organize the Island's annual LGBTQ Pride beach bash. Next, friends **Yvonne Tutt** and **Christy Chris Gross** discuss founding the social organization Galveston Island Rainbow Lesbian Society (GIRLS). Pastor **Todd Starnes-Williams** also talks about his journey to leading one of Galveston's LGBTQ-affirming churches. Then, meet artist **Alicia Boles**, who owns a hip boutique on the historic downtown Strand. Finally, newlyweds and healthcare aspirants **Mercedez Hernandez** and **Cristal Aldrete** recount their Island wedding and favorite beachside activities.



Terry (l) and Jamie Fuller-Waymire



Pride on the Island

Terry and **Jamie Fuller-Waymire** host an annual LGBTQ event.

By **RYAN M. LEACH**

Terry and Jamie Fuller-Waymire are a gay Galveston couple that have been creating spaces and experiences for LGBTQ islanders and tourists for the last three years with their annual Pride Galveston celebrations. They are holding out hope that 2020 can still include some Pride partying, even if COVID-19 has sent most of the season out with the tide.

"Years ago, there was a club called the Third Coast Downtown. They always threw a big beach weekend. After the bar closed, the event kind of fizzled out. That's when we were approached to do Pride Galveston. We were known for doing many special events, and we thought that we would be able to get it off the ground," says Terry.

The Galveston couple has been together for eleven years and married for four. Terry, who is 40 and originally from Los Angeles, met Jamie, a 50-year-old Houston native, through mutual friends. They moved to Galveston six years ago, and their roots in the community developed fast as they took on Pride Galveston only a few years after their move. These two men are uniquely situated to lead the way for Galveston's growing Pride organization.

When they aren't working their day jobs at an engineering firm, Jamie is a mobile DJ who usually does wedding and corporate events, while Terry has a side gig that's a little flashier. "My drag name is Kiki Dion Van Wales. I have been doing drag for about ten and a half years. I am all over the place. In Galveston I do a lot of corporate and special events. I also perform at Robert's Lafitte and 23rd Street Station. Every other month I am at the Eagle, where we do a regular Out for Brunch fundraiser," he says.

Out for Brunch is a significant event for the couple. On July 19, Robert's Lafitte will host the brunch that will benefit Pride Galveston—COVID-19 restrictions permitting. The fundraiser was originally scheduled to take place in March, in order to raise money for Pride Galveston's regular summer events. But as with almost everything fun in 2020, it was all pushed back.

"With everything other than our full-time jobs put on standby because of COVID-19, we had to [reschedule all of the Pride] events," says Terry.

But there is good news for brunch attendees: admission to Out for Brunch is free, and all of the money raised from the $10 Mexican brunch plates (and the tips earned by the likes of Van Wales herself) will help make Pride Galveston a huge success in September—restrictions permitting.

"We keep these events free so that a ticket price isn't a barrier for people. We are still a small Pride, so we want to make sure that the community has access," says Terry.

If all goes as planned, the three-day Pride Galveston celebration will commence on September 18 with the annual Mister and Miss Pride Galveston Pageant at Lafitte's. Then on Saturday the 19th, the Beach Bash starts at 10 a.m. on the Apffel East Beach, where the LGBTQ community can enjoy DJs and pop-up tents all day. With the tropical climate of Southeast Texas promising hot weather throughout September, free food as well as the all-important bottled water will be provided by Walgreens.

That evening, 23rd Street Station will host the White Party. Things wrap up on Sunday back at Lafitte's for the second annual pool party featuring poolside DJs and special shows inside until around 7.

"We will be responding to the City's guidelines regarding COVID-19. If we are not able to have the event in person due to social distancing, we will try to work on something virtually," Terry notes.

The couple also recognizes that, particularly this year, the event needs to show its solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Plans are underway to make sure that that supportive presence is recognized during the weekend's events.

"If people are curious about Pride Galveston or Out for Brunch, they should visit our website at pridegalveston.com. We can answer any questions you have through the website," says Jamie. "We are thinking about all of our community right now, and we're being vigilant about COVID-19 and the important issues surrounding Black Lives Matter."



Yvonne Tutt (l) and Christy Chris Gross

GIRLS Just Wanna Have Fun

Yvonne Tutt and **Christy Chris Gross** rally the lesbian community.

By **JENNY BLOCK**

When Yvonne Tutt and Christy Chris Gross were preparing to move to Galveston from College Station, they realized there were no real lesbian organizations to speak of in their soon-to-be home. So the 37-year-old friends decided to take matters into their own hands and founded the Galveston Island Rainbow Lesbian Society (GIRLS) on March 13, 2018.

"We made our own group in hopes of bringing more awareness and social gatherings to the lesbian community," Gross explains. "GIRLS is a space where you can build forever-friendships and everlasting bonds with people that you relate to. GIRLS affirms that any person who identifies as a woman, or who is a respectful ally, is welcome. We do not tolerate sexism, racism, homophobia, or transphobia in our space."

GIRLS has a Facebook page where members discuss LGBTQ issues, share online experiences, and plan group meetups, including the Island's first lesbian prom in 2019. "It's important that we have the GIRLS group because many of us didn't have a familiar place to belong," Tutt says. "It's a group where we can vent and feel safe. GIRLS [members] come from all sorts of backgrounds and experiences, and you can more often than not find someone that can help you through things or, at the very least, a friend to get you over the steepest hill."

Gross and Tutt describe Galveston's LGBTQ scene as being vibrant and diverse. "There is a lot of support on social media and within the different groups," they say. "We also have Pride Galveston every year in June. This year it will be September 18–20."

When it comes to the lesbian scene in Galveston, the two say it's definitely in the mix when it comes to all things LGBTQ on the Island. "However, we wanted to bring representation to the lesbian community. The lesbian scene, in our opinion, was pretty much non-existent when we moved to Galveston," Gross says. "Most of us have some sort of connection to each other, if by nothing else than being part of the same social network," adds Tutt.

Both women would love to see more free activities and events focused on the lesbian community in alcohol-free spaces and outside of bars and clubs. "We would like for there to be more family-based events and activities. Also, [we'd like to see] more activities that cater to queer women instead of mostly gay men," Tutt says.

"WE MADE OUR OWN GROUP IN HOPES OF BRINGING MORE AWARENESS AND SOCIAL GATHERINGS TO THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY. GIRLS IS A SPACE WHERE YOU CAN BUILD FOREVER-FRIENDSHIPS AND EVERLASTING BONDS WITH PEOPLE THAT YOU RELATE TO."

—Christy Chris Gross

GIRLS is changing that narrative by partnering with other LGBTQ organizations on the Island. "We participate in Pride Galveston, which is run by my two good friends Terry and Jamie Fuller-Waymire," Tutt explains. "They also keep us in the loop and let us know when there are events going on. We are actually one of their sponsors this year. Todd Slaughter, the owner of Rumors Beach Bar, was generous enough to pay for our sponsorship fee."

Tutt and Gross are both Palestine, Texas, natives who now call Galveston home. Tutt holds an associate's degree in medical assisting from Vista College, while Gross earned her BA in psychology with a minor in child development at American Public University System's American Military University. When it comes to childhood dreams, Tutt wanted to be a model and an actress, and Gross wanted to be a veterinarian.

Life had different plans for both of them, however. Tutt and Gross both work for UTMB Health—Tutt as a health unit coordinator in the hospital's NICU, and Gross as an animal research biocontainment technician at the Galveston National Laboratory.

Tutt explains that managing GIRLS quickly became more than a two-woman endeavor. "After Christy and I founded GIRLS, we needed a little bit of help because our group began to grow quickly." Enter Kristen Chauncey, Darinae Ivey, Sky Taylor, and Heather Barker. "They help us keep this group running. They are like sisters to us."

GIRLS now has more than 500 members, and is growing by the day. Tutt and Gross say it is definitely the group to watch out for in the Galvestion lesbian scene. And, Tutt adds, "We have big things planned for GIRLS in the future!"

For more information on GIRLS, visit facebook.com/GalvestonIslandRainbows.



"IT TAKES A LOT OF COURAGE FOR A GAY PERSON TO WALK INTO ANY FAITH COMMUNITY. I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FORTUNATE TO BE AFFIRMED BY PEOPLE WHO LOVE ME. IF THAT CAN HAPPEN IN MY LIFE, WE HAVE TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR OTHERS."

—Todd Starnes-Williams

A Place in the Pews

Openly gay pastor **Todd Starnes-Williams** leads an LGBTQ-affirming Island congregation.

By **CONNOR BEHRENS**

Faith has always been at the forefront of pastor Todd Starnes-Williams' life, helping him stay positive despite the hardships he has faced.

"I have always had an association with the faith community," he says. "My grandfather was a pastor, so growing up I always knew something about church. I always participated in church in some way."

But Starnes-Williams, originally from Indiana, didn't set out to be a pastor. He had a career in marketing before making the trek back to school to become an ordained minister.

"I always knew that I was going to do something different with my life," he admits.

After receiving his Master of Divinity degree from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1999, he made the move to Texas that same year to preach.

The trip to Texas would start a divine journey that eventually led Williams to come to terms with his sexuality.

"It was while I was pastoring [at First Christian Church of Alvin] that I finally decided to come out," he recalls. "I also went through a divorce." The eventual termination of his Alvin job led to some particularly rough times.

"I really struggled, because the denomination that I loved just did not have a place for me," he says. "I knew that being gay was not something that the church would support."

When he started New Convenant Christian Church in Montrose, a church that worked closely with LGBTQ homeless youth, Starnes-Williams slowly began to heal. After receiving a Peace Fellowship Award from his denomination, he realized that he had a voice and could help others who were going through struggles.

"I learned that I still had a calling," he says. "I went back to school at MD Anderson, where I received all my training to become a hospice chaplain."

Starnes-Williams has been a chaplain for 17 years. Three years ago, he started to become heavily involved with Westminster Presbyterian Church in Galveston, and began to see that religious groups were slowly becoming more accepting of the LGBTQ community.

"It was then that I discovered I could be gay and a pastor," he says.

After working with Westminster Presbyterian members in Galveston, church officials decided to hire Williams to become "their" pastor.

"In December of last year, I was officially called to be the Stated Supply for Westminster Presbyterian Church," he says. "It is an amazing congregation there, and we are actually getting ready to celebrate our 125th year as a presence on the Island."

But the road to become a notable leader in Galveston County's religious community had some setbacks earlier this year when his hiring in December sparked a backlash from certain crowds.

"We posted my hiring on our Facebook page, and did some social-media marketing with it," he says. "I think it shocked some of the leadership of the church to see just how mean people can be online. There were some threats made on our Facebook page. It was just ugliness—overwhelming ugliness."

Reflecting on his early career as a pastor and comparing it to where he is now, Starnes-Williams notes that much progress has been made, even though there is still much work to be done.

"There are times when I feel like we are making great progress, and then I am disappointed," he admits. "I try not to let it get to me, but it is hard not to. It reminds us that we still have work to do."

Williams is grateful that he had a pre-existing relationship with Westminster Presbyterian before the controversy of his hiring erupted online.

"We knew each other well enough to know that what we were doing was important," he says. "It's a church with a historic past, and we are living the historic present. By hiring someone who is openly gay, we knew that we were entering a different arena."

Despite the negativity, Williams continues to keep an open dialogue with everyone. Regardless of what some individuals may think of his sexuality, he welcomes them all into the church.

"There is always a place in the pew," he says. "Conversations are important."

Starnes-Williams wants his hiring to serve as a beacon of hope for others in the gay community who are spiritual and looking for support.

"It takes a lot of courage for a gay person to walk into any faith community," he says. "I have always been fortunate to be affirmed by people who love me. If that can happen in my life, we have to make it possible for others."

As he looks back at his career as an ordained pastor, he hopes he is remembered as someone who was compassionate, helpful, and welcoming to people from all walks of life.

"I do not know if it is so much about being a great pastor," he notes. "I am hoping that, at the end of the day, I was just a good human being and did what was right."

For more information on Galveston's Westminster Presbyterian Church, visit westminsterprez.com.


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Weaving Life's Rich Tapestry

Artist and boutique owner **Alicia Boles** discusses her eclectic life adventures.

By **JENNY BLOCK**

Alicia Boles, a 39-year-old Texas City native who now calls Galveston home, says she wanted to be a veterinarian when she was growing up. Her mom, on the other hand, remembers Boles wanting to be a brain surgeon. In the end, she graduated from the University of Louisiana at Monroe in 2005 with a degree in aviation and a minor in business administration.

Both her childhood dreams and her higher-education pursuits belie where she actually landed, as she is currently the co-owner of a women's boutique named Pardon My French, located on The Strand in Galveston's historic downtown district that showcases outstanding 19th-century architecture. Boles' hip shop is filled with clothing and goodies adorned with unicorns and pithy sayings. One of those, "I have to have one of everything" kind of places.

Of course, being a shop owner is just one stop on Boles' life journey. "I like to break life down by decades," she says. "In my 20s, I was a flight instructor and a commercial pilot. In my 30s, I've been a small-business owner. As for my 40s, who knows what's to come? It's just around the corner. I do plan on trying out to be a Galveston lifeguard."

After all, Boles quips, what is life if it isn't an adventure?

"In 10 years, I hope to see myself in a successful career, hopefully photography-related, and possibly with a family and Mrs. Right," she adds. "But I get sidetracked easily, so who knows where this new journey of mine will take me. That's the exciting part. You plan for one thing, and life says 'Nope, *this* is what's happening.' Whatever direction I end up taking, I hope that I am doing something that will help others."

Boles' friends and family use words like determined, caring, independent, and trustworthy to describe her. One of Boles' close friends, Rachel Stokes, says Boles "holds the true meaning of 'the L-words'—loving, loyal, laughable, lean, lighthearted, logical, level-headed, loved by her friends, and a little loca."

As for how Boles describes herself, she says, "Well, I identify as a lesbian. It took me 38 years to fully come out. Now I'm all rainbows." Boles wants to be known as "a truly kind and generous person who always made time for others and would lend a helping hand whenever possible."

"More importantly, I really hope to make a strong impact on at least one person's life, to inspire them to be who they are and to never hide what they feel," she adds.

Boles prioritizes connection and community, and she'd like to see much more of that in Galveston's LGBTQ scene. "There are very few organized events, and most are geared toward what I refer to as the three B's: bars, brunches, and boozing," she explains. "I will say that there seems to be a stronger gay-male community on the Island."

As for Galveston's lesbian scene, she says it's mostly located online through social media. "I know a lot of that has to do with the ongoing pandemic and my own lack of a social life. [But] I do actually take the time to get out and spend time with friends and socialize.

"Call me old-fashioned, but I want to see you and speak to you in person," she says, describing her dream of an LGBTQ community "where all ages are accepted, and where the focus is on building a better, more supportive community outside of social media. I would also like to see more activities and gatherings like ArtWalk, art talks, book clubs, or just grabbing a coffee at MOD Coffeehouse. There is more to life than just drinking."

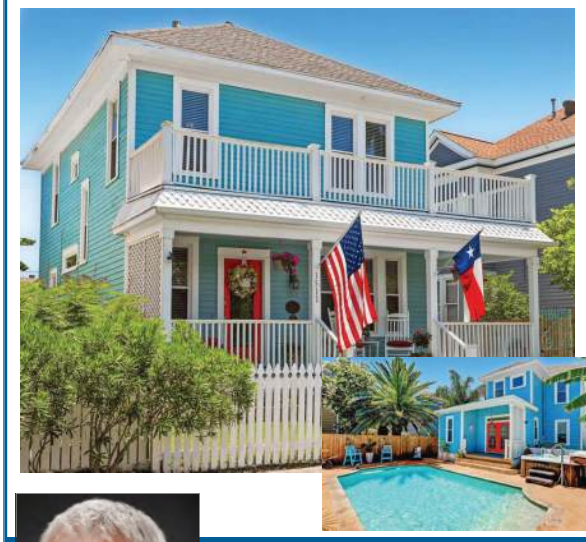
Boles is also an artist and photographer, and she plans to start a new photography business with a strong focus on the LGBTQ community.

"Being an artist has always been my outlet—my voice, so to speak. I am a very shy, introverted person, and I have always felt comfortable using art as a way to express what I am feeling and experiencing. Without art, I am without a voice. I do believe there is a strong correlation with my love of art and being a lesbian."

Boles sees her past as her "story" that forms the basis of what makes her who she is today. "I believe Lady Gaga put it best when she said, 'Baby, I was born this way.' I was born a lesbian and an artist."

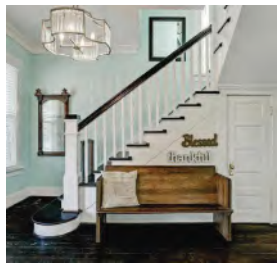
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Coastal Love

Years after they met, **Mercedez Hernandez** and **Cristal Aldrete** married on the Island.

By **MARENE GUSTIN**



Mercedez Hernandez (l) and Cristal Aldrate

Mercedez Hernandez and Cristal Aldrete, both 26, met four years ago at a medical research conference during their last semester of college. Hernandez was presenting her research, and had invited Aldrete to attend her presentation. Although Aldrete couldn't make the presentation, at the dinner afterward she marched up to Hernandez and said she was glad to have met her. Taken aback, Aldrete got the hint and asked if they could keep in touch.

Both Texas gals, Hernandez was graduating from West Texas A&M in Canyon, while Aldrete was at the University of North Texas in Denton. One wanted to be a doctor, the other an artist.

If it wasn't love at first sight, it was pretty close.

Then they spent the next year and a half apart. "It was hard," says Hernandez.

"Long distance is tough," echoes Aldrete, "but if you can make that work, you can get through anything."

The month before they met, Hernandez had been accepted into the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB Health) in Galveston. It took a while, but the two were finally able to live together in Galveston. This past February, four years after they met, the pair married at the picturesque Galveston Island Palms outdoor events venue. The covered pavilion sits on a 29,000-square-foot of landscaped space on Avenue S.

"It was very pretty," says Aldrete. "It was in the evening, with all the lights on outside."

Married life on the Island for these two has been pretty sweet. They live in a duplex on the East End, just two blocks from the beach.

"Having a backyard was important for us," says Hernandez. "We have two rescue dogs." Peddy is a three-legged, 80-odd-pound German Shepherd mix, and Cookie is a tiny Yorkipoo. Kayaking and biking are the couple's twin passions, and they recently bought a bike trailer for the dogs.

"Cookie rides in the trailer, and when Peddy gets tired of running alongside, because he just has three legs, he just gets in and rides with her," says Hernandez.

The women also love the fresh seafood that the Island has to offer, in particular crawfish and blue crab. Aldrete introduced Hernandez to crawfish and says she's now a big fan. Sadly, that's something they are going to miss pretty soon.

While Hernandez was in medical school, Aldrete, an artist, worked until recently at the Galveston Arts Center as an administrative assistant, volunteer coordinator, and ceramics instructor. Although she loves the arts, she's about to make a major career change.

"I'm going back to school to become a nurse," she says.

"I think I was an influence," admits her wife. "I would come home and tell her how wonderful the nurses were, always advocating for their patients. I told her I could see her doing that."

Aldrete says it was during the recent pandemic that she made her decision to switch careers. "I really decided I wanted to help people. And maybe once I have my nursing degree, I might start a patient art program."

As much as the couple loves Galveston, their island time is coming to an end when Hernandez graduates from medical school.

Aldrete was born in Palestine, Texas, and moved to Dallas at a young age, while Hernandez was born in Lubbock. "I'd like to move to San Antonio or Austin," says Hernandez. Although the couple would like to stay in Texas, they know that the matching of medical students to residency programs at hospitals is computer-generated, so that may not happen. "Wherever I end up to do my residency, there will be a nursing program for Cristal."

"I'll miss going to the beach with the dogs and exploring everything," admits Aldrete. "And how close everything is here. We have a five-minute commute to work, which is nice."

"I love the beach and the seafood, I *love* the seafood," Hernandez emphasizes, "but I definitely won't miss the heat and humidity in the summer."

Wherever these Island gals end up, it looks like their love is sure to survive.



Art that Demands Justice

Lesbian artist Violette Bule illuminates the plight of the pandemic's "essential workers."

By **BILL ARNING** | *Photo by* **JAN RATTIA**

Like many no-longer-supportable social realities that have been exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the service industry is facing massive calls for total re-invention. All of the actors, poets, painters, and stand-up comics who survive by waiting tables are asking the same questions: Can I afford to do this anymore, knowing that when the next crisis comes I will be screwed once again? And can I afford to quit waiting tables and train for other employment?"

How do we address the implications of this reality beyond 2020? The demands for fair treatment of "essential workers" and the demands for racial justice are interrelated, and they certainly open up more questions than answers.

Artist Violette Bule was born and raised in Venezuela, one of the few developed countries facing a near-total lack of a functioning government and public safety net. Bule makes visible in her art all of the inequalities that we usually try to ignore in order to avoid being in a constant state of panic.

In an imposing sculpture entitled *Homage to Johnny* (2015–2018), Bule recalls a co-worker from a restaurant job she had when she first arrived in New York City. Johnny used to clean the silverware at a fancy restaurant in Manhattan for $5 an hour. Johnny doesn't know how to speak English or Spanish. He is from Mexico and he only speaks the indigenous Nahuatl language, so even the City inspectors that look into immigrant working conditions could not communicate with him.

The sculpture is a wall of 1,509 metal forks attached to a magnetized metal restaurant door. It's stunning in its mass, and yet just a small visual fragment symbolic of the underpaid labor that makes an elite lifestyle possible.

When *Tribute to Johnny* was last exhibited, Bule extended her narrative by mounting her *Dream America* (2015), a two-panel portrait of a strong woman shouldering a mass of badly balanced dirty plates on the left and a U.S. flag



Thank You, Essential Workers (2020)

on the right. Her face appears determined to prosper and survive in any conditions, with an awareness of the worth of her labor.

Dream America is based on the revered August Sander photo-series *Citizens of the 20th Century*, a 40-year project that set out to document everyday German citizens through the lens of their professions. Sander's lifelong project manifests the troubling idea that one's class and economic realities are as fixed as height and eye color. His pastry chef is as corpulent and self-satisfied as you would imagine, but even he appears beaten down by the rigors of creating sugary treats for strangers. Yet there is a strange hopefulness in Sander's ambitious mission and his faith that every citizen could and should be *seen*, and is worthy of being recorded for posterity.



Dream America (2015)

Despite being a relatively recent Houston arrival who followed her partner here (who enrolled in the University of Houston's prestigious writing program), Bule has embraced the city's grand diversity. Not surprisingly, the unfairness of the nation's immigration and labor policies is seen in Bule's work. *Dream La Bestia* (2015) is a giant painted version of the Snakes and Ladders game in which you can play-act the life-threatening adventures of trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Viewers can choose to play either an immigrant or a border agent.

In a less-tragic vein, Bule has been venturing into the realm of public art by creating life-affirming projects for communities that have borne the brunt of the pandemic. Working with the nonprofit Avenue CDC that builds affordable housing in Houston's near Northside, she created a jubilant mural entitled *Thank You, Essential Workers* with the phrase "Community work makes us stronger" in English and Spanish. The 15 mural figures of local community leaders are easily visible from the light-rail line. As a remembrance of 2020, the mostly Black and Brown faces are wearing face masks, and the emphasis on restaurant and janitorial work seems perfect. A closer look also reveals *BLM* and *DACA* written on some of the workers' shirts, a detail that will forever tie the mural to the events of 2020.

The Art League Houston and Houston Arts Alliance supported "Rethinking Your Neighborhood," an enhanced-reality project taking place in Irvington Park, also on the near Northside, in which the results of the several interviews with area artists are presented as both virtual-reality games and a a 3-D urban-planning project with movable units representing different types of buildings—houses, stores, and art centers. Visitors can listen to their neighbors' worries and try to solve issues through their insights about their own neighborhood by placing building models on the neighborhood street grid.

I was first drawn to Bule's work after seeing this lesbian artist's images of gay male eroticism. I included a large photograph of masturbating Venezuelan soldiers in my Stonewall 50/50 exhibition at Alabama Song last year. I love when she inverts gender roles in art history, such as recreating Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe* with a cute, modestly exposed guy replacing Manet's inexplicably naked female. Queer themes run through the work she did during her student days in Mexico in the '90s. But her current focus, since arriving in Houston in 2018, seems to be the Texas Latino population's increasingly crucial role in turning the state blue in the November elections. Her championing of the power of Latino women in creating a better future for Texas helps in that effort, and I am pretty sure that all evolved humans can agree that turning Texas blue must be our top priority in 2020.

For more information on Violette Bule, visit violettebule.com

Overcoming Trauma with Humor

Baptist musician Tim Seelig has the last laugh.

By **ZACH McKENZIE** | *Photo by* **MARI JAXN**

Houston's First Baptist Church, whose roadside cross is impossible to miss when passing by on the Katy Freeway, boasts on their website that they are "a thriving and diverse community of real people experiencing real life together." For Dr. Tim Seelig, it was indeed a real-life experience at First Baptist that led to his firing and exile, subsequent years of harassment by the church, and a renewed sense of self and happiness. In his forthcoming memoir, *A Tale of Two Tims: Big Ol' Baptist, Big Ol' Gay*, Seelig details the ebbs and flows of coming out as gay in 1986 and how, despite the church's best efforts, he is thriving in his second act.

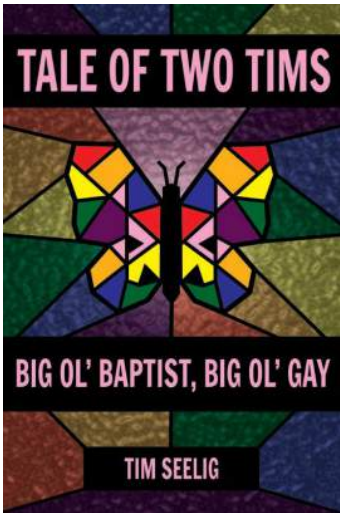
"I've spent 35 years as a Baptist and 35 as a big ol' gay," the jovial 69-year-old laughs. Throughout his life, Seelig has worked as a conductor, singer, teacher, and motivational speaker. Today, he is the artistic director and conductor of the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and the National LGBTQ Center for the Arts. He has also conducted annually at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center for 25 years, and was recently part of a documentary called *Gay Chorus Deep South* that won the Audience Award at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival.

Meeting him today, you would never suspect that he was once married to a woman, raised two children, and led a thriving music ministry at a very conservative church in Texas. "My dad was the vice president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and my mother was on the voice faculty," Seelig notes. "They spent 60 years there and the name Seelig was synonymous with Baptists." Speaking to the years of sexual repression that he experienced, the decorated musician says plainly, "As a Baptist, if you come out, you fear being disowned or thrown out."

In his latest book, Seelig recounts his life leading up to his outing by a Christian counselor to his wife, who then outed him to church leaders, the hardships he faced as a result, and everything in between. He recalls visiting an adult bookstore in Montrose, meeting men in a park that was just spitting distance from the church, and feeling very isolated as a gay man in the '80s. "In 1986, I knew one out gay person," he recalls. "So it was not a matter of, 'Let's join this crowd of gay people.' I was definitely the Lone Ranger."



Tale of Two Tims
Big Ol' Baptist, Big Ol' Gay is available for pre-order on Amazon and B&H.



Upon being outed to his church's leadership by his therapist, Seelig knew his job and life were in jeopardy. "[The church was] not going to just let me come out and go be gay," he explains. "They wanted it to be public and a lesson to others—to make me a scapegoat." He dedicates a portion of the book to those harrowing days, the three therapists that shamed him for speaking his truth, and the lengths that the church went to in order to "ruin" him. "My wife and I had decided on 'irreconcilable differences' [as our grounds for divorce], because we had no money," Seelig remembers. "First Baptist got her a lawyer, and a constable

served me with new divorce papers—on the grounds of sodomy—while I was teaching at Houston Baptist University."

Clearly, it was time for a fresh start. Seelig moved back to Dallas and interviewed to serve as conductor of the Turtle Creek Chorale, a gay men's chorus, to make money. "I told them, 'I've just come out, I've been ruined, the church took everything that I had, and I don't have the option of failing.'" It would prove a formative move in his new life as an out gay man. He dove into activism, working and marching alongside brothers and sisters during the AIDS pandemic. He was honored to carry the Olympic torch in 1996 as an "AIDS activist hero," his self-described proudest accolade. Even after receiving an HIV-positive diagnosis, Seelig used humor to survive and move forward. "I was maybe a little funny as a Southern Baptist, but when I came out at 35," he laughs, "I decided the rest of my life would have a foundation of humor—or else I don't want to keep going."

His trademark sense of humor has come in handy throughout his life, but no more so than when he headed west to San Francisco to be closer to his daughter and her family. Her "sudden and unexpected" death two years ago rocked Seelig's world and inspired him to take a three-month sabbatical to write his memoir. "That's why I wrote it," he states. "It's not the final bump in the road, but definitely the biggest that I've ever faced, or will ever face."

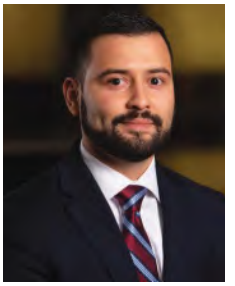
After putting the final touches on his autobiography, Seelig took a leap of faith and submitted it to a publisher. "I sent it off and thought they wouldn't take it, but they did, and now it's published," he says with playful disbelief. "When my son-in-law read it for the first time, he said, 'This is the greatest gift you could have ever given my daughter, because she's going to learn more about her mom through your autobiography than we ever could have told her.'"

The charismatic septuagenarian's whirlwind of a life, separated into two parts, is immortalized in his new page-turning book. It's a testament to the power of living your truth, and serves as a guide to anyone who is fearful of that challenge. "I want this story told. Even if you come out and someone wants the worst things to happen to you, it won't happen," he says passionately. "As my mom and dad said in their later years, 'Honey, you've had a greater ministry than you would have ever had if you had stayed in the church.' That's what I've been doing for the past 30 years: healing myself and others who have also been wounded by organized religion. I was out there alone on the cliff. Thank goodness I had the gumption to climb up it instead of fall down."

For more information on Dr. Tim Seelig, visit timseelig.com.

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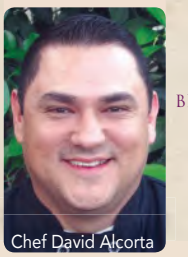
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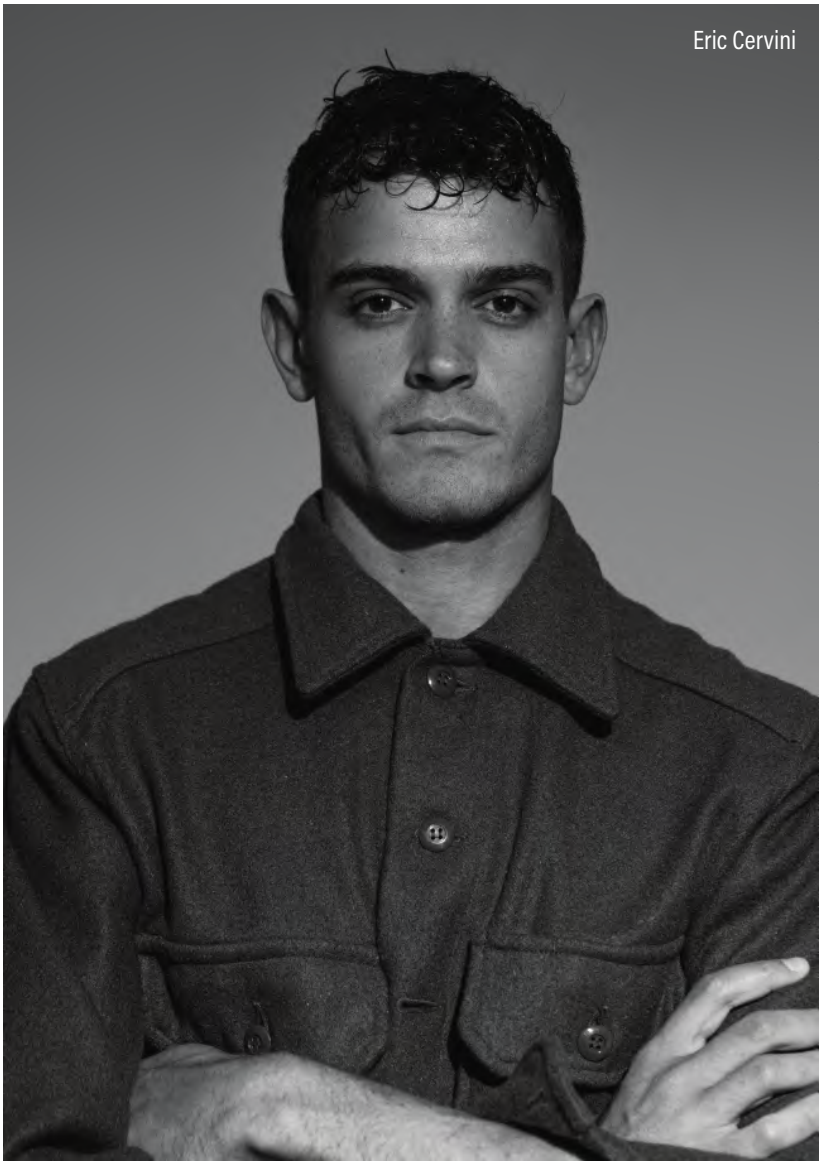
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Eric Cervini

Recapping the Fight for LGBTQ Rights

Historian Eric Cervini's new book brings pre-Stonewall queer history to life.

By **GREGG SHAPIRO** | *Photo by* **JAKUB KOZIEL**

Anyone looking for a compelling and juicy queer-history read (while they continue to shelter in place to stem the tide of COVID-19 cases) need look no further than *The Deviant's War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America* (FSG, 2020) by Eric Cervini. Cervini, who received his PhD in history from the University of Cambridge, introduces readers to Frank Kameny, a legendary figure in the fight for LGBTQ rights. A prominent force in the early days of the Mattachine Society, Kameny bravely took on the United States government's policy regarding homosexuals in 1957, when he was fired from his job with the Department of Defense for being gay. *The Deviant's War* is a perfect summer read, especially in the absence of many Pride celebrations.

Gregg Shapiro: Eric, what does it mean to you to have your first book, *The Deviant's War,* featured in a "13 Books to Watch For in June" column in the *New York Times*?

Eric Cervini: It was quite an honor. I'm so excited that my publisher, FSG, was able to get it out in time for the 50th anniversary of the world's first Pride march. As people are wondering how to celebrate Prides without parades, I hope the book reminds readers that the very first Pride was about resistance. I hope people can be reminded of that fact once again.

When did you first become interested in history and, by extension, gay history?

In college, I thought I was going to law school. I thought I was going to study government, and that I had a very straight path ahead of me, so to speak. [*Laughs*] Then I realized, after watching the film *Milk*, that I didn't know the first thing about Harvey Milk when I was 20 years old. So many people of my generation were not taught about LGBTQ+ history in high school or even in college. And if I didn't know Harvey's story [as the nation's first openly gay city official], then what other stories are out there that have not been turned into Oscar-winning films? So as an undergrad at Harvard, I was searching for other gay activists to research. Frank Kameny's name came up, and I saw that he had just recently passed away. I saw that he had donated [what is probably] the largest individual LGBTQ+ collection of personal papers to the Library of Congress. No one had written a book about him. I went down to the Library of Congress and started thumbing through his daunting number of documents, and realized that I was staring at the secret history of gay →

rights in America. I've been hooked ever since, and that was seven years ago.

Early in the book, you write about the social data-gathering work of Laud Humphreys, Alfred Kinsey, and Frank Kameny. Do you see yourself and your book as a continuation of that legacy?

That's an interesting question. I'm not sure I want to follow in Laud Humphrey's footsteps, since he is primarily taught in sociology courses as an example of unethical research. [*Laughs*] But I think what Kinsey did was start a conversation. I hope that, like Kinsey, I can prompt a larger discussion in the media, in the public, and especially in academia about the stories that we're forgetting when we teach queer history. I make sure that, yes, the story is primarily about Frank. But every chapter, as I'm sure you saw, begins with a different character who influenced or was influenced by Frank. That includes people like Bayard Rustin, Ernestine Eppenger, and Sylvia Rivera. These are people who also deserve their own books. I hope people read Frank's story and recognize how important he was for our movement, but also recognize the less-discussed figures that are equally important parts of our community, and who deserve to have their own stories told. Just as Harvey Milk's story compelled me to search for other stories that are hidden in the archives, I hope Kameny's story does the same for other scholars, students, and members of the general public.

Absolutely! Can you please say something about your process of chapter titling, such as The Astronomer, The Letter, The Panic, The Crusader, and so on?

All of them are nouns. They're all similar to these secondary characters I introduce who influenced or were influenced by Frank. These are objects or people that represent not just Frank's life, but America in the 1960s. You have to tell Frank's story to understand the pre-Stonewall homophile movement. But you also have to understand everything else that was occurring in America. You have to understand the Black Freedom Movement, Women's Liberation, the Daughters of Bilitis. After Stonewall, you have to understand organizations like STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) in New York City. All these different aspects of American politics and culture were essential to influencing Frank and creating what we now celebrate each June.

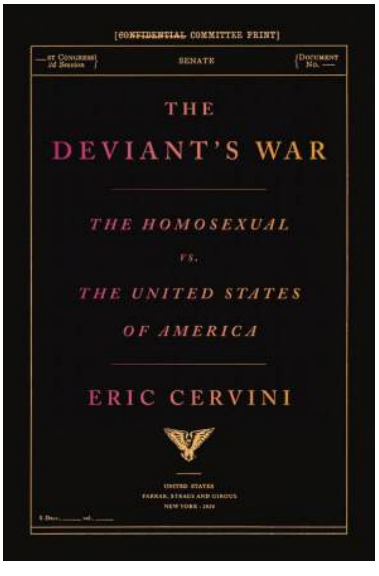
***The Deviant's War* has many examples of important history being made, such as in September of 1962 when Congressmen Nix and Ryan voted against H.R. 11363, and the April 1965 picketing protest at the White House.**

What would it mean to you to have your book become part of the syllabus for college-level history courses?

It would be a dream come true. I'll never forget taking my first history class at Harvard and realizing that history—unlike the daunting lists of facts that we're taught in high school—is also about storytelling and the human condition. These are fully formed human beings with complexities and flaws. Frank Kameny is a very flawed hero. So I hope it shows students who may be taking an Introduction to Queer History course that it doesn't just have to be memorization of facts. These are human beings who changed over time and were confronted with extreme difficulties, and still resisted. I hope it compels them to study other figures within the movement who may have been forgotten, [and who need to be] painted in a very human light.

The LGBTQ+ community has lost some significant voices this year, such as Larry Kramer and Phyllis Lyon. You write about both of them in the book, as well as Mart Crowley and Terrence McNally. From the perspective of a historian, are there older people you would like to interview while you still have the chance?

Absolutely! There are so many people, especially in the second wave of activists within the Gay Liberation Front. Especially the women who were really struggling [to have a voice] within the Gay Liberation Front that was so male-dominated and so misogynistic.



The Deviant's War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America is available for purchase on Amazon.

[Many lesbians] were confronted with having to choose between a male-dominated gay liberation movement and the women's liberation movement. I think that struggle is something that needs to have a lot more books written about it. Many figures are still alive, like Eva Freund, who's a veteran of the Mattachine Society in Washington, DC. Martha Shelley, who was one of the founding members of the Gay Liberation Front. Nancy Tucker, who created the *Washington Blade*. They're all around, and so happy to talk. [*Laughs*] I'm so happy I got to talk to them for this book, but they also deserve their own books. Martha Shelley was in a biology class at Bronx Science with Stokely Carmichael! You can't make that up. These stories need to be written.

With that in mind, have you started to think about your next book project?

I have a few ideas. I'll be honest: I'm currently living in Los Angeles, so I have a passion for making history entertaining and accessible, rather than staying within academia. I'm very grateful that I was trained as an academic, but I think now I want to use those tools of research to bring history to the masses. Sharing archival materials is a big passion of mine—open-sourcing materials that are otherwise held behind paywalls or [in libraries]. One thing I'm working on with a nonprofit in DC is open-sourcing all the digitized documents that formed the backbone of my book. If you go to thedeviantsarchive.org, you can access over 100,000 pages of documents, ranging from Frank's papers to FBI files. I hope that people read the book and become inspired by Frank's story and everyone else who's in the book. A lot of these archives are closed now, because of the pandemic. I would encourage anyone who's interested—you don't have to have a PhD—to start researching history. Anyone can do it. Anyone can write an article or highlight a certain document, and it should be open and accessible to all.

Finally, we started the interview with your mention of the movie *Milk*. If a movie were made based on *The Deviant's War*, who would you want to play Frank Kameny?

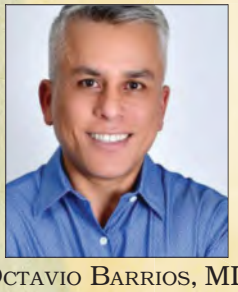
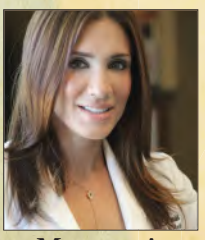
[*Laughs*] That's a very difficult question. He had a very distinctive voice; very loud and nasal. Very staccato, as Jack Nichols would describe it. It would have to be a classically trained actor. It would take months of dialect training of some sort, in order to capture his New York accent and his style of speaking. If it is ever adapted as a movie—and for any LGBT story that is adapted—[the title role] needs to be played by someone who is LGBTQ+. I think that's non-negotiable.

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By **SAM BYRD** | *Photos by* **CHASE PEDIGO**



Josue Hernandez (l) and Jason Trippier

Nuptials for the New Normal

Josue Hernandez and Jason Trippier tied the knot as friends joined them via Zoom.

Chalk it up to Murphy's Law: if anything can go wrong, it will.

But Murphy couldn't stop two people in love from following their hearts. That's the story behind Jason Trippier and Josue Hernandez Gonzalez's whirlwind wedding plans.

The two met through OkCupid and decided to take their online flirtation to the next level by meeting for a glass of wine at Brasil, a favorite Montrose hangout on Dunlavy.

"Jason only wanted a glass of wine, because he didn't want to commit to a meal without knowing me. But I was hungry after my CrossFit class, so I ordered food. I didn't realize what I ordered had onions on top. I went ahead and ate it in front of him. That was one of the things he didn't expect me to do," Josue admits.

"Of course, I saw the onions and thought there wouldn't be a first kiss—and there wasn't," Jason recalls. "But after that, we continued to go on dates and have been together ever since June 8, 2016."

June 8 continues to be a lucky date for the couple, as it has marked several significant events in their relationship. On June 8, 2017, they celebrated their first anniversary. Their engagement party took place June 8, 2019, and they were married on June 8, 2020.

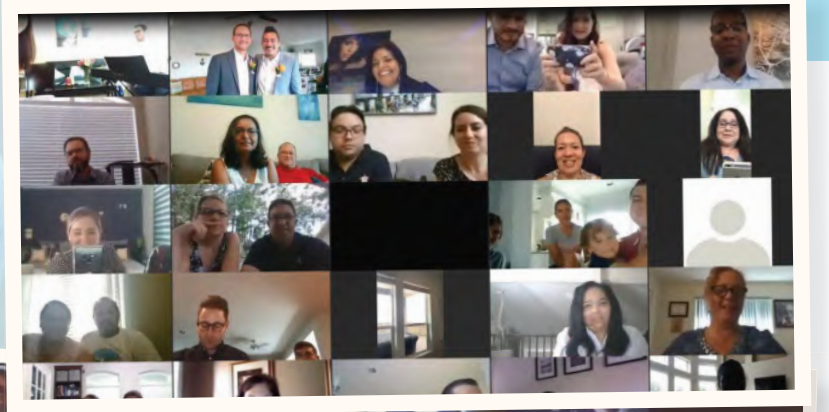
But just like the onion that took Jason by surprise on their first date, last month's wedding plans took more than a few unexpected turns. The couple wanted to celebrate their nuptials in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where they had enjoyed previous vacations.

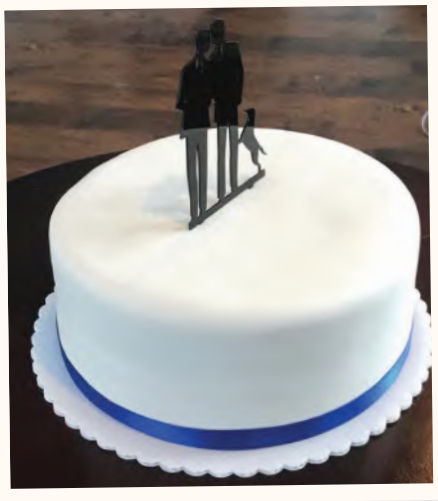
"We wanted the wedding to be small and intimate. We were focused on the immediate family and best friends," Jason says. "We rented a house on the beach, we had a caterer established, and we were going to have a New England clambake. We had purchased our flights to Boston and were going to buy our passes for the ferry to P-town. We were selecting flowers. The invitations had already been sent out, and everyone RSVP'd."

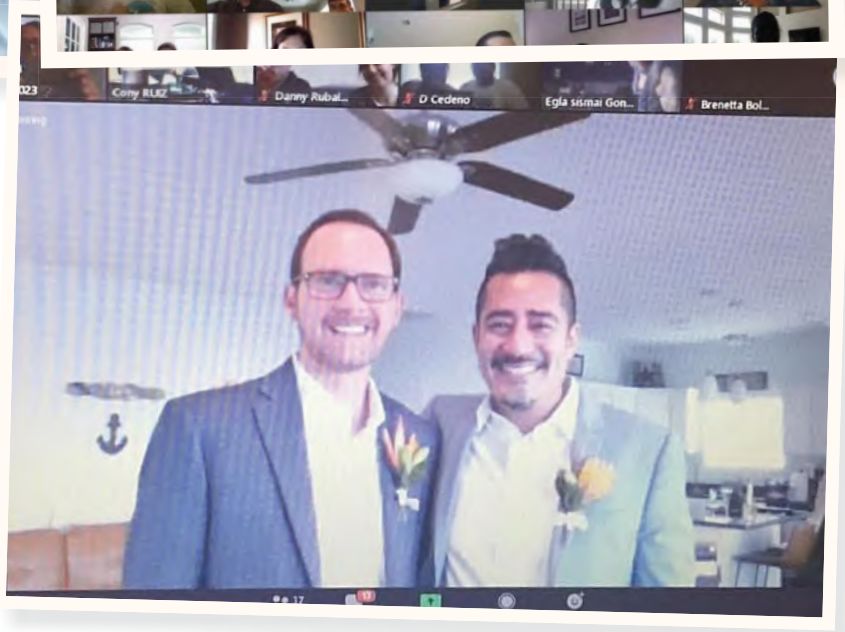
Enter COVID-19.

"Around mid-March, we had to put things on a temporary hold and figure out what was going to happen. We didn't cancel anything im-









mediately because we wanted to see the impact COVID-19 was going to have," Jason explains. "We ended up canceling P-town on April 30 because we figured it was unsafe to ask people to travel. None of the venues were open, and you couldn't have events with more than 10 people. It wasn't the time to have a wedding."

The couple entertained the idea of waiting a year, but as time drifted on they liked that idea less and less.

Josue says, "We thought about what would happen if we got COVID-19. In that situation, they wouldn't let us visit [one another] in the hospital. Because of the uncertainty, we wanted to make sure we had that protection. We thought we could still get married this year using technology, and we could embark on this adventure."

The couple decided to have a local wedding on their lucky day—June 8—and try to keep the details as close as possible to their original plans. But it was a race against the clock to get everything organized. First on their to-do list was the marriage license.

"One of the biggest hurdles was that Harris County was only issuing marriage licenses by appointment, and they were booked through July 13. We looked at Montgomery County, but they were only giving them to county residents," Jason explains. "So, we looked at Galveston County and drove there in May to get our marriage license. We wanted to make sure we had it, because there is a 72-hour waiting period before you could use the license."

Jason continues, "We had some hesitation, especially when traveling to Galveston County, because we didn't know how we'd be received there. Would there be any discrimination for two men asking for a marriage license? But they were professional and congratulatory. We didn't have any problems, and everybody bent over backwards to help us."

Then the rush to finalize the details began.

"We rented a house on Bolivar Peninsula so that we could be married near the beach. We found Rev. Faith Thomas, who performs LGBTQ weddings, and she was willing to travel to the Island. Then we found a florist who was so gracious to help us on such short notice," Jason explains.

Josue mentions they were able to get a cake made within three days, which was especially miraculous because he is lactose intolerant and the baker faced supply shortages due to COVID-19. They also received help from a professional cellist friend who doubled as a Zoom administrator for the livestreamed ceremony.

Jason says, "Connie helped us with everyone who called into Zoom. She also invited a pianist to her apartment, so we had classical music for the ceremony." By special request, the duo played "Lover" by Taylor Swift.

The couple was able to welcome online guests from across four states and two countries. The newlyweds say that one of the positives of the last-minute solution was that they were able to share their special moment with friends who would not have traveled to Provincetown.

When it becomes safe to gather again, the couple would still like to enjoy a celebration with friends. "We are planning to go to Provincetown on our one-year anniversary," Jason says. "We hope to celebrate in person next year with the group we had invited this year."

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OUT THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & EDGARDO AGUILAR







June 27, 2020

In response to the dual crises of racial injustice and the COVID-19 pandemic, Pride Houston shifted gears from its annual summer LGBTQ parade and festival to host **It Started With A Riot!**, an LGBTQ rally for racial justice at Houston City Hall. The event, which was livestreamed on the organization's website, featured guest speakers, performers, and special guests.



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By **LILLY RODDY**

Lunar Eclipse Impacts Our Nation's Chart

People will be more vocal about their political views and our current conditions.

We start the month with Mercury, our communicator, retrograde until July 17. Our next best time to start new projects is from July 17 through August 23. At the end of August, Mars, our planet of instinctual response, goes retrograde until December 1. Make good use of that time. The big event this month is the lunar eclipse on the 5th. This eclipse will be making a big impact on our nation's chart. People will be much more vocal about their political views and our current conditions. We will be looking for someone to step up and be a real leader. We are focused on making our home a safer place this month. That theme is especially strong in the latter half of the month. Positive days this month are July 1, 12, 14, 22, and 30. Days to stay on your toes are July 4, 5, 8, 15, 20, 27 and 30.

ARIES

(Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

This is going to be a very active time for you with Mars, your ruler, visiting Aries (its home sign) until January 6, 2021. This will make you take life more personally, and motivate you to take action on areas of your life that you want to improve. Your patience and tolerance will be lower than usual. As the month begins, home and family take the lead. You are definitely looking to make your home and family safer for the long term. You may be impatient with your bosses and co-workers, as they seem slow to act. Relationships are dicier as well. This can be a great time to renew those bonds and commitments, as you will need more attention. The latter part of the month is a good time to put your plans into action and to focus more on yourself.

TAURUS

(Apr. 20–May 20)

You are wanting to share your ideas and views about a variety of topics this month. You will be more chatty than usual, and also reflecting on the past. You are continuing to reexamine your career



ANGEL ALBARRAN

CANCER

(June 22–July 22)

Happy Birthday to the Moon Kids this month. This is your personal yearly cycle of review and renewal. With Mercury (our planet of communications) retrograde in your sign, this birthday cycle is a much more introspective one. Your perceptions about your relationships are going through a huge overhaul. You are seeing things in others that you seem to have dismissed or ignored before. This is a great time to renew your bonds and goals in all of your relationships. Some of those relationships will be coming to an end, while others provide greater support and acceptance. Career activity is going to be especially active for the next six months. There could be new opportunities even as some of the old avenues are closing. You will not be as patient as you usually are over the next couple of months. Look for positive ways to release your tensions.

direction and consider a new path or direction. You are looking for something that really ignites your passion, and not just something you'll do to fill time. Restrictive jobs or relationships can really grind on you, especially in the last half of the month. Relationships that enhance your individuality and provide plenty of freedom of expression will need some goals, directions, and possibly a new level of commitment. Home and family play a bigger role in your life in the latter part of July.

GEMINI

May 21–June 21)

With your ruler, Mercury, retrograde until July 17, this is a more introspective month for you. It may be more difficult to get your words and thoughts together during this retrograde. Finances and income issues are highlighted as this month begins. You will be looking at ways to budget your money better and find alternative investment options. You will also be reviewing your own skills and talents, and looking at how to use them more effectively. Relationships should flow more easily, as it's been easier to find common ground. After the 17th, it's time to move forward with your ideas. Friends and support groups can be very helpful over the next couple of months. They will have ideas and inspiration for you.

LEO

(July 23–Aug. 22)

As the month begins, it's an introspective time for you. You are more sensitive to your environment than usual, and you'll need to choose your company carefully. This is a very good month to take time for self care, exercise, and healthy eating programs. With work, you are looking for something that stimulates your passion, as you may feel bored or trapped with your current position. Your spirituality is a big focus this month. Your own natural psychic talents are on full display this month. You may need more time to yourself, especially in the first half of the month. In the last half you are more energetic, but you are nevertheless pacing yourself.

VIRGO

(Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

This month is a time to review your past choices and actions, make corrections if you can, and prepare to put some of your newer and more innovative ideas into action after July 17. This is a great time to reconnect with old friends, clients, or former business associates. They can provide support, information, and possibly some inspiration for new ideas. After the 17th, July will become a much better month to promote your services or go looking for other employment. Your relationship will need some attention throughout the rest of this year—some renewal and a big dose of fun will be essential! Arguments and disagreements are the early indicators that you need to take action. Children or less-mature folk will require more of your time for personal guidance.

LIBRA

(Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

Career is a big focus this month, especially with Mercury (planet of habits and routines) retrograde in your career area. This is an excellent month to delve into the existing problems and look for solutions or alternatives to your previous choices. Particularly with the eclipse on the 5th, you could be looking at alternative career options, retirement, or disconnecting from the grid altogether. The other big thing for you is that Mars (planet of action, anger, and adventure) is visiting your relationship sector for the next six months. This can be a real time of testing for your relationships. If you are single, this will be a time where you are looking for someone new! If you are involved, your partnership needs some attention. If the problems are too great, it may be time to go your separate ways. It will be hard to hide your feelings in this area.

SCORPIO

(Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

In the early part of the month, you are ready to relax and open your mind to new ideas, expressing your thoughts in a book or on a social-media blog. You are also restarting old projects from the past, with a better sense of how to complete them. Family relationships are very important this month, especially those associated with siblings or cousins. This may be a time when some difficult decisions need to be made. Relationships remain an open question, as you are reinventing this part of your life. If you are single, you are more open to a partner than you have been in the past. And if you are involved, you are ready to redefine the parameters of your current commitments. In the latter half of the month, your focus shifts to your career, as you will be putting more energy into that part of your life.

SAGITTARIUS

(Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

While your relationships are improving, you are shifting your focus to your finances. This should be an excellent month to review that aspect of your life and make real improvements. On one level, this is you coming to terms with your real talents and attempting to make the best us of those capabilities. You will also be letting go of the parts of your life that are too expensive or just don't provide enough return. This is a good time to be looking at long-term investing, fundraising, or becoming part of a company that does those very things. And finally, you will need more fun in your life, especially over the next six months. Boredom doesn't sit well with you!

CAPRICORN

(Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

The ongoing tensions that you have been dealing with continue through most of July. The planets that are creating the pandemic, the economic crisis, and the demands for racial equality are all in Capricorn and Cancer this month. This will have a direct impact on your relationships and the people that you encounter on an everyday basis. There is more fuel for the fire with Mars, planet of action and anger, playing a big role in your horoscope for the next six months. Some of you will be inspired to fight back, while others have had enough and are looking for a place to live "off the grid." Family will need your actions and energy to take care of a family crisis. Be clear about what you want to do, and not what they want you to do! Your stress levels remain high through the middle of August. Make sure you find some time for yourself.

AQUARIUS

Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

You are working hard to get your ducks in a row this month. This should be a great month for reorganizing, cleaning up storerooms, clearing out old computer files, and getting yourself back on your exercise and diet program. Long-term career revisions are a strong possibility this month and next. You are looking to commit your energy and talents to something that can create real security for you. This is also a time to update and improve existing commitments and partnerships. You are in a very sensitive time and may want to avoid problematic people altogether. Still, you are better able to express your opinions, even if it creates a difficult situation. By the end of the month, the tension level drops as your focus shifts more to your relationships and long-term commitments.

PISCES

(Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

You are looking to keep yourself running on a smooth and clear path this month. You need to express your creative side, either through your own art or through your children. Your home is your sanctuary this month, so you'll want to keep it as peaceful as possible. After the 17th, it can be a great time for some redecorating or maybe even relocating. You had been wanting to do more with your partner in June, and that trend continues this month as well. The eclipse on the 5th will stimulate the friendship area of your horoscope, and you may feel the need to reconnect with old friends. But there must be a balance there, as it was too easy in the past to let people take advantage of you. You are paying much more attention to your boundaries these days.

For more astro-insight, log on to lillyroddy.com.

The Bearded Beauty of Texas

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **ANGELO S. ORTIZ VELA**



Blackberri is the gender-bending barrel of laughs who sports the whiskers of ZZ Top and the demeanor of Lucille Ball. When she first started drag, she wanted to have something that set her apart from everyone else, but also felt unique to herself. Hence, the facial hair. "My beard has pushed me to go above and beyond—to be seen as an equal in a state known for praising more traditional drag."

Preferred pronouns?
In drag: She/Her. Out of drag: He/Him.

Hometown?
Born in Houston, but raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Drag birthday?
August 31, 2016

Story behind the name?
The name "Blackberri" is a combination of a few things. I am both an African-American and a part of the Bear community. And in the Black community, a lot of people call gay guys "fruity" or "a fruit." I took all these things and combined them together to make something delicious.

Tell us about your comedic side.
Before drag, I worked as a bartender in a comedy club, and I think it made my love for comedy grow. It pushed me to start writing my own material, and once I started drag, I tried to make it an important part of who I am as an entertainer.

What first attracted you to do drag?
When I was in fashion design school, I had a friend that was a well-known drag queen. I helped fix her costumes and practiced my sewing skills with her. Over the years, I learned so much and [decided that] drag was something where I could use my acquired skills to express myself. Also, it was a way that I could make people smile, which has always been my goal.

What do you do when not performing in drag?
I sleep a lot! I am a pretty amazing cook, so on my free days I enjoy playing in the kitchen or spending time with my seven-year-old dachshund, Bettie Page, or my two-year-old ferret, Paris Hilton.

Thoughts on what is happening in our nation right now?
These past few months have been very hard for entertainers like myself, whose full-time jobs are working in nightlife. It has pushed me to become more creative with putting together all forms of content like videos and livestreams so I can connect to people who love my art, and also keep my creative juices flowing. It's a small glimmer of light out of much darkness.

Who would you want to be reincarnated as?
Hopefully, one of Jeff Bezos' grandkids. Or a Kardashian.

How have you grown through the years?
When I first started, I wanted to be this over-the-top club kid with crazy makeup and super-wild looks. After years of working on my craft, I have embraced more of a feminine look that reads more "pinup" or "old Hollywood."

Biggest personal inspirations?
I am a huge comic book and anime fan, so I get a big amount of my inspiration from comics, movies, cosplay, or even Disney.

Any horror stories from the stage?
I've had my share of wigs fall off during a cartwheel, but that happens when you wear wigs as big as mine.

Overall thoughts on Houston's drag scene?
Houston drag is one of the most diverse scenes in the country. There's so much talent in the city, and such a variety of artists. It makes me proud to be a part of a drag scene that I see evolving into a shining future.

Where can people see you perform when we no longer need to be socially distant?
You'll catch me all around Houston! Wednesdays at The Room Bar and Lounge in Spring for "Drinks & Drag," Thursdays at ReBar for "Drag It On," Fridays at Hamburger Mary's Houston for "F-Rated Fridays," and Saturdays at Michael's Outpost for "Eye Cons."

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