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HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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Docuseries
features
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Rebecca
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Pride Houston's
2020 GRAND MARSHALS

LEGENDARY ENTERTAINER

DRAG SUPERSTAR TOMMIE ROSS IS THE FIRST
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Pg.29

Plus

LANDON RICHIE, AUSTIN DEXTER WILLIAMS, KELSEY REYNOLDS,
LILLIE SCHECHTER, and NIKKI ARAGUZ LOYD

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT: 8 LOCAL QUEER CREATIVES

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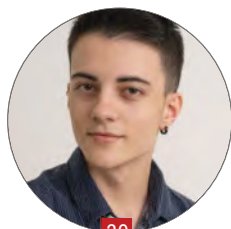
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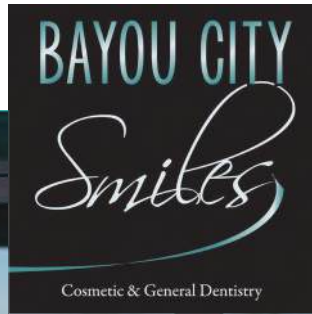


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Houston may not have been able to celebrate LGBTQ Pride with a festival and parade this summer, but COVID-19 hasn't stopped Pride Houston from uplifting the community with several online events. The organization, which puts together Space City's queer celebration every June, has made sure we can still enjoy the LGBTQ festivities from home.

In response to the unjust murder of George Floyd, Pride Houston hosted It Started With A Riot, a virtual LGBTQ Black Lives Matter rally on June 27. The group continued its digital outreach with Rights Are Human, a July 25 online roundtable that aimed to raise awareness on community issues.

Pride Houston's next virtual soiree is its upcoming Heritage Gala fundraiser. The star-studded

event, which takes place via Zoom at 8 p.m. on October 17, helps to ensure the future of Houston's queer community by awarding scholarships to local LGBTQ students.

And the organization isn't stopping there to recognize queer Houston activists. Pride Houston's 2020 grand marshals, who represent the city's top LGBTQ leaders, are featured on OUTSMART's September digital covers. Writer Brandon Wolf interviews these inspiring folks: Tomorrow's Trendsetter Grand Marshal Landon Richie, Female-Identifying Grand Marshal Tommie Ross, Male-Identifying Grand Marshal Austin Dexter Williams, Nonbinary Grand Marshal Kelsey Reynolds, and Honorary Grand Marshal Nikki Araguz Loyd.

Because there was no Pride parade this year, these 2020 grand marshals will be honored alongside the 2021 grand marshals during next year's celebration. Until then, get to know these inspiring

folks by reading their OUTSMART profiles, and keep up with Pride Houston's year-round slate of events by visiting their website at pridehouston.org.

Elsewhere in this issue, we highlight eight local LGBTQ artists who are elevating the city's creative landscape—MoNique LeRoux, Cody Fitzsimmons, Chris Scott, Sebastian Gomez de la Torre, Wood Anthony Fancher, Robin Baker, Leticia Contreras, and j bilhan.

We also want to congratulate Jovon Tyler on becoming president of the Houston GLBT Political Caucus. Writer Ryan Leach sits down with Tyler, who is leading the candidate-endorsement group as it prepares its pro-equality slate for the upcoming November 3 election. Be sure to look for their Caucus endorsement card online at thecaucus.org before you head to the polls.

This election is a crucial one, as many civil-rights issues are on the line. Don't forget to register to

vote by October 5 by downloading an application at tinyurl.com/ybwcnytl or picking one up from any Harris County Tax Assessor-Collector's branch office, library, or other government office.

To further inspire you to vote, OUTSMART's October issue will highlight several local pro-LGBTQ candidates who are on the November ballot. And don't miss our annual Gayest & Greatest Reader's Choice Awards that will also be featured in the October issue.

See you then!



Lourdes Zavaleta
MANAGING EDITOR



ON the COVER

Pride Houston's 2020 Grand Marshals

This year's honorees are (from top left) Tommie Ross, Landon Richie, Austin Dexter Williams, Kelsey Reynolds, Lillie Schechter, and Nikki Araguz Loyd.

Photography by Alex Rosa
for OUTSMART magazine

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Advocates Uniting for Action

Transgender Ally Collective shows how local allies can better support the trans community.

By LILLIAN HOANG
Photos by DALTON DEHART



Transgender Ally Collective, a new local advocacy organization, kicked off its launch by raising a billboard that reads “Protect Black Trans Women” in Fifth Ward. The group was founded by LGBTQ Houston leaders Ian L. Haddock (l), Verniss McFarland III, Mia Porter and Justyn Smith (not pictured).

On December 29, 2018, local transgender activist Mia Porter was brutally attacked after leaving a restaurant in downtown Houston. During the assault, Porter’s friend, who she was on the phone with at the time, dialed 911 on her behalf, as did a couple driving by. The aggressor, whom Porter says she knew, fled before officers arrived.

According to Porter, the couple told the police that had they not stopped to help her, the attacker would have killed her. “I had to fight for my life,” Porter recalls.

Although she provided the Houston Police Department with a sworn statement, the man she said assaulted her was neither charged nor convicted. The Harris County District Attorney’s office concluded that there wasn’t enough evidence.

Based on the latest survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, trans people are at a much greater risk of verbal harassment, physical abuse, and discrimination because of their gender identity. For trans women of color, and especially for Black trans

women, the stakes are even higher.

A few months after Porter was assaulted, Tracy Single, Porter’s friend and another Black woman of the trans experience, was murdered by her boyfriend.

At least 26 trans or gender-nonconforming people have been shot or killed this year, according to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). And just as in previous years, HRC’s data reveals that many of these victims have been Black trans women. These statistics, along with the memory of Porter’s unresolved police report and Single’s death, have pushed several Houston activists to become better advocates for the trans community.

Porter decided to further her trans advocacy work in December 2019 by creating Sister to Sister Support Group, a social organization that offers Black trans women a safe space to meet and share resources.

In March 2016, Ian L. Haddock, a Black gay man and one of Porter’s childhood friends, created The Normal Anomaly, an organization that supports the Black and/or LGBTQ community through storytelling, outreach, and programming. He recently partnered with

Porter, Verniss McFarland III of The Mahogany Project, and Justyn Smith of Impulse Group Houston, to create the Transgender Ally Collective (TAC), an organization dedicated to serving the trans community with a focus on Black trans people.

TAC kicked off its launch on August 9 with a public-awareness campaign that featured a billboard on Interstate 10 east of downtown that read “Protect Black Trans Women.” The collective also uploaded three online public-service announcements to uplift Black trans women and highlight their experiences. The PSAs, which can be viewed on the Facebook pages of The Mahogany Project and The Normal Anomaly, feature stories that show how the LGBTQ community and its allies can support Black trans women.

McFarland, a Black activist of the trans experience, says the project is essential because it answers the question “What can be done?” According to McFarland, TAC teaches LGBTQ groups and their allies how they can become better supporters of the trans liberation movement.

“We need other LGBTQ people and allies, other Black people, and other people of color to

be a part of this movement so we can have trans liberation for everyone,” McFarland adds.

TAC will host several trans-led Zoom webinars starting this month to show community allies what they can do to protect the trans community. The first training session occurs on September 18 at 7 p.m. and will be led by McFarland and Atlantis Narcisse, the founder of Save Our Sisters United, INC, a support group for trans women of color. Interested individuals can register for the event through Zoom at tinyurl.com/y2kpfz6q.

The organization will also hold a virtual town-hall meeting with local politicians and healthcare leaders in September to discuss how they can help protect the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of trans people. More details on that upcoming event will be posted on TAC’s website.

In the meantime, TAC will continue to work with trans activists of all ages to determine what the group’s next steps are, gather funds for Black trans-led organizations like The Mahogany Project, and assist these groups with grant writing.

“The collective is a way of prioritizing Black trans women by placing them at the forefront of an actionable movement, instead of waiting



TAC’s August 9 launch and billboard unveiling featured remarks from members of Houston’s Black trans community and their allies.

for [murdered] Black trans women to become hashtags,” Haddock says.

Porter agrees, and hopes TAC will reduce the level of violence and discrimination directed at trans people.

“Like other organizations, TAC is working to ensure trans people have an equitable source of healthcare, education, housing, and gainful

employment,” she says. “TAC is trying a different approach to create awareness and change. In the end, we’re all working for the same cause—to empower the movement and sustain trans lives.”



Join TAC’s mailing list and get updates on the program’s future efforts by visiting transallycollective.org



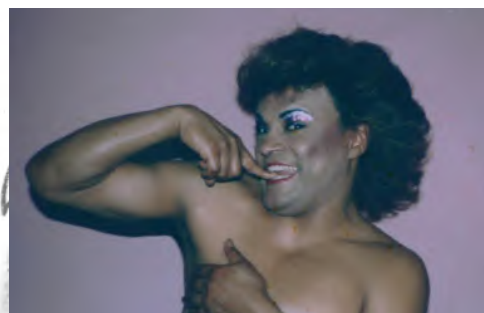
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QFest Moves Online

Houston's LGBTQ film festival is set to greatly expand its reach.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Born and raised in Alvin, Texas, 47-year-old Kristian Salinas was on the advisory committee that created the first Houston LGBTQ film festival, now known as QFest, back in 1996. He was pretty sure the film festival would grow into what it's become today.

"I think there was that belief that it would last and endure," says Salinas, who is now the executive and artistic director of the festival (and who also currently serves on the MFAH film committee and as an advisor for Aurora Picture Show).

But did he ever imagine QFest being forced to do an all-virtual festival, thanks to a world-wide pandemic?

"No, never," he admits. "We've always had a relaxed conversation about doing some things online. Sundance has been doing some virtual screenings for a couple of years. But we never thought we'd be forced to hold the entire festival online."

Typically held in July, this year's 24th annual QFest will be online September 24-28, with a lineup that has been somewhat scaled back.

"We were already planning to scale back a little," he notes, "[in order] to save for our 25th anniversary next year." But this was like throwing out the whole playbook and creating a festival from scratch. Plus, COVID-19 has

impacted support for all the arts, so funding for the festival was limited.

"It was like that expression about trying to build an airplane while it's in flight. We didn't want to bite off more than we could chew," Salinas says. "We got feedback from some other film festivals and started to go from there. Like our slogan 'Dorothy, lose the dress but keep the shoes,' we had to pare down a lot, but we kept the best part—the sparkly shoes, which in our case is our programming."

But QFest was hard-pressed to create a virtual festival by itself, especially since Salinas is the only full-time staffer along with five part-timers. Festivals like Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival can afford to build out their own websites to accommodate online screenings. And Austin's South by Southwest Film Festival was famous enough that it could partner with Amazon Prime to put their 2020 films online.

But then something good happened for QFest and Salinas.

"This start-up approached us," he says. "Cinenso is a [new] website designed specifically for virtual film festivals. Its slogan is 'film festivals from your couch.' I think we've all gotten a little tired of sitting on our couches," Salinas admits, "but this will be a five-day event, so you don't have to watch it all at once."

Cinenso also hosted the BELIFFestival and the Salento International Film Festival online last month. The user-friendly site prompts you to log on, create an account, and pick a festival. You then buy a festival pass to use whenever your chosen festival begins.

"This year, we had almost 2,000 entries," Salinas notes. "That's a low average for us." The QFest jury will select 5 to 6 features and about 15 short films for screening. Selections will be announced on QFest's website September 1.

Despite all of the hassles involved, Salinas says there is a silver lining. "We'll have the advantage of an international reach," he admits. "We get international films, and oftentimes the filmmakers can't attend the festival. This way, they can." Cinenso currently covers the U.S., Canada, the EU countries, and Australia. It can also facilitate discussion forums and interviews online—something that QFest may do next year.

And even when the world returns to something resembling pre-COVID normalcy, QFest may continue its online presence in order to attract a whole new virtual audience.

"I really think we might do that," Salinas says.



QFest 2020 schedule and festival passes available at q-fest.com. Online viewings run September 24-28. Hosted by cinenso.com.

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Taking the Lead

Jovon Tyler is the new president
of Houston's GLBT Political Caucus.

By RYAN M. LEACH



2020 is a monumental election year for the United States. Choosing a new president is always a significant milestone for countries, as well as for community organizations

like Houston's historic GLBT Political Caucus. The Caucus held a presidential election of their own last month, and members selected Jovon Tyler, 44, to lead the South's oldest LGBTQ political group.

Tyler, who is gay, is no stranger to the Caucus. From 1994 to 1998 he served as the organization's youngest board member ever, working alongside storied LGBTQ Houston leaders like Pat Gandy, Terry Richardson, and Lane Lewis. He played a pivotal role in putting the Caucus on the map with a mayoral administration that did not have the same close relationship with the Caucus that more recent mayors have had.

"The Caucus didn't have a relationship with [the late Mayor Bob] Lanier. He wouldn't take meetings with us. He wouldn't engage. I thought that was outrageous, so we came up with the Power Brunch. The Caucus invited each of the mayoral candidates to join us for brunch, with [former Mayor] Lee Brown being the first. Then, eventually [Mayor Sylvester] Turner, Gracie Saenz, and George Grenias joined us. We even had Rob Mosbacher, who came to thank us for the brunch but let us know that we would not be getting anything from his administration. Those meetings helped establish a relationship between the Caucus and the leaders at City Hall. That was the beginning of what led us to the relationships we have today, and I am proud that that is part of my early legacy at the Caucus," Tyler notes.

After finishing his term on the Caucus board, Tyler took a break to become a member of AmeriCorps. That experience took him to Brazil—an appealing opportunity for a 22-year-old. When he returned to Houston and to the Caucus, many of the leaders he had worked alongside were gone. The institutional knowledge they carried with them was missing, and Tyler recognized that he now had a responsibility to bridge that gap between the activist voices of the past and the emerging activists of today.

He also noticed the positive change taking place with the organization's growing diversity. "When I was invited back to the Caucus by my friend [and former Caucus president] Mike

Webb, I was stunned that there was so much more diversity within the organization. That's good, because if we are ever going to achieve anything of great significance, it will take more voices. More Black and brown people from all over the city. Even people we don't know yet. It's going to take all kinds of people working together as part of the LGBTQIA+ coalition to get big stuff done in the next decade," Tyler says.

As the first nonbinary-identifying president of the Caucus from 2018 to 2020, Mike Webb was a groundbreaking leader in their own right.

September 2 will be Tyler's first official Caucus meeting at the helm. As the new president, he will be responsible for helping the Caucus set priorities in its fight to advance social justice for the LGBTQ community in Houston and throughout the state.

"IT'S GOING TO TAKE ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER AS PART OF THE LGBTQIA+ COALITION TO GET BIG STUFF DONE IN THE NEXT DECADE."

—Jovon Tyler

"I think one of the major things Houston needs is a nondiscrimination ordinance. It has come up three times and has been rejected by the citizens three times. It hurts us as a city not to have one in place. We like to think of ourselves in Houston as a lovely blue dot in a sea of red, but I think that [history of intolerance] is a red stain on our blue dot," Tyler says.

He is referring, of course, to the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) that was passed by City Council in 2014. After anti-LGBTQ activists petitioned to get a repeal on the ballot in 2015, the ordinance was struck down by voters after a divisive and hard-fought campaign. HERO got national attention and became the rallying cry for conservatives who

pushed the false claim that "it would allow men to enter women's bathrooms." That fear-mongering rhetoric was based on one narrow aspect of the ordinance that allowed people to use public restrooms based on their gender identity. The HERO defeat was a significant political blow for Mayor Annise Parker's administration.

Parker is a former president of the GLBT Caucus who went on to make history as the first openly lesbian mayor of a major U.S. city. She also happens to be Tyler's mother.

"We worked really hard with all of our kids to make sure they were engaged in politics, but Jovon [especially] took to it. He cares deeply about what happens in the community. By taking on this leadership role, he is putting his money where his mouth is," Parker says.

The Caucus has a long history of grooming its presidents for larger leadership roles in the community. Parker is probably the most recognizable example, but other presidents like municipal judge Fran Watson (2016–2017) and activist Kris Banks (2009–2010) have also ascended to positions of influence. Both have faith in Tyler's ability to carry on the legacy.

"Jovon at the helm of the Caucus is pretty phenomenal. His intellect, experience, and care for the LGBTQ community will keep the Caucus moving in a way that ensures Houston will be at the forefront of achieving fully-realized equality for LGBTQ people," Watson says.

"As someone who served on the board years ago and has remained active in local politics since, Jovon brings both a fresh outlook and a historical perspective to the role. I am excited to see what he does," Banks adds.

With Tyler following in his mother's footsteps to become a Caucus president, the natural question is whether he also has his sights set on much larger roles in the future. Both Parker and Tyler demurred on that question.

"He is more of a natural politician than I am, but he has plenty of time to figure that out," Parker says.

And Tyler just wants to remain focused on the important task at hand. "All I really want to do is be the best president the Caucus has ever had—and that would include my mother. That's a tall glass of water, but I hope every president feels that way."



For more information about the Houston GLBT Political Caucus, visit thecaucus.org.

By MONICA ROBERTS



Kamala Harris is Not Transphobic

Why are white fauxgressive transgender peeps hating on the Democratic VP pick?



Senator Kamala Harris was my first choice for president when she announced that she was running on January 21, 2019. She has been on my po-

litical radar since the early 2000s when I saw her speak as a member of a criminal-justice panel during one of Tavis Smiley's State of the Black Union events.

I was so impressed by her that I made a mental note to keep up with this then-San Francisco district attorney, because I had a hunch she was a political star in the making.

I watched her continue to blaze trails as California's attorney general, and then as the second Black female U.S. senator in American history. I was overjoyed when she was named as Joe Biden's vice-presidential running mate last month.

But literally hours after the announcement was made, I was not happy to hear the smears coming from white transgender fauxgressives who were attacking her as "transphobic." It was also interesting to note that most of those ticked-off trans peeps were former Sanders and Warren supporters.

One trans person even posted (before I had a chance to screenshot the comment and read their behind) that "Kamala is a TERF"—a trans-exclusionary radical feminist.

So Moni is about to "reclaim her time," as my Aunt Maxine would say, and blow up the lies and distortions about Kamala Harris' record. Let's get to the reality of where Kamala Harris stands when it comes to trans-specific issues.

I'll start with the July 2006 two-day conference she organized to come up with ways to push back and defeat the "trans-panic defense" that murderers of trans people often use in court. That conference was attended by over 200 prosecutors and law-enforcement officials from across the nation.

In 2014, as the California attorney general, she supported AB 2501, a bill authored by Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla that banned the use of the trans- and gay-panic defense in California. She also joined with other attorneys general in several states to submit the 2016 amicus brief in opposition of North Carolina's transphobic HB 2.

Then as a California senator, Harris filed a federal bill to ban the use of the trans- and gay-panic defense nationwide. She has repeatedly called out anti-trans violence aimed at Black trans women, and expressed her vehement opposition to Trump's anti-trans ban on trans members serving in the military.

Now let's address the persistent lie that Harris "opposed surgery for trans inmates."

The California AG office is the designated attorney for all California state agencies. That means when any agency goes to court on an issue, the AG's office represents them.

The California AG office is the largest state attorney's office in the nation, with five divisions and over 1,000 attorneys working for it. As Attorney General from 2011 until 2017, Harris was in an executive position heading up several layers of management above the state attorneys who actually try those cases.

So when a trans inmate filed a case to force the California Department of Corrections to allow her to have gender-confirmation surgery (GCS) while incarcerated, Harris' office was obligated to defend the state's Department of Corrections.

When Harris discovered this anti-trans case was happening, she worked behind the scenes to change the policy so that this inmate could have GCS surgery.

So, news flash for all you Kamala haters: responsibility for what goes on in the California prison system falls on Governor Gavin Newsom, and the last time I checked, y'all weren't calling him a transphobe over this case.

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

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To Cancel or Not to Cancel?

A closer look at call-out culture reveals the good, the bad, and the ugly.

By DARYL SHORTER, MD



By now, we should all recognize the pattern:

Step 1: A person says or posts something that sounds ignorant or thoughtless.

Step 2: That person's followers are insulted or offended. Tweets, retweets, and Facebook comments go viral. More outrage follows.

Step 3: The person is "canceled," and their posts are removed. An apology is offered, but it's deemed to be weak and insincere. The person is banished from social media by offended followers who feel justified and vindicated.

Step 4: Days, weeks, or months pass. The canceled person gradually re-emerges, chastened. Perhaps they have learned something from the incident. Former followers have collectively forgotten why the person was canceled in the first place—that is, if they ever knew to begin with.

Step 5: Life continues. Then another unfortunate person posts something offensive and begins the cycle of outrage all over again.

Sound familiar?

The Tribal Roots of Cancellation

While the concept of "cancel culture" is new, humans have shunned their fellow humans for various kinds of social infractions since the dawn of time. From an evolutionary standpoint, it makes sense. Communities were safer when all members agreed and exhibited similar behavior. If an individual's thoughts or actions were too far out of line, they might well have been ostracized and left to fend for themselves.

Today, we can see that "cancel culture" is a byproduct of the Internet. Dissatisfaction with personal friends and celebrities alike can be easily communicated across multiple platforms. Individual decisions to criticize someone can quickly grow into widespread calls for the person's complete social obliteration. Public opinion, amplified by social media and the erosion of civility in our public discourse, now wields a new kind of power in our daily lives.

The LGBTQ Community and Cancel Culture

Offensive language is often weaponized

against the LGBTQ community, and jokes are frequently made at the expense of queer people. So to what extent should we be willing to participate in and support cancel culture?

It is important to consider that canceling can sometimes be a valid option for marginalized people who need to forcefully voice their opposition to injustice and exploitation. Even if this angry rhetoric does not match your particular style of communication, you can still try to understand the perspective being voiced. Why might this individual feel the need to call for change in this particular way?

This also brings up the question of how far one should go in calling out offensive behavior. For example, it's easy to stop following a celebrity on social media. It's much harder, but not impossible, to persuade the public to give up that person's movies or music. Boycotting, or refusing to support businesses with beliefs or values contrary to your own, can also be a valid means of influencing a company's business practices. Rather than focusing solely on the offending entity, calling attention to those who are being harmed radically shifts the emotional tenor of our societal response. Purchasing according to your principles is ultimately a

good thing, as is divesting from companies in an effort to hold them accountable.

If you don't think the calls for cancellation and boycotts have any real impact, you need only think back to some recent prominent examples. After making anti-gay comments in a 2010 stand-up routine and a 2011 Twitter post, comedian Kevin Hart was not allowed to host the 2018 Academy Awards ceremony. When word of Ellen DeGeneres' toxic workplace culture spread like wildfire in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the nationwide reckoning with institutional racism, she suffered great damage to her "nice gal" image and a huge drop in ratings and advertising revenue. Notably, this isn't the first time DeGeneres has been canceled. In 2019, she came under fire for sitting next to and joking with former president George W. Bush during a football game. Angered fans even began questioning her "loyalty" to the community.

Most recently, openly gay comedian and Internet star Randy Rainbow has been called out for cancellation. Following his nomination for an Emmy Award last month, a number of racist, sexist, and transphobic Twitter posts from the 2000s resurfaced. Rainbow admitted to making the comments, but in his

apology he denied ever being racist and stated that his comedy has "evolved" with the times. The extent to which he will be believed and supported in the future remains to be seen.

Moving beyond Cancel Culture

While it may feel personally and emotionally gratifying to cancel someone, the actual impact on the person may be quite limited. To what extent does cancellation deter the behavior of sexists and racists? It's hard to know. Does cancellation lead to behavioral change? More importantly, can it bring about changes of heart and mind?

Ultimately, whether or not you believe cancel culture works depends on what you think canceling someone can achieve. If the intent is to hold people accountable for their behavior in the public realm, then it works fairly well. As a social deterrent, it can prevent others from behaving in a similar manner. However, it may be overly optimistic to think that canceling people who enjoy demonizing and belittling others will somehow reform their antisocial behavior.

Applying the principles of restorative justice can help us navigate in this angry and divisive time. Rather than calling for social eradication as punishment "to teach people

a lesson," engaging people in purposeful conversation can create opportunities for education and developing mutual understanding.

In cases where people have erred, how can we work to repair the harm caused by their offensive behavior? How can we educate ourselves and the community about the issues being raised? Meetings between offenders and their victims have been shown to increase empathy and promote lasting changes in behavior.

Investing our emotional energy in real-life interactions with people outside of our own echo chambers can help us move beyond cancel culture toward the more meaningful goals of healing and reconciliation. We all need to hold on to the hope that even hate-filled people are capable of change. By offering forgiveness and grace to someone who may not seem like they deserve it, we can all learn and work toward creating a better society.

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

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Do You Need a Financial Physical?

How to make sure your portfolio stays fit.



It's been said that there are seven pillars of good health, and they go way beyond just eating right and exercising. In fact, true wellness involves integrating seven important components: physical, emotional, relationship to self, social, spiritual, habits/actions, and financial.

All of these pillars support each other, so even if just one of them is off, it can have an impact on all of the others. With that in mind, a healthy retirement-savings plan should start with taking a financial physical.

How Healthy Is Your Plan?

Getting a good baseline assessment of where your financial plan is right now can help point you in the right direction in terms of meeting your future objectives. Without taking a financial physical, though, you may not receive the right type of care.

In fact, even if you're a good saver, it is necessary to have a "care plan" in place so that

you'll know you're going in the right direction.

For example, if you have a variety of different investments in your portfolio, were these financial vehicles picked at random or purchased specifically to get you closer to your goals?

In addition to giving you a definitive direction, a financial plan can provide you with other benefits, such as:

- Protecting assets from various risks
- Reducing your future out-of-pocket healthcare and long-term care expenses
- Uncovering any shortfalls between anticipated future expenses and current income sources
- Allowing for more tax-efficient strategies
- Creating income that continues to flow for as long as you need it to.

Although setting up a complete financial plan may seem a bit overwhelming, the reality is that you don't have to start out big. Just like the goal of attaining optimum physical health to run a marathon, you don't start out running

the whole 26 miles on day one. Rather, you build up to it by going shorter distances and increasing them over time.

An experienced financial advisor can provide you with recommendations on how to get to where you want to go, based on where you're starting from now. They can also act as your "trainer" to guide and motivate you throughout the planning process and beyond.

Preparing for Your Financial Physical

In order to develop a plan that is based on your specific needs and goals, it is important to prepare for your meeting with a financial professional. So prior to your appointment, make sure that you:

- Make a list of your current expenses and income generators, and distinguish between expenses that are needs versus those that are wants
- Discuss your current and future financial objectives and challenges with your spouse or partner. Make sure that you're both on the same page!

It is also recommended that you gather some important documents and bring these to the meeting so the advisor can review them.

These should include your:

- Most recent federal tax return
- 401(k) and/or other retirement plan statement(s)
- Statement(s) from any personal savings and/or investment accounts
- Pay stubs
- Mortgage and/or other debt statements.
- Insurance statements

Getting Regular Financial Checkups

Once your financial plan has been created, you shouldn't treat it as a "set it and forget it" task. Rather, you should ideally review your plan every year or every couple of years. And if you incur any major life changes such as marriage or divorce, the birth or adoption of a child, or the purchase or sale of a business, your plan should be reviewed sooner. Leaving your original plan in place could cause you to unintentionally disinherit someone or benefit the wrong individual(s). For example, if your life insurance and/or retirement account(s) still have an ex-spouse or partner listed as the beneficiary, that will likely need to be changed.

With that in mind, it is essential to ensure that all of your beneficiary and "transfer on death" (TOD) designations are up-to-date, and that the financial plan is properly set up for any new goals and objectives you may have.

Next Steps toward Healthy Finances

Just like developing your ideal plan for nutrition and exercise, everyone needs to have a plan that fits their unique financial and retirement needs. What may work for a friend or family member may not necessarily be right for you.

The first step toward attaining and maintaining a healthy financial life should be to talk with an advisor who can review your current plan and objectives, and from there develop a roadmap to address your short- and long-term needs.

Working with an LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly advisor can further ensure that your financial plan is up-to-date with regard to tax, inheritance, and other rules pertaining to same-sex spouses and partners.

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

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All Tuckered Out

Tired of all those annoying “Karens”?
Try a few of the male variety.



As you know, the name “Karen” is now the moniker given to straight, semi-wealthy white women of privilege—those holier-than-thou types who will solemnly swear on a stack of Bibles that there’s no such a thing as “white privilege.” This new breed of soccer moms and social butterflies will also claim that \$2,400 a month can certainly support a family of four, if only that lazy mother would just clip coupons.

Let me stop right here and point out that I have some beloved friends named Karen, and I feel real bad for them right about now because none of them are *those* Karens. It’s a sad day for all of you normal Karens, who had no control over the name your mamas came up with.

But what the hell—it’s 2020, and everybody’s got something, ya know? There’s plenty of “deal with it” sentiment going around—I’ve got a couple of bucketloads myself. For example, my Aunt Thelma observes that old people aren’t quarantined to keep the COVID away—they’ve simply stopped going outside because that would mean they’d have to “deal with it.” They’ve already dealt with the Vietnam War, two Bushes in the White House, the disco craze, New Coke, and having to figure out what those darn kids mean when they say “OK, Boomer.” That’s enough.

Speaking of 2020, up until this year I thought the Dark Web was whatever appeared on the second page of a Google search. Have you

heard about those scary places on the Internet machine that specialize in making bat-crap-unhinged people even more unhinged?

Anyway, back to the Karens. Aunt Thelma and I were having a discussion last weekend about what name we would give to a male Karen. We tossed around a few ideas and came up with one that seems to work like a charm.

Tucker.

The advantage of calling them “Tucker” is that there are very few men named Tucker, so innocent people don’t get hurt. Also, everybody knows the annoying Fox News Tucker, who is a perfect Karen in a bow tie and an expensive haircut. Plus, he has his own teevee show where he can shout and look offended over all manner of manufactured outrages.

So Aunt Thelma and I are going with “Tucker.” Honestly, though, we had to chuckle when Tucker Carlson opined that it was “probably illegal” for Joe Biden to narrow the parameters of his VP search and focus only on women—and maybe only on *Black* women.

“For what could very well be the most important job on Earth, Biden has decided to hire exclusively on the basis of qualities that are both immutable and completely irrelevant: race and gender,” Carlson huffed.

Yes indeed—after those other 48 vice presidents were selected by narrowing the parameters down to straight, white, and male.

Of course, Tucker ignores the fact that

Biden was indeed considering many types of women—Elizabeth Warren, for starters. But no, our Tucker wants those white males, dammit! And they’d better be straight, have good hair, and look and think exactly like Tucker Carlson.

Additionally, Tucker’s verbal attacks on Dr. Anthony Fauci have inspired some of his viewers to make actual physical threats on Fauci, who bravely announced that “I’m not concerned about what Tucker says. I think you could say that when he does that, it triggers some of the crazies in society to start threatening me—actually threatening, which actually happens. I mean, who would have thought that when I was in medical school doing things to save people’s lives, I’d [end up having to] go around with a security detail? That’s really ridiculous.”

Yes indeed, Aunt Thelma, we’re going with “Tucker.”

Until next month, I need to ask y’all if I’m the only person who gets out of my car, walks ten yards, and then turns around and yells, “Oh crap, my mask!” You’d think I was damn Batman or something.

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

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“Trump Is the Most Pro-Gay President Ever”

A sobering look at 45's anti-LGBTQ record.

By RYAN LEACH



In a video posted by the Log Cabin Republicans, a.k.a. “The Patty Hearsts of the Republican Party,” Richard Grenell, the gay, former Trump-appointed ambassador to Germany and (for three months) the acting director of national intelligence, made the case for why he thinks Trump is “the most pro-gay President in American history.” In the video, Grenell mentioned the word “gay” fifteen times, while “lesbian” or “LGBT” was only heard three times. His message was clearly crafted to hit one core audience: white, gay, cisgender men. So as a member of his intended audience, I would like to respond:

First of all, Dick, (I can call you Dick, right?) thank you for pandering directly to me. No one ever takes into account what rich, white, gay, cisgender men are thinking. Our day has finally arrived! This whole summer has been a bust ever since the “China virus” arrived. I was talking to my friends at a Fire Island Fourth of July dance party with DJ Sickennnnning, and we are all completely over being ignored. It is good to hear that Trump continues to have our backs. Am I right, Dick?

Dick, I want to dive into Trump’s extensive “pro gay” record, which you detail in your video. Let’s break it down:

- **Trump appointed you as the first openly**

gay Acting Director of National Intelligence, a cabinet position. Wow. History making. I can’t wait to hear more about all of your accomplishments from February 2020 to May 2020, when you served. You mentioned in the video that Democratic nominee Joe Biden didn’t bother congratulating you on your appointment. Perhaps your voicemail hadn’t been set up before your storied tenure ended?

- **Trump appointed you as Ambassador to Germany. You weren’t the first openly gay ambassador, but you certainly were a gay ambassador,** and that certainly improved *my* lived experience, probably. I am not being hyperbolic when I say this, but it’s like you threw the first brick at Stonewall. Where’s *your* statue in Greenwich Village?

- **Trump opposes Hezbollah, which is supported by the homophobic Iranian regime.** While I do think it is great that the Trump administration opposes Hezbollah, that’s probably not the most persuasive of your five great points. Technically, 31 other countries around the world condemn or oppose Hezbollah, at least in part. As for the United States, we designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 1995. Hey, that’s when Hillary’s husband was president! Lock her up! LOLZ. Remember that?!

- **Trump backed out of the Iran nuclear deal.** Okay, I am confused. You see, I thought

he backed out of this because of many, many complicated reasons involving Iran’s ability to produce nuclear weapons and America’s need to defend itself. There are some other details about oil production and Iran’s relationship with Russia, too. But I guess, according to you, it was primarily to support gay Americans. A nice gesture, but also potentially very dangerous, no? Finally (and this is the big one) . . .

- **Trump told the United Nations that he opposed laws currently in place in 69 other nations that criminalize being gay or lesbian.** This sounds big, especially since they can kill you for being gay in some of those countries. This sounded big when Obama said it at the UN in 2011, and when Hillary Clinton made a historic speech before the UN about LGBTQ rights being human rights in December of that same year. Ugh, Hillary again! Lock her up! I am curious what Trump has done to address the murder and persecution of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya, but I get it—your video was only four minutes. I am sure I can google that.

Aaaaaaaaand . . . that’s all you have, Dick?

Gosh, now that I am seeing this in writing, it doesn’t look like much. In fact, it looks like a bunch of stuff that was already being done by Democrats for years before Trump took office. And in the case of pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal, it looks like it might actually be dangerous. I am sure I am missing something. So let’s look at your proof about how Joe Biden HATES gay people:

- **As a Senator in 1993, Biden supported Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.** This is true, and very damaging. However (and I am pretty sure I am right about this), didn’t Biden help lead on the legislation to repeal Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell in 2010 when he was vice president? I could be mistaken. (Never mind, I am not. I just googled it.) Yes, Biden was the first in the Obama administration to give a definitive timeline on when the law would be repealed, and it *was* repealed.

- **As a Senator in 1996, Biden supported the Defense of Marriage Act.** This is also true. But wasn’t Biden also the first nationally elected official to say publicly that he supported marriage equality? It wasn’t convenient tim-

ing, either, as it was right before his re-election and before President Obama revealed that he had “evolved” on the issue. Also, wasn’t it the Obama/Biden administration that wrote amicus briefs in support of overturning DOMA and legalizing same-sex marriage in 2013 and 2015, respectively? (I just googled it. It was.)

• **As a Senator in 1994, Biden said he would support cutting funding to schools that portrayed homosexuality as a positive lifestyle.** This is also true, and very damaging. But this position also predates his largely progressive work for “gay rights.” Also, school curricula are developed in large part by each individual state, so federal funding isn’t a large part of those budgets. However, as Vice President, Biden did support gender-affirming school policies and important federal civil-rights laws that have largely been reversed by (hold on while I google it . . .)
DONALD TRUMP!

Okay, so I am looking at Joe Biden’s record on “gay rights.” I will admit that Joe has had some problems in the past, but he went on to play a pivotal role in turning that past around. That’s more than we can say for our boy Trump, Dick!

Maybe we should look at Trump’s record on lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights. Maybe he will do better in those categories.

Here’s what Google came up with:

1. Trump opposes the Equality Act.
2. Trump is supportive of anti-LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace.
3. Trump banned transgender service members from the military.
4. Trump rolled back LGBTQ non-discrimination practices in the Department of Justice.
5. Trump’s Department of Labor issued rules allowing federal contractors to discriminate against LGBTQ workers.
6. Trump kicked service members living with HIV out of the military.
7. Trump created an HHS division that would defend doctors refusing service to LGBTQ patients.
8. Trump proposed a \$1.3 billion cut in funding for AIDS research abroad.
9. Trump’s Department of Education reversed gender-affirming guidelines for transgender students in public schools.
10. Trump threatened to withhold federal funding to schools that allow transgender students to participate in sports consistent with their gender identity.

11. Trump allowed emergency shelters to deny access to gender-nonconforming and transgender individuals.
12. Trump allowed prisons to place transgender people in cellblocks inconsistent with their gender identity.
13. Trump allowed the foster-care system to discriminate against LGBTQ parents and still receive taxpayer funding.
14. Trump refused visas to same-sex partners of diplomats.
15. Trump changed the rules allowing children carried by surrogate mothers to become citizens.

Wowzers, Dick, this doesn’t look great. This is a list of fifteen not-very-pro-gay (or for that matter, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer) things I’ve found, and there are many, many more. I must say, I am disappointed to learn how terrible Trump has been for gay people like me, and apparently for the L, B, T, and Q people, too! Well, important food for thought. Thanks for the propaganda. Your rainbow MAGA hat looks like shit.

Ryan Leach is a frequent contributor to OutSmart magazine. Keep up with him on Medium at medium.com/@ryan_leach

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Pride Houston's 2020 GRAND MARSHALS

Each year, Houston's queer community selects Pride Month grand marshals to recognize the city's top LGBTQ activists. It is among the highest honors to be named a grand marshal for the June Pride parade, and those who are chosen also perform ceremonial duties and serve as community ambassadors throughout the year.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Pride Houston, the nonprofit that organizes the city's LGBTQ June celebrations, was forced to cancel all of its in-person events. Because of this, the organization's 2020 grand marshals will be honored next year, alongside the 2021 grand marshals.

Although they were unable to host this year's festivities in June, Pride Houston leaders believe that the queer community should be celebrated year-round. For that reason, this issue of *OUTSMART* highlights the pioneering leaders who are being honored as 2020 grand marshals.

First, meet our cover star **Landon Richie**. The 18-year-old transgender activist is Pride Houston's first person to be named Tomorrow's Trendsetter Grand Marshal—a new category for local LGBTQ youth who are making a difference.

Next, get to know Female-Identifying Grand Marshal **Tommie Ross**, a Houston-based drag-pageant legend whose career has spanned over four decades. She is the first Black trans woman to receive this Pride Houston title in the organization's 42-year history.

Male-Identifying Grand Marshal **Austin Dexter Williams** is a Houston transplant who was

raised in Tennessee and worked in Georgia before moving to Space City. He has worked tirelessly alongside his husband to build LGBTQ community engagement.

Nonbinary Grand Marshal **Kelsey Reynolds** has had quite an eventful journey on the way to becoming a changemaker. The social worker and advocate for gender diversity has dedicated their life to helping others.

Ally Grand Marshal **Lillie Schechter** then discusses her commitment to furthering LGBTQ rights through political action. As chair of the Harris County Democratic Party, Schechter is working to turn Texas blue in the upcoming November election.

Finally, we celebrate the life of Honorary Pride Grand Marshal **Nikki Araguz Loyd**. The late trans trailblazer, who passed away last November, is remembered by her husband, William Loyd, as an advocate for change.

For more information on Pride Houston, visit pridehouston.org.

Photos by **ALEX ROSA**



**"LGBTQ PEOPLE NEED TO CELEBRATE
OUR PERSONAL JOURNEYS,
AND THOSE OF THE PEOPLE
WHO IGNITED THE MOVEMENT."**

—Landon Richie

Tomorrow's Trendsetter Grand Marshal

EMERGING LEADER

Landon Richie makes waves in the fight for transgender equality.

By BRANDON WOLF

Landon Richie's life has been an odyssey of authenticity. From his earliest memories he knew who he was, and since coming out as transgender at the age of ten, he has been an advocate of trans rights. The brave 18-year-old's personal journey, and his work as a political activist, are being recognized this year as he becomes Pride Houston's first Tomorrow's Trendsetter Grand Marshal. This new marshal category was created to honor local LGBTQ youth who are making a difference.

"It's nothing I ever saw coming," Richie says, adding that he is honored and pleased that LGBTQ youth are being highlighted. "Young people, and our experiences, are so often overlooked."

Richie was born to Aaron and Erika Richie in Houston on October 31, 2002. He is a third-generation Texan who grew up in the Sugar Land area and graduated from Dulles High School in June.

After struggling to understand his gender identity in elementary school and using the Internet to learn more about what it meant to be trans, a 12-year-old Richie attended summer camp with another trans boy in 2014 and learned more about trans life. "That brought me total clarity," he remembers.

When Richie was selected for his middle

school's honor band at the end of sixth grade, he knew he would be expected to wear a white dress for their concerts. Richie struggled with this issue, knowing that wearing feminine clothing would invalidate everything he knew about himself.

Shortly after camp, he came out to his parents, hoping they could help. "I sent my mother, who was just down the hall from me, an email telling her I was trans." Richie says he then sat against a wall with his knees in his chest, shaking. "I had read about so much rejection of trans youth." But after reading the email, Richie's parents showed him unconditional love and a willingness to learn by attending PFLAG Houston meetings.

Before the start of his seventh-grade year, Richie's mother talked to his school's band director, who was extremely understanding about Richie's gender identity and assured him he could dress in a tuxedo for concerts.

Richie had his name and gender marker legally changed before he entered the eighth grade, and he began to come out to close friends. That year went smoothly for Richie, aside from having to use the nurse's bathroom to change clothes for gym and band. "It was still alienating," Richie recalls. "I wasn't accepted as a boy or a girl."

A Young Activist Speaks Up

Also that year, Richie volunteered for block walking and campaigning for the Houston

Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), a City Council initiative that would have prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression (in addition to more than a dozen other characteristics). The rhetoric of fear and ignorance that was aroused by this political fight pushed him to become more of an activist.

Heading into high school, Richie and his mother sat down with school officials in hopes of resolving the bathroom issue. When the assistant principal objected to Richie using the boys' bathroom, his mother suggested they talk to an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyer who had experience fighting for the rights of trans students. The assistant principal backed down and allowed Richie to use the boys' bathroom. Band practices were Richie's most affirming part of his school day, and they became his safe haven throughout his high-school years.

In 2017, Richie traveled to Austin to testify against Senate Bill 6 (SB6), which prohibited trans-friendly bathrooms. While waiting to testify, he heard some of the negative speakers that preceded him. "I had to leave the room several times, because I was shaking while listening to their testimonies." The bill ultimately failed, and Richie returned to Austin in 2019 for a lobby day where he addressed a Capitol rally.

Protesting the anti-trans bill also inspired him to begin using his Instagram account to →

CONTINUED ON PAGE 35



**"I'M GLAD I DIDN'T HAVE
TO COMPROMISE MY
BLACKNESS TO WIN."**

—Tommie Ross

Female-Identifying Grand Marshal

LEGENDARY ENTERTAINER

Tommie Ross built her legacy by overcoming adversity.

By BRANDON WOLF

Tommie Ross says her life has been full of blessings—in spite of surviving racism, homophobia, transphobia, and nearly being paralyzed in a horrific car crash. That positive attitude is one of the many reasons this 60-year-old transgender drag legend is so beloved by her community.

In April, Ross was blessed again when she was elected as Pride Houston's 2020 Female-Identifying Pride Marshal. Winning the title is a special honor for Ross, since she is the first Black transgender woman to be so honored. "I'm glad I didn't have to compromise my Blackness to win."

Growing Up in Houston

Ross was born in Houston in 1960 and grew up as an only child, attending Lanier Middle School and Lamar High School. She says her life's defining moment came at the age of 4, when she saw The Supremes perform their hit "Come See About Me" on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. "I connected to Diana Ross both as a Black and as a woman," she says. Little did that 4-year-old know that she would one day take her idol's last name as her own.

In 1977, Ross went with friends to The Cove, a Black LGBTQ bar near what used to be the Alabama Theater. "We parked in the parking lot for a while to watch people come and go." When they finally went in, Ross was delighted to see men dancing with other men, drag performances, and hearing popular disco music.

Ross first came out as a gay male, but ad-

mits she never felt comfortable in that identity. After watching trans Houston performer Champagne take the stage, Ross understood that she was also a trans woman.

Ross soon became fascinated with drag, and began performing locally at The Copa. That popular LGBTQ disco had regular talent shows where each evening's winner could go on to compete in the club's annual competitions. Quickly sizing up what makes a great performer, Ross garnered The Copa's Entertainer of the Year award in 1982. After that win, Ross became close friends with popular drag performers Donna Day, Hot Chocolate, and Naomi Sims.

Ross' love for performing in lavish costumes led to her interest in beauty pageants. As a pageant queen, she began competing under the name Tommie Ross, and created her own aura of elegance and depth.

Ross found the beauty pageants to be lacking in racial diversity. "I was often the only Black person on the plane to a pageant, and arrived to find myself one of the few Black people in the building." But that didn't stop her from winning just about every pageant title in the drag world, including Miss Gay Houston America and Miss Black America. In 1999, she won the Miss Continental contest in Chicago, where she was so overcome by her win that she dropped to her knees and wept.

In July 2000, Ross was asleep in the back seat of a vehicle, headed to Houston. Near Tyler, the driver lost control of the car and it flipped over, throwing Ross 50 feet in the air. She was taken by helicopter to a Tyler hospital,

and eventually underwent three surgeries that left her with a metal rod in her femur and metal plates in her right shoulder and neck. At the 2000 Miss Continental pageant, Ross was unable to stand up to crown her successor, so the 2000 Miss Continental winner bowed before Ross while she sat in a chair to do the honors.

Ross eventually moved to Memphis after a stint in Dallas. It took two years of rehabilitation to be able to walk without her injuries being noticeable. "It was devastating to me physically, but it ended up giving me so much spiritually." Ross now lives with a high-school friend in the South Park area of Houston, close to Hobby Airport.

Ross believes that the annual Pride events are important because "we can't forget that we were persecuted and killed. We must not lose that awareness."

The COVID-19 pandemic is something that has Ross very concerned. "I contracted Legionnaires' Disease in 2018, so I am taking this seriously and am not out and about."

The recent death of George Floyd, who grew up in Houston, has also had a big impact on Ross. "It's not just his death. [That murder] was just the match lighting the fire. The fuel [for that fire is society's] racism."

Looking back on her life, Ross credits her spiritual awareness as the factor that has made all the difference. "If my connection to God hadn't been so close, my life could have been a tragedy."



Keep up with Tommie Ross on Instagram @TommieRoss.

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advocate for trans rights and share personal stories that conveyed an accurate trans experience. He now has over 28,000 followers from around the world, and they often ask him for advice on coming out, questioning one's gender identity, and where to find trans resources. Richie says using his platform to share this information with trans youth is important, because there are little to no resources for transitioning as a minor.

Richie is now in his freshman year at The Honors College at the University of Houston, majoring in political science and minoring in sociology. Due to the pandemic, most of his classes will be virtual. After college, Richie plans to attend either the UH Graduate College of Social Work (in order to do political social work) or enroll in law school so he can become a civil-rights attorney.

The Pandemic, Pride, and Politics

The COVID-19 pandemic has had its impact on Richie's life. "I left high school for spring break and never went back. The last two months of school were spent online. It's been a lonely experience."

And while the pandemic canceled all of Pride Houston's in-person activities, Richie was impressed that the organization integrated the Black Lives Matter movement into its online Pride 2020 lineup. "It's a conversation that is long overdue," he says, noting that he attended the first two protests held in Houston following George Floyd's death "because of the way Black communities have been treated consistently throughout history. That's not acceptable for a country that prides itself on justice and equality for all."

Richie, who identifies as gay, says it is important to celebrate Pride so that we make sure we realize how far we have come, and how far we still must go. "[LGBTQ people] need to celebrate our personal journeys, and those of the people who ignited the movement."

While Richie is encouraged by all the TV shows that include trans characters, he is disappointed that there are relatively few transmasculine roles. He intends to do something about that by becoming a role model and improving trans visibility through his participation in Gender Cool, an organization dedicated to promoting new and authentic images of trans Americans.

Richie has strived for years to be authentic. "I've learned, and re-learned, what authenticity is and how it applies to me, and how it affects those around me."

 *Keep up with Landon Richie on Instagram @landon_richie*

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A portrait of Austin Dexter Williams, a Black man with a beard, wearing a blue plaid blazer over a white shirt. He is holding a small, colorful paper crown with rainbow stripes above his head with both hands. The background is a plain, light color. The image is framed by a colorful gradient border on the left and right sides.

**"I JUST WANT PEOPLE IN
MY COMMUNITY TO FEEL LOVED."**

—Austin Dexter Williams

Male-Identifying Grand Marshal

COMMUNITY BUILDER

Austin Dexter Williams is passionately committed to empowering his community.

By BRANDON WOLF

Austin Dexter Williams is Pride Houston's 2020 Male-Identifying Grand Marshal, an honor that he admits was not on his radar. Although he is excited about his win, he is also aware that "there is great responsibility behind it." He is only the second Black man to be selected as a grand marshal in Pride Houston's 42-year history.

An Artistic Education

Williams was born in 1960 at the historically segregated Black hospital in Lafayette, Georgia, where his mother had to be rushed after being ignored at the city's main hospital while she was in labor. He was raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he excelled in the arts at his predominately white high school as president of the drama club and a member of the school choir. Show business was Williams' first love, and he also took dance lessons in hopes of becoming "the next Ben Vereen." Over the years, he starred in school productions of *Oliver*, *South Pacific*, *Pippin*, *Showboat*, and *Chicago*.

At the age of 16, Williams came out after his mother found a love letter tucked under his mattress that a male classmate had addressed to him. His parents needed time to adjust to his sexuality, but they were supportive by the time Williams was 19 and dating a Marine who had been deployed to boot camp. Williams' mother suggested that he write his friend a note "because he must be very lonely now."

Williams chose the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where he majored in psychology with a minor in theater. By the time he graduated, pragmatism had won out over his

dream of performing, and he moved to Atlanta to head up a visual-marketing team for Macy's department stores.

After a twelve-year career at Macy's, Williams went to work for The North Face, a company known for their activewear and outdoor sports gear. The perks that came with that job included a lot of fun trips to the ski slopes of Aspen, Colorado.

When North Face issued layoffs, Williams decided to move to Houston after seeing the city ranked number one on a list of top cities for Black men. He soon found a job as a regional design specialist with Retail Concepts, another sportswear firm.

From Designer to Activist

In 2017, Williams became the social-media marketing manager for Bee Busy, a local organization that offers free testing for HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis in addition to a wide array of safe-sex classes. He now serves as the organization's quality assurance specialist. Williams has been featured in several public-service announcements related to HIV prevention, teen pregnancy, and safe sex. He also hosts various Bee Busy forums such as Trans 101, The MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) Power of Sex, and Know Your LGBTQ+ Rights.

In the summer of 2012, Williams met Dr. Keith Clarke, the love of his life whose passion for community matched his own. Their first date was at El Tiempo Cantina in Montrose, where they sat for hours and fell more and more in love as they talked. In 2017, the men married.

Shortly after moving to Houston, he began to involve himself in various LGBTQ organizations. The first community event he orga-

nized was a forum titled Under the Rainbow, a discussion platform aimed at "understanding the pressing concerns on who we are as gays, lesbians, trans, asexual, nonbinary people." Later, he organized other events to increase awareness about race relations in the LGBTQ community.

In 2013, Williams created the Community BYOP (Bring Your Own Picnic) where LGBTQ folks played games, shared food, and reunited with old friends. At each picnic, he featured one nonprofit organization to help raise funds and awareness.

Williams' motto is "I just want people in my community to feel loved." He and his husband teamed up to show that love for their community by hosting monthly events they call Keith & Dexter Presents, where people of all ages gathered for lighthearted fun.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult for Williams and his husband, because they are highly active people and have not been able to celebrate with others. He says they remain active online, trying to help raise money for their causes.

Williams notes that it's important to celebrate Pride because "we should never let anyone tell us that we are not worthy, not responsible, and not allowed to do the things we do." Reflecting on the death of George Floyd and the resulting wave of Black Lives Matter demonstrations, Williams emphasizes that "Black Lives Matter has put this country on notice. We are fully aware of mainstream America's systematic efforts to silence and brutalize Black people by over-policing Black communities. We will not be silenced."



For more information on Bee Busy, visit beebusy.org.



**"CELEBRATING PRIDE PROVIDES A SPACE WHERE EACH
PERSON CAN CELEBRATE THE LGBTQ ASPECT OF THEIR LIFE,
WHATEVER THAT MAY BE TO THEM."**

—Kelsey Reynolds

Nonbinary Grand Marshal

HUMANITARIAN HERO

Kelsey Reynolds has devoted their life to assisting those in need.

By BRANDON WOLF

Kelsey Reynolds has had an “eventful” life, to say the least, and this year is no exception. In April, the nonbinary social worker was named Houston’s 2020 Nonbinary Pride Grand Marshal.

“I never expected to win, and was honored just to be nominated,” they say. “I feel honored and humbled to be a 2020 marshal.”

Becoming a Social Worker

Reynolds was born in Houston on November 7, 1991, and grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. They graduated from Parkview Baptist High School, which was considered to be a “Bible Belt” school.

Civil engineering was Reynolds’ first career choice as they began college at Southeastern Louisiana University. But the first day of calculus class changed that. “I had no idea what the professor was talking about,” they laugh.

Instead, Reynolds decided to be “a part of something bigger than myself,” and opted for a major in social work. “I wanted to be a changemaker,” they say. After graduating in 2015, they moved to Space City to further their education at the University of Houston (UH) by earning a master’s degree in social work.

Reynolds then worked for two years at the Salvation Army Young Adult Resource Center, helping homeless adults find housing.

Earlier this year, Reynolds joined the Houston Food Bank, working with volunteer services and engagement. “When the COVID-19 crisis is over, I’ll be working to increase

the number of volunteers again.”

Finding Their Identity

Reynolds came out as queer in 2012. “There really wasn’t any other option for me,” they say. It took their parents two years to adjust to a new reality and accept Reynolds’ identity.

Reynolds first heard the term “nonbinary” in sociology and gender-studies classes. “I thought, ‘Hmmm, that really fits me,’” they recall. Then, in the summer of 2016 during a class lecture on social-work practices within the LGBTQ community, students were asked to introduce themselves. That’s when Reynolds publicly identified as nonbinary for the first time. “Suddenly, I felt like the weight of the world was off my shoulders. It made me feel so comfortable within my own skin.”

Outside of their Houston Food Bank day job, Reynolds serves on the board of Gender Infinity at UH, and as a planning committee member at Gender Infinity. That committee is responsible for developing and creating a national Houston-based two-day conference on gender diversity, featuring dozens of speakers, two keynote addresses, and over 400 attendees.

Reynolds has been in a relationship with Camah Asha Wilson for seven years. They currently reside in the Hobby Airport area, but plan to move north to either the Heights or the Jersey Village area. The couple planned to be married this October, but have postponed the event until October 2021 because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Celebrating Pride

To explain gender diversity, Reynolds uses a

simple but effective metaphor. “Most [cisgender] people are in chairs bolted to the floor. Some transgender people unbolt their chairs, move them, and bolt them down again. And some of us—the nonbinary individuals—are in chairs with rollers.

Reynolds says that individuals need to define their gender identity in a way that makes them comfortable. For Reynolds, it’s all about not being put in a box. “It’s a matter of being myself and being comfortable with who I am, with no set gender definition.”

Reynolds explains how validating it is to recognize nonbinary as a gender option. “One doesn’t have to exist on a binary in order to belong. Celebrating Pride gives people that sense of community. It provides a space where each person can celebrate the LGBTQ aspect of their life, whatever that may be to them.”

Reynolds is also pleased with Pride Houston’s renewed focus on racial equality and the Black Lives Matter movement. “It’s time for white people to recognize their place in all of this, and that silence is no longer an option. We must rise up with our fellow Black and brown community members to speak up and speak out against the racism that has run rampant in our country for centuries. No longer can we idly sit by and let [the victims of racism] do all of the emotional, mental, and physical labor alone. It’s devastating that it took George Floyd’s death for a lot of us white folk to realize our role in all of this. We should have come to this realization centuries ago.”



For more information on the Houston Food Bank, visit houstonfoodbank.org.



**"WE LIVE IN A TIME
WHEN WE ALL HAVE
TO STICK TOGETHER.
WHEN ONE GROUP IS
PERSECUTED, WE ARE
ALL PERSECUTED."**

—Lillie Schechter

Ally Grand Marshal

POLITICAL POWERHOUSE

Lillie Schechter defends democracy and LGBTQ rights.

By BRANDON WOLF

Lillie Schechter is a woman of passion—for her family, her friends, her career, her political party, and for the causes she believes in. As a longtime ally of Houston's LGBTQ community, Schechter is being honored this year as Pride Houston's Ally Grand Marshal.

A Montrose Upbringing

Schechter was born on February 3, 1980, in Houston, and her family lived in Montrose (near Crocker and Stanford) before moving to the West University area when she was four. She later graduated from Jesse H. Jones High School, an HISD magnet school in South Park.

Schechter grew up in a political environment. Her mother, Sue Schechter, was a state representative from Texas House District 134 and later became the chairperson of the Harris County Democrats. Her great-uncle Arthur Schechter was an ambassador to the Bahamas under President Clinton. Her cousin Alan Rosen is the Harris County constable for Precinct 1 who was chosen as Pride Houston's 2019 Ally Grand Marshal.

After taking some community-college courses, Schechter eventually attended the University of Texas in Austin, where she earned a degree in American studies. In 2009, she founded Bayou City Strategies, which offers strategic planning and support services for fundraising and communications campaigns. She still serves as president of that organization.

Schechter now lives in Montrose once again, near West Gray. She is engaged to be married in 2021, when she will become an official step-mom to “three amazing step-children.”

Leading the Harris County Democrats

In March 2017, Schechter was elected chair of the Harris County Democrats (HCD). She made the decision to run after Trump's election, and because she has been an active

Democrat for her entire life. “After Trump got elected, I wanted to make sure that we got him out of office. In order to do that, the Democratic Party needed to be built up. I had the skill set, and felt we needed to build everyday relationships around the county.”

Under her leadership, the party opened an easily accessible Fifth Ward storefront two blocks from I-10, just east of downtown Houston. Schechter notes that “it's in a neighborhood that we have historically undervalued.”

Schechter says it's an important time to be a Democrat in Texas. “There is a huge motivating force because of the man who is in the White House. We have been able to recruit thousands of volunteers. We are a major battleground state in 2020—the metropolitan areas of Texas are Democratic, and the majority of the population lives in these counties. But still, winning is not a slam dunk.”

Schechter encourages the LGBTQ community and its allies to vote Democratic because “it's the only party fighting for LGBTQ rights.”

COVID-19 has forced Schechter to work from home since mid-March, so she has turned her garage into an office. That kind of improvising during the pandemic has allowed Party officials to forge ahead toward November. “It's a true testament to Democratic Party staff, who have all adjusted to the virtual world. We are calling 5,000 voters a week and doing online training for volunteers. It's the new normal, but I miss the people and the big meetings and being surrounded by hundreds of like-minded citizens.”

A Longtime LGBTQ Ally

Schechter recalls one of the defining moments in her life when she became deeply involved in the effort for LGBTQ rights at age 16. Her gay uncle and his partner had been killed in a helicopter crash during a cruise in Alaska, and her uncle had never told his parents about the relationship because he worried that he would not be accepted. She was devastated when

the two men were not buried together simply because his parents did not know about the relationship.

Schechter says it was “really cool” when she heard her name announced as this year's Ally Grand Marshal. “It's incredible to celebrate how far we've come, and to remind people we are still fighting for more. People need to remember that LGBTQ people were once [and still are] criminalized, demonized, and penalized. [As soon as we forget that fact], we start to slide back.”

As the HCD chair, Schechter has continued the Party's involvement in Houston's annual Pride parade. “We've grown our presence in the event, including the size of our float. Pride is a favorite activity of mine because it is fun. But we are also building programs around issues. We have had events at Hamburger Mary's and featured speakers about gender-nonbinary and transgender issues.”

She adds, “We live in a time when we all have to stick together. When one group is persecuted, we are all persecuted.”

Reflecting on the Black Lives Matter movement, Schechter issues a clear call to action. “Our vision is a society that inherently guarantees equality and justice for all. That cannot be achieved until there is equality and justice for the lives of Black Americans. We must demand a complete and transformative restructuring of our legal and justice system so that Black lives are not taken with impunity.

“Right now, none of us can afford to look away from the pain, grief, and frustration of Black Americans. And at this moment, we are all being called upon to gather the strength of our shared values and come together to bring about the change that this mass mobilization of Americans demands. Showing up in this moment looks different for all of us. The only wrong way to do it is to *not* show up.”



For more information on Harris County Democrats, visit harrisdemocrats.org.



**"NIKKI WAS A ROLE
MODEL AND ADVOCATED
FOR CHANGE. SHE
ALWAYS WANTED TO
CHANGE THINGS FOR
FUTURE GENERATIONS."**

—William Loyd

William Loyd holds a photo of his late wife, Nikki Araguz Loyd.

Honorary Grand Marshal

REMEMBERING NIKKI ARAGUZ LOYD

William Loyd looks back on his late wife's life of activism.

By BRANDON WOLF

Nikki Araguz Loyd has been selected as Pride Houston's 2020 Honorary Grand Marshal. The late pioneering transgender activist had worked tirelessly throughout her life to effect change for the LGBTQ community.

Nikki died unexpectedly in November 2019 at age 44. Her widower, William Loyd, will stand in her place when Pride Houston's 2020 grand marshals are honored at the next Pride parade. "Nikki was a role model and advocated for change," William says. "She always wanted to change things for future generations."

Her Early Years

Nikki was born in Carmel, California, in 1975, and was one year old when her family moved to Houston. She grew up in the Spring Branch area, and came out as trans in her freshman year of high school. Her mother was supportive of her transition, and the two appeared on the talk shows of Maury Povich and Phil Donahue, in addition to numerous other public appearances. In 1996, she successfully petitioned Harris County's 245th Family District Court to change her name and correct the gender marker on her California birth certificate to female.

In 2008, Nikki married Thomas Trevino Araguz III, a Wharton volunteer firefighter who later became a sheriff's deputy. Two years later, Araguz lost his life while fighting a fire at an egg plant in Boling. At the time of the fire, Nikki was on a business trip and was not made aware of her husband's passing. She learned of Araguz's death from a fellow fireman's wife who had posted the news on social media. Upon her return to Wharton, Araguz's parents prevented Nikki from seeing her stepchildren.

The morning after Araguz's burial, Nikki learned that two separate lawsuits had been

filed by her husband's mother and ex-wife to take away her benefits as a firefighter's spouse. Araguz's family claimed that since Nikki was assigned male at birth, she was not female and therefore her marriage to Araguz was invalid.

In May 2011, State District Judge Randy Clapp ruled in favor of Araguz's family by nullifying the marriage and withholding Nikki's widow benefits during litigation. Hoping to have Judge Clapp's ruling overturned, Nikki unsuccessfully appealed the ruling in 2011.

As the court case began to make national headlines, Nikki garnered the support of many trans activists after she was featured in a 20/20 television segment and a lengthy profile in *Out* magazine.

In 2012, Nikki was in the spotlight again when she spent nearly a month in jail after being accused of stealing a woman's watch. Originally booked into the men's section of the jail under her male birth name, Nikki's protests over that practice prompted then-Sheriff Adrian Garcia to change the jail's booking policy. Months after her release, new federal standards were implemented that required trans inmates to be addressed by their chosen name.

Finding Love Again

Following her release, Nikki met William Loyd on a dating website, and their first dinner date occurred at Little Pappasito's on Richmond Avenue. They soon became inseparable and were married on September 18, 2013, in the Corpus Christi courthouse.

That same day, and in the same courthouse, Nikki's appeal of her case as "the fireman's widow" was being heard. "We went from one floor to another, all in the same afternoon," William recalls.

In February 2014, the 13th District Court of Appeals ruled that Nikki would get another chance to litigate the case in a State district

courtroom. In 2015, a District judge ruled that Nikki was legally married to Araguz at the time of his death in 2010, so she finally became eligible to collect widow's death benefits from her previous marriage.

A Champion of Change

William emphasizes that Nikki "lived her life in defiance, and she thrived. She was the type to see a beehive and go whack it."

"Nikki's biggest pride was her home life," William says, noting that the couple was raising two kids. "Her children were her pride and soul." Despite living openly as a trans woman, Nikki was elected president of her local PTA in the conservative Humble area.

"She always felt that if you can make something better for someone, you have a duty to make things better. Every time you use your voice to stand up, you embolden someone else."

Nikki idolized people who pushed the envelope and formed alliances in order to create change, William says. "Trans activist Monica Roberts is the person she respected the most."

Nikki was also fascinated by Christine Jorgensen, a former GI who underwent gender-confirmation surgery in 1952. Nikki was a fan of the Netflix series *Pose*, and was even a friend of Angelica Ross, who played Candy Ferocity in the series. Ross would stay with Nikki whenever she visited Houston.

To create trans visibility, Nikki and William had begun producing a show entitled *Nikki's American Dream*, which they were trying to sell to a television network. The couple also founded the nonprofit Transgender National Alliance in 2015. "We were able to change the lives of hundreds of trans people by helping them change their gender markers," William notes with pride.



Watch Nikki's American Dream online at youtube.com/nikkisamericandream.



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Local Art through a Lens

MoNique LeRoux's new docuseries examines the lives of Houston's top artists.

By JENNY BLOCK

Ask MoNique LeRoux her age, and you'll get more than you asked for. "I'm a cool, smooth, and level 35," she says. Although LeRoux was born in Lufkin, Texas, she was raised in the Charleston, South Carolina area. But, she's quick to add, "Texas is better." Ask how she identifies, and her quick wit leads again. "Certainly not straight!"

LeRoux is a self-described "underground" artist who owns and works at Mo LeRoux Art Studio, a fine-art gallery. "I create amazing art, and currently I am filming, directing, and narrating a docuseries here in Houston called *Meet Houston's Artists*."

She has always wanted to be an artist. As a kid, LeRoux was fascinated by how cartoons were made, so she imagined she would be an animator one day. But this changed when she discovered other media.

"[When] I got my hands on paint, tools, and so much more, I decided to just try it all until I found my favorites." But instead of exploring her artistic options, she explains, she followed her parents' advice. "My parents encouraged me to join the military instead." After completing her service, she became a police officer, a dental assistant, and a firefighter—the last of which, she says, was her favorite.

"I just kept trying to figure out what I liked and what I wanted to do, since I believed being an artist wasn't a real career or option," she says. "Some have said to me, 'I just didn't know what I wanted to do with my life.' But I knew. I just kept trying everything else, up to the truthful moment of finally becoming an artist."

And now that she has landed solidly on her dream, she says, "I love it, and I'm happy." LeRoux can tell that art is "her thing" because whenever she's creating, her heart becomes

incredibly warm and she feels nothing but happiness and peace.

Looking back, LeRoux sees that her different career paths offered her a great deal of perspective. "I understand that mankind needs empathy and compassion, now more than ever before. And finding love within is the key to that." This is especially true now, amid rising COVID-19 infections, deaths, and protests in the streets over the shameless murders of Black men and women.

But despite everything going on, filming her first docuseries has kept her universe exciting. Each episode tells the stories of 14 local multi-level career artists who continue to create amid COVID-19, economic downfall, and a seriously divided country—all from the vantage point of Houston, Texas. The artists, which include figurative painter Hugo Perez, muralist Amy Malkan, and more, share their stories of making it all work, from painting out of their living rooms and studio spaces across the city to doing pop-up art shows and

festivals.

"Each artist has his or her own story of how they got started in Houston, and we visit some of those locations and see how they are managing the mess that is 2020," LeRoux says.

Episodes of *Meet Houston's Artists* will debut on social media upon completion this month. People can watch the docuseries trailer on YouTube by searching Mo LeRoux Art. Those who would like to see the making of the film can follow the film's social-media accounts on Facebook and Instagram at Meet Houston's Artists.

"I'm excited to do this for the city, its art enthusiasts, and the artists," she says. "I'm especially excited about the artists in the LGBTQ community that are on board and will be featured in the series."

LeRoux's commitment to the LGBTQ community inspired her to create artwork themed around the Houston skyline and the rainbow colors. "I have many LGBTQ friends, and I support their projects and passion," she notes. "I encourage them to continue to be themselves—it's what makes us all beautiful."

LeRoux sees art as vital and inspirational because it can be anything—"all the time, and anywhere."

"It's important to understand that a lot of things are simply just made up. Some have purpose, and some do not," LeRoux explains. "Either way, if it's all made up, it means that you can make things up, too. You just have to find your thing, the things you like to make. Because if you like what you do, you make the world and yourself better."

In fact, LeRoux says she's figured out that that is the key to happiness. "Stop doing things you don't like!"

"EACH ARTIST HAS HIS OR HER OWN STORY OF HOW THEY GOT STARTED IN HOUSTON, AND WE VISIT SOME OF THOSE LOCATIONS AND SEE HOW THEY ARE MANAGING THE MESS THAT IS 2020."

—MoNique LeRoux



Learn more about MoNique LeRoux and her work at lerouxart.com.



Cody Fitzsimmons (l) and Chris Scott

Elevating Houston's Artistic Landscape

Cody Fitzsimmons and Chris Scott want to make art collecting accessible.

By RYAN M. LEACH
Photo by ANTHONY RATHBUN



In March, as the world was on the precipice of a global health crisis, queer Houstonians Cody Fitzsimmons, 29, and Chris Scott, 32, were launching their Christopher + Christopher Art Advisory. This new business endeavor seeks to penetrate the sometimes impenetrable world of art collection and curation by identifying artwork and artistic solutions that can enrich the experiences of art collectors and their local communities.

"We launched the week before the COVID-19 lockdown. Could you think of a better time to start a business?" jokes Fitzsimmons. "But you know what? Despite what's going on in the world, it's gone really well."

Both Scott and Fitzsimmons, who are also partners in life, credit their successful launch to the deep relationships that they have developed with galleries and artists all over the world. While those relationships have been easier to maintain through social media and videoconferencing, nothing is more ef-



B. Anele, *Making Me* (detail), 2019. Digital print, mirror, and industrial fan. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

fective in business than established, personal relationships.

"All the relationships that we have with galleries around the world were built remotely, even before COVID. The art world is so transient and constantly moving. Whether it was the art-fair circuit, museum shows, or traveling gallery shows popping up all over, we had to engage with that stuff pre-COVID with remote technology. The modes of communication haven't changed. We have still maintained those close relationships which allow us to continue [locating art] for our clients, even during a pandemic," says Scott.

Both men have deep roots within the art community, although neither boasts of a degree or formal art training. "Neither one of us

is trained in art, apart from our own observations and a lifelong obsession with aesthetics and objects," says Fitzsimmons.

Fitzsimmons' background is based in years of experience working in commercial galleries, where his responsibilities ran the spectrum from walking the gallery owner's dog to negotiating six-figure deals for collectors acquiring art.

Scott's experience, on the other hand, is rooted primarily in his intellectual and academic interest in art, which he sees through the filter of being a queer and Indigenous person. Originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma, Scott is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. His experiences have allowed him to develop a broader view of the kind of art he believes is worthy of

being placed in the cultural canon.

Like their backgrounds, both men also have diverse personal tastes that collectively create a well-rounded approach that can better serve a wide range of clientele, whether they be new collectors or established individuals.

"I am always looking for 'new.' That's what I love. I don't like to look backwards. I like artists that subvert our own ideas of what art is," says Fitzsimmons. "One artist that comes to mind is Martine Gutierrez. She is a trans-female artist who has a body of work called *Indigenous Woman*. It is basically a self-made fashion magazine that she created using self-portraiture. She is actually having an exhibition at the Blaffer Art Museum next year."

"Cody likes to focus on the hyper-contemporary," observes Scott. "I love that work, but I am also really drawn to underrepresented historical figures in art history. There is an artist that I am obsessed with, Laura Aguilar, who passed away in 2018. She was a Chicano lesbian photographer working in the '80s, '90s, and into the 2000s. Her work focused on rebelling against the stereotype of the 'perfect' female body. She reacted against the dominant aesthetics in the art world, and I am drawn to artists with that focus. In that regard, she is similar to Martine Gutierrez."

On the horizon for Houston's art community is the opening of a new exhibition space called the Blue Rose Gallery in north Houston. Both men are very excited about that project, which is being led by the Los Angeles-based artist B. Anele. It will be the first Black- and queer-owned gallery in Houston. The space, which was formerly known as Private Eye and Common House, has been a gallery and artist residency space on and off since 2015. The current GoFundMe campaign has surpassed its initial ask, although those that are interested can still contribute at gofundme.com/f/blue-rose-gallery.

Other galleries of interest to Fitzsimmons and Scott are the Jonathan Hopson Gallery, a young gallery in Montrose with a very diverse, inclusive program; and F Gallery, founded by Adam Marnie. The two men also love the David Shelton Gallery, which shows a variety of artists from marginalized groups.

"We always say that art is for anyone. Most of our clients are young people interested in art, but find it intimidating or don't know where to start. We have a client in their 20s who we met through Instagram. Other clients have been collecting for 25 years and want to diversify or edit—or are looking for new ways to support the arts. Our business intends to serve all of them," Fitzsimmons emphasizes.



For more information on Christopher + Christopher Art Advisory, visit christopherchristopheradvisory.com.

Imaginative Illustrator

Sebastian Gomez de la Torre showcases his journey to self-acceptance through his unique creations.

By ZACHARY MCKENZIE

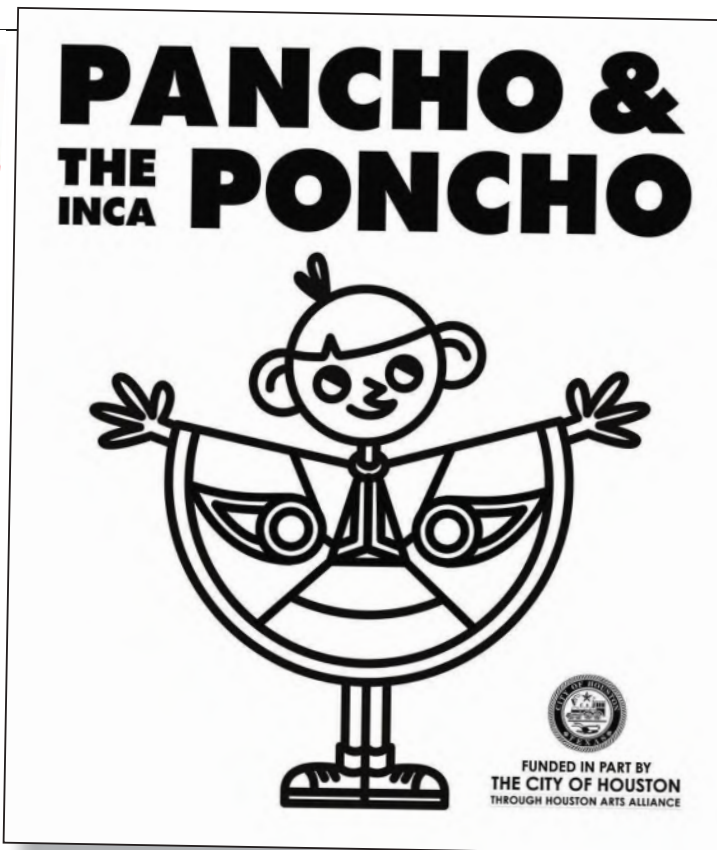
After moving from Peru as a child, artist Sebastian Gomez de la Torre felt immense pressure to assimilate quickly into American culture. Masking and suppressing his Hispanic roots for much of his childhood left the artist yearning to reconnect with that identity as an adult. The self-professed “big Texas gay” has been on a journey of self-acceptance that ultimately landed him in Montrose, where he is showing his Hispanic pride with his latest project, an illustrated children’s book titled *Pancho & the Inca Poncho*.

The laid-back creative is an open book when discussing his personal and professional life. When asked how he identifies, he responds, “I am 30 years old, and a 6 on the Kinsey Scale,” followed by laughter. Gomez de la Torre was admittedly not always out and proud. In fact, it wasn’t until leaving Houston for college that he felt comfortable coming out.

“I moved from Peru to Miami when I was 11 years old, and then from Miami to Conroe,” explains the nomad. While living in the Houston suburb, a serendipitous encounter initiated his career as an artist. “We had a recruiter come to College Park High School, and that’s how I learned about the College for Creative Studies in Detroit,” he recalls. He applied, got accepted, and made the leap to Michigan. The move proved formative for the artist, both personally and professionally. “On a personal level it was great because I was able to get out, and I learned a lot,” the easygoing 30-year-old emphasizes. “I would say that for me, art school was 10 percent knowledge and 90 percent practice. I think no matter where you go to school,



Sebastian Gomez de la Torre says many of his illustrations are inspired by the big, beefy men that he finds attractive.



Sebastian Gomez de la Torre works in many styles, and his most recent project is an illustrated children's book called *Pancho & the Inca Poncho*.

it's really about how much you put into it."

While in college, Gomez de la Torre took a major step in shedding years of cultural suppression and pressures by coming out to his friends and family. "My family is very Catholic, so coming out was definitely difficult," he admits. "Coming out to my friends in college was a lot easier. Hispanic culture is very macho, and I don't think homosexuality is as mainstream in Hispanic culture as it is in America."

In 2010, the out artist's professional career got a major boost. "There's a website called Threadless that sells T-shirts, and you can submit designs to be produced by that company," he says with childlike excitement recalling his big break. "The community votes, and if your design goes through you get a commission of \$2,000 and an additional \$500 in store credit. Being a college student, that amount might as well have been \$1 million."

That T-shirt project landed the artist several new clients, and it still does to this day. "People will see that design and it's still linked to me, so they will reach out." After graduating college, Gomez de la Torre moved to Montrose, knowing it was gay-friendly and rich with opportunity.

The artist emphasizes the importance of balancing his professional and personal art practices. "To me, personal work is something that is uncommissioned and I have full control



over. It's not for anyone else." When asked what his inspiration is for his personal work, he says plainly, "Hot dudes." He admits there is a little manifestation at play as he creates. "I think I've always had an admiration for that Hercules type [that you see in] Greek sculptures, or the big, beefy dudes from classical paintings and art. I remember this article about a woman

who painted her dream man, and she eventually married someone that looked like him. There's a little bit of fantasy there."

Today, the proud Hispanic artist is living his authentic life in the gayest neighborhood in Houston. And his latest children's book project was inspired by his own journey to self-acceptance and self-realization. "I was awarded a grant from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance," he explains with a tone of gratefulness. "I submitted my children's book, which is about having cultural pride. As an immigrant growing up in America, I hid that part of myself to assimilate. The idea behind this book is that it's okay to be from where you are, and not feel the need to get rid of [your heritage]."

With a plethora of clients under his belt, the sky's the limit for Gomez de la Torre. Staying true to his practice, the talented Peruvian outlines his artistic goals while offering advice to the next generation of artists. "I do hope to one day publish a full-length graphic novel. I'm very fortunate that I've reached a point in my self-employment where I can work at my own pace. As an artist, having the ability to do personal work while still being able to support myself is really important."



For more information on Sebastian Gomez de la Torre, visit illseabass.com.



Robin Baker(I) and
Wood Fancher Anthony
at their studio.

Partners in Art

Local gay creatives **Wood Fancher Anthony** and **Robin Baker** debut their new studio with an opening exhibit.

By SAM BYRD



Two of Houston's most vibrant and compelling gay painters have joined forces to bring a jolt of excitement to Space City's visual-art scene. To celebrate the merger of their studios,

Wood Fancher Anthony and Robin Baker will present more than 50 of their paintings this month.

The exhibit, entitled *A Two Man Show*, will be open to the public on the last two Saturdays in September from 3 to 9 p.m. at Hardy & Nance Studios, 902 Hardy Street. Private showings are available September 20–25 by appointment. The event will include solo pieces as well as collaborations by the pair, who have known each other for more than six years.

The exhibit is both a celebration of their

studio merger and the result of COVID-19 economic stress. Art shows and sales have dwindled this year, creating a financial strain on the entire creative community. The two decided to consolidate resources and are opening their new studio space after a month of hard renovation work.

"One day we were talking, and I mentioned the idea of combining studios," Anthony recalls. "I was mostly joking, but within minutes of me saying it, it started to make sense. About a week later, we decided to do it, and about a month later, we started completely renovating the studio. We added new floors, new lighting, and we started sharing the wall space. Now it's the prettiest studio in all of Hardy & Nance."

The partnership is also a chance for the two to piggyback off of each other's creative vibes and contrasting résumés. →



The Green Hour
Wood Fancher Anthony



Afternoon Splash
Robin Baker

Unlike Anthony's experience, Baker's art career began as an act of defiance.

"I took only one art class in school. My teacher hated me and gave me an F. Then I won 'Best In Show' in a scholastic art show. I gave her the [proverbial] finger and have been painting ever since," says Baker, who has been creating for 40 years.

He originally started with ceramics, but moved to other media when he downsized his studio space and couldn't accommodate a kiln to finish his pieces. Now, Baker uses acrylic on canvas to create high-contrast black-and-white human figures.

Anthony began painting when he was 15, even though he was never formally taught how to paint. His style is rooted in his Mexican background, with bright colors prominently displayed in oil on his canvases.

"Once I started, I've never stopped doing it. It's something I keep going back to. I keep developing and challenging myself with each painting. It's been an evolution for the past 27 years," Anthony says.

While their styles differ, elements of their work have been influenced by their health. For Baker, a biological malfunction in one eye prevents him from seeing colors the way other people do.

"I have a lot of eye issues, and I don't see

"WE STARTED COMPLETELY RENOVATING THE STUDIO. WE ADDED NEW FLOORS, NEW LIGHTING, AND WE STARTED SHARING THE WALL SPACE. NOW IT'S THE PRETTIEST STUDIO IN ALL OF HARDY & NANCE."

—Wood Fancher Anthony

very well. I see a lot of shadows, so I do high-contrast and negative-space type stuff. If I look out of one eye, you're in Kansas. If I look out of the other, you're in Oz," Baker explains, referencing *The Wizard of Oz's* famous shift from sepia tones to Technicolor. "It's a lot easier to paint in black and white because I only have to buy one color of paint, and I specialize in those colors because of my eyesight."

In the same vein, Anthony's latest paintings reflect his recent fibromyalgia diagnosis. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fibromyalgia is a condition that can cause pain all over the body, as well as sleep problems, fatigue, and emotional and mental distress. "People with fibromyalgia may be more sensitive to pain than [other]

people," the CDC reports.

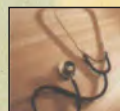
"My health is collapsing. I know it doesn't look bad when you see me, but the truth is I feel like a 75-year-old," Anthony admits. "In these paintings I'm showing what's going on with me mentally. I wanted to make them slightly erotic as a challenge, because it's nerve-racking to paint like this. I'm also wanting to show that it's really all 'surface.' Just because it looks okay on the outside doesn't mean it's okay on the inside. There are some rough things going on behind each one of these paintings, but I don't want to present people with the ugliness. I want to present people with beauty. I guess that's my way of getting around it."

Both artists intend to continue creating individual pieces in their new studio, although they would like to extend their collaborative relationship in the future. For now, they are hopeful that *Together: A Two Man Show* will serve as a salve for the last six months of canceled showings and lost sales.

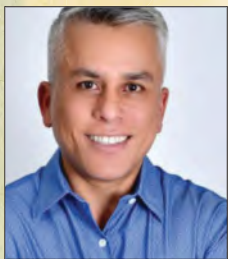
"Most people assume artists just do this as a hobby—that we have other jobs and do this on the side. But this is my living, and it's getting difficult to survive," Baker says.



For more information on Wood Fancher Anthony and Robin Baker's *Together: A Two Man Show*, visit tinyurl.com/y4zg5w32.



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Queer and Revolutionary

Artist **Leticia Contreras** inspires her audiences to become interconnected agents of change.

By **LILLIAN HOANG**
Photos by **ALEX BARBER**



As a queer interdisciplinary artist, Leticia Contreras explores both her spirituality and her observations about capitalism's corrosive effects on human

relationships through her art. The proud Afro-Chicana, who uses she/they pronouns, also works to create spaces where people can fully express themselves without judgment and contemplate their impact on the world and people around them.

"Moving through this world as a queer person, I dream of a life of liberation," she says. "This seeps into the choices I make in my work—both the subjects [I deal with] and the materials I use."

Contreras' work is as expansive as her queer and fluid identity, and her passion for art reached new heights in 2012 when she attended Hampshire College, a private liberal-arts school in Amherst, Massachusetts, that allows each student to create a customized curriculum.

Students at the college asked Contreras for her name, pronouns, and used the term "queer" in a non-derogatory manner, which was a first for the Houston native. Her peers, who were mostly students of color and/or working class, also taught her the power of self-organizing for different forms of activism.

Contreras says Hampshire College broadened her understanding of the arts and helped her become the queer and revolutionary creative she is today.

After graduating Hampshire College, Contreras displayed her works at several Houston events such as El Chow: Fruto en Vaina, a group exhibition that showcased local Latinx LGBTQ artists and highlighted their experiences as women and queer people of color. At the show, she presented embroidery looms that featured Spanish and English expressions used by and for lesbians like "tortillera," a derogatory term said to identify lesbians, "marimacha," an offensive word used to demean women who present as masculine, "baby dyke," a young lesbian, and "lipstick femme," a feminine lesbian.

She also presented her work at Project Row Houses (PRH), a nonprofit organization in Houston's Third Ward that enriches that community via art. In 2019, as part of PRH's Round 49: penumbras: sacred geometries exhibition, Contreras created large-scale cyanotypes. She made these blueprints by first soaking natural fiber in chemicals, letting the material dry, and then asking her loved ones to lie on the textiles. After exposing the material to UV rays or direct sunlight, the blue fiber captured her loved ones' shapes, resembling a print.

She wanted to represent how people in the Gulf Coast region affect the environment around them with her blueprints. The human shapes also gave viewers the chance to consider their relationship with the land, their responsibility to the Earth, and our duty to each other.

"My practice examines how capitalism has impacted our Black and Indigenous communities and commodified our relationship to the Earth, its natural resources, and our relationships to each other," she says. "Through my work, I try to get my audiences [to realize] that we can be agents of change, and that we have autonomy that is amplified when we recognize our interdependence and interconnectedness with one another and the Earth."

Contreras is currently a full-time caretaker. Although COVID-19 eliminated three



of her jobs as a yoga instructor, a JuiceLand employee, and a photography teacher, the pandemic has also forced her to slow down and reflect on her creative and spiritual practices, which intensified after the George Floyd protests and Pride Month.

"All that national activity made me pick up my camera," she says. "I wanted to preserve our story because if we are not the ones directing our narratives, someone else will."

Since the Black Lives Matter protests and Pride Month, Contreras has taken a few dignified portraits of the Black and Brown people in her life. During this unprecedented era, she would like to design a series of unisex shirts featuring quotes from brilliant Black and Indigenous LGBTQ leaders including Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler, James Baldwin, and Winona LaDuke.

However, Contreras has come to realize that her worth as an artist and as a person is not determined by her productivity, so she won't be upset if these projects never manifest. She views stillness to be as vital as action, and encourages others who feel pressured to create during the pandemic to consider slowing down as well.

"If we give ourselves time to individually and collectively dream, the energy will go in that direction," she says. "Our dreams can lead to defunding the police and redistributing that wealth toward reparations, or to our trans brothers and sisters. We have to think of the possibilities in order for them to exist."



Keep up with Leticia Contreras on Instagram @laletty.mala

Embracing Intergenerational Love

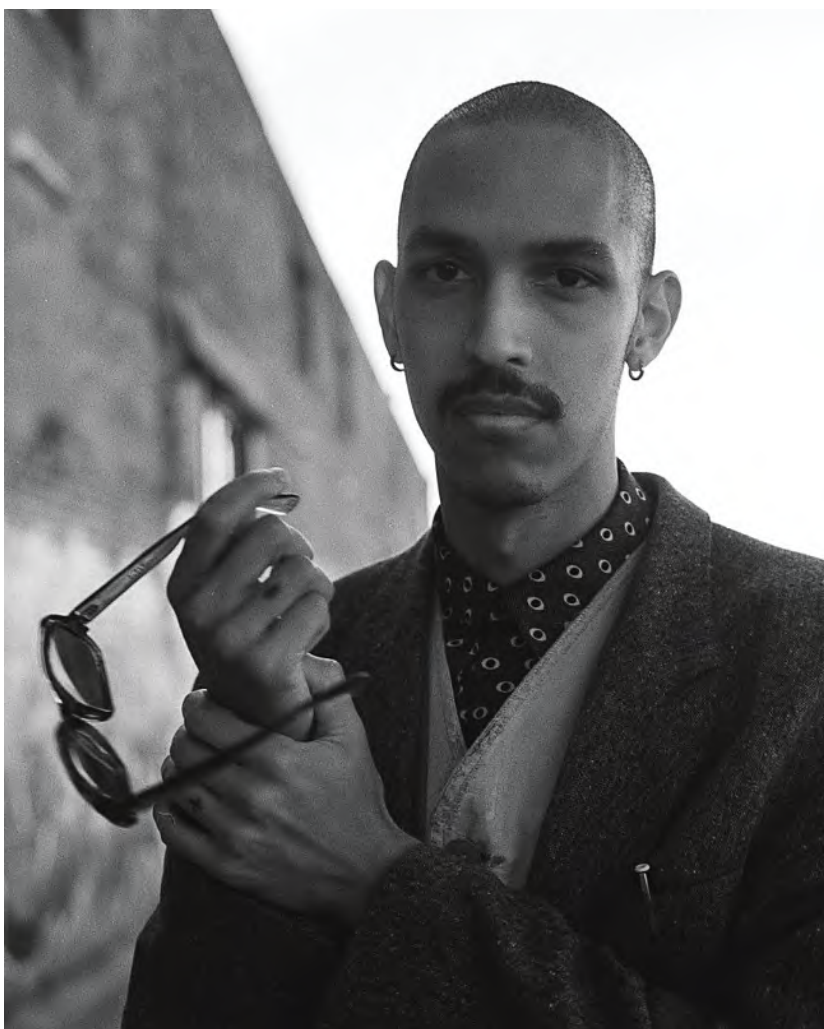
j bilhan's photographs celebrate mixed-age queer relationships.

By **BILL ARNING**

Intergenerational queer erotics have come out of the closet at the same time that the #MeToo hashtag has sparked fraught discussions about sexual power dynamics. Over the last few years, many stimulating visual-art projects exploring intergenerational queer erotics have been generated by articulate young art makers in all media. These artists' relationships with older persons were central to their sexual and romantic development, and helped define their queer identities.

Intergenerational sexual love is complicated and often haunted by shame—which is the great killer of our people. Telling Mom you're gay might lead to a few tears, but introducing parents to a lover five years older than they are can cause family meltdowns. But such attractions appear as hard-wired into some people's erotic makeup as homosexuality itself. Popular dating apps for this romantic predisposition include Silver Daddies, Mister, and, most famously, Daddyhunt (founded by writer Armistead Maupin and his younger lover to deal with the feelings of erasure they had experienced). In heterosexual love, the grotesque visuals of gorgeous young women paired with lecherous old men (like the current occupants of the White House) smack of glorified prostitution. But that is rarely the assumption made about same-sex mixed-age couples, in which a sugar daddy/sugar baby dynamic is more likely an erotic game than a financial reality.

Houston photographer j bilhan (whose lower-cased name adds to his mysterious demeanor) opened *Variable Embrace*, an exhibition curated by Houston painter Terry

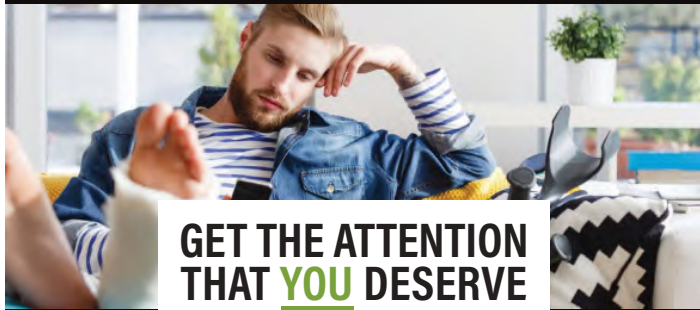


Suprean, at Sabine Street Studios as part of this year's citywide FotoFest biennial. Even in its online-only form, j bilhan's art cut through the fog of those first pandemic crisis weeks in March.

For his first exhibition, the artist made large prints of his erotic images as a way of "billboarding" his support for mixed-age lovers. The hothouse intimacy was palpable in his images of eroticized older men's bodies and causally removed clothes discarded on the floor. For the Instagram generation that rarely sees photography presented as fine art, the live exhibition would have had quite an impact.

j bilhan is a self-taught artist who was raised in Houston, but only started exploring the wild side of gay life after a move to Los Angeles in 2016. There he met his first older lover, a German named Jürgen, outside of Bar Mattachine downtown. After following Jürgen to Berlin, j bilhan started using his photography to analyze and celebrate himself as a lover of older guys. He allowed himself to love men in their 70s who were often married—sometimes to "understanding wives." He found a whole army of these men who were sexually available but who often had to be photographed with faces hidden. A man shown in bondage →

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is married, and another couple carries on a secret relationship between Texas and Kuwait. The most memorably romantic Fotofest image shows the artist nude in a quiet embrace with Jürgen, a shirtless, classic cowboy-hatted “daddy.”

“Through all of this, my abstract principles of beauty guided me as I attempted to excavate an ideal. I was working to make my attraction feel normal. To this day, my photographs are a response to beauty; they are a direct, tender celebration of this unpopular sexuality between young and old men,” the artist explains.

Lacking the financial means to continue living in Germany’s gay paradise, j bilhan had to end his relationship with Jürgen and return to Houston. He is currently in a relationship with Domenic, who was living in Frankfurt when they met. Domenic was photographed nude in another striking Fotofest image, swiveling his manly torso toward us, with a friendly bearded face that clearly reveals the artist’s affection for him. Taken early in their romance, the image serves as a reminder of the pandemic’s worldwide impact. Despite enjoying daily video calls, j bilhan must remain in Houston while Domenic moves to China for work. Neither one knows when they will be able to touch again (or even be in the same country), which makes the easy intimacy seen in their pre-COVID portrait especially poignant.



Dale & Mr. X. 2020. Baytown, Texas. Discreet mixed-age couple Dale (from the Midwest) and Mr. X (from Kuwait) meet a few times each year.



Alain and Lin. 2018 Near Louvin, Belgium. Two weeks prior, bilhan met the couple at Antwerp Pride. They agreed to be photographed.

In the ’70s, veteran curator John Coplans started photographing his aging body, twisting it into abstract shapes and showing in precise detail the parts of the older male body that sag, wrinkle or sprout hair in ways that our society would rather not see. Studying those pictures while still in college, I learned that ageism was real, older men were supposed to volunteer to become invisible, and I was one day destined to inhabit a body that was universally seen as undesirable.

As gay men, we receive the message that sex into our sixties, seventies, eighties, and beyond should only occur in darkness or with paid companions. That is a totally unacceptable way to spend the last several decades of an otherwise happy gay life. It is great to see those attitudes begin to disappear, and we should be grateful that brilliant image-makers like j bilhan in Houston (along with his associates in New York, San Francisco, London, and Berlin) are leading the way.



For more information on j bilhan, visit bilhan.website.



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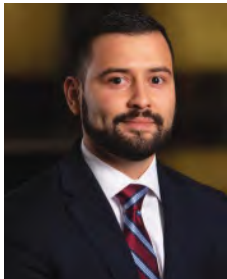
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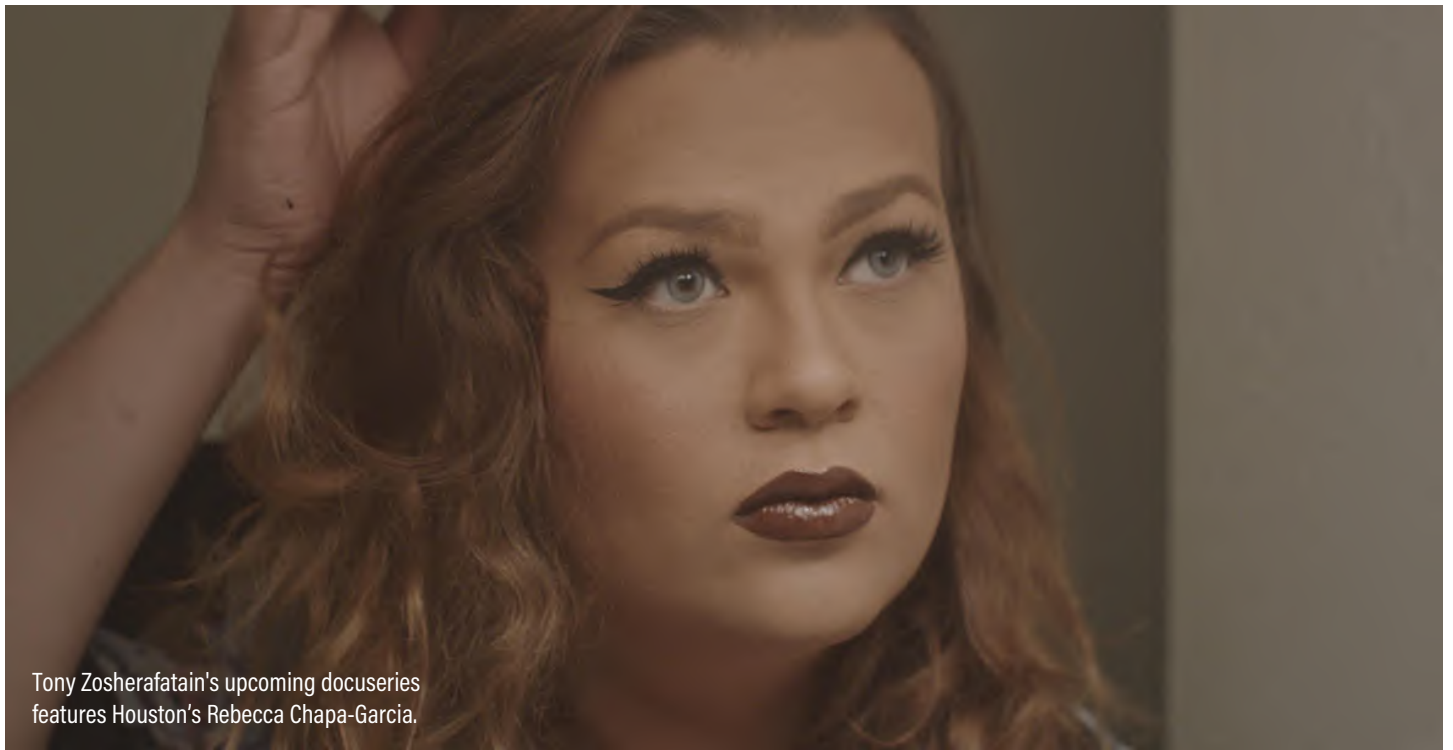
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Tony Zosherafatain's upcoming docuseries features Houston's Rebecca Chapa-Garcia.

Trans in Trumpland

New docuseries follows the lives of four transgender Americans.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



For transgender director Tony Zosherafatain, watching Donald Trump become the 45th U.S. president sparked a lengthy creative journey that has culminated in a four-part documentary titled *Trans in Trumpland*.

"I was sitting at home with my mom and we saw, unfortunately, that Trump was going to win the election. We were in shock," he recalls. "A week later, the title *Trans in Trumpland* just came to me."

The four-part series, created by New York City-based TransWave Films and produced by Jamie DiNicola, follows four people in Idaho, Texas, North Carolina, and Mississippi as they fight for transgender equality in the U.S. during the Trump presidency. Production was completed in 2019, and the film is slated for release on streaming platforms later this year.

Zosherafatain knew he wanted to deal head-on with the Trump administration's anti-

LGBTQ policies. "I knew I had to do something as a filmmaker to fight back against this kind of hatred," he says.

Since the election, the Trump administration has worked to erase trans Americans from official websites, remove discrimination protections, ban trans members of the military, legalize discrimination based on religion, and create new rules to ban trans women from women's shelters.

Zosherafatain knew he could not sit by and watch the Trump administration attack his community in this way, and creating a documentary felt like an effective way to shine a light on trans rights.

"I thought I needed to commit my resources full-time to this," he says.

Trans in Trumpland is the latest in a wave of documentaries and docuseries about the LGTBQ community. *Disclosure*, which tells the history of trans representation in film and

television, earned widespread praise when it premiered on Netflix this past June. Also receiving critical acclaim earlier this year was the five-part Apple TV+ series *Visible: Out on Television*.

Zosherafatain feels honored to add his own documentary to this lineup, and hopes that *Trans in Trumpland* offers a raw but ultimately uplifting look at the state of trans rights in America. "It is about individual struggles, and showing how human and resilient every character is. There are a lot of moments of joy and happiness, and I made sure we see each character surrounded by love. We are human like everyone else," he emphasizes.

Zosherafatain's plan to split the documentary into multiple parts was not something he had originally planned, but he soon realized this was the right approach once he started hearing his four subjects' stories. "We had four very distinct stories that would be difficult to mesh together," he says. "The stories are all connected, and in each episode the viewer is going to be introduced to a different trans character who is battling their state's anti-trans policies."

One of those four individuals is Houston's own Rebecca Chapa-Garcia, a Mexican-American trans woman. Chapa-Garcia came here legally as a child, but her family overstayed their visas. *Trans in Trumpland* tells Chapa-Garcia's story of being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) several times since Trump won the election.

Her story, while rooted in injustice, is one she hopes can inspire others who are facing hatred. →

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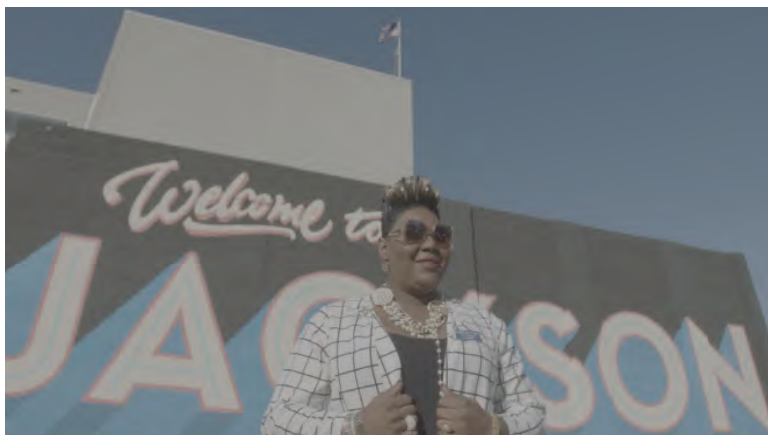
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Trans in Trumpland director Tony Zosherafatain

"I wanted to be a voice for those trans immigrants who are coming into the United States for a better life," Chapa-Garcia says. "I wanted to be a voice for those who cannot speak out."

Each ICE facility that Chapa-Garcia was placed in was different, but none of them knew how to accommodate a trans woman like herself.

"The first time I was detained in a facility, I was housed with a hundred men," she says. "It was hard. They are not educated, and they are not ready to house trans people in these facilities. Even with the correctional officers there was mistreatment."

Chapa-Garcia fought her way into the system and was eventually able to legalize herself, but her battle is far from over. "Now, while I am no longer targeted as an immigrant, I am targeted as a trans person," she says.

She hopes her struggles will open viewers' eyes to the current anti-trans prejudice occurring throughout the nation.

"I feel like this film is going to be very educational," she says. "We, as trans people, exist and we are not going anywhere. More than anything, I hope it will educate people and show them that this administration is not the best for us."

The documentary also provides a realistic snapshot of the trans community's day-to-day lives. "I want to show people the real truth of how trans people live," she says. "We really want to showcase our stories, and we want to showcase to the world what we have been through."

The documentary is now in post-production, and Zosherafatain hopes to get it released on streaming platforms before November. "We do not have a solidified release date, but we are aiming to get this out before the election, just because of the title and the topics discussed."

Depending on the ratings success of *Trans in Trumpland*, Zosherafatain sees a sequel as a real possibility.

"I do have a strong interest in maybe a season two," he says. "Depending on the election results, that could morph into something like a documentary about the [nationwide] fight for trans rights. Even with a new president, these issues are not going to go away. It's going to require a lot of political changes during the next four to five years."

As for Chapa-Garcia, she plans to start her own nonprofit organization for the trans community.

"I want to be an ally," she says. "I want to be someone who can speak up for everyone. I want to be a leader for my community."



For more information on Trans in Trumpland, go to transintrumpland.com.



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The Drama and Pain behind ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’

Cindy L. Abel’s film celebrates the bravery of a closeted lesbian couple.

By JENNY BLOCK

When Cindy L. Abel was a kid, she had no idea what she wanted to be when she grew up. “I was interested in so many things. I thought about being a translator at the UN and a doctor with Doctors Without Borders. I wasn’t even sure by the time I went to college.”

However, after attending Southeastern College in Westgate-Belvedere Homes, Florida, Abel, 59, decided she wanted to teach and coach basketball. So she double-majored in theology and secondary education, with a minor in physical education. But despite her

childhood dreams and college studies, film and communications became her field of expertise.

“In addition to filmmaking, I direct, produce, write, and coach clients in public speaking, and occasionally consult in communications and change management,” she says. “In pre-COVID times, I also enjoyed public speaking.”

Abel says she has always loved the medium of moving images. Film’s collaborative nature—having to work with other creatives to assemble a work of art—is one of the best parts about filmmaking for Abel.

After a breakup, she decided to explore directing and filmmaking by founding her own

film company called Atlantis Moon. “We tell stories that launch conversations and impact popular culture,” she explains.

Abel, who identifies as a “bisexual lesbian,” recently released a film titled *Surviving the Silence*, which tells the story of Col. Patsy Thompson and Barbara Brass, two women whose love affair altered the course of military history. The movie shines a light on Thompson’s role in Col. Margaret Cammermeyer’s high-profile expulsion from the Army National Guard, and Cammermeyer’s 1994 reinstatement following a high-profile federal court case.

“We cover the role that both women played in [abolishing] Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell—one upfront, and the other behind the scenes. It’s especially timely given the upcoming 10th anniversary of the policy’s repeal,” Abel says.

Cammermeyer’s memoir was adapted as a 1995 Barbra Streisand television movie starring Glenn Close, but Thompson’s story remained hidden—until now.

Abel became interested in Thompson and Brass’ story at a director’s reception following a screening of her film *Breaking Through*, which featured Houston’s own Annise Parker. “I met Col. Patsy Thompson and Barbara Brass on the eve of their ‘coming out’ speech at Sierra College. I was both impressed and intrigued at how two people—especially [those who pretended] at times to not be together—could stay in love and together for 30 years.”

During their conversation, Brass asked →

Abel if she had heard of Cammermeyer. Abel quickly answered, "Of course, she is one of my heroes!" Brass then explained that Thompson presided over the board that kicked Cammermeyer out of the military.

Looking through her 21st-century lens, Abel says it was her judgmental shock that launched her into an investigative journey. She wanted to know more about Thompson—where she grew up, the beliefs that were ingrained in her, the basis for her career and relationship choices, and how she took on the biggest challenge of her life.

The more she learned about Thompson, Brass, and Cammermeyer's individual backgrounds, the more she understood how they developed their strength and drew on that "when their worlds collided, and history asked them to make an impossible choice."

After their speech at Sierra College, Abel went up to the stage and told Brass and Thompson that she wanted to tell their story. "They said 'Oh, okay.' [Then I clarified]: 'No, really. I want to do a *film* about you.' Then it dawned on them: 'Oh... Oh!' A few months later, they signed an agreement to let me tell their story."

Viewer response has been overwhelmingly positive, Abel says. "And people who haven't



Col. Patsy Thompson (l) and Barbara Brass

seen it yet are asking when they can! There is a demand for this story. Overall, it seems to have really touched people who sacrificed greatly to serve in the military [while remaining] closeted, as well as civilians who didn't realize the depth of the sacrifices being made."

While looking into her distribution op-

tions, Abel plans to continue screening the film at festivals throughout the U.S. and abroad, including India, Australia, and Afghanistan. "We'll also be offering the film in the future to high schools, libraries, universities, nonprofit organizations, as well as businesses—like we did with *Breaking Through*."

Abel says she hopes the film sets the historical record straight (so to speak) and helps others truly understand what it was like to be LGBTQ during that period, both in and out of the military, when service members and civilians often had to hide their same-sex relationships to hold on to careers and even to remain physically safe.

"I also hope it inspires people to see that we can often find a way to do something good in a horrible situation, and [get] one step closer to living authentically and free from secrets, whatever they may be," she says.

Abel hopes the film will lead audiences to honor and respect those who have lived similar stories, and provide hope and healing for the LGBTQ services members and their families whose sacrifices have been ignored for so long.



For more information on Surviving the Silence, visit survivingthesilence.com.

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‘Bodies and Barriers’

Queer activists voice their frustrations with LGBTQ healthcare.

By TERRI SCHLICHENMEYER



You woke up this morning feeling pretty good, which was quite a relief.

In these frightening, uncertain times, every day of wellness is a bonus—especially when you consider

that healthcare for a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer patient can be different than the care that straight people require. Too bad that healthcare providers don’t always know that.

But read *Bodies and Barriers*, edited by Adrian Shanker, and you’ll feel more empowered to educate your providers.

If you were to look for books or articles that address healthcare issues for LGBTQ patients, you would find plenty of material. The problem is, says Shanker, most of it was written by people who are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer.

“Every person providing care for humans is providing care for LGBT humans,” he says. “[So now it’s time for them to hear] our stories about our bodies.”

For the youngest LGBTQ patients, physical and mental healthcare may look different than the care given to their heterosexual peers, or to LGBTQ adults. For example, kids struggle with social issues that adults are better equipped to handle. Parents, as one of the book’s essays indicates, can be the best allies of all.

Young adults, of course, have their own developmental issues. Teens may suffer from depression, suicidal notions, bullying, unpro-

tected sexual encounters, and homelessness—all of which can exacerbate healthcare needs. LGBTQ teens also need help with learning “social-services navigation” in order to access suitable care.

LGBTQ adults seeking good healthcare may need screening for alcohol abuse and other addictions, but doctors sometimes don’t know which tests to ask for. Doctors are often completely uninformed about caring for transgen-

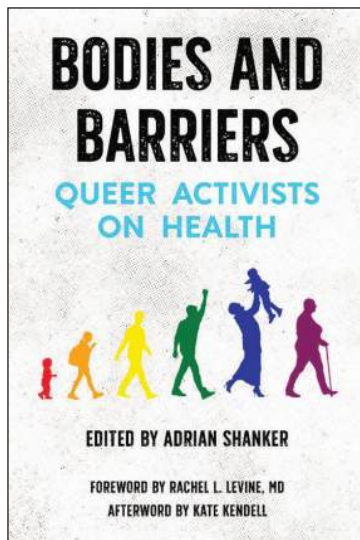
der patients who have transitioned. They may also be uncomfortable managing a patient’s HIV infection, or they may be unaware of the cancers that particularly affect LGBTQ individuals. As a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender adult, being your own highly vocal advocate is key.

Shanker has assembled a chorus of voices whose viewpoints and frustrations could ultimately teach healthcare workers a thing or two. While most of the essays impart a calm but determined tone, readers shouldn’t be surprised at the feelings of resignation that are revealed in a few of

the stories, or the occasional flashes of anger and outrage.

So wash your hands, don’t touch your face, and read *Bodies and Barriers* so you can go to your next doctor’s appointment equipped to tell your doctor about the kind of health care you really need.

 *Bodies and Barriers: Queer Activists on Health is available for purchase on Amazon.*



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WEDDING GUIDE

By JENNY BLOCK | Photos by KAT MACK PHOTOGRAPHY



Alyssa (l) and
Evelin Lopez

Reimagining Love

Alyssa and Evelin Lopez hosted an intimate pandemic wedding ceremony.

Some say that best friends make the best couples. If that's the case, Houston natives Alyssa Michelle Lopez, 30, and Evelin Guadalupe Lopez, 24, are in for a lifetime of love. Alyssa, a sheriff's deputy for the Waller County Sheriff's Office, and Evelin, a paramedic student, became best friends while working together at Portrait Innovations in Champions Village. And then one night, being friends turned into something much more.

Alyssa had invited Evelin to the Whiskey River North nightclub near Willowbrook Mall. "I went and we had a blast," Evelin recalls.

"There was one moment when we were dancing to 'I Don't Dance' by Lee Brice. She spun me around the dance floor, and I knew in that moment she was going to be my forever." Alyssa says she had the exact same thought at the exact same moment. The pair has been together ever since.

On their one-year anniversary in 2018, Alyssa, a graduate of the Art Institute of Houston, took Evelin, a Lone Star College graduate, to Austin. When they arrived early in the morning to check in, Evelin noticed that Alyssa seemed really nervous. Later that day, Alyssa took Evelin to a staircase that overlooked Lake Travis. Both women are huge Harry Potter fans, so Alyssa asked Evelin, "Would

you make the Unbreakable Vow with me for the rest of our lives?" Alyssa then pulled out a Harry Potter wand, on which she had placed an engagement ring. "I was so overjoyed, and immediately said yes!" Evelin says.

Evelin and Alyssa got married on July 11, 2020, at Mia Bella Houston, an events venue in Tomball, with Mario Huerta officiating. The pair was originally planning to get married on their Halloween anniversary, but the pandemic left them wanting to avoid a big event before a vaccine appeared on the horizon. "I didn't want to postpone any longer. I just wanted to marry Evelin," Alyssa says. That's when they decided to do a pop-up wedding with Mia Bella, which they say worked out perfectly.



In fact, Evelin described the entire day as being magical. The most memorable moment for her was when the doors opened and she saw Alyssa standing at the end of the aisle. “Our dream was coming true, and seeing the love of my life just made me feel bliss. Our wedding was finally happening, and we couldn’t be happier!”

Those first moments are forever etched on Alyssa’s heart, as well. “When I proposed to Evelin in 2018, we tried planning the perfect wedding, but life always got in the way. So when I saw those doors open and Evelin walk down the aisle, it absolutely took my breath away. At that moment, I felt as if she and I were the only ones in that room.”

There was one wedding tradition in particular that the pair wanted to include: the sand ceremony, in which several colors of sand are joined together. Alyssa explains, “The white sand is our foundation, and represents Christ. The pink and blue sand that comes together represents Evelin and me coming together as one with Christ.”

“We both have a strong faith [and a strong] relationship with the Lord,” Evelin adds. “He will always be our foundation.”

The brides were concerned about getting their wedding dresses in time, since the big day was only three weeks after plans were finalized. But, Evelin says, “We ordered them from David’s Bridal, and they were here in less than a week from! It worked out perfectly.” And the day itself went off without a hitch as well. “Everything went smoothly, [considering how] little time we had to plan,” Alyssa says. “The only mishap was I forgot the bouquet that I had made for Evelin that morning. But Mia Bella quickly provided me with one when they found out.”



When the dust settles, the couple is planning a trip to Honduras. “It’s where all my family is from, and it’s a beautiful country, Evelin notes. We want to go to Roatán.”

Evelin says that Alyssa has a heart of gold. “She makes me laugh until my tummy hurts, and knows what to say in times of need. She’s a light in darkness, and has the ability to make anyone smile with just one look.”

Alyssa says Evelin is exactly the kind of person everyone needs in their lives. “She has a laugh that’s so infectious. You can’t help but laugh, even when you’re having a bad day. I like to joke with her and say in her world it’s always rainbows and unicorns. I believe people like Evelin are needed to show there is still good in the world.”

Best friends lighting the way for one another and for those around them, all in the name of love. Sounds exactly like the antidote we could all use in times like these. ▼

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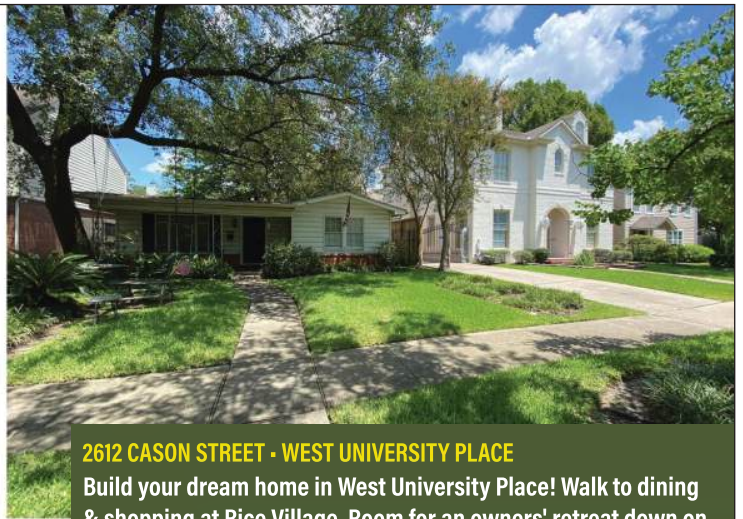
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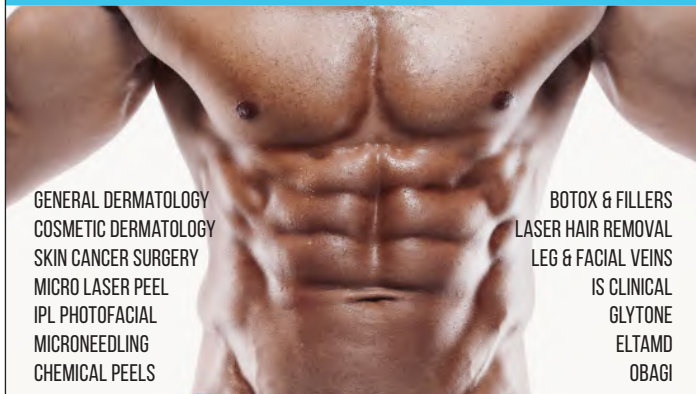
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By LILLY RODDY

Frustrations Come to a Head

September is an active, drama-filled month.

September could really test our patience as the frustrations that have been building over the last several months begin to come to a head. Adding fuel to this inner fire, Mars (our planet of action and survival) has been slowing down since August 23 for a stationary retrograde on September 9. Three days later, Jupiter, our planet of truth and justice, goes stationary direct on the 12th, when we will slowly begin to see “real” justice enter the picture. And finally, Saturn, our planet of structure and restriction, goes stationary direct on the 29th. This will push us forward to focus on the economy and our long-term security. It’s going to be an active month, with the drama extending well into October. The Sun enters Libra on the 22nd at 8:31 a.m.—the autumnal equinox, or the first day of fall. Each week in September is packed with positive and demanding activity. Trust your own instincts, and keep flexible so you can react to the ongoing challenges of our time.

ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

Mars, planet of action, anger, and survival, is visiting your sign until January 5. You will be especially self-aware and self-focused during this time. This month will bring a strong focus on career and long-term security. This is a great month to gather information and develop a strategy for the months ahead. It will also be very helpful to also have an exercise and self-care program in place. Connecting with people from your past can be especially helpful for examining career options. You will want to wait until December 1 before you start any new ventures. In the latter part of September, relationships can be more tense than usual. Talk about what’s going on, and don’t let conditions fester.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

Although you’ve been searching for new ways to express yourself as authentically as possible, September finds you being more adaptable and just going with the flow. There are new plans incubating in the background, and you should stay aware of what’s going on. Not everyone has your best interests at heart. Relationships become more important as the month progresses. You are communicating better, and getting clear about long-term plans that will

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

Happy Birthday to the Virgoans! This is your yearly cycle when you can review the past year and make plans for the next one. You are more sensitive this month, especially around the 10th, 11th, and 12th, so you will need to get away from the noise and take some time for yourself. You have been looking inward this year to find something that gives your life purpose—something you can integrate into your career and your everyday life. This continues to be a creative time for you, with a strong emphasis on using your creativity in your vocation or avocation. Next month, you are more focused on future finances and ways to ensure more safety in your life. You will feel more compelled to do more with what you have!

increase your sense of commitment. You are making your home more comfortable and beautiful this month, and even looking at plans for a future move! Toward the end of the month, relationships with co-workers take the spotlight. This can be a good time to resolve unaddressed issues. You continue to be clear about your views, even when others aren’t.

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

You are focusing on home and family as the month begins. This is a great month for home projects, or finding ways to bring your family closer together. Finances, budgets, and investments remain strong in your consciousness as you explore different options to help you feel safer. Old friends can be very helpful in offering real advice—options that you can respond to immediately. Some friendships will be tested during the next couple of months as you begin to see their motives more clearly. Make sure you have some time for yourself around the 10th, 11th, and 12th, as you will need that period for recharging. By the end of the month, you become more detached as you develop a better sense of vision and possible action.

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

This month sees you getting more organized, throwing out useless items in storage, and re-examining your long-term career goals. You are also better at communicating, teaching, and writing this month. This is a time of reassessing your career and looking for ways to renew your choices by updating them or exploring brand-new options. You are being reminded of why you made those choices in the first place. To ensure success, it is best to wait until December 1 before you put any new plans into play. Your relationships, both personal and professional, need attention as well. This is a good time to make sure everyone has common goals so you can benefit each other. Toward the end of the month, you are

more focused on home and family—a natural path for Cancerians.

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

You are more aware of finances and budgets as the month begins. You also need some time to yourself, away from the noise and distractions of daily living. If you can do this, you can enter a more creative realm and find reasonable solutions for your dilemmas. It may also be a good time to look at your current investments and see if they need to be updated. Health and self-care have been a constant theme for you this year. You still need to pay more attention to that part of your life through better eating, improved exercise routines, and addressing health concerns. You are also exploring some new ideas about career options, but it’s best to wait on those until after December 1. Toward the end of the month, you are looking for more peace and harmony.

LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

Normally, this is a time when you feel the need for some rest and retreat. Even though the level of activity continues to increase throughout September, make sure you have some time for yourself. All of the relationships in your life need some attention. You will need to re-emphasize boundaries in some relationships, while in others you’ll want to make sure that you’re both on the same track. And in all situations, you are taking your time in responding as you make sure you have your best interests at heart, rather than settling for a solution that buries your feelings. Home and family continue to take a big bite out of your time and energy. Boundaries are very important here. This is a good month to search your contacts list at work and connect with existing clients. People are more open to your energies there!



SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

This month you are paying attention to your health and exercise patterns, confronting those well-being issues you have been ignoring, and expressing your feelings and thoughts more openly. Your patience is very low, and you are more than ready to let go of people, ideas, and tasks that don't serve you. This is also a time to pay attention to your environmental health at work, including your personal workspace and the attitudes of your colleagues. You will have no patience for those who are too selfish, and you won't mind telling them so. Friends and support groups can be especially beneficial this month. Communications become easier toward the end of the month. You will need to take more time for yourself!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

You Sagittarians have not been as happy-go-lucky as you usually are. Life has taken on a heavier tone, and you may feel limited or stunted in your goals and plans. You are focused on career and security as the month begins. You are trying to get back into a comfortable routine, but your strong spiritual sense is motivating you to move away from those old patterns. Financial concerns are still very strong, and this could make you feel limited in your ability to reach your objectives. Make sure you put fun and joy on your menu this month. This will help you feel freer and open up more inspired avenues to help

you achieve your dreams. Friends and business organizations are more helpful toward the end of the month, so look to them as a resource base as well!

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

You are feeling edgy and pulled in several directions this month. You will need to put yourself at the top of your list so you don't feel taken advantage of, or unappreciated. Patience may be very hard to find during September and October. Home and family are taking the lead this month in demanding more of your time. You may feel the need to be the referee, but avoid that role. Instead, establish your own rules and insist that they play by them. You will feel more in control and less resentful, even if your plans aren't perfect. With business relationships, this is a very good time to reconnect with old clients or existing customers to help advance your career. You'll feel some of the same energy you felt and dealt with in January, February, and March of this year. Make sure you give yourself the care and concern that this time demands, and don't overdo it!

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Your relationships need some time and attention this month, as you and your partner need to feel a stronger connection between the two of you. You will want to let go of past relationship patterns that you have fostered over time. Long-term security

concerns are strong this month, so you are looking to make better use of existing resources through alternative methods. Over the next couple of months, you may feel that you are in a holding pattern and just waiting for them to say Go! By the end of the month, you are looking at making more permanent plans for the future, but you are still in data-gathering mode. The time to put those ideas into action will come in December and January. Use this time to gather your forces, and be ready to move at the beginning of 2021.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

Relationships and connections with others are part of your focus this month. You will want to have some personal time with your romantic partner to enjoy the connection that you have created. This is also a great time to deal with any problems in relationships, because the communication process is open to new solutions. You continue to have an underlying concern about money and future finances, so you're looking for new alternatives and letting go of those old ways of doing things. By the end of the month, you are speaking more freely and openly. This can be a great time to write, teach, and work with social media as an outlet for your creativity. Watch your impulse-buying, as it will be easy to overspend as you respond to those immediate needs!



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By SAM BYRD
Photo by ALEX ROSA

Houston's Kingmaker

Inside Ian Syder-Blake's world.



Drag isn't just for queens anymore. The Kings of Houston have made their mark, and leading the pack is none other than **Ian Syder-Blake**, who is help-

ing give rise to a new generation of performers. In addition to twice being named *OUTSMART* magazine's Gayest & Greatest "Favorite Drag King," he's a family man who has reared eight drag children, two adopted brothers, and ten grandkids.

Pronouns?

He/him, both in and out of drag.

Hometown?

Born and raised in Houston.

Drag birthday?

February 2013.

What first got you interested in drag?

I had been a fan of drag for years. I was invited by an old friend to a show, and fell in love. With some encouragement from my partner and that friend, I decided to try it out. The rest is history. Once I started, I didn't want to stop. I felt like I'd found a home.

Describe your drag persona.

Fun, encouraging, silly, energetic, accepting of everyone, and really gay. I make it my mission to make everyone I meet feel special.

Inspiration behind the name?

 Keep up with Ian Syder-Blake on Facebook and on Instagram @ian_syder

I have always loved the name Ian, and many drag kings use puns for their names. Ian Syder sounds like "inside her," and I thought it was clever and fun. Blake is a family name, which I took on when I was adopted by the legendary Lana Blake.

What illusions are you known for?

Peter Griffin, George Michael, and Fred Flintstone are a few. Each illusion has original

mixes that I refresh regularly to keep the characters entertaining.

What would your fans be surprised to learn about you?

I am a hyper-effeminate man on-stage—campy and fun. While I do have my effeminate qualities at home, I also do many of my own repairs as well as make some mean barbecue.

I'm not at all afraid to get dirty and do the "butch" chores.

What is Drag King Boot Camp?

Drag King Boot Camp started when co-creator Richard Long and I realized there were so many [beginning] king entertainers who needed guidance. There isn't a "legendary" king generation to teach them, and I didn't want anyone to struggle to learn on their own like I did.

There are eight weeks of classes and a final that includes a live performance. There are now boot-camp classes around the country and online, helping new kings get their start with confidence and class.

How do you find your outfits?

Almost everything in my closet started out as a regular outfit. I have some custom costumes, but most of what I own is hand-picked and embellished by myself and my family. You can have some absolutely beautiful pieces that began on a rack in a thrift store. All you need is a little imagination and lots of glue.

Any difference between performing in person versus online?

It's much harder to perform for a camera and without the feedback during your numbers. It's almost impossible to know if you're doing well. Many entertainers are moving to a digital format, which requires learning new skills. It may be hard, but we will always push through and find a way to bring art to those who watch us.

Where do you see the future of drag?

With luck and hard work, I can see drag becoming much more inclusive. Kings, nonbinary, AFAB queens, AMAB kings, and people of color deserve a place at every show.

When we're not socially distancing, where can people find you performing?

Pearl Bar on Wednesdays with the Kings of Houston. But there isn't a venue around that I haven't been lucky enough to work at. ▼

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