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HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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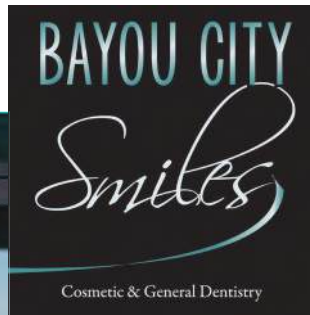
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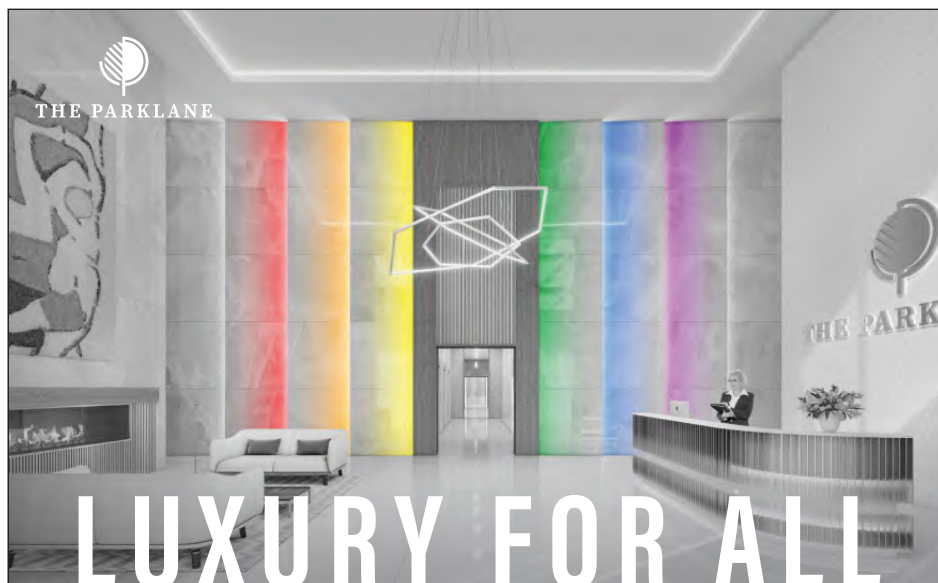
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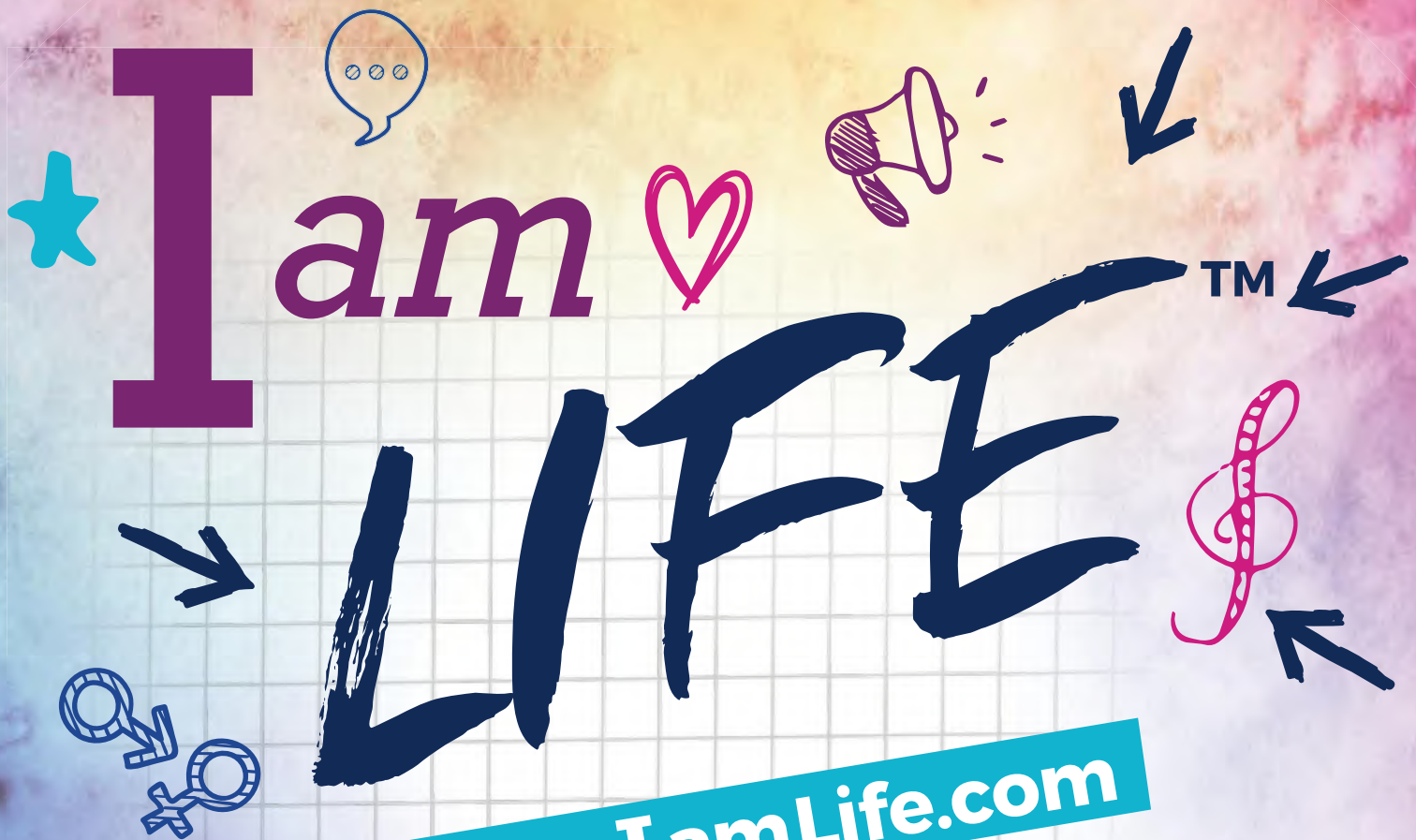
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Last month, Texas received failing marks on the Human Rights Campaign's State Equal-

ity Index, a state-by-state report of statewide policies that affect queer folks and their families. Also in January, Republican lawmakers in Austin were busy proposing two bills that would restrict transgender youth's access to healthcare and student athletics, while a Houston pastor was exercising his "religious freedom" to encourage LGBTQ people to "overcome" their gender identities and sexual orientations. Clearly, our already-vulnerable community is under attack.

But what happens when LG-BTQ Texans are affirmed and

supported? Look no further than this February issue of OUTSMART, which is filled with of success stories ranging from flourishing queer politicians to nationally recognized artists and local changemakers.

For example, our recently elected State Representative Ann Johnson, an out lesbian and Houston native, chats with writer Marene Gustin about her advocacy work in Austin, while writer Kim Hogstrom interviews Jonathan Estrada, who will likely become the first openly gay person to serve on the Pasadena City Council.

On the creative front, the work of ten LGBTQ visual artists is on prominent display at the Museum of Fine Arts' new Nancy and Rich Kinder Building. Check out writer Andrew Edmonson's roundup of

queer creatives to take note of on your next visit to the museum.

And on the activist front, trans advocates Kai Jones and René Mendiola are working hard to strengthen the trans community in Houston. Zachary McKenzie sits down with this duo to discuss their Saving Our Sons & Brothers organization, a new group for local trans men of color.

This Black History Month issue also highlights several gifted Black LGBTQ leaders. Writer Lillian Hoang speaks to Houston Public Media's Eddie Robinson about his upcoming radio program, while writer Sam Byrd interviews author and recording artist Justin Michael Williams about his surprising new approach to the practice of meditation. And writer Krystle Lyons chats with our cover stars Ashley

and Courtney Adams-Matthewis, a local lesbian couple whose popular mental-health podcast is making waves.

Finally, in the spirit of Valentine's Day, local drag queen Violet S'Arbleu shares her thoughts on the challenges that drag artists face in their relationships. And don't miss writer Jenny Block's ideas for a romantic V-Day date, quarantine style. From having a picnic to getting crafty with art projects, saying "Be Mine" this year doesn't need to put your health at risk.

See you next month!

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

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

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

What is DOVATO?

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

Who should not take DOVATO?

Do not take DOVATO if you:

- have ever had an allergic reaction to a medicine that contains dolutegravir or lamivudine.
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What should I tell my healthcare provider before using DOVATO?

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

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

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

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

What are possible side effects of DOVATO?

DOVATO can cause serious side effects, including:

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

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

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(DREW PERINE/AP)

Transgender U.S. Army captain Jennifer Peace

Biden Lifts Transgender Military Ban

Previously discharged trans service members' cases will be re-examined.

By KATE SULLIVAN, CNN



On January 25, President Joe Biden signed an executive order to repeal a Trump-era ban on most transgender Americans joining the military.

"This is reinstating a position that the previous commanders, as well as the secretaries, have supported. And what I'm doing is enabling all qualified Americans to serve their country in uniform," Biden said, speaking from the Oval Office alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin just before signing the executive order.

President Donald Trump's ban has been rebuked by the Democrat-led House of Representatives and condemned by LGBTQ activists as discriminatory. Austin voiced his support

for overturning the ban in his Senate confirmation hearing last week.

"No one will be separated or discharged from the military or denied re-enlistment on the basis of gender identity. And for those transgender service members who were discharged or separated because of gender identity, their cases will be reexamined," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said during a White House briefing.

"President Biden believes gender identity should not be a bar to military service, and that America's strength is found in its diversity," Psaki said. "America is stronger around the world when it is inclusive."

Biden had a meeting late Monday morning with Austin, Vice President Kamala Harris, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, according to the White House. Later on

Monday, Harris ceremonially swore in Austin as defense secretary in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

Harris and Austin's joint appearance underscores the record-setting diversity of Biden's administration. Austin is the first Black secretary of defense, and Harris is the first Black vice president, as well as the first woman and South Asian to hold the position.

Austin addressed the transgender ban in his confirmation hearing on Friday and told the Senate Armed Services Committee: "I truly believe, Senator, as I said in my opening statement, that if you're fit and you're qualified to serve, and you can maintain the standards, you should be allowed to serve."

He was confirmed by the Senate later that day, after being granted a congressional waiver to serve in his post because he was assum-

ing the post before waiting seven years after active-duty service. Austin was the second member of Biden's cabinet to be confirmed by the Senate, following Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines.

Trump first announced the transgender ban on Twitter in July 2017, arguing that transgender people in the military would lead to "tremendous medical costs and disruption."

The policy, later officially released by then Secretary of Defense James Mattis in 2018, blocks individuals who have been diagnosed with a condition known as gender dysphoria from serving, with limited exceptions. The policy specifies individuals without the condition can serve, but only if they do so according to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Trump's ban reversed a policy initially approved by the Defense Department under former President Barack Obama, which was still under final review, that would have allowed transgender individuals to openly serve in the military.

"PRESIDENT BIDEN BELIEVES GENDER IDENTITY SHOULD NOT BE A BAR TO MILITARY SERVICE, AND THAT AMERICA'S STRENGTH IS FOUND IN ITS DIVERSITY. AMERICA IS STRONGER AROUND THE WORLD WHEN IT IS INCLUSIVE."

—Jen Psaki, White House Press Secretary

The Supreme Court allowed Trump's transgender military ban to go into effect in January 2019. The House of Representatives passed a resolution in March of that year expressing opposition to Trump's ban, describing it as discriminatory and saying it was based on "flawed scientific and medical claims."

"We're thrilled that the Biden administration has moved forward to place this garbage policy into the dustbin of history," Sasha Buchert, a transgender military veteran and senior attorney at the LGBTQ legal advocacy group Lambda Legal, told CNN on Monday.

Human Rights Campaign president Alphonso David also praised Biden's move.

"The greatest military in the world will again value readiness over bias, and qualifications over discrimination," he said in a statement.

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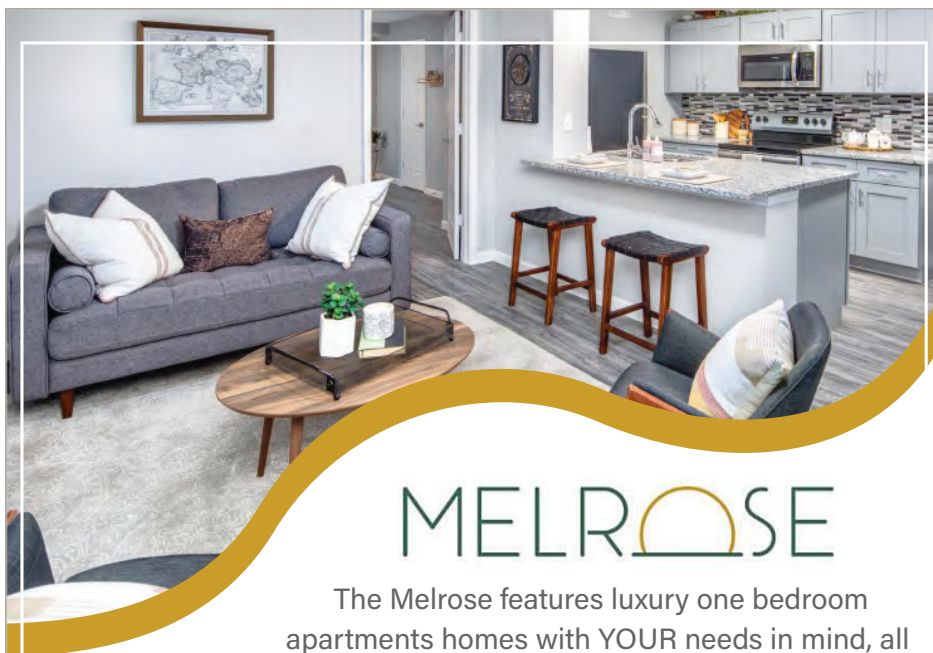
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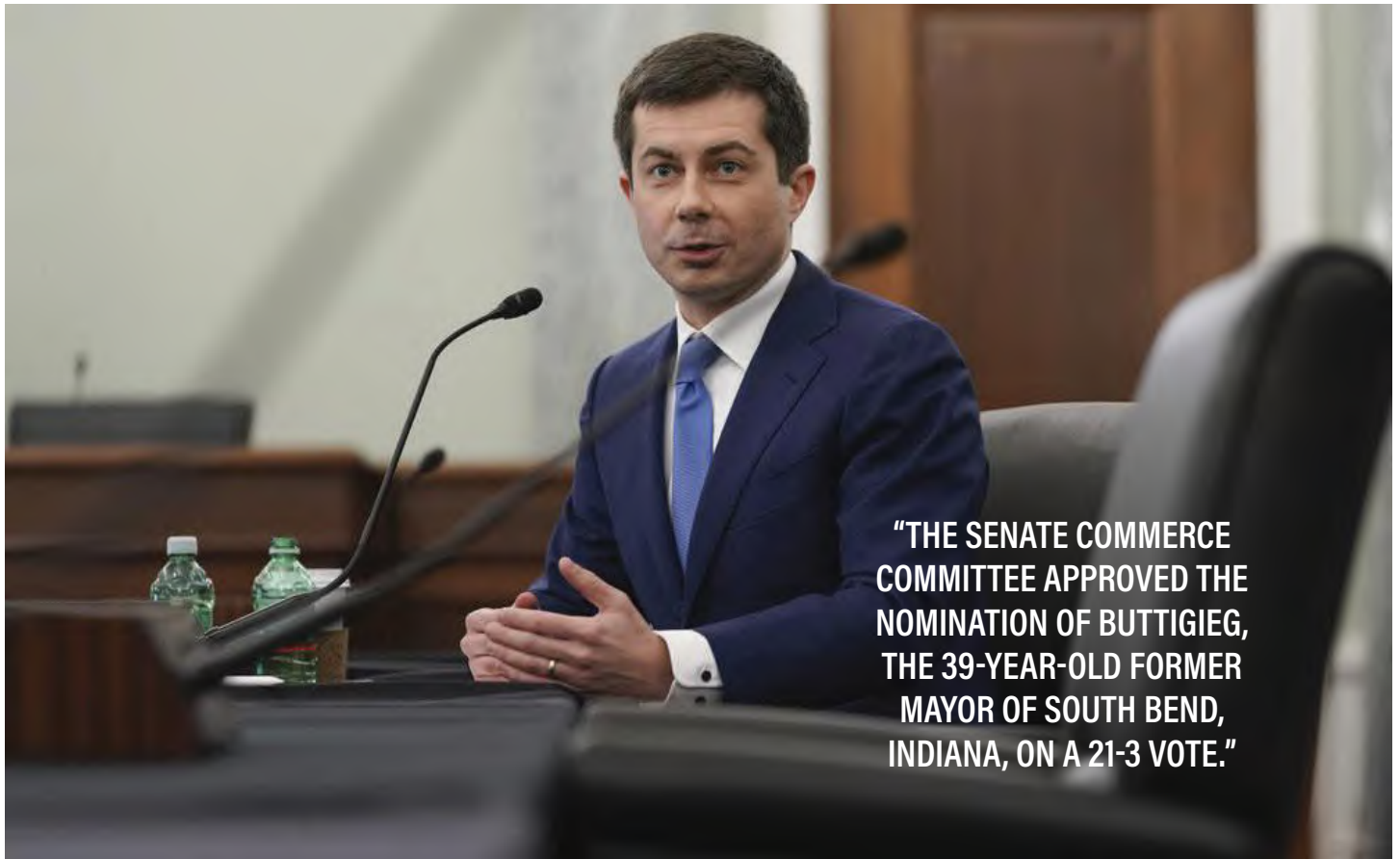
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Pete Buttigieg Advances in Senate

As Biden's transportation secretary, he would be the first openly gay cabinet member.

By HOPE YEN, ASSOCIATED PRESS



A Senate panel on January 27 easily advanced President Joe Biden's nomination of Pete Buttigieg to be transportation secretary, setting up a final confirmation

vote for a key role in Biden's push to rebuild the nation's infrastructure and confront climate change.

The Senate Commerce Committee approved the nomination of Buttigieg, the 39-year-old former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, on a 21-3 vote.

Should the full Senate vote in favor of Buttigieg's nomination, he would be the first openly gay person, and one of the youngest, to be confirmed for a cabinet post.

Biden has been urging the Senate, where Democrats hold a slim majority, to move quickly on his Cabinet picks, given the current COVID-19 crisis. The president has also pledged an ambitious agenda of job growth, fighting climate change, and promoting racial equity.

Senator Maria Cantwell, the panel's incoming Democratic chair, praised Buttigieg's credentials before the vote Wednesday and

urged quick confirmation so he can get to work on COVID-19 safety in transportation. "He understands what all of us have to deal with on transportation and infrastructure," Cantwell said.

With the transportation sector, and particularly car emissions, being a top contributor to global warming in the United States, Buttigieg, whom Biden praised as bringing "a new voice," is expected to play an important role in the climate agenda. Advocates hope his public stature and loyal following from 2020 campaign will help win over lawmakers and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 59

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Two Anti-Trans Bills Introduced in Austin

Legislation would restrict trans access to health care and student athletics.

By LOURDES ZAVALETA



It's been two weeks since the 87th Texas Legislative Session began, and anti-LGBTQ Republican lawmakers have already proposed two anti-transgender bills.

Representative Steve Toth (R-The Woodlands) has filed HB 68, which would ban trans youth from accessing gender-affirming health care by reclassifying it as child abuse, while Senator Charles Perry (R-District 28) has filed SB 373, which would force K-12 school children to only participate in sports according to the gender on their birth certificate.

"In the newest attempt to erode support for equal rights in Texas, Representative Steve Toth and Senator Charles Perry are directly targeting transgender youth, putting them under a harmful spotlight in two pieces of dangerous legislation," Equality Texas said in a statement.

Since its inception in 1978, Equality Texas, a political advocacy organization, has advocated for LGBTQ rights at the State

Capitol. Every year, opponents of equality in several state legislatures present the public with a newly fabricated "emergency" related to LGBTQ people, the group noted.

"These policies are designed to create fear, spread misinformation about who LGBTQ people are, and erode the steady and rising support for [gender equality] that give LGBTQ people opportunities to participate fully in their communities," Equality Texas said, noting that a Public Religion Research Institute study revealed that a majority of Texans support nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ people.

"Being a kid is hard enough," Equality Texas added. "Lawmakers claim these bills are designed to protect vulnerable youth, but they do just the opposite. We don't need politicians making it even harder for kids who are transgender, denying them the best-practice medical care and singling them out for increased bullying and harassment."

Trans people, including trans children, rely on informative health care as part of their transition, according to a recent study published in the official journal of the Ameri-

can Academy of Pediatrics. Major medical associations consider transition care for trans people to be safe, medically necessary, and life-saving.

While there is no law specifically regulating transition-related treatment separately from other medically necessary care, all minors need parental consent to medically transition, according to PolitiFact.

Widely accepted guidelines for transgender transition care emphasize gender-affirming care and therapy as primary tools for children. More intensive options, such as surgery or hormone treatment, are typically reserved for older adolescents (with parental consent) and adults.

Puberty blockers are a reversible treatment often prescribed for children who may feel uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth, and it requires a child's informed consent, according to the Mayo Clinic. Children whose gender identity is not being affirmed face "astronomically higher" rates of suicide, according to Equality Texas. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has confirmed that transgender youth face a "disproportionately higher risk" of suicide, substance abuse, and violence.

"Classifying best-practice medical care as child abuse sets a dangerous precedent for all Texans by allowing non-expert lawmakers to criminalize care that is life-saving and consistent with prevailing medical standards," Equality Texas said.

For all students, having the opportunity to compete in sports results in positive outcomes in development, social skills, and psychological well-being, according to GLSEN. The psychological benefits of sports specifically include improved emotional regulation, decreased hopelessness and thoughts of suicide, fewer symptoms of depression, and higher self-esteem.

GLSEN research has also found that LGBTQ student athletes have higher GPAs than their peers who do not compete in sports, and a majority of LGBTQ student athletes feel a sense of belonging at their schools.

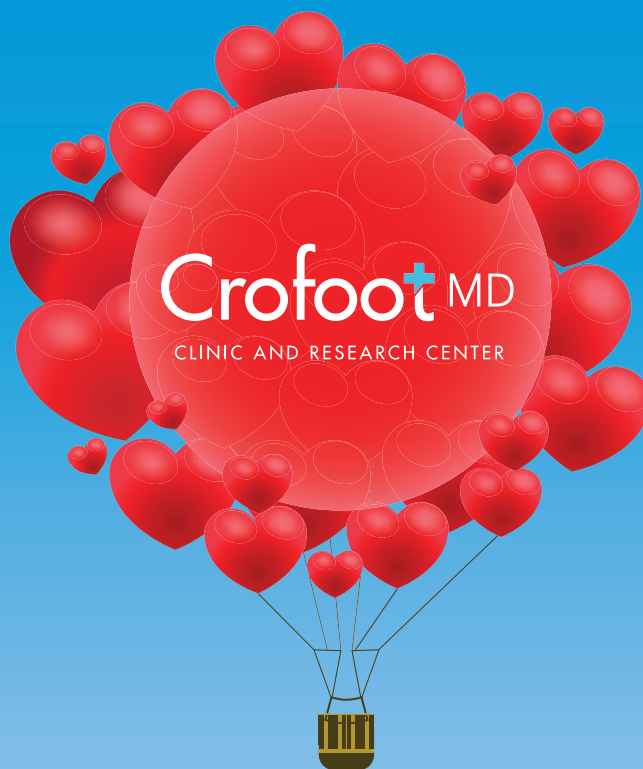
"Attacking trans youths' access to sports—a tactic that, like debating bathrooms, has no basis in real-world facts—is another attempt to isolate vulnerable trans kids, barring them from the friendship, education, teamwork, and health benefits of playing a sport," Equality Texas said.

To help stop the attacks on LGBTQ people during the Texas Legislative Session, Equality Texas is asking its supporters to make their voices heard by contacting legislators, virtually mobilizing, and providing their own testimonies.



To get involved with Equality Texas, go here or visit equalitytexas.org.

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Texas Gets Failing Marks on HRC's Equality Scorecard

The Human Rights Campaign's annual report challenges legislators to do better.

By MARENE GUSTIN



The Human Rights Campaign's State Equality Index (SEI) scorecards are out, and Texas doesn't fare too well. In fact, it's at the bottom of the barrel. The annual state-by-

state report of statewide laws and policies that affect LGBTQ people and their families places Texas right down there with ultraconservative states like Alabama and Florida.

Texas gets a "High Priority to Achieve Basic Equality" rating, which is a failing grade. In the Lone Star State, there are no laws to prohibit housing discrimination, employment discrimination, discrimination in public accommodations, or student discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. Texas does not have an anti-bullying law for LGBTQ kids, nor does it have a law that bans insurance companies from denying transgender health care to state employees. There are no policies or laws to facilitate gender-marker updates on identification documents, and there are no restrictions on conversion therapy. Nor does the Texas hate-crime law address sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, just

about the only thing the State of Texas does for the community is allow marriage licenses to be issued for same-sex couples. The HRC scorecard deems all other Texas markers as unacceptable.

And so far, the current Texas Legislative Session has seen several anti-LGBTQ+ bills being filed by Republicans, including a bill that would criminalize medical officials who aid trans youth with medical transitions. Republican legislators, who control the Texas House and Senate, have until March 12 to file proposed bills.

Nationwide, LGBTQ advocacy groups (such as the nonprofit Texas Equality) spend most of their time trying to keep anti-LGBTQ bills from becoming law in conservative states. Some bills are blatantly anti-LGBTQ, and others are cloaked in deceptive "religious freedom" language.

HRC's approach to the Texas Legislature is similar during every session, meaning it tries to prevent anti-LGBTQ bills from becoming law while building steady support for pro-equality legislation. But instead of focusing on the many challenges all Texans face, the Texas

Legislature continues to waste time putting discrimination on the menu during each session.

"The Biden administration has committed to being the most pro-equality administration in history, and HRC looks forward to partnering with them in making that possible," says Colin Kutney, HRC's senior legal department program manager. That could be both a blessing and a curse. "Some states might deprioritize LGBTQ issues, knowing that there is progress on the federal level, while other states might react to the administration's actions negatively," she says. One of President Biden's first executive orders was to reverse Trump's ban on transgender troops.

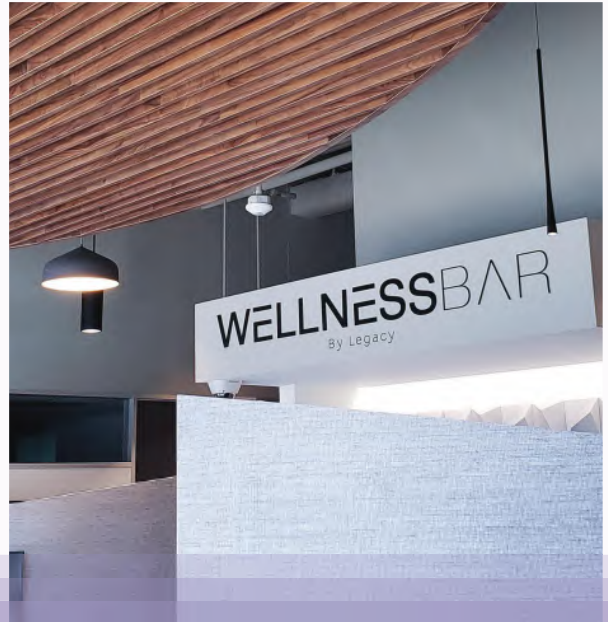
And while there is currently no sign of another bathroom-bill showdown, anti-LGBTQ bills continue to be filed. The fight for equality in Texas is far from over, according to the Texas House LGBTQ Caucus, a recently formed "forum for Texas legislators to discuss issues that affect LGBTQ Texans and to further the goal of equality and justice for all Texans."



For more information about the Human Rights Campaign, visit hrc.org.

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Toxic Ministry

Houston pastor's lecture series urges LGBTQ people to "overcome" their sexual orientation.

By ZACHARY MCKENZIE



A South Houston mega-church is in the midst of a midweek lecture series that encourages LGBTQ people to "overcome" their gender identities and sexual orientations.

Sagemont Church, a Southern Baptist congregation in the Pearland area with over 21,000 members, claims on its website that "we are all equal at the foot of the cross, regardless of your past, your family, or your circumstances." For three consecutive Wednesday nights through February 3, the church is featuring lectures by local pastor Michael R. Newman, who is sharing his testimony and interpretation of the Bible to help those dealing with "unwanted same-sex attraction."

"Pastor Michael R. Newman, Director of Christian Coalition for Reconciliation, will lead this three-Wednesday series [entitled "Christians and LGBTQ: Understanding and Dialogue."] He has over three decades of experience as a "speaker/minister/overcomer from a same-sex attraction background. He will share his personal testimony of transformation, as well as insights for better understanding of LGBTQ persons. Biblical perspectives will be examined concerning our focus in dialogue and relationship with LGBTQ persons. This series will be January 20, 27, and February 3 in room WC1320," according to Sagemont's website.

At press time, neither Sagemont Church nor Pastor Newman had responded to OUT-

SMART's multiple requests for comment.

According to the Christian Coalition for Reconciliation website, Newman is an ordained pastor but not a licensed professional counselor. His online bio includes "years of experience in discipleship training and one-on-one mentoring/coaching related to sexual and relational brokenness."

In his January 20 presentation, which is available online, Newman promoted a loose-leaf handout that attendees could pick up. He began his testimony by describing his "early homosexual tendencies," which included making good grades and being an all-star student,

seeing examples of powerful women and assuming they were the dominant gender, and not being good at sports. He then mentioned other observations that "Satan forced him to misinterpret."

Newman went on to explain that his high-pitched voice, which can be misinterpreted as feminine, is the result of year-round allergies. He also claimed that molestation leads to homosexual behavior, and reassured the group that "I am one of few [LGBTQ] people who don't have sexual abuse or molestation in my story. Most people I know have [suffered sexual abuse]."



Sagemont Church is a Southern Baptist congregation in the Pearland area with over 21,000 members.

Elsewhere in his presentation, Newman suggested that feminism is a “gateway drug to lesbianism” and that girls are keen to experiment with other girls because they mature faster than boys and are “desperate for some sort of romantic attention, [which] they aren’t receiving from the opposite sex.” He also claimed that homosexuality is an “attack on the family” and that parents should teach their children about sex from a young age.

Nearly half of LGBTQ adults in America are religious, according to a report from UCLA’s Williams Institute. The vast majority of those are Christian, and are split fairly evenly among Catholics (25 percent), Protestants (28 percent) and other denominations (24.5 percent). Just over 2 percent identify as Jewish, and 2 percent identify as Muslim.

LGBTQ people who are not affirmed by their religion are more likely to die by suicide and experience high levels of depression, said out Baptist pastor Rich Havard, executive director of The Inclusive Collective, a Chicago student ministry on the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago. He references studies such as the recent report by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

“Toxic ministry, like that of Pastor Michael R. Newman, bears bad fruit and is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Plus, it is not even effective at what it sets out to do,” Havard says. “Studies prove again and again that conversion therapy, [an attempt to change one’s gender identity or sexual orientation], doesn’t even work. [If you] don’t believe those studies, listen to the haunting testimonies of people who have gone through conversion therapy.”

A queer member of Sagemont Church, who wishes to remain anonymous, tells OUTSMART about the impact that messages like Newman’s have had on her, as well as other LGBTQ Christians and their families. “My family has gone [to Sagemont] since I was 8. I’ve seen firsthand how listening to messages like these is problematic,” she says, noting that her parents have routinely denounced her sexuality due to their religious beliefs. “Also, I think if I had heard sermons like Newman’s message even just a few years ago, I might not be here right now. That’s terrifying, and I know I’m not the only one.”

Sagemont Church’s senior pastor, Dr. Matt Carter, was hired in May 2020. Prior to working at Sagemont, Carter and his wife, Jennifer, established The Austin Stone Community

Church, a ministry with meeting locations throughout Austin. The church’s six campuses have attracted around 7,500 attendees each Sunday—including many young professionals and college students.

Carter received a doctorate of ministry degree in expository preaching at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2015. He made his thoughts on the LGBTQ community widely known in 2017 when he signed the Nashville Statement, an evangelical Christian statement of faith relating to human sexuality and traditional gender roles authored by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

**“TOXIC MINISTRY, LIKE THAT
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**—Pastor Michael Havard,
The Inclusive Collective**

(CBMW) in Nashville. Among other proclamations, the Statement, which includes over 24,000 signatures, condemns same-sex marriage and LGBTQ sexuality.

Jacob Breeze, pastor of Holy Family HTX in EaDo, “a church for people without a church,” emphasizes that LGBTQ locals who do not feel affirmed by churches like Sagemont are welcome at other congregations in Houston.

Pastor Breeze, a fierce LGBTQ ally, says the presence of his church’s LGBTQ members makes the congregation unique. “Holy Family is better because of our LGBTQ+ sisters, brothers, and siblings. They show us the face of God. Our paid and volunteer LGBTQ+ leaders and attendees help us lead more Jesus-centered lives.”

He adds that faith communities like Holy Family can be safe spaces for LGBTQ people who have been hurt by other churches. “You are not a burden. You are a blessing. In you, we see just how creative the living God is. Also, there really are churches who can help you reconstruct a loving, liberating, and life-giving faith without fundamentalism. Even so, we know that your trust has to be earned.”

 Check out *The Inclusive Institute* in Chicago at letsgetinclusiveuic.org. For more information on Holy Family, visit holyfamiyhtx.org.



Pastor R. Michael Newman identifies as an “overcomer from a same-sex attraction background.” (Screengrab via Stream Monkey)

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So Long, Trump

A few random murmurs about the outgoing administration.



I hope by the time you're reading this that the pandemic is starting to pump the brakes. I call it The CoronaCoaster, for all of its ups and downs. One day

you're loving your bubble, doing your workouts, baking banana bread and going for long walks, and the next day you're bawling, drinking gin for breakfast, trying to jump-start your toaster with your vacuum cleaner, and missing people you don't even like.

At deadline time, we were fixing to get a new president. I'm gonna suppose that has actually happened—assuming the shirtless buffalo-horns guy didn't come back in a Jesus outfit and walk across the National Mall reflecting pool without getting his robe wet. (You know what the tacky people are calling him after they found out about his vegan prison diet? Dances with Kale.)

Nobody was more surprised than I was to see that Trump got impeached a second time. Honey, I hadn't even finished writing all my thank-you notes for the first impeachment.

Here's my list of things that we had just assumed were true about Trump's administration, but couldn't prove:

- Trump also extorted the prime minister of East Bandar to produce some dirt on Marco Rubio. Then we discover that there is no East Bandar, but the prime minister shares a post office box with Rudy Giuliani.
- Jared Kushner takes not one dime in salary, and since his accomplishments turn out to be worth about that much, it looks like we owe him a little back pay.
- Ivanka Trump is coming out with a new line of household items for the Russian market. Pee-resistant plastic bedsheets top her list of best-sellers.
- Mike Pence's wife (whom he calls Mother) is also his cousin (whom he calls Dixie). This little-known loophole in Indiana marriage law is the reason why some couples need to live in Indiana.
- Rev. Billy Bob Jeffers, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, claims to have the original version of the Constitution (not the

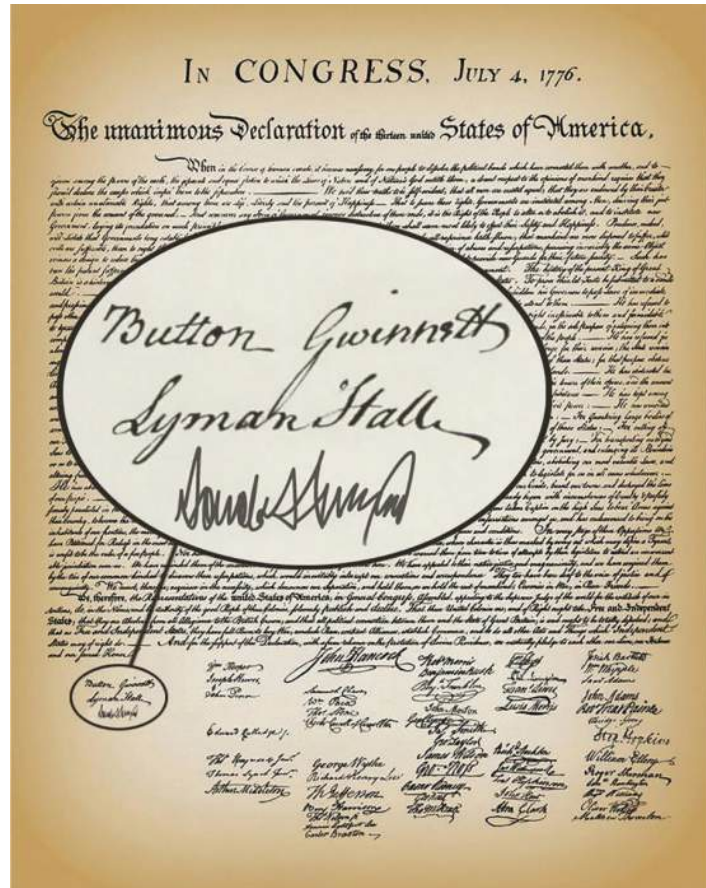


ILLUSTRATION BY BLASE DISTEFANO

current version that was changed by the Deep State in the basement of a Des Moines pizza parlor). Rev. Jeffers' original version lists Donald Trump as the third signer of the Declaration of Independence and the rightful heir to the American flag, the Lincoln Memorial, and most of the Godzilla movies.

- And one thing we already knew for sure (but we still like to sit and savor every now and then) is that Rick Perry has done yee'd his last haw, and is every bit as dumb as we suspected.

Sometimes those QAnon people cannonball into the middle of the rage pool and can't get back to the side to get out, so there they are. That wouldn't be so bad, except that they won't shuddup and they keep splashing water on your cute new outfit. Everything is a personal affront to them. Everything. They've never read the Constitution or its amendments, but they're absolutely certain it says they can do whatever they feel like doing. And they can't spell *infringed*.

If anybody ever tries to tell you that Trump actually played no role in the Capitol insurgency, remind them that Bin Laden didn't actually fly the airplanes on 9/11.

Let's chat for a minute about our former First Lady Melania Trump. When she first

landed in Dee-Cee, we all felt sorry for her because she married for money, and there's just not enough money in the world...

But then came Melania's anti-Christmas rant. You can hate a lot of things, but you cannot hate Christmas. There she was, caught on tape saying that she doesn't give an F or a K about Christmas. Oh no, girlfriend! While that explains your horrid White House holiday decorations, it doesn't explain why you are unable to smile.

Top Ten Titles for Melania's New Book:

10. The Devil Wears MAGA
9. A Tale of Two Twitties
8. Chicken Soup for the Soulless
7. I Write Dees Book
6. The Third Wives Club
5. Raging Bullies
4. Putin on an Act
3. The Days of Whine and No Roses
2. White Pride and Prejudice
1. Gone with the Windbag

And so here we are, all ready for the new year to be better. During the Middle Ages, they celebrated the end of a plague with wine and orgies. Let me know as soon as you hear what's being planned when this one ends.

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Managing Loneliness in a COVID World

Find ways to connect safely with others—and yourself.

By DARYL SHORTER, MD

After scrolling through the many photos of mask-free partying on Instagram's now-infamous @GaysOverCovid account, one can't help but wonder how people could be so cavalier in the midst of a pandemic. The anonymously-curated social-media account is dedicated to publicly exposing and shaming LGBTQ people (mostly cisgender gay men) who get together for parties (of either the dinner or circuit variety) and then post pictures of the event to their social-media accounts.

Clearly, there's something deeper here that can and should be considered—beyond the obvious controversy surrounding the practice of public shaming. Rather than immediately posting judgmental comments about foolish and risky behavior, it can be helpful to have a bit of compassion for those maskless party

boys who are no doubt struggling with intense COVID fatigue. In truth, there is a great deal of loneliness at the root of this potentially life-threatening desire to connect at all costs.

For many of us, loneliness has characterized much of the past year. With so many restrictions on both public and private gatherings, we are spending a great deal of time in varying states of self-quarantine. The arrival of Valentine's Day this month throws this loneliness into stark relief that can further intensify our emotional distress. We all wish that we could return to some semblance of normalcy.

But what, exactly, is loneliness? Although we all feel lonely at some point, actually describing this emotion can be challenging. It can be helpful to think of it as an unpleasant feeling of disconnectedness or isolation. This is different from simply being alone, or having time to one's self—which can be rejuvenating to

both mind and body. Solitude is not the same as loneliness or isolation.

Not all loneliness is created equal. Psychiatry professor Sarvada Tiwari, in speaking of his work with older adults, theorizes there are actually three types of loneliness: situational, developmental, and internal. Drawing this distinction is helpful, since the potential causes and ways of managing these conditions can be quite different.

Situational Loneliness

Situational loneliness develops in response to socio-economic, environmental, or cultural factors. Importantly, these external forces are oftentimes out of our control. These past several months are a great example. A global pandemic and the economic shutdown brought on by stay-at-home orders set the stage for widespread isolation. If you find yourself frequently saying, "I miss being around and seeing people," then situational loneliness may be what you're experiencing.

Developmental Loneliness

Developmental loneliness can occur as a result of the conditions of our upbringing, and the ways in which we are socialized into family and community. For example, a traumatic childhood or young adulthood can result in patterns of thinking and behavior that reflect the very real lack of safety and comfort that occurred earlier in life.

While feeling the need to spend time with others is healthy and natural, feeling insecure in one's primary relationships with parents or family can lessen that desire to closely engage. Also, when there is a sense of instability due →

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to financial or emotional strain in the home, people will often question the security of the relationships they have. Rather than risk insecurity, the phrase “I would rather be alone” may become a common refrain.

Internal Loneliness

Internal loneliness is when someone perceives themselves as being alone, despite evidence to the contrary. Chronic feelings of low self-worth, or difficulty with maintaining positive self-esteem, can drive the feeling that we are not truly connected with others. Those people may have a pervasive feeling that “I am alone in the world.” As a result, other negative emotions of sadness, hopelessness, or despair can creep in and take hold.

Alone, but Not Lonely

Striking a balance between having time to ourselves and closely engaging with others is a challenge for many of us. When our emotional barometer is out of alignment, it can be easy to either feel lonely or become overly clingy. When you are feeling lonely, ask yourself: What is the cause of my loneliness in this moment? Is it that I am missing people, or am I being triggered by something from my past that requires further examination?

If situational loneliness is the culprit, thinking through ways of safely connecting with others can be helpful. Using online technology, or gathering outdoors while maintaining an appropriate distance, can provide opportunities for socially recharging. If developmental or internal loneliness is more prominent, then monitoring for chronic feelings of emptiness, separateness, or despair is critical—and may signal the need for additional mental-health evaluation and treatment.

Valuing Your Time Apart from Others

At the same time that you strive for social connection, it's important to have time to yourself. Finding a designated space away from others can help you develop a deeper connection with your internal thought life, and represents the core of your individualism.

Becoming your own best friend may be exactly what's needed to combat feelings of isolation. The trick is to approach this task with a spirit of curiosity and adventure, rather than with feelings of dread. The next time you're alone with nothing but your own thoughts, ask yourself: What can I do to get to know myself better?

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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The No-Spend Challenge

How to decrease expenses and increase savings.



Most people are familiar with the saying, “It’s not what you make, but what you keep that matters.” It definitely rings true when it comes to money

matters like spending, saving, and investing.

So if you earn a healthy income but also spend a lot, the contributions to your savings may be much smaller than someone who earns less but sets more aside for the future. Over time, those seemingly small deposits (along with their corresponding growth) can really add up!

With so many demands on your money, it may be difficult to find any “extra” dollars to save or invest. But by taking a look at things differently, a solution can sometimes be found. Take, for instance, using “the no-spend challenge” to decrease the amount of outgo and at the same time increase the money that you save or invest for retirement.

How Can The No-Spend Challenge Increase Savings?

While you may have come across savings plans that require you to eliminate all but the bare-minimum expenses, the no-spend challenge does not require you to part with everything you love and reside in a tent with no running water.

Rather, this savings strategy focuses on simply cutting out some of your non-essential expenses—and in many cases, doing so only on a temporary basis. For instance, you can still keep your heater on in the winter and continue to purchase groceries, but you will need to step back from making various unneeded “impulse” purchases such as Starbucks coffee and streaming services. You could also cook more at home and bring your lunch to work rather than going out for meals.

When you do so, keep track of the amount of money that you would have spent on these items, and move those dollars into a savings or investment account instead. With the no-spend challenge, no amount is considered “too small” to save. And over time, you may notice that your nest egg is growing nicely.

Implementing a No-Spend Strategy

Just like other strategies that are available for saving and investments, there are different ways to go about implementing a no-spend challenge, based on what works best for your



particular objectives. (You could even start out with one of these no-spend challenge plans and then switch to another one later).

No-spend challenge options include:

- Banning your spending for a pre-set period of time. Using this no-spend approach, you will continue to pay your essential living expenses but stop any type of non-essential spending such as purchasing junk food or new clothes.

- Having certain “no-spending days” and then tracking your progress. Easing into the no-spend challenge may work best for some people, as it only requires you to implement these new habits some of the time (similar to dieters having a few “cheat days”).

- Targeting your spending weaknesses. Most people have certain weaknesses like purchasing new (but unneeded) shoes or clothing. By targeting just these areas in the no-spend challenge, you could find that your spending decreases significantly.

- Freezing your spending on special occasions. We all know that holidays or birthdays lead to higher spending. So by cutting back on these occasions, you will spend less while at the same time you find other ways to celebrate.

In addition to these easy-to-get-started options, another nice feature about the no-spend challenge is that it can work for both seasoned investors and those who are just starting to save—either for retirement or for a special goal like a new iPad or phone.

In either case, though, the no-spend chal-

lenge can help you to “find” money that can benefit you in the long term—versus letting it slip away on impulse and other unnecessary purchases.

As another added bonus, taking the no-spend challenge could also be a catalyst for making long-lasting changes to your spending, saving, and investing habits, as well as for providing you with a regular stream of contributions to your savings and investment plan.

How Can I Start the Challenge Now?

There are many ways to enhance your retirement savings, and some are much easier to implement than others. The no-spend challenge gives you several different options for getting started and seeing results right away.

If you’re ready to put your no-spend challenge in place to start enhancing your savings, it can help to work with a financial professional who may offer you suggestions and strategies that will work best for your specific objectives. That way, you’ll have a customized no-spend challenge plan in place that can be followed and revised in the future if your income or savings situation changes.

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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A Fresh Face for Pasadena

Openly gay city council candidate **Jonathan Estrada** shares his vision for District E.

By KIM HOGSTROM



Unable to ignore the call of public service, Jonathan Estrada, a 28-year-old openly gay Hispanic man, is running for Pasadena's City Council District E seat. Although the Pasadena native will face issues that would challenge even the most seasoned legislator, his warmth, charm, and unrelenting energy will serve him well.

"When people identify problems in Pasadena—be they street repairs, drainage issues, or crime—they always say, 'Why hasn't our city done something about that?' Then I think, 'Well, maybe it's me who should do something about that. If not me, who?'" Estrada says with a smile.

Since the incumbent council member for District E is term limited, and no one else has registered to run for the position, Estrada will be the likely winner of the May 1 election. He would become the first openly gay person to serve on the Pasadena City Council.

Growing up in Pasadena, Estrada attended Sparks Elementary, San Jacinto Intermediate, and Sam Rayburn High School. With his sights set on public service, he enrolled in the political science and government program at the University of Houston-Downtown. He is currently participating in a UH-Clear Lake initiative that prepares students for

local, state, and federal public service. "Local government sparks my passion. That's where it all starts," he says. "I recently bought my first home in District E so I could stay and serve the community that I love."

Estrada's municipal and county government experience is hard to match. For the past six years, he has served as a regulatory compliance coordinator for the City of Houston. He has also worked in various Harris County departments, from the tax collector to the district clerk. And when he isn't studying at UH-Clear Lake, he is serving as the Precinct 404 chair in Pasadena and as a member of the Pasadena Historical Society.

"I understand the workings of the government, and I can navigate it," he says. "District E has been overlooked for a decade, but I know what it needs and how to get it."

Estrada isn't the only one who has faith in his ability to lead. Jennifer Halvorson is the president of Area 5 Democrats in Pasadena, the oldest grassroots organization dedicated to supporting Democratic candidates in Texas. Halvorson first worked with Estrada in 2014 during Wendy Davis' campaign for governor, and she was impressed by his commitment and vision from the start. "Jonathan has a true flair for government. He is also a warm and engaging person. He listens carefully when people tell him how they feel and what they need.

"People don't often realize that a city council member has more impact on a citizen's day-to-day life than a president. It is a very important position. With his tremendous potential, Jonathan will help move the city forward, and District E is sure to benefit," Halvorson says.

Although 65 to 70 percent of the city's population is Hispanic/Latinx, only a third of the Pasadena City Council members are of Hispanic origin. The good news is that Pasadena is moving beyond its image as an industrial suburb with few amenities. Last October, digital giant Zillow partnered with Yelp to recognize Pasadena as one of America's ten most exciting "under the radar" suburbs in 2020. The city was awarded fifth place nationally, based on the area's amenities, livability, and affordable housing. It is the only Texas city that made the list.

"District E deserves a council member who represents our community with passion and insight," Estrada says. "My experience demonstrates my drive to advocate for our district. I believe Pasadena is ready for an openly gay council member, and that I am the right person. I am deeply committed to the work—I just don't see it any other way."



For more information or to speak with Jonathan Estrada, visit Estradaforpasadena.com.

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René Mendiola (I) and Kai Jones

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

Brothers Unite

Kai Jones and René Mendiola launch a new organization for Houston's transgender men of color.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Leaders are not born, they're made, and sometimes all it takes is knowing that someone you admire sees your potential for leadership to help you take the next step. That's exactly how Save Our Sons & Brothers (SOSB) came to be. Today, co-founders Kai Jones and René Mendiola are laying a foundation for transgender men and transmasculine people of color in Houston, with hopes that their local example will lead to similar safe social spaces throughout the country.

Jones, a Black trans male, was inspired by local trans activist Atlantis Narcisse to forge a path for trans men of color in Houston. Narcisse is the CEO and founder of Save Our Sisters United, Inc. (SOSU), which was created in 2017 to "develop safe spaces for individuals of transgender experience and women of minority communities to exist without the stigma that everyday society imposes on transgender individuals." The seasoned activist was a godsend to Jones, who had also struggled to find his place in Houston's trans community. "When I left the military, I couldn't find [any groups] in California that fit what I needed, especially being a person of color (POC). When I moved back to Houston, I met Atlantis and started volunteering with her."

When Mendiola, a Latinx trans man, met with Narcisse and Jones, it was a no-brainer that the three should collaborate. "I didn't know I was going to be such a big part of Atlantis' life. She became my mentor," Mendiola explains. "Apparently she knew that she wanted to have branches of her organization that were not just for trans women, but for trans men and people who are nonbinary. When she met me and Kai, it clicked in her head to invite us to create Save Our Sons & Brothers (SOSB)."

Narcisse recalls that Jones and Mendiola spoke often about their dream of creating an organization for Houston's trans men of color. She chose the two to create Save Our Sons & Brothers because of their strong vision for what the group would look like. "Kai and René

reminded me of me, and how I simply wanted a space to exist [where others like myself could share]."

During the initial push to start the group, the pair realized their combined leadership styles would make them a force for change within their community. "I was attending support groups, and that's what inspired me to want to create a space for POC individuals," Jones explains. "I'm still getting my name changed, because there's no info on how to do that on the DD214 form [that verifies military service]. Going through what I'm going through, I know I can bring some value to the community." Mendiola notes that their differences are what make them such a strong team. "I think Atlantis liked that we were so different from each other. She thought there was something beautiful to be made."

So the dynamic duo set out to create safe social spaces where other trans men of color could gather. Jones hopes to bring resources and mentorship to other trans men who are coming out. "It's hard to find trans men in Houston, at least for me. I didn't know that many until this program was created." The organization is a labor of love for Mendiola, whose Houston roots give him a sense of pride

in his leadership role. "I love Houston, and this is my contribution to help improve the city," he says. "Trans spaces are typically composed of white people. We collectively want to make a space for people of color, and particularly trans men of color."

About 62 percent of trans Texans identify as people of color, according to a recent study by UCLA's Williams Institute. Thirteen percent are Black, 44 percent are Latinx, and 5 percent identify as other non-white races or ethnicities.

"Bringing visibility to this community is a big goal for me. Trans men of color in Houston need to have a place to ask questions and talk about sensitive subjects—things that no one else understands because they're so nuanced," Mendiola explains. "We want to build a social network to share info about the best pharmacies for hormones, job opportunities, and other info. That's the overarching goal."

Discussion groups where people can share their experiences, ask questions, and enter a safe space of vulnerability are hallmarks of the new organization. Even though they are still in the early stages, the duo already has dreams of expanding, according to Jones. "I hope to see this spread out to other cities. I feel that everyone's overall goal [is an organization that's accessible nationwide]."

The two activists continue to look to Narcisse as their role model. "It's an honor to be a part of something that is led by a Black trans woman," says Mendiola. Jones summarizes the impact of the group as he reflects on his experience thus far. "Atlantis built Save Our Sisters off of family orientation. We are following that same model. I consider René and the other SOSB members to be my chosen family. I can always talk to them about things I'm going through, and they'll understand. I hope others will gain the same thing through this organization."

"TRANS MEN OF COLOR IN HOUSTON NEED TO HAVE A PLACE TO ASK QUESTIONS AND TALK ABOUT SENSITIVE SUBJECTS—THINGS THAT NO ONE ELSE UNDERSTANDS BECAUSE THEY'RE SO NUANCED."

—René Mendiola



Keep up with Saving Our Sons & Brothers on Facebook at facebook.com/saveoursonsandbrothers.

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Finding the Way Home

LGBTQ-affirming nonprofit helps teens find permanent housing.

By RYAN M. LEACH

There are 11,000 kids in foster care in the state of Texas, according to the 2019 CPA Data Book. These are young people who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect. And 1,100 of those youth will reach the age of 18 and be emancipated (or “aged-out” of the system) without being

adopted. The Way Home Adoption, a Houston organization, is focused on connecting foster kids on the verge of emancipation with loving families before that happens.

Around 20 percent of these young people identify as LGBTQ—a vast over-representation, statistically. LGBTQ youth may have already encountered discrimination within the foster-care system, so they have an even steeper climb after they are emancipated.

When a child in foster care reaches the age of 18, national statistics show that they will face a daunting future as they attempt to thrive as adults without the benefit of supportive families:

- 5,000 emancipated youth die each year as a result of assault, illness, or suicide.
- 50% of the homeless population has spent time in foster care.

- 30% of emancipated foster males are incarcerated by age 21.
- 71% of foster females become pregnant by age 21, with 62% becoming pregnant more than once.
- 70% of emancipated foster youth will receive public welfare benefits by age 21.

The Way Home Adoption wants to change these statistics, as it has been proven that finding a permanent home can drastically reduce the chances of these kids falling victim to a system that doesn't seem to care. And LGBTQ adoptive parents play a significant role in The Way Home's mission.

“I’ve never had a child say, ‘I want a straight mom and dad only,’” says co-founder Kendall Pace Monroe. “We try to target LGBTQ parents for this reason. Sometimes they are older,

and open to an older child. They are comfortable with a family that is not ‘traditional.’”

Monroe, 35, and co-founder Ashley Fields, 42, met while working together in social services. They kept coming back to working with older foster youth because it was clear that those kids had an immediate need that wasn't being addressed. After doing their research and talking with Child Protective Services, elected leaders, and other organizations, they realized that none of them were focusing solely on older youth in foster care.

Fields summarizes the belief system behind The Way Home Adoption perfectly: “When relationships are what cause trauma to a child, relationships are also what can heal them. We knew that adoption or ‘forever relationships’ [are the key to] eliminating all of the staggering statistics.” →



Ashley Fields and Kendall Pace Monroe

The Way Home Adoption focuses on LGBTQ youth because they have a higher than average number of foster-care placements than their non-LGBTQ counterparts, according to the Human Rights Campaign. This disparity is directly related to the non-affirming nature of many foster placements for LGBTQ youth, and the higher levels of bias and discrimination that they face.

Kristopher Sharp spent eight years in foster care in the Houston area before eventually being emancipated. “I was told that foster families didn’t want a gay kid in their home, so I grew up in group homes and residential centers where I was abused sexually, physically, and emotionally.”

The Way Home Adoption is not a full-service adoption agency. Their focus is on recruitment and matching services for older youth in foster care. They assist these teens by working on individual cases with a child-centric approach. They do, however, collaborate with CPS and other child-placement (adoption) agencies by including those youth in their

program. They support potential parents by helping them get to know the youth so they can make an informed decision about adoption.

“We are a little like a cold-case unit, and a little like Match.com,” says Monroe.

She is referring to the fact that the older a child becomes while in foster care, the less likely they are to be placed with a permanent family. Traditional adoption efforts typically result in successful adoptions about 20 to 25 percent of the time. The Way Home’s approach has resulted in over half of their youth finding permanency.

The point of the service is not necessarily to match LGBTQ kids with LGBTQ parents, although that may happen. The purpose is to match kids who want a family with parents who want to provide that for them. Fields and Monroe recognize that LGBTQ individuals or couples may be reluctant about navigating the adoption system, due in large part to the discrimination they may have already faced when dealing with traditional adoption agencies.

“We get emails every now and then that

say, ‘I’ve considered adoption, but am wondering if you guys are supportive of same-sex couples adopting.’ There is an unfortunate history within some adoption programs where same-sex couples are told they are not allowed to adopt. However, we are very supportive of LGBTQ parents or same-sex couples coming and meeting our kids and pursuing adoption,” Fields emphasizes.

Before COVID-19, The Way Home Adoption would schedule in-person group events where the kids and potential adoptive parents could interact and hopefully find a match. This might have been a painting class or a spotting event. Since March, these events have largely moved online, with fun activities followed by time to chat via Zoom. Although the pandemic makes things more challenging, it hasn’t slowed down the mission of the organization.



For more information on The Way Home Adoption, or information on donating, volunteering, or even becoming a parent, visit thewayhomeadoption.org.

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State Representative Ann Johnson

A committed LGBTQ advocate discusses
this year's Texas Legislative Session.

By MARENE GUSTIN

How is it in Austin? What are you doing when you're not in session?

I love Austin! I am a proud University of Texas grad, and am happy to be able to experience the city yet again. When not in session, I am meeting with groups, advocates, and individuals both in Austin and at home in House District 134. I am also continuing to represent the indigent in our criminal courts and teach law at South Texas College of Law.

Do you return to Houston every weekend to see your wife, Sonya, and the dogs?

We alternate between Houston and Austin, and of course we'll always have our three dogs accompanying us. I am thankful that Sonya's job allows her to work remotely [so she can] be with me during this exciting time.

What are your priorities for the 87th Texas Legislative Session?

My priorities this session are fighting for our working families, fully funding our public schools, enacting common-sense gun reform, and finally expanding Medicaid in Texas to not only provide health care to more than one million uninsured Texans in the midst of a pandemic, but also to bring \$100 billion of federal funding back home to Texas as we work to recover from this economic crisis.

Are you worried about the anti-LGBTQ bills and redistricting?

I am hopeful that the anti-LGBTQ bills will be unable to pass this session. While several horrible anti-LGBTQ bills have been introduced, I believe that Republicans realize that the majority of Texans are against LGBTQ+ discrimination. Unfortunately, Democrats did not take the House this year, leaving Republicans to entirely control the redistricting process. I hope



"I AM HOPEFUL THAT THE ANTI-LGBTQ BILLS WILL BE UNABLE TO PASS THIS SESSION. I BELIEVE THAT REPUBLICANS REALIZE THAT THE MAJORITY OF TEXANS ARE AGAINST LGBTQ+ DISCRIMINATION."

they can realize that voters want fair districts that allow their voices to be heard.

How are the COVID safety precautions in the House?

When we voted on the rules for the 87th Legislative Session, I am grateful that we landed on rules that take into account the health and safety of not only ourselves, but of all those with whom we interact. While some of our Republican colleagues are rebuking the idea of masks and social distancing, my Capitol office may be entered by appointment only, and masks and negative COVID-19 test results will be required. We hope that as the session progresses, we will be able to open up our office further.

Were you concerned at all about the pro-Trump violence that was being threatened at all of the state capitols in January?

I am very thankful that the Department of Public Safety has been ensuring our safety. They're doing a fantastic job.

Do you think there is a way forward for Democrats and Republicans to work together, at both the federal and state levels?

I do believe that there is a way for us to reach across the aisle. [There are so many] challenging issues, and we need to come up with solutions for the entire state of Texas. I do expect that you will see a lot of necessary collaboration across the aisle on some of these big issues.



For more information on State Representative Ann Johnson, visit www.annjohnson.com

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The many faces of queer romance.

the Love issue

FROM BUDDING NEW FLINGS TO COMMITTED LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS, THERE ARE COUNTLESS LGBTQ LOVE STORIES IN HOUSTON. IN THIS FEBRUARY EDITION OF OUTSMART, WE SPOTLIGHT FIVE ONE-OF-A-KIND RELATIONSHIPS AND SHOWCASE THE WAYS THAT EACH OF THESE QUEER COUPLES CONNECT AND NAVIGATE THEIR LIVES TOGETHER IN SPACE CITY.

First, we introduce you to our cover stars and the driving force behind the biweekly HOODxHOLISTIC podcast, **Ashley** and **Cortney Adams-Matthewis**, who use their platform to advocate for healing and open communication. Then we feature **John Papagiannopoulos**, **Brandon Bartee**, and **Geno O'Quinn**, whose poly-faithful romance is grounded in the same values that any loving relationship requires. Next, researcher **Wanderson Rezende** and real-estate agent **Eric Bradley** bond over their love of theater, art, and travel, while influencer **Dominic Green** and Netflix

star **Lexi Brumback** find love in the limelight. Lastly, childhood sweethearts **Naomi Scales** and **Marilyn J. Jordan**, who first met as young teenagers, have become partners in life and in business.

Elsewhere in this February Love Issue, local drag queen Violet S'Arbleu shares her thoughts on the challenges that drag artists face in their relationships. And don't miss writer Jenny Block's ideas for a romantic V-Day date, quarantine style. From going on picnics to getting crafty with art projects, saying "Be Mine" this year doesn't need to put your health at risk.



Wellness Wives

Ashley and Cortney Adams-Matthewis use their podcast to promote holistic healing and healthy relationships.

By KRYSTLE DIAZ

Ashley and Cortney Adams-Matthewis are trailblazers at starting deep conversations. They're also experts at maintaining non-judgmental spaces that inspire others to make their voices heard. Mix these skills with a determination to empower their community, and it's no surprise that the Houston-based wives co-host one of the Internet's hottest mental-health podcasts.

The married duo's *HOODxHOLISTIC Podcast* was launched in August 2017 to spread positivity and light to those dealing with stress following the massive flooding caused by Hurricane Harvey. The show quickly grew into a successful biweekly podcast that is now aired every other Monday to over 100,000 listeners in 60 countries.

"Like a baby, we watched the podcast grow and flourish," Cortney says, adding that while the show is rooted in healing and meditation, they often get up close and personal with their listeners. Each episode explores sensitive topics that are usually discussed only among close family and friends—sex, healthy relationships, childhood trauma, and more.

Noting that there aren't enough Black lesbians with a platform, the couple believes it is their duty to speak up and expose real-world issues, such as the stereotypes that plague BIPOC communities, and queer issues that are rarely discussed. Cortney's "Hood Update" segment of the podcast highlights current events that are sometimes overlooked by the mainstream media. "We have a desire to tell our own story our way, and to connect with people who look like us."

Because Ashley and Cortney have been together for 11 years, they also use the podcast to share their tips for a successful relationship. They are steadfast believers in communication, personal growth, and evolution. The couple attended marriage counseling before they got married in 2016, and they still practice healthy communication by discussing topics every night over dinner.

While living through a pandemic has been difficult, the couple chooses to look on the bright side. Before their lives were put on pause, the two had day jobs with opposite schedules. "Our communication has gotten so much stronger since COVID," Ashley says. "And we're finally able to sleep together!"

Pre-pandemic married life wasn't the first time the couple had been apart, though. When the two first met on Facebook, the Space City natives were separated by over 1,000 miles.

At the time, Ashley lived in Houston and Cortney was in Frankfort, Kentucky, playing basketball for Kentucky State University.

**"WE WANT TO BRING
[TRANSFORMATIVE] CARE
TO THE FOREFRONT AND
NORMALIZE THE HEALING
POWERS OF COMMUNITY
AND CONVERSATION."**

—Ashley Adams-Matthewis

They chatted for six months online and met for the first time in Houston when Cortney came home to recover from a serious knee injury.

The relationship blossomed over their mutual interest in art, crystals, and jewelry. "Creating in the beginning of our relationship brought us so much closer," Ashley says. "We took what we were doing individually and started creating together."

After showing off their designs, which included broaches, bow-tie pins, and earrings, fans began to show interest in purchasing similar pieces from the couple. "We were known as the girls with the crystals," Cortney remembers. She and Ashley now live together in Houston, where they continue to sell their artwork on Instagram twice a month.

Along with helping others strengthen their relationships through the *HOODxHOLISTIC Podcast*, the couple has also authored the interactive journal *Love Yours: 365 Days of Q&A* (complete with a separate edition for couples) that features daily writing prompts to start conversations. Both editions are available on Amazon and at Walmart.

As podcast personalities, jewelry designers, and book authors with over 31,000 combined Instagram followers, the couple's growing presence is impressive. In the future, the duo hopes to create a physical brick-and-mortar presence in Houston where people from all walks of life can hang out, find resources, and build community. "We want to bring [transformative] care to the forefront," Ashley says, "and normalize the healing powers of community and conversation."



For more information on Ashley and Cortney Adams-Matthewis, visit linktr.ee/hoodxholistic.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

Ashley (I) and Cortney Adams-Matthewis

Three Hearts

John Papagiannopoulos, Brandon Bartee, and Geno O'Quinn discuss their poly-faithful romance.

By RYAN M. LEACH

John Papagiannopoulos, 52, Brandon Bartee, 42, and Geno O'Quinn, 49, have identical tattoos on the inside of their left wrists. It is an image of three hearts, interconnected, each a different color—orange, green, and blue—to represent themselves, their relationship, and the life and love they share together.

Bartee explains how those three tattoos—and the three Houston men's poly-faithful relationship—came about. “When my ex-partner of eight years and I separated, John sent me a picture of three white hearts. At that time, it was just a friendship thing,” Bartee says. The two decided to get tattoos that were a colorful version of Papagiannopoulos' white hearts.

O'Quinn, who was single at the time, met Papagiannopoulos and Bartee while they were still in their respective relationships. The three friends grew closer over time, and supported one another as those relationships ended.

Bartee still recalls the moment when things took a more serious turn. “I had a 450-square-foot apartment that Geno would stay at, even though he had a townhouse. When John separated [with his ex], he asked if he could stay there more. One night, we were all watching a TV show on the sofa, all cuddled up, and I said, ‘This feels like home.’ That was six years ago on February 21.”

“We were already in love with each other,” O'Quinn adds, “but I think when John's relationship ended and Brandon was no longer with his ex, it kind of connected one day for all of us. We knew [our relationship] felt comfortable—that it was home.”

Queer people are generally more open and accepting of relationships that may not reflect the heteronormative images that society proscribes when it comes to romantic love. Although polyamory—relationships consisting of more than two people—may not be widely understood or even accepted, the root of those relationships is grounded in the same values that any loving relationship requires.

While the throuple cannot legally marry, the men wear wedding rings and refer to themselves as husbands—in the same way that committed male couples used the term in the days before same-sex marriage was legal. Through a combination of marriage and adoption, the three hope to one day become a “legal” family.

“Our relationship is poly-faithful,” explains Bartee, “but the trouble we get into we do together, and we have rules: don't lie, don't cheat, be honest. And if you do something you're not supposed to, be up front and ask forgiveness.”

One thing that the trio agrees *can't* be a part of their relationship is jealousy.

“We all have our alone time, and we all have together time. You can't get jealous because the other two are cuddled up and you're not involved. You have to step back and appreciate the bond that they have, because the bond they have is the bond you have with each of them,” says Bartee.

Like the three different heart colors in their tattoos, these men have personalities that are quite distinct. Fortunately, their unique characteristics complement each other. “John and I have the whole nerd factor in common, whereas Brandon and I have the spontaneity and craziness,” O'Quinn explains. “Brandon also helps bring that out of me and John.”

Papagiannopoulos agrees. “All three of us bring something that the others help temper. I am non-confrontational and laid back. I don't want to get anyone riled up. Brandon is a little more energetic. And Geno, as the Libra, is the balancing force between the three of us.”

Or to put it more bluntly, Bartee notes that “you have the pacifist, the aggressor, and the glue.”

The three men allow each other to be entirely themselves, and it shows through. They all share some interests, of course. They are very involved in the leather and kink community, but they also have their own unique passions that might seem unexpected. For example, Papagiannopoulos has an extensive Barbie collection and O'Quinn has an unwavering love for Wonder Woman. Bartee's unique passion is being a people person.

Geno O'Quinn (l),
John Papagiannopoulos,
and Brandon Bartee



**“I LOVE THEM BOTH
EQUALLY, BUT IN
DIFFERENT WAYS
AND FOR DIFFERENT
ASPECTS.”**

—Geno O'Quinn



“Brandon is the spontaneous one,” says O’Quinn. “We went to Montreal for Gay Pride and saw a leather group there and started talking to them. Because Brandon is so spontaneous, we got to march with the group and hold the leather flag in the parade. If it hadn’t been for him, that adventure would not have happened because I’m more reserved and quiet when I’m around people that I don’t know.”

The men’s families all seem to recognize that the love they have for each other is healthy and good. “Everyone has been very

supportive. I haven’t had any friends, or clients, or anybody in my life express anything but support for our relationship,” Papagian-nopoulos says.

“If there have been any objections, they haven’t let us know,” O’Quinn adds. “After I brought John and Brandon over to meet my mother, I told her that I wanted her to know that I am dating both of them. She said, ‘I have Facebook. I’m not stupid.’ That was it!”

Bartee’s experience with his mother was especially affirming. “When my dad passed

away, my mom called and said, ‘I have a question. How do you spell John and Geno’s last names, so I can put them in your father’s obituary? It’s the first time I have seen you happy and in a relationship that I know will last,’” he recalls.

But no matter how other people view the poly-faithful trio’s relationship, these men know that the thing that centers them is love. O’Quinn puts it best: “I love them both equally, but in different ways and for different aspects.”

Wanderson Rezende (l)
and Eric Bradley



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

A Quirky Courtship

From lasagna to a museum proposal, love was in the air for husbands **Wanderson Rezende** and **Eric Bradley**.

By SAM BYRD



It's no secret that more and more LGBTQ couples are meeting online. With app developers creating new match-making options, and the omnipresence of smartphones, the ability to find a date is in everyone's pocket.

For one Houston couple, the Grindr app was just a way to try something new. But things soon turned serious for Wanderson Rezende and Eric Bradley, who have been married since 2014. Their journey to happiness is the stuff of rom-com movies.

Rezende, a native Brazilian, spent several years working in vaccine development and tropical-disease research before his job transferred him to Houston. Since he didn't know many people, he started using social media to meet new friends. "I was exploring people. Before meeting Bradley, I was just a guy living my life. It was kind of boring, and I was working a lot," says Rezende, a doctoral candidate in virology at Baylor College of Medicine.

Luckily, Bradley, a real-estate agent and the owner of In The Loop Properties, decided to entertain the idea of talking to Rezende. But it didn't come without some trepidation. "Normally, if I find someone on a social app, I wouldn't meet them before I talked to them for three months. I would make sure they were sane, legitimate, and honest before I would even go out for a bite with them," Bradley says. "I would vet people meticulously on social apps. If people aren't serious enough, I'll wear them down and eventually they'll go away. But the one time I made an exception was for Wanderson."

After talking for a week via the Grindr app, Bradley found out that Rezende loves lasagna. That's when he got the bright idea to take Rezende to an Italian restaurant for their first date. After that, the couple's relationship only grew deeper.

"I picked him up at his apartment in Midtown and took him to Collina's Italian Cafe. The conversation went so well—we were vibing nicely, and we had ice cream for dessert. Then we strolled around before I took him back to his apartment," Bradley says, noting that Rezende gave him a kiss at the end of the night. "I normally wouldn't kiss someone on a first date, but he snuck one in."

That kiss would be the first of many. "A few days later, we decided to meet each other at Bar Boheme in Montrose, and after that we just didn't stop seeing each other. It was an organic process. I wanted to know more about this person," Rezende adds.

They continued to learn how similar they are, including their love of theater, art, and traveling the world. They also shared that they would one day want to get married, and that Rezende wanted to be the one to propose.

So Rezende arranged a trip to New York City and organized a tour at the New Museum. Unbeknownst to Bradley, he also conspired with a few museum employees to concoct a plan for the big moment.

"I wanted to see if they had an open exhibit or room where I could do something fun, and they wanted to think of something," Rezende adds. They decided to print the proposal on a small placard mounted next to one of the art pieces.

"I wrote a blurb, and they created the placard and [placed it just before we arrived] for a tour. Then they took us to the room where 'the proposal piece' resided," Rezende explains.

Bradley chimes in, "We got up to the top floor of the museum, and there was a balcony looking over the SoHo area. I didn't see anything there, but our guide said 'Let's start up here, and be sure to not miss that piece over there.' He gestured over to a wall and a hallway. I didn't see anything, so I was peeking around the wall. I missed the placard on the wall, but Wanderson was staring at it and it drew my attention, so I read it."

The placard read: "Will you marry me? A proposal."

Bradley recalls, "I saw that, and it took a few seconds, and then it registered. I turned to look at Wanderson, and he was down on one knee officially proposing. The emotions were overwhelming, and I said Yes!"

It was another year before the couple got married at a courthouse in New York City, surrounded by a small gathering of friends. They've been enjoying married life ever since.

As for the future, Rezende offers a glimpse of the couple's plans as they have grown closer over the decades.

He says, "I want to move out of Houston eventually. I want to take Eric on adventures. I want to explore life with him. I want to grow old and disgusting with him. I want to get to the point where our faces are so saggy that I have to hold his cheekbones back to feed him soup."

Now, *that's* true love.

Dynamic Duo

Local notables **Dominic Green** and **Lexi Brumback** share their tips for a successful relationship.

By CONNOR BEHRENS

Healthy communication and understanding. Those are the two qualities Houston natives Dominic Green and Lexi Brumback credit for their successful two-year relationship.

"Communication is key," Green says. "Just talking about how you feel. You need to communicate to make sure your relationship is stronger."

Green is a transgender influencer and activist, while Brumback is a bisexual professional cheerleader who most recently starred in Netflix's docuseries *Cheer*. About two years ago, the pair was just beginning to know each other after feeling a spark during a fateful day on the beach in Galveston.

"It was funny, because at the time we were each in a relationship with someone else," Brumback notes. "[We were not really dating] until a year later, when we kind of went through breakups at the same time."

Green was impressed with the college cheerleader, and when she came home for winter break, he jumped at the opportunity to ask her out.

"I always thought he was so cute," Brumback admits. "I was like, 'Yes. Finally!' We went on a date, and sparks were flying right away. It was kind of funny because he never officially said, 'You are my girlfriend now.' It was just a thing that was known between the two of us."

Since the first day that the pair started hanging out, they have been inseparable.

"It is weird, because usually when you are around someone so much, you are usually needing a break from them," Brumback says. "It is not like that. Two years later, I am still

not tired of him."

As one can imagine, the two are both busy. Because of their schedules, they realize that it is even more important to plan special time together.

"We enjoy all of the same things," Green says. "We would always go to raves together. We both love going out and listening to live music and dancing. We just like to hang out with our friends together."

In fact, because of Green's large social-media following, he was able to help Brumback promote her Netflix documentary series. She now has a dedicated online fan base of her own.

"We definitely help each other with work," Brumback says. "At the beginning of my 'stardom,' he was already an influencer on social media, so he trained me to be an influencer. He was always giving me all these ideas. We really bonded through helping each other."

Brumback notes that no matter what a couple does, it is important to find special moments to connect. "For us, whenever we have time, we try to have a date night. We are pretty good about dividing our work life and our leisure time. I feel like we conquer everything together, which keeps us close."

"AT THE BEGINNING OF MY 'STARDOM,' HE WAS ALREADY AN INFLUENCER ON SOCIAL MEDIA, SO HE TRAINED ME TO BE AN INFLUENCER. WE REALLY BONDED THROUGH HELPING EACH OTHER."

—Lexi Brumback

Finding those moments is even more important due to COVID-19, Brumback says.

Despite the hardships of the pandemic, the restrictions have actually been good for their relationship, Green says. "We have been able to help each other grow. I do not think the virus has actually affected us. The only downside is we weren't able to do as much as we planned prior to COVID, but we have had more time to communicate. I feel like she has learned so much from me, and I've learned so much from her. I love that. We keep each other balanced."

Brumback agrees that COVID has made the duo stronger. "[Even though it] has made everyone stay home, it gives you more time to reflect."

Yet, with couples spending more time at home together, tempers can flare. It is important during times like that to talk instead of fight.

"It is good to voice how you feel at all times," Brumback says. "I have had relationships in the past where I just did not say anything, and then you just let all this emotion build up inside of you and you blow up. Fighting fire with fire is probably the worst thing you can do."

"We are very non-confrontational people," Green notes. "We like to work through things."

The pair is excited to be growing their respective careers while they continue to grow as a couple.

"I just want to learn more about the outside world and ourselves together," Brumback says. "I am excited for everything to get back on track. At the end of the day, I am really happy that we found each other, and I know that this is going to be the person I spend my life with."



Follow Dominic Green and Lexi Brumback on Instagram at @lolhidominic and @lexisbrumback.



Lexi Brumback (l) and Dominic Green



Naomi Scales (l) and Marilyn J. Jordan

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

An Instant Connection

Marilyn J. Jordan and Naomi Scales met as teenagers before they became partners in life and in business.

By JENNY BLOCK



If cleanliness is next to godliness, then Naomi Scales and Marilyn J. Jordan must be blessed. In 2006, the Houston-based couple founded MarFran Cleaning, LLC., a business

that offers janitorial services both locally and nationally.

“Although we specialize in full-service janitorial cleaning for both commercial and government facilities, we also offer building maintenance and management services,” they explain.

Scales primarily handles contracting, business development, and workplace compliance issues. Jordan handles MarFran’s management and human-resources tasks in addition to her work as a NASA analyst.

Scales and Jordan, who are both 56-year-olds from Helena, Arkansas, met through family connections as young teens, years before they became best friends and business partners.

“She took my breath away the first time I saw her,” Scales admits. “I knew it was love when I realized that the feeling I had at 14 years old never went away when I saw her again at 20 years old.”

Although Scales was raised in Chicago, her family later returned to Arkansas, where she attended the University of Central Arkansas after transferring from Bishop College. At UCA, she reconnected with Jordan, who had

transferred there from Spelman College in Atlanta. Their romantic relationship blossomed in 1985 and progressed to the next level in 1990.

Scales served in the military and worked for the U.S. Postal Service for a combined 21 years, while Jordan has worked as a government contractor for over 25 years. The couple eventually realized that they simply weren’t making enough to support their family. “The painful reality came when my mom took ill and needed care,” Scales remembers. “I needed to work on my dream of being a business owner if I wanted to make things better for our family.”

“SHE TOOK MY BREATH AWAY THE FIRST TIME I SAW HER. I KNEW IT WAS LOVE WHEN I REALIZED THAT THE FEELING I HAD AT 14 YEARS OLD NEVER WENT AWAY WHEN I SAW HER AGAIN AT 20 YEARS OLD.”

—Naomi Scales

Now that MarFran Cleaning has become successful, Naomi says they’re working smarter, making more, and loving every minute of it. And according to Naomi, most of their customers and employees are pleased that the women are always available when problems arise. “We do good work, and our employees know we care about them,” Naomi says.

Marilyn’s work motto is “Our job is not complete if the customer is not satisfied.” She adds that the appreciation they’ve received from satisfied customers motivates her and Naomi to continue doing more for their community.

The pair says their business has been doing well despite the pandemic restrictions. “We have survived during this pandemic because of the nature of our business. We have expanded our services, and I am working on turning [the business] over to our children as we both plan for our second careers.”

As for the future, the couple is excited about the book they have been writing. “This book is our official coming-out story to our friends. It is about the burden we carried as two Black women from the South who are now ‘women of a certain age.’ A large portion of our life has been in the closet, and filled with lies [that we told] to survive,” Naomi explains. They hope that by sharing their story, they will help others who are facing similar challenges.



For more information on MarFran Cleaning, LLC, visit marfrancleaning.com.

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 Nov 22 - Dec 2, 2021, Dec 8 - 18, 2021
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 Mar 11 - 16, 2022
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Rethinking Romance

Some fun new ways to celebrate Valentine's Day, quarantine-style.

By JENNY BLOCK



This Valentine's Day is definitely going to be different than any other one that came before it. No restaurants packed with cozy couples. No theater dates or movie nights.

No browsing the mall for gifts—alongside everyone else who's out looking to show their love with a bauble in a box.

But instead of feeling bummed, why not get inspired and rise to the challenge? There are so many ways to say "Be My Valentine" without putting your health or theirs at risk. Here are a few ideas to get your creative juices flowing...



GO ON A PICNIC

Whether it's at home or in a public space with plenty of room to social-distance, hardly anything is more romantic than a picnic. You could get take-out, or surprise your Valentine with a beautiful homemade spread. It's the perfect time to try your hand at making food that tastes as good as it looks. Maybe a charcuterie board filled with all of your favorite goodies? Or make the picnic prep a part of the date and craft a board or a basket of goodies together.

TACKLE A PROJECT

I know, at first glance, painting a room or building a fence might not seem like the most romantic Valentine's Day activity. But tackling a project with your special person can be super-romantic when you work to complete something together. You can compare your skill sets and teach one another, or you can both try your hand at something totally new. Achieving something together is always a great way to grow closer.



CRAFT A CULINARY CREATION

This is not the time to think small. Team up and take on a cooking challenge that you would never try on your own. Think homemade dumplings or pasta. Maybe a cake enrobed in fondant, or get really crazy and make a croque-mouchette. Don't worry about the results—this is about having fun and trying something new with your love. (You can always call for take-out if you end up with nothing but a messy kitchen and some fun memories!)

VISIT THE ZOO

Head over to the Houston Zoo's outdoor exhibits, wearing a mask and staying socially distant from others. Make faces at the monkeys. Talk to the birds. Giggle at the hippos, run with the rhinos, and hop with the kangaroos. In other words, take a deep breath and give in to the silly, romantic side that we all have hidden somewhere inside. There's something about all of that giddiness that can lead to all kinds of romance.

GET CRAFTY

It doesn't matter if you like crafts or not. It doesn't matter if you're good at them or not. All that matters is your intentions. If you intend to have fun while making something sweet for your sweetheart, that's all that matters. And the best part of all? No need to buy an expensive gift. You can make one another something truly heartfelt. Even if it looks crazy, nothing on earth is more romantic.

READ TO ONE ANOTHER

The story or poem you choose can be anything, really. Something funny or sad, new or old. The only requirement is that you take turns reading to one another. There's something so intimate and comforting about reading to someone, and being read to. You can even surprise one another with readings that you each pick out. And who knows? You just might find it's something you'll want to keep doing long after Valentine's Day.



WORK UP A SWEAT

Take a walk. Ride your bike. Kick the soccer ball around. Whatever gets your heart rate up will also get your endorphins pumping. That feel-good feeling will also make you feel even better about your Valentine. Pick an activity you're both great at, or try something new to both of you. Or maybe take turns teaching each other something new. Who knows, you just might have some surprising basketball skills or hula hooping talent. The activity doesn't matter, as long as you're sweating together.

PLAY A GAME

Challenge your partner to a Scrabble duel, a Rummikub battle, or a Monopoly match. To level the playing field, take turns choosing what to play. (This isn't supposed to be like that time at summer camp where the kid who didn't capture the flag has never gotten over the shame.) So be a good sport, and remember that playing games is always supposed to be fun!



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push through broad infrastructure changes long unachievable on Capitol Hill.

Buttigieg, in a tweet, thanked the members of the Commerce Committee for “their vote of confidence in me.” He said he looked forward to teaming up with members of the committee “as we get to work on infrastructure and building our economy back better.”

At his confirmation hearing, Buttigieg received bipartisan praise as he pledged an immediate focus on transportation safety while pointing to a “generational” opportunity to help remake how people travel.



**“HE UNDERSTANDS
WHAT ALL OF US HAVE
TO DEAL WITH ON
TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE.”**

—Senator Maria Cantwell

As examples, he pledged to help put in place new federal automotive fuel economy standards to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, promote quicker development of self-driving cars, and push the use of electric vehicles by adding a half-million charging stations nationwide.

Republican senators during his hearing signaled future battles ahead over the cost and scope of updating the nation’s roads and bridges, rails, and airports—a broad goal that eluded former President Donald Trump over the last four years. Senators also said they looked forward to many discussions with Buttigieg.

Biden has said he will unveil the full details of his infrastructure plan next month.

This article originally appeared on the Associated Press website at apnews.org.

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A Complex Holiday

What Valentine's Day means to a 34-year-old drag queen.

By VIOLET S'ARBLEU

Don't get me wrong: I *love* love. I perform a ton of love songs, replay Disney movies regularly, and cry at *everything*. I'm a hopeless romantic—and sometimes, just hopeless in general.

When my mother was 34, she was already in her second marriage and raising two step-children. And she had just given birth to me! Considering that I haven't even been kissed since 2020, I think it's safe to say I'm not exactly on the same life path. And even though this city keeps me plenty busy with work, every once in a while I sit back and think how nice it would be to have someone to share this with.

So every year on Valentine's Day, I celebrate the people in love and wish them well. And even though I'm truly happy for them, I do admit that I envy them just a little bit. In fact, I'd like to give a special shout-out to all of the partners of drag artists in Houston. And to all of you entertainers who have found that special someone who is willing to share *both* of your lives, don't forget that it's a rare treat to have a partner who is undeterred by the many trappings of a drag career. Drag spouses are the real unsung heroes of our profession. Congratulations to those lucky few who have found that extra-special magic with an understanding romantic interest. We should all be so fortunate.

But then I remember: I *do* have someone I can celebrate the season with. Hence, when February 14 rolls around each year, I wish Violet a Happy Birthday and get ready for her gigs that week as I think to myself, "Maybe next year..."

Jacob Chaput (Violet S'Arbleu), a graduate of the Savannah College of Art and Design, is a Houston entertainer who has received national coverage and a number of awards for his work as a drag queen. He was named Miss Gay Texas America 2017-2018 and is a two-time winner of OutSmart's Gayest & Greatest Most Divine Drag Queen. Follow him on Facebook at facebook.com/RosesAreRed and on Instagram @violetwithav.



For nearly six centuries now, people around the world have spent February 14 expressing their devotion or platonic affection for one another, using every method imaginable.

But why? Nobody knows who St. Valentine really was. In one story, he secretly performed weddings for lovestruck couples under cover of darkness, violating the emperor's ban on young men getting married. In another, he was caught rescuing Christians from inhumane prison conditions, and during his own incarceration tried to woo the warden's daughter with inventive romantic gestures.

As with all good legends, the truth isn't nearly as important as the legacy. St. Valentine's namesake holiday grew far beyond Christianity itself as it became an immovable secular force that now makes it impossible to get a dinner reservation anywhere in town. (On the plus side, it also leads to plenty of discount sweets on sale during the third week of the month.)

So what does Valentine's Day mean to me, a 34-year-old drag queen? Well, I've never fallen in love while imprisoned, and I'm certainly not performing hasty secret marriages for lovers on the run, like the guy in *Romeo and Juliet*. Truth be told, that fat, winged baby with the bow and arrow misses me *every* year, so I've never actually had someone to share Valentine's Day with.

Well, that's not *entirely* true, because someone fairly important to me was born on the eve-

ning of Valentine's Day 2009: Violet. During a college party that night at a bar in Savannah, Georgia, I decided that this persona should no longer be called "Jacob in a Dress." At the end of the evening, I gave her a name of her own, and this month I'm hitting my 12th anniversary of the birth of Violet S'Arbleu.

Violet is my full-time (and I do mean *full-time*) job. Even with her own designated room, she has taken over the house like those plants in *Jumanji*. But since she also pays all the bills, I suppose she's entitled to that. Violet is the longest-running and most demanding commitment of my life, so even though I'm single, I suppose one could say that I've actually been in a long-term relationship since 2009. And honestly, I couldn't be more grateful.

Still, she's not real. And just as no man is an island, no queen is one, either. Unfortunately, though, despite the growing number of "throuples" in our modern society, the fact that I'm sort of *two* people all on my own deters many gay guys from wanting to be my/our third. In a way, my unique situation does weed out the shallow and the undesirable. But on the other hand, it can get pretty lonely.

Dating has never been my forte; my first kiss wasn't until my 17th birthday and I've only had two very short-term boyfriends in my entire life. And now that I'm an entertainer, being in a nocturnal job with such high community visibility limits the dating pool. Then throw in a pandemic, and a tough situation is made harder still when we're forced to flirt from six feet away with half of our faces covered.

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It's been said that while television can only offer audiences one image, radio has the power to inspire millions of mental images unique to each

listener. Local award-winning Houston Public Media (HPM) morning news anchor Eddie Robinson agrees, and aims to do just that with his new radio broadcast show, *I See U*.

The show, which debuts in March, will feature Robinson's experiences with surrogacy and his journey into fatherhood as a single Black gay man. He will discuss the financial costs of surrogacy, the limited number of resources offered to LGBTQ people who want to start families, and how overwhelming and time-consuming the process has been. "This is quite possibly the most challenging endeavor in my entire life, and it has thrown me off financially," Robinson says. "I'm hoping this [show] will help other gay single men, especially [those who are] men of color."

He began to look for a surrogate after his own father, Edward "Skeet" Robinson Sr., died

in 2018 due to complications from diabetes. That painful moment convinced the younger Robinson to continue his dad's bloodline and legacy. He wanted to honor the love that his father showed him while growing up—and, eventually, after he came out.

Coming out to his parents was a difficult process. Although Robinson's grandparents were committed civil-rights activists who fought to end Jim Crow laws in McComb, Mississippi, his parents were deeply religious

Southern Baptists who did not accept him when he first told them that he was gay in 2007.

"Family has always meant the world to me," Robinson says. "I love the concept of family and being around those who support and care for you. That's the true definition of family, but mine shut me out. It hit my heart."

For months, it was radio silence between Robinson and his parents. But the stalemate ended when his father called him on the phone right before Labor Day weekend and told him, →

Finding His Voice

Eddie Robinson's new radio show features his journey into fatherhood as a single Black gay man.

By LILLIAN HOANG



Passing Down a Legacy

After his father passed away, Eddie Robinson (r) decided he wanted to have a child to continue his dad's bloodline.

"We still love you. Come home. Come visit. We miss you."

"It's been his love, compassion, and sense of humor that has inspired me to create a long-lasting legacy for him," Robinson says. "He was relentlessly devoted to his family, wife, work, and friends. Losing him meant losing my world. I want to share that kind of fatherly love. I'm excited about being a dad."

According to his GoFundMe page, Robinson has faced severe roadblocks since he embarked on this journey. At one point, after spending more than \$60,000, he still had no child. Although his situation has improved now that his gestational carrier in Oregon has become pregnant, he is still seeking financial assistance to continue his journey.

While this experience has been fraught with hardship, Robinson believes fatherhood will be worth the effort and struggle.

"I have faith that something really phenomenal is going to happen," Robinson says. "My fertility saga has been a wild roller coaster of extreme highs and devastating lows, but for some reason, in my heart I believe that every-

thing's going to be fine and work itself out."

Robinson hopes sharing his story on *I See U* will inspire more companies and organizations to invest in financial resources for single gay men.

Robinson's ability to use his voice to create change was one of the many reasons why he fell in love with radio. Growing up in McComb in the late '80s and early '90s, he didn't have many LGBTQ role models to look up to, or safe spaces where he could be himself. So, he decided to make that space on the radio.

Radio was liberating for Robinson. The medium allowed him to conceal his face, find his voice, and be himself without risking hate or having to put up with society's often-harmful perception of what a Black gay man should look and act like.

Robinson says, "Radio just brought out the best in me. When I'd go live on-air, there'd be an instant tsunami of energy, personality, and emotion because I didn't have to worry about people judging me by what I looked like. I had the protection of hundreds of thousands of watts of broadcast bandwidth and a micro-

phone. All of that was just sheltering me, protecting me, comforting me, and creating that comfort zone. Radio was a creative oasis for me to be able to enjoy the fruits, sunshine and rain—it was truly escapism."

Although his parents wanted him to become a lawyer or engineer, Robinson always found his way back to the broadcasting field because he loved engaging with, teaching, and learning from listeners of all backgrounds.

His career in radio started in the tenth grade when he worked for two stations in McComb as a music jockey. Despite being a mechanical engineering major, he was given the chance to host his first public-radio program on KPVU-FM at Prairie View A&M University because of his background in radio and ability to connect with audiences. He later worked at CBS News as a broadcasting marketing producer for Bryant Gumbel when he co-hosted *The Early Show* in 2000. He eventually hosted his second talk show in 2014 on Sirius XM's OutQ channel called *The Outfield*, where he spoke with LGBTQ athletes like tennis legend Martina Navratilova as well as allies like NFL quarterback Warren Moon.

Thanks to HPM, the National Public Radio news affiliate in Houston, Robinson will have another opportunity to host his own talk show next month.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder and so many other police-brutality incidents, HPM has launched a "diversity, equality, and inclusion initiative" that has given rise to new projects like *I See U*. Robinson's show is being promoted as a weekly series that offers marginalized or otherwise neglected voices, from newsmakers to religious leaders, the chance to share their story and experiences on a public digital platform.

"This show gets at exploring culture through dialogue pertaining to social justice, racial inequality, spirituality, music, and gives voices to people who have overcome obstacles or have made significant impacts on our lives but have somehow gone unnoticed," Robinson notes.

"They could be Black, white—whatever race, ethnicity, or orientation. We want to hear their story, learn, and understand where they're coming from so, hopefully, the listener can walk away with 'aha' moments and experience a sense of self-discovery."

 Learn more about Eddie Robinson at houstonpublicmedia.org/staff/eddie-robinson, and donate to his surrogacy GoFundMe at gofund.me/19db345b.

'Trans in Trumpland'

Docuseries features four transgender Americans dealing with the Trump presidency.

By STAFF REPORTERS

The lives of transgender Americans were constantly under attack during the Trump presidency. Since his election in 2016, Trump's administration worked to remove discrimination protections, ban trans members of the military, legalize discrimination sanctioned by religious beliefs, and the list goes on.

In order to shed light on the hostility that trans people faced during the last four years, openly trans director Tony Zosherafatain is releasing the docuseries *Trans in Trumpland*, which will be available for streaming on Topic starting February 25.

"I knew I had to do something as a filmmaker to fight back against this type of hatred," Zosherafatain told OUTSMART in October.

Trans in Trumpland "uncovers the complexities of being transgender during the Trump administration era" by travelling to four different states that lack legal protections for trans people, according to the series' website.

One of the individuals featured in the docuseries is Houston's own Rebecca Chapa-Garcia, a Mexican-American trans woman who came to the U.S. legally as a child. *Trans in Trumpland* tells Chapa-Garcia's story of being detained for an expired visa by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) several times during Trump's presidency.

Her story, while rooted in the nation's broken immigration system, is one she hopes can inspire anyone who is facing hatred.

"We, as trans people, exist, and we are not going anywhere," Chapa-Garcia says. "More than anything, I hope it will educate people and show them that this administration [was] not the best for us."



Watch *Trans in Trumpland* on the streaming service Topic and its carriers: Apple TV, Roku, Amazon Fire TV, Android, and Amazon Prime. For more information, visit transintrumpland.com.



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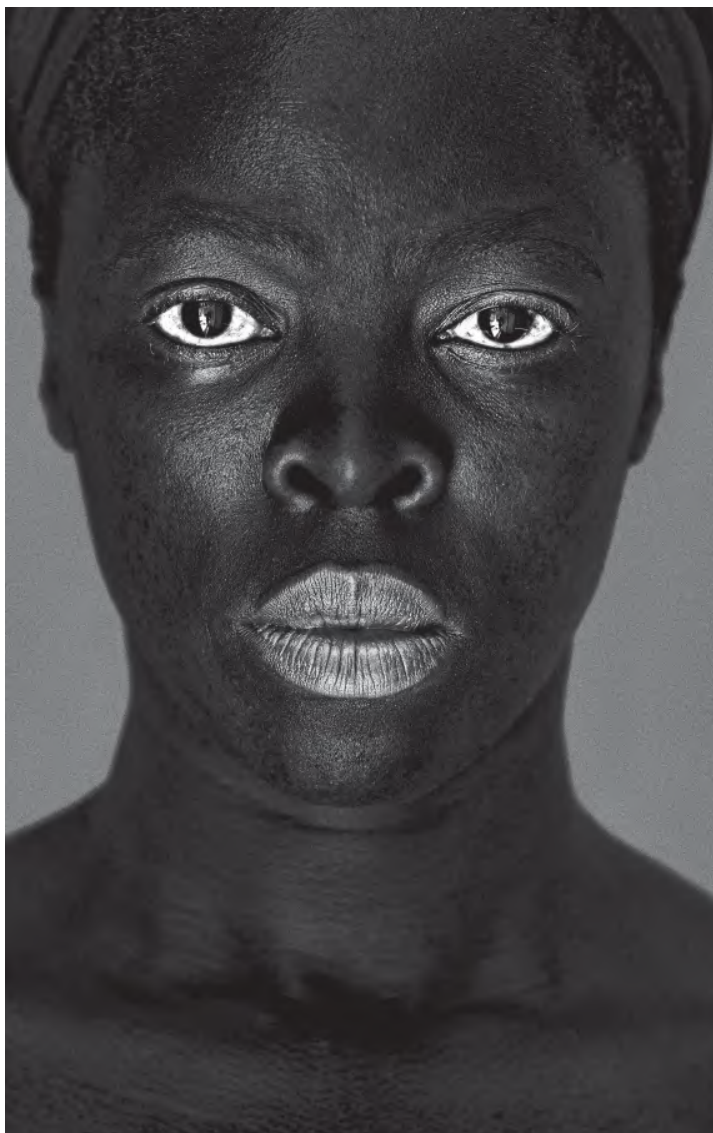
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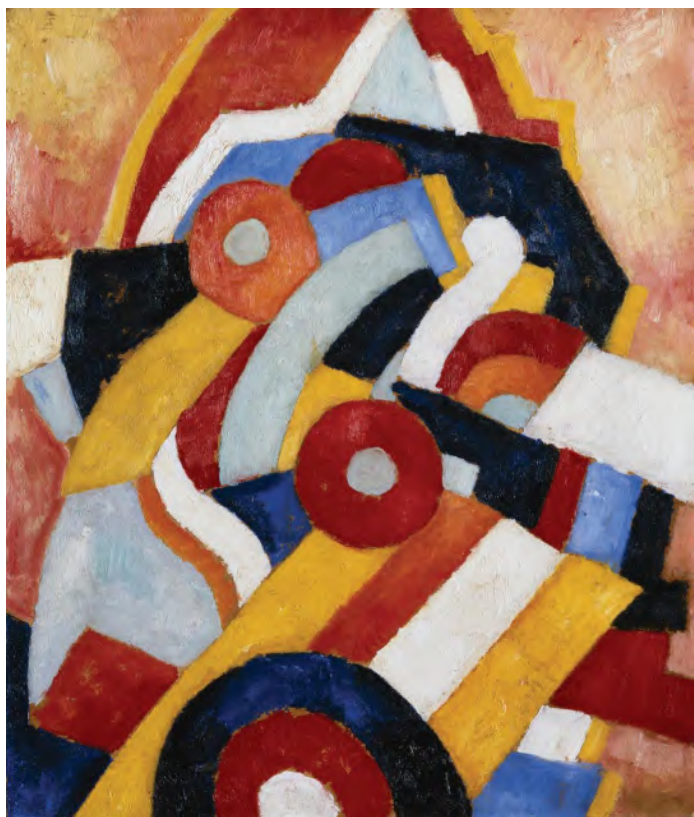
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Cutting-Edge Creations



Zanele Muholi, *Misiwe IV*, Biljmer, Amsterdam



Marsden Hartley, *Abstraction*

Ten LGBTQ artists take center stage at MFAH's new Kinder building.

By ANDREW EDMONSON

When the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, unveiled its new Nancy and Rich Kinder Building in November, it marked a golden new era for the 121-year-old institution. It also gave Houston an iconic new architectural landmark in the heart of the Museum District.

The 237,000-square-foot building, located at 5500 Main Street, was designed by architect Steven Holl and hailed by the *Wall Street Journal* as “a triumph.” The new facility expands the museum’s gallery space by 75 percent, enabling the company to display its burgeoning collection of modern and contemporary art, the majority of which had previously gone unseen.

The Kinder Building also provides a spectacular showcase for the Museum’s superb holdings of works by Latino and Latin American artists—almost a quarter of the 1,100 objects on display in the new facility. And perhaps most importantly for Houston’s LGBTQ community, the facility also spotlights the works of some of the most exciting and important international queer artists from the 20th and 21st centuries, spanning the globe from China and Africa to Europe and Texas.

Here are 10 LGBTQ artists to take note of on your next visit to the Kinder Building:

1.
Zanele Muholi’s *Misiwe IV, Biljmer, Amsterdam*

Zanele Muholi’s towering self-portrait dominates the photography gallery with its fierce, dramatic intensity. For almost two decades, the photographer has documented the lives of the LGBTQ community in South Africa. Today, Muholi’s star is white-hot in the international art world as they enjoy a major mid-career retrospective at London’s prestigious Tate Modern.

“It is our responsibility as activists and artists—as activists who practice art—to challenge all ‘isms,’” Muholi told *Tate Etc* in 2020. “To combat bias and erasure. To keep the dialogue going and create opportunities for others less fortunate or privileged. To open access to spaces historically denied to us—to black, queer, trans, female-bodied and gender-nonconforming individuals, especially. That is my main agenda going forward: to queer, to blacken, to open, and to occupy spaces.”

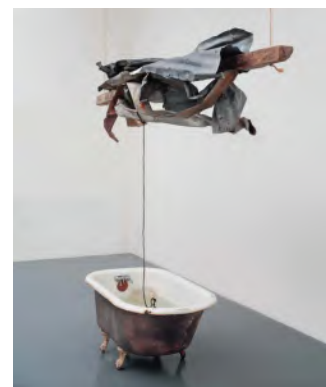
(Location: second floor, Gallery 208, photography gallery)



2.
Andy Warhol’s *Self-Portrait*, 1986

Another self-portrait—that of Andy Warhol, the American master of Pop Art—commands the modern and contemporary art gallery. He made his first self-portrait in 1964, and this work from the museum’s collection was created in 1986, a year before his death. Suffused in pink, the image captures the artist’s shock of white hair and his intense, contemplative gaze. The art historian Carter Ratcliff has observed, “As blank and anesthetized as his surfaces sometimes are, they hide depths of a traumatized self or a deep sense of the random and

depersonalized tragedy of the modern world.” (Location: second floor, Gallery 203, modern and contemporary art gallery)



3.
Robert Rauschenberg’s *Sor Aqua (Venetian)*
Across the gallery from Warhol’s self-portrait are works by two of his contemporaries: Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who had a closeted love affair lasting from 1954 to 1961. They would go on to revolutionize American art through their appropriation of what Johns described as “the things the mind already knows.” Born in Port Arthur in 1925,



Forrest Bess, *Sign of Man*

Mark Bradford, *Circa 1992*

Rauschenberg is represented by *Sor Aqua* (Venetian), a major assemblage from 1973 that features a bathtub, rope, and a glass jug. The work pays homage to the Italian city of Venice, where in 1964 the Texan became the first American to win the Venice Biennale's grand prize. (Location: second floor, Gallery 203, modern and contemporary art gallery)



4. Jasper Johns' *Cicada*

Jasper Johns has several works in different galleries in the Kinder Building. *Ventriloquist*, a 1983 piece featuring his trademark flag imagery, is on view in the modern and contemporary art gallery on the second floor. His *Cicada* series, vibrantly colorful works on paper created between 1979 and 1981, is on display in the prints and drawings gallery. Johns, who has been hailed by the *New York Times* as "America's foremost living artist," celebrated his 90th birthday in May 2020. In the fall, he will be honored with vast, concurrent retrospectives at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York City and the Philadelphia Museum of Art in recognition of his enormous influence over the last seven

decades. (Location: second floor, Gallery 207, prints and drawings gallery)



5. Guanyu Xu's *The Dining Room*

One of the strengths of the Kinder Building is its focus on living artists who are actively creating work today. Not yet thirty, the Chinese photographer Guanyu Xu lives an openly queer life in America. But when he visits China to see his parents (who do not know that he is gay), he must go back into the closet. When his parents are away at work, he secretly alters their home by inserting countless photographs that he has made or collected. As his gallerist Yancey Richardson notes in his biography, "His work bridges the gap between the personal and political, highlighting the disparities and connections between the two nations, in which his intersectional experience of the U.S. meets his conservative familial experience of China." (Location: second floor, Gallery 208, photography gallery)

6. Rachel Hecker's *Bait*

Rachel Hecker came to Houston in 1982 from the Rhode Island School of Design (at the beginning of the Texas art boom) to help launch MFAH's prestigious Core Program, where she served as associate director from 1982 to 1991. For almost three decades, she has been an associate professor of painting at the Univer-



sity of Houston School of Art. In 2013, she was honored as Texas Artist of the Year by the Art League of Houston. She has been praised by critics for the wit, invention, and the beguiling use of humor in her works—qualities in abundant supply in this 1995 piece. (Location: third floor, Gallery 313)

7. Mark Bradford's *Circa 1992*

African American artist Mark Bradford launched his career as a self-described "beauty operator" in his mother's hair salon in Los Angeles, and didn't take his first art course at a community college until he was almost thirty. He didn't sell his first work of art until he was almost forty. In 2017, he was selected to represent the United States at the prestigious Venice Biennale. Today, his art fetches millions, and collectors of his work include Beyoncé, Shawn Carter, and Anderson Cooper. Bradford fearlessly tackles difficult social issues in his oeuvre, ranging from the AIDS epidemic and the complexities of American history to the 1965 Watts Riot. *Circa 1992* was inspired by the community response in the wake of the 1991 beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. After the first days of violence, local church groups issued signs proclaiming "Rebuild South Central Without Liquor Stores! / Reconstruir al sur Central Sin Negocios de Bebeidas Alcoholicas!" By repeating these phrases in his painting, Bradford pays



Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*

tribute to the spirit of community renewal.
(Location: third floor, Gallery 314, Collectivity)

8. Nick Cave's *Soundsuit*

Artist Nick Cave also responded to the trauma of the Rodney King beating with a completely different type of work: a vibrantly colorful, surreal mixed-media piece incorporating rugs, mannequin legs, and crocheted socks. Over the last three decades, Cave has created 500 soundsuits—wearable sculptural forms based on the human body and comprised of found objects—which have become his signature works. “I felt like my identity, and who I was as a human being, was up for question,” Cave told the *New York Times*, recounting how the 1991 Los Angeles event shook him as an African American man. “I felt like that could have been me. Once that incident occurred, I was existing very differently in the world. So many things were going through my head: How do I exist in a place that sees me as a threat?” He has transmuted his pain into the soundsuit works, which can be displayed in museums and galleries but also worn in live theatrical and dance performances. As Megan O’Grady

observed in the *New York Times*, the soundsuits have “grown alongside Cave’s practice, evolving from a form of protective shell to an outsize, exuberant expression of confidence that pushes the boundaries of visibility. They demand to be seen.” (Location: third floor, Gallery 314, Collectivity)

9. Mickalene Thomas' *Lovely Six Foota*

Throughout her career, Mickalene Thomas has delved deeply into the African-American female experience and the history of art. Her



2007 photograph *Lovely Six Foota* depicts a fierce, sensual African-American woman, arrayed in chic 1970s attire, trailing clouds of Black Power and feminist glory as she looks boldly at the viewer with her blouse unbuttoned and her legs spread slightly. Thomas created this installation, replete with 1970s furnishings and vinyl LP album covers. (Location: third floor, Gallery 314, Collectivity)



10. Catherine Opie's *Flipper, Tanya, Chloe, & Harriet*, San Francisco, California

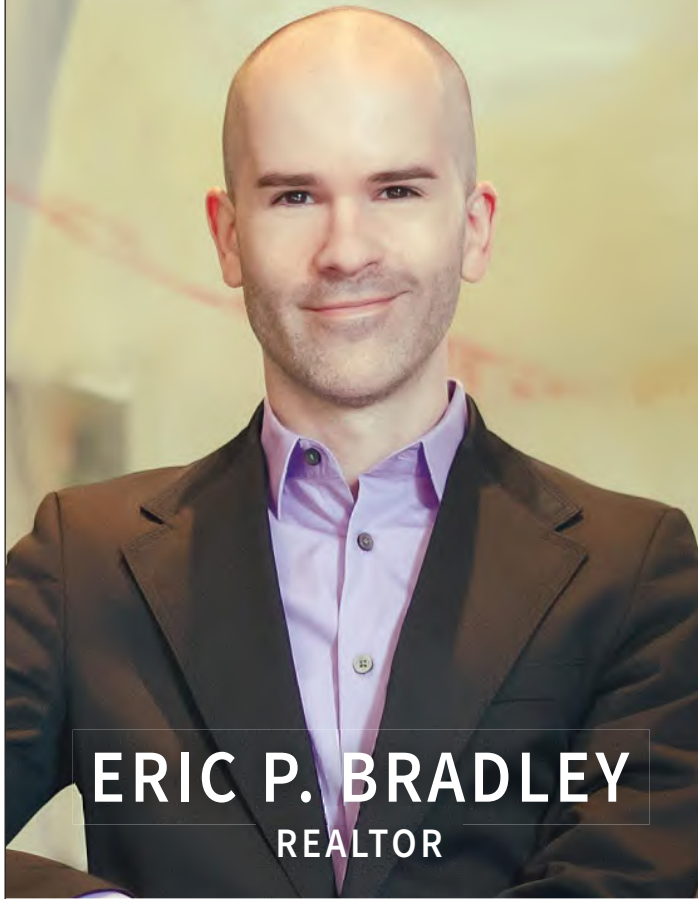
For over three decades, the celebrated American photographer Catherine Opie has found inspiration in a variety of subjects: the freeways of Los Angeles, the personal effects of Elizabeth Taylor, Tea Party rallies, Lake Michigan, and San Francisco’s gay and lesbian sadomasochistic community, of which she was an active part. But she is perhaps best known for her documentary portraits of queer people, shot with a piercing beauty and uncommon psychological insight. “I take a very traditional way of looking at portraiture to photograph a nontraditional and misrepresented community in a loving and dignified way,” Opie has explained. In the 1990s, she embarked on a cross-country road trip to photograph lesbian families, and this beautiful 1995 work is a portrait of her own family of choice. (Location: third floor, Gallery 314, Collectivity)

This partial list only scratches the surface of the treasures on view. Other queer artists featured in the Kinder Building include British icon Francis Bacon, visionary Texas artist Forrest Bess, photographer Kyle Meyer, the overlooked Harlem Renaissance master Richmond Barthé, and Marsden Hartley, among many others.



The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, offers free admission, including to the Kinder Building, on Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. For more information, visit mfah.org

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Call Her Kat

Queer fan favorite **Mayim Bialik** discusses her new television role.

By GREGG SHAPIRO

When it comes to recognizing and embracing promising talent, the gays have been at it longer than practically anyone else. Remember the opening sequence of the movie *Beaches* starring Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey, where those lead characters were portrayed as children? The kid version of Midler's C.C. Bloom was a young Mayim Bialik in one of her earliest film roles. Ask any of us, and we'll tell you we knew Bialik was going to be a star.

Since then, Bialik played the titular role in the '90s sitcom *Blossom*, and she stole the show as Amy Farrah Fowler in Fox's *The Big Bang Theory*. While she was filming that 21st-century sitcom, she also managed to find the time to earn a PhD in neuroscience from UCLA.

Even though *The Big Bang Theory* ended in 2019, things are still looking up for Bialik. She now stars in *Call Me Kat*, where she plays Kat,

the single and sassy owner of a Louisville cat café. OUTSMART had the pleasure of speaking with Bialik in January, shortly after the show debuted on Fox.

Gregg Shapiro: Before signing on to do *Call Me Kat*, did you consider yourself a fan of Miranda Hart's British sitcom *Miranda*, on which it's based?

Mayim Bialik: Honestly, I hadn't seen it until Jim Parsons brought it to my attention towards the end of *Big Bang Theory*. [He asked], "What do you think of this?" and I said, "I think it's delightful." He said, "No, I'm not asking your personal opinion; I'm asking you to be part of it." That was really the first that I heard of it. That's how we got here. [Laughs]

One of the first things the viewer sees in *Call Me Kat* is the breaking down of the fourth wall. Say something about working in that mode.

I think a lot of people don't understand that we are literally motivated by our desire to honor the original *Miranda* for all the good that it has brought us. When I was on *Blossom* as a teenager, *Blossom* actually kept a video diary, so I'm used to talking at the camera. When we decided to keep that piece of *Miranda*, it seemed to make a lot of sense, [because Kat] is a woman who is not necessarily lonely, but she is alone a lot. In that sense, breaking the fourth wall [lets] the audience be part of her life. It's often the way that people who spend a lot of time on their own have to be creative—picturing who's listening and who cares about them. In this case, [having] the audience care about her is how she sees it.

***Call Me Kat* allows you to display other aspects of your talents, including your skills as a physical comedian. You even got to do spit-takes in an episode. What do you like best about that kind of humor? →**

Not everything I do is stuff that I think is the funniest. [Laughs] When I'm told to do a spit-take, I do a spit-take. That's kind of how it works. I've always been a very physical person. I was a dancer from the time I was very young. I grew up watching Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett and Tracey Ullman—women who really all inhabited their bodies in a very specific and comedic way. For me, I think that Darlene Hunt, our showrunner and creator, just incorporated a lot of things about me. I am very physically flexible, so she's capitalized on that. I like to say that if my mom, when I was 11 and started acting, could have designed a show for me, it would have been *Call Me Kat*, because this show takes everything I can do and it puts it in there. She can sing, she can dance, she's funny with her body, she can kick high. That's what it feels like.

I'm so glad you mentioned singing, because you do get to sing on the show. Is it daunting or fun to sing with Cheyenne Jackson, who plays Max?

It's absolutely terrifying! I specifically requested that I not have to sing in front of him for extended periods of time because, first of all, he's absolutely incredible. He is also a person who, if you ask him to sing something 62 times, is going to sound amazing every single time. With me, you get about four takes out of me and then my voice starts to suffer, because I'm not a professional. It's incredibly lovely how welcoming he is and how much support he gives me, but it really is standing in the presence of greatness to work with him, and especially to sing in front of him. [Laughs]

Kat has a secret crush on Max. Have you ever had a secret crush on someone, and if so, how did that turn out?

Well, they're not usually secret. I usually post on social media about them. [Laughs] I don't know if I've had a secret crush. Like I said, I feel like nothing's secret anymore, thanks to the Internet.

Speaking of Cheyenne, your queer fans must be delighted that he, as well as Leslie Jordan, are a couple of your *Call Me Kat* co-stars. Is it as much fun to work with them as it appears?

Oh, absolutely! What I say about Leslie Jordan is, everything that you wish he's like is what he's like. That is no joke. Everything he says is a sound bite. We get to hear him be a little raunchier with his language because we get to see parts of him that other people don't. He's



delightful, he's hilarious. Everything he says is an unbelievable story or joke. I did not know much about Cheyenne, to be honest, before getting to work with him. He's just one of those people; his presence and his heart are so stunning. He's goofy and playful. He's adorable! We have a great time. I wouldn't say that if it wasn't true. I would just say, "Oh, he's really nice to work with."

Early in your acting career, you played the young version of Bette Midler's character, C.C. Bloom, in *Beaches*. Did you develop a sense that you had a gay following after that?

I was told that I did, and I found that to be true. I was raised by two very liberal documentary filmmakers who lived in the Village and had gay friends when that was a scandalous thing to do. I was raised with a very strong love and

appreciation for the gay community. My parents had gay friends. I grew up seeing men as couples in our home, having dinner with us and celebrating holidays with us. I have gay family members, as many of us do. I'm a happy liberal and loving ally. For sure, the Bette Midler connection is a very specific thing, which I love to be part of.

Kat owns and operates a cat-themed café. Do you have any of your own pets?

I do. I have three cats. I had four, but unfortunately I lost one of them during COVID. It was definitely a rough year in the cat department. But I do have three fur babies, as we call them. And like Kat, I like to say, "I'm not a sad cat lady, I'm a *rad* cat lady."



Watch *Call Me Kat* on Fox every Thursday at 8 p.m.

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Meditation Master

Queer author and musician **Justin Michael Williams** delivers a message of hope to high school students.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **JAMAAL**



With the spring 2021 semester in full swing, high school students are still adjusting to the new normal. In addition to the usual drama of teenage life, they're grappling to balance virtual Zoom classes with a severely limited social life. Fortunately, they have at least one person in their corner: Justin Michael Williams.

During the first week of February, the singer, author, and speaker will deliver keynote speeches to four Houston high schools and discuss his newest book, *Stay Woke: A Meditation Guide for the Rest of Us*.

Williams, an openly queer entertainer, tells his virtual audiences that his book is for people who thought they'd never buy a book about meditation. He also explains how one can use meditation to find a higher calling in life.

His presentation style sounds promising. "It's very different than anyone would expect from a wellness event," Williams says. "When people hear about a presentation on meditation, they think it will be quiet, soft, and boring. This one has music and a lot of engagement. The students go nuts in the chat box. Almost every principal [I've worked with] says they weren't expecting this type of dynamic."

Williams' overall goal for his Houston talks is to meet students where they're at, and engage with them going forward.

"It's about empowering them and motivating them to move past anxiety and stress and the unknown," he adds. "[I want to help them] access that powerful and unshakable part of themselves so they can choose what they want to do next in their lives."

For Williams, learning how to tune out the noise of the world is a practice he is quite familiar with. He wanted to be a singer when he was younger, but a lifetime of being bul-

lied, teased, and abused made him give up his dream. After starting out in a rough neighborhood, where he lived in a home riddled with bullet holes, he became a chronic overachiever who earned a full scholarship to the University of California, Los Angeles. Even though he graduated at the top of his class, his successes didn't heal the trauma of living in an unstable area. "I thought if I did enough, I'd get out and people would love me. Then I had this moment in college where I thought about [how I

"IT'S ABOUT EMPOWERING THEM AND MOTIVATING THEM TO MOVE PAST ANXIETY AND STRESS AND THE UNKNOWN. [I WANT TO HELP THEM] ACCESS THAT POWERFUL AND UNSHAKABLE PART OF THEMSELVES SO THEY CAN CHOOSE WHAT THEY WANT TO DO NEXT IN THEIR LIVES."

—Justin Michael Williams

had] everything I dreamed of, but I was still miserable. I still felt like that boy who is afraid, inauthentic, and doesn't know what he wants."

After seeing a therapist who recommended meditation, Williams' life turned around. His debut song album premiered in iTunes' top-20 charts next to Britney Spears and Taylor Swift. He has since been featured by Billboard and Grammy.com and has presented at a South by Southwest event in Austin. His work has also

been heard at events that featured Marianne Williamson, Deepak Chopra, and Chaka Khan.

Williams is dedicated to using his voice to serve others, being a beacon of hope for those who are lost, and making sure people of all backgrounds have access to the information they need to change their lives.

But instead of promoting his new book with a traditional book tour, he's reaching out to youth in their own neighborhoods. His publisher wanted to send him to upscale New York City bookstores, but that didn't sit right with Williams. "Those stores can't be the only places we go, because the rest of us aren't there," he told them. "We need to go to some of the most underserved places, give the book away for free, and do [some 'musical TED Talks'] to teach students how to use these meditation practices."

The publisher agreed, and Williams' plan was set into motion. That's when Marlin Murdock, a local educator who has long followed Williams' career, connected the speaker with leaders at the four schools in Houston. "I had been doing a deep-dive study into racial inequality, and wanted to do something to begin to change my community. [Helping Justin to come here] seemed like a great way to do it," Murdock says.

After his tour concludes, Williams plans to continue using his voice for change. "I want to bring people together in hope and positivity, and across perceived divides. When we stand in the space of hope and positivity, we can do a lot to impact the world. That's what I'm focused on next."



Find out more about Justin Michael Williams by visiting StayWokeGiveBack.org. *Stay Woke: A Meditation Guide for the Rest of Us* is available wherever books are sold.



Drive 'N Drag

Bianca Del Rio previews her first in-person pandemic drag show.

By LOURDES ZAVALETA

It's clear that your production is making a big effort to ensure everyone's safety. Did this play an important role when deciding to participate in the show?

Yes. I've worked with Voss Events for many years, and when they approached me about this, I was most impressed by the COVID regulations. They travel with a specialist who will be there to test us daily and make sure we're also being safe by regularly washing our hands and social distancing. They're on top of everything, and take it all seriously. I'm also excited by the fact that they're able to get a drag show to the South. I really hope people turn out, because they're doing things the right way.

Aside from the safety measures, what else are you looking forward to?

People! My dogs are sick of me and my jokes. [Laughs] I'm excited to be seeing other faces and having their energy around me. I think everyone is in the same boat. We've kind of been clouded in our heads [with so much] TV watching and ordering takeout. This is finally something different to do.

Speaking of watching TV, have you been keeping up with the new seasons of *Drag Race*?

I have not. I'm horrible, but I like seeing things all together consecutively, as opposed to waiting for one episode each week. Also, I didn't realize so many seasons had been coming out. Since there's a new American season and a new UK season, my Twitter feed is a blur—I don't know who is on what or what is going on. I need to do my homework. There's so many new queens, it's crazy!

As a *Drag Race* legend, is it exciting for you to see the show continue to grow in popularity?

I think it's great. The show keeps bringing drag into more people's homes. *Drag Race* was an amazing opportunity for me, but it's now a completely different show than it was then.

Bianca Del Rio's star has continued to rise since winning Season 6 of *RuPaul's Drag Race* in 2014. After her time on the show, the dimple-cheeked, larger-than-life performer has toured across the globe, starred in several feature films, and published a best-selling memoir.

The snarky comedy queen was prepared to continue entertaining audiences last year when COVID-19 restrictions ended public gatherings across the nation. Just before her life was put on pause last March, she moved into a new home in Palm Springs, California, where she continues to quarantine.

The world has adapted since then, and artists are finding innovative new ways to reach their fans. Bianca Del Rio is finally stepping outside of her pandemic bubble to headline *Drive 'N Drag Saves 2021*, a drive-in drag tour starring fellow *Drag Race* alumni Aquaria, Asia O'Hara, Kameron Michaels, Naomi Smalls, Plastique, and Violet Chachki.

Bianca Del Rio was kind enough to talk to *OUTSMART* prior to her Houston *Drive 'N Drag* shows at Deerbrook Mall on March 2 and 3.

Lourdes Zavaleta: What was your 2020 like?

Bianca Del Rio: It was a lot like everyone's 2020—a pretty dismal reality check. I started out the year pretty good, and then once corona happened, I tried to make the best of it. Luckily, I'm in sunny Palm Springs, which has been pretty good for me mentally. Other than that, fingers crossed things will get better this year.

The arts, including drag performances, were heavily impacted by COVID-19. How did the pandemic affect your work?

Everything I had scheduled was pushed back. It's a scary situation—I mean, people are dealing with illness and death. There's a lot going on in the world, so I understood that entertainment would be affected. And even if the vaccine was distributed tomorrow and everyone was taken care of, I think it would take a while for the arts to get back. There are fans who are going to be interested in going out and supporting entertainers, but it's just a bit risky to put that many people in one space. That's why *Drive 'N Drag* is such a great opportunity, because it's the safest way to see a drag show right now. You and your bubble can see us from the safety of your own car.



Since there's so much of it right now, I hope the new queens get as many opportunities as I was able to have over the past seven years.

Since you're spending so much time at your new home, what have you been up to?
Liquor. [Laughs] No, I just moved, so I had a whole house to set up. I had to unpack many boxes and reorganize my life. That's been really saving my sanity. This move happened the week we went into lockdown, so I've been very lucky and blessed. Over the months, it was interesting to piece it all together while living in a different world.

I've also been having cocktails, talking to my dogs, and roaming around the house in a wig and pretending I'm an old movie star. Clearly, I haven't been doing well! Kidding. [Laughs] I've just been trying to get through the days, without really being able to plan too far in advance. That's why I'm so excited about Drive 'N Drag.

We're excited to have you back in Houston! What can fans expect from the show?
There's so many different types of performers. You've got Violet, who's an aerialist. The other girls do high-energy dances and can lip sync, twirl, and split. I don't do that—I'm too old, and I'm not interested in starting anew. [Laughs] But really, there's a great variety of performers. So if you hate one, you'll love another. There's also some great production values. Dancers, costumes, video screens, lighting—they do it up! You're going to want to be there.



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A Stritch in Time

Cabaret legend **Billy Stritch**
discusses his new album.

By GREGG SHAPIRO
Photo by BILL WESTMORELAND



Sugar Land native Billy Stritch is a gay man who's as comfortable in the limelight as he is in the background.

Known for his creative collaborations with Liza

Minnelli, Linda Lavin, Christine Ebersole, and others, Stritch has been making the most of the pandemic lockdown with his *Billy's Place* livestream performances. On his new album, also titled *Billy's Place*, Stritch performs songs from the Great American Songbook, as well as more contemporary fare and even some originals. At a time when travel is restricted, tunes such as Peter Allen and Carole Bayer Sager's "Planes," John Wallowitch's "My Love Went to London," and Stritch's own "Since You Left New York" take on even greater meaning. Now a New York City resident, Billy was kind enough to answer a few questions over the phone for OutSMART.

Gregg Shapiro: Your *Billy's Place* livestreams on Facebook Live began during the pandemic. Can you please say something about what it means to you to still be able to reach your audience at a time when audiences are forced to social distance?

Billy Stritch: It really means everything to me, and it certainly wasn't something I was anticipating when this all started. I started doing the livestreams in late March with my friend Linda Lavin, the actress. We started doing livestreams from her apartment, three floors above me here in my building. We just thought we would do things on Wednesday afternoons, and just kind of put some stuff out there. Then a few weeks in, I started to realize that there were people that I knew (or people that knew me) from all over the country that don't have much chance to see me live, or come to New York and see my regular gigs. All of a sudden, the light went on: "Oh, I'm reaching so many more people than I ever had a chance to before." That's the great gift that's come out of this. I always try to be a glass-half-full kind of guy, anyway. It was the lovely surprise that has come out of being able to livestream—something I would never ever consider before. I'm sure most people that I know that are [watching livestreams have also] never thought about

it before. Even after we're all able to go out and work again, I don't think this livestream is going to go away. It's a wonderful way to reach people.

The *Billy's Place* album opens with your cover of Barry Manilow's "Meet Me, Midnight." Would you describe yourself as a night owl, or did you have to become one as an entertainer?

I like the nightlife. That's always been the attraction for me. Even when I was a little kid, I didn't want to go to bed. Everything fun happened at night, as far as I was concerned. I wasn't athletic. I wasn't a sports kid. I wasn't an outdoors kid. My world was television and movies and music. I would see nightclubs represented on TV, and that's always what I wanted to do. Even before I came to New York, I had this dream that I would work in these glamorous nightclubs. Now as I get older, it's like, "Oh God, that show is so late." When I was starting out, I had a vocal group and we worked at the Algonquin Hotel in the '80s. We had shows at 8:45 and 10:45. That was kind of normal; two shows a night. Now you do a show at 7:00 or 8:00, something like that. It definitely has skewed earlier. I don't know why that is.

Do you think it's because your audience is aging along with you?

[Laughs] I don't know. That could be part of it. I'm sure the younger kids are probably out later and doing whatever they do. I do co-host an open-mic night at Birdland on Mondays. We always go until about 12:30, so that's kind of a late night. When I work at Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle, it's nine to midnight. So I'm a night owl, to answer your question. I like the nightlife.

I'm happy that you included "My Love Went to London," a tune by John Wallowitch (of Wallowitch & Ross fame), on *Billy's Place*. Have you ever performed any of his racier or more humorous songs, such as "Bruce"?

I knew John. We became friends back in the '80s. I had this vocal group called Montgomery, Plant & Stritch. It was me and two girls. We were a vocal trio from Texas. No one was doing our mix of tight jazz harmony and humorous

and theatrical material, so we really kind of took the town by storm at that time. We met so many great people. John and Bert Ross were the two people that I remember so fondly. We had great evenings at their house on Beekman Place. A wonderful home, and just unforgettable nights. I'm very familiar with a lot of his material. His material is really more specific. Almost anybody can sing "Bruce" or "I'm 27," and "Come a Little Closer" is one that I've sung before. But so much of it was so specifically *his* kind of material. I have him on my iPhone, and I listen to him quite a lot. He loved New York and he loved performing, and he was so open. He was just so unique. There will never be anybody like him. I first heard Tony Bennett do "My Love Went to London," and then I heard Blossom Dearie's recording of it. I was putting together a show back in August for the *Billy's Place* livestream and it was Tony's birthday, so I did an hour of his material. I pulled that one out. Boy, especially when you can't travel, some of these songs kind of hearken back to that a little bit. I would love to go to London! There's an added layer to it when you sing it now, in the midst of being stuck at home. It's musically so satisfying to sing.

"Does He Love You," the Grammy Award-winning song you co-wrote with Sandy Knox, has been covered by Reba McEntire, Patti LaBelle, and in a duet version by Liza Minnelli and Donna Summer. Is there anyone else you would love to have record the song?

Kelly Clarkson and Reba sang it on an awards show a few years ago. I think it was the CMAs. I always thought they should record it. I'd love to hear Reba do it again with somebody else. There are loads and loads of singers, but honestly, Gregg, I think the time might be right for two men to sing it, perhaps.

"Since You Left New York," another song you co-wrote with Sandy, is on the *Billy's Place* album. What makes Sandy a good songwriting partner?

Again, it's collaborating. It's finding someone who you could laugh with and you can have an easy rapport with; you kind of get each other. Sandy and I have been friends since we were back in Houston. She used to come hear me →

when I was first starting out. I've known her for 40 years now. We have so much of a great frame of reference together with that sort of background. We did a lot of writing together back in the '80s. That's when we wrote "Does He Love You." Then Sandy went to Nashville and pursued a career as a full-time songwriter. I would make regular trips there to write with her. This song, "Since You Left New York," was written all that time ago. We made a demo and sent it out, but nothing really happened with it. I had forgotten about it, it's been so long. When this pandemic started, just a few weeks into it, Sandy emailed me and asked what I thought about "Since You Left New York." I said, "Remind me!" [Laughs] I kind of remembered the title. She sent me an MP3 of the song, and I was like, "Holy cow, that song is perfect for now." The way it starts—"They turned off the lights on old Broadway." That's exactly what's happened. People tend to think it's something we wrote this year, and it's not. It's a great example of how sometimes a song has to find its time. It may not be right when you write it, but if it hangs out long enough (and luckily Sandy did remember it), hopefully it's going to get a new life. Now, that's a song I would love to get somebody big to record, for sure.

What did it mean to you when the Sugar Land Auditorium in your hometown christened The Billy Stitch Stage in your honor in 2014?

It was the most incredible thing. Sugar Land, Texas, the town I grew up in, was 3,000 people—a small industry town. It had a sugar refinery, the Imperial Sugar Company. There were a lot of old-time families that worked for that industry. It's close to Houston, so my family moved out there and built a house when I was a baby, because it was the suburbs. But in the intervening years, the town has boomed. It's almost 120,000 people now. It's become a medium-sized city with a big City Hall and a big historical society. Chad Muska was heading up the historical society, and he floated this stage-naming idea because I was a small-town boy who's made good, I guess. It's this great old auditorium that was built in 1918. It's been landmarked by the State of Texas, so it's not going anywhere. I remember it from when I was in elementary school and there was no air conditioning and horrible seats. I remember kin-

dergarten graduation was at that place. It was very run down, but they have done a magnificent job restoring it. One of the last things they did was to dedicate the stage, with a big plaque, in my honor. It was so wonderful to come back. I did a concert on the Sunday afternoon of the dedication day. It was like *This Is Your Life*, *Billy Stitch*, because there was my kindergarten teacher and my fifth-grade teacher. I knew all these people. My dad was on the school board and later became a teacher, so they all knew me. A lot of those people were still around. My band director from high school was there. People I hadn't seen in years. We had about 300 people that showed up that day for it. It's really one of the most thrilling honors that's ever happened to me. I always joke that

little kids now are going to look at that plaque and go, "Who's Billy Stitch?" They're not going to have any idea who I am, but there it is anyway.

A well-deserved honor!

 *Billy Stitch's album Billy's Place is now available on all streaming platforms.*



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Gender-Creative Parenting

Author **Kyl Myers** chose not to enforce gender norms onto her infant.

By **TERRI SCHLICHENMEYER**



Kyl Myers



Pink or blue?

When you're pregnant, everybody asks that question. What kind of clothing or toys will you require: dolls or trucks? They'll want to know about the

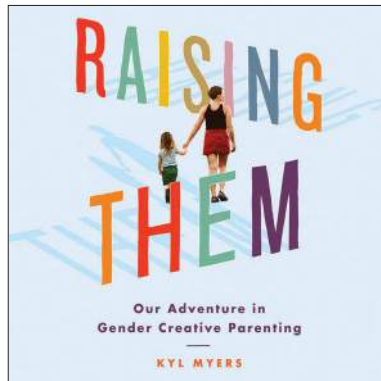
gender-reveal party, and the kind of names you're considering.

And if you take a cue from the new book *Raising Them* by Kyl Myers, you might decide to ask them if they'd mind not knowing your baby's gender for a few years.

Long before she ever became a mother—even before she met and married her husband, Brent—Kyl Myers had thought about what she calls “gender-creative parenting.”

Myers identifies as queer (and somewhat of an activist), so she was aware that society places too much emphasis on the chromosomes of an infant. After all, a child's intimate body parts have nothing to do with simply being a child. So during Myers' pregnancy, she and her husband decided that they would raise their child “gender-free.”

They aren't the first parents to do so. Parents around the world have gone public with their enthusiasm for successful gender-creative parenting. Still, it took plenty of



determined pre-planning: Myers would deny knowledge of the baby's gender to anyone who didn't absolutely *need* to know. That meant restricting diaper duty, and making sure the four grandparents wouldn't know their grandchild's gender until the child was several months old.

Once Zoomer Coyote entered the world, there would be no pink or blue bassinet cards in the hospital nursery. Myers learned to find non-gendered infant and toddler clothing (and even neutral-hued toys) for her child—items that didn't scream *Boy!* or *Girl!*. Zoomer's day-care was “cool” with the neutrality, but strang-

ers and other parents were a problem when Myers challenged them to open their minds.

Raising Them could be an emotional read, depending on which side of the debate you stand on. The writing is intriguing but exhausting, and too chirpy, sunny, and precious by half. Myers' cute-little-Zoomer tales wear thin after a very short while.

And yet, the idea of giving your child time to know themselves is *intriguing*. Author Kyl Myers should be commended for not throwing in the towel, even though her struggles were exactly what you might expect.

Clearly, gender-creative parenting involves work, vigilance, and forethought, and while it's not for everyone, it's a compelling enough idea to stick in your mind like glue. You might be persuaded that it's worth a try, even if only sometimes.

And if you can't rest without knowing, Myers does drop a few hints to soothe your boy-or-girl curiosity. In fact, she has even created a website-supported, mind-opening, ongoing tale for parents-to-be, or for anyone who wishes they'd been raised in a similar kind of household.



Raising Them by Kyl Myers is now available on Amazon.

BLACK QUEER MUSIC PIONEERS

Six artists who have greatly impacted the industry.

By ALYS GARCIA CARRERA



This month, we highlight and celebrate the talented Black LGBTQ recording artists who have not only enjoyed mainstream success, but have forever

changed the musical landscape with their trail-blazing talents.

Black American creatives have birthed pop-culture staples such as jazz, rock 'n' roll, disco, hip-hop and rap, permeating every aspect of mainstream culture with their unique sights and sounds. Queer Black musicians have been at the forefront in each of these genres, and will influence generations to come with their music, fashion, and activism.



Billie Holiday (1915–1959)

Billie Holiday's music continues to be a staple in the jazz and swing genres, although her identity as a queer woman of color has been largely erased. Rising from humble beginnings, Holiday's enchanting voice gained worldwide notoriety throughout the 1930s and '40s. In spite of discrimination and even incarceration, Holiday enjoyed continuously sold-out shows throughout her career. Notably, her penchant for improvisation influenced new styles of jazz that were precursors to modern pop music. Holiday was among the first Black women to perform at Carnegie Hall, win a Grammy, and be inducted into the Grammy and Rhythm and Blues halls of fame.

Billy Strayhorn (1915–1967)

Billy Strayhorn was jazz icon Duke Ellington's right-hand man and collaborator for over thirty years. The pianist and composer helped shape mainstream jazz through his work in the renowned Duke Ellington Orchestra. Many of his notable contributions to the sound of contemporary jazz have gone unnoticed, although Strayhorn's hypnotic soundtracks played a key role in the New Wave Cinema movement of the 1960s. Strayhorn had a famously lovable personality and lived his life as an openly gay man, gaining the acceptance and respect of his peers and friends, including Martin Luther King Jr.





◀ Sylvester (1947–1988)

The renowned '70s disco legend Sylvester celebrated his blackness and his queerness throughout his life. Sylvester began his career with the avant-garde drag troupe The Cockettes, where he started to experiment with sounds and styles inspired by Black queer icons Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday. Lauded as “The Queen of Disco,” Sylvester also dedicated himself to activism during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, ultimately leaving all of his royalties and future earnings to San Francisco HIV/AIDS charities. This out-and-proud Black artist enjoyed a career that reflected the dramatic rise in LGBTQ acceptance during the 1970s.



◀ Frankie Knuckles (1955–2014)

Known as “The Godfather of House Music,” DJ Frankie Knuckles became a pillar in the Chicago and New York club scenes during the '80s and '90s. His sound gained popularity after moving to Chicago and DJing at a friend's private Black gay club. His pulsing house-music style was popularized in London and imitated worldwide. Knuckles became a coveted act, and was even hired to remix for the likes of Michael Jackson and Diana Ross. His house music produced for the queer underground club scene paved the way for mainstream pop and hip-hop sounds.



⬆ Janelle Monáe (b. 1985)

Uniquely creative, Janelle Monáe's sound is a perfect blend of retro pop iconography and trendsetting Afro-futurism. Fascinated by science fiction and technology, Monáe's work has garnered praise for her naturally gifted voice, genre-bending music, and strong conceptual work. Her music has tackled themes of oppression with futuristic concepts of androids and artificial intelligence. The avid songwriter has also ventured into acting and activism, and is a strong advocate for feminist and LGBTQ causes. Lauded as Prince's protégé, Monáe's music and style has toyed with gender and sexuality norms since her debut. Now openly nonbinary and bisexual, her future endeavors are widely anticipated.

➡ Kevin Abstract (b. 1996)

One of the founding members of the experimental audiovisual collective Brockhampton, Kevin Abstract is a young talent carving out his place in the public consciousness. A Texas native, Abstract began his musical ventures at 17 by releasing a solo album shortly before moving to California to form his popular boy-band Brockhampton. The vocalist, rapper, and visual artist's work combines rock and rap influences with his distinctly modern and alternative sounds. Openly gay, his music and videos often feature queer themes—something still rare among his rap and rock contemporaries. While still in his early 20s, his work has gained notoriety in historically homophobic musical genres, proving that the winds of change are blowing in a more positive and tolerant direction.





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International Eats

Traveler's Table brings global cuisine to Montrose.

By MARENE GUSTIN | Photo by JENN DUNCAN

Houston restaurateur Matthew Mitchell is a worldly man of many talents. He moved to the city when he was five, and wanderlust hit hard in his twenties. He attended Emory University in Atlanta, studied in France, Italy, and England, and then worked as a journalist in London, Paris, and New York City. He later came back home to Houston and started a drug-development company with his dad. "I'm afraid my feet will go to sleep if I stay in one career too long," Mitchell says.

In October of 2019, Mitchell and his wife, Thy, opened a restaurant in Montrose. "Maybe right before a pandemic wasn't the best time to sell a drug company and open a restaurant," he says with a laugh. But so far, things are working pretty well for Traveler's Table, which is located in the former Aquí spot on lower Westheimer.

Thy grew up in Houston working in her family's Vietnamese restaurant, and she's currently working on a master's degree in business management. "A neighbor introduced us, and we went for sushi on our first date," Mitchell recalls. "I think she was impressed when I ordered jellyfish instead of a California roll."

It was this foodie couple's love of travel and food that inspired the Traveler's Table motto: "Exploring the world through food and drink." And for those who aren't exactly sure what they're in the mood for, this restaurant is perfect because the menu offers a bit of everything.

How about a warm Indian-spiced mango salad, or Peking-style duck dumplings? There are Vietnamese dishes, as well as plates from Thailand and Jamaica. If you're looking for something closer to home, try the Mexican street corn soup, the Cajun oysters (on Wednesday oyster nights), or the New Orleans shrimp and grits on the weekend brunch menu. You can also pair your meal with a Good Morning Vietnam cocktail, which is made with Hennessy VS, espresso, condensed milk, and coffee beans.

Mitchell doesn't have a favorite dish (he says choosing one is like picking a favorite child), but lately he's been liking the lamb ragù,

crab samosas, and jerk chicken.

Mitchell is also the family chef (unless his mother-in-law is around), and when the restaurant opened in October of 2019, he was in the kitchen every day for the first six months. He has a degree from the International Culinary School at the Art Institute of Houston, and has worked for several restaurants around town. "But now we have a great team of diverse chefs, and they've been coming up with some great new dishes," he says.

Mitchell and Thy live very near the restaurant in Montrose with their three-year-old daughter, who says she wants to be either the chef or general manager of Traveler's Table



one day. The family also enjoys sampling Houston's diverse restaurants, including Kata Robata, Thai Gourmet, and Cool Runnings Jamaican Grill.

"Houston is a great restaurant city," Mitchell says. "I think we're in for a couple of more difficult months, but we'll get through it. We're putting in more outdoor seating, and we'll open for lunch sometime down the road. But once things get better, I hope it's like when prohibition ended. Everyone's going to want to go out and eat!"



For more information on Traveler's Table, visit travelerstable.com.

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WEDDING GUIDE

By JENNY BLOCK | Photos by ANGELA ANGIE



Noteworthy Nuptials

Cherie Beasley Tutt and Yvonne Tutt celebrated their love with a Halloween-themed wedding ceremony.

Cherie Beasley Tutt (l) and Yvonne Tutt



Galveston couple Yvonne Tutt, 38, and Cherie Beasley Tutt, 32, got married on Halloween, but the way they met is far from scary.

In fact, they met through Yvonne's best friend, Christy Chris Gross.

Yvonne says, "Chris and Cherie became friends first, and she said I should talk to Cherie. We started talking through Facebook Messenger in February of 2018. We talked daily, and finally met up at Jimmy's on the Pier in Galveston on March 30, 2018. We also attended a drum circle with some of the ladies from the GIRLS group."

GIRLS, or the Galveston Island Rainbow Lesbian Society, was actually founded by Yvonne and Chris on March 13, 2018, when the two friends moved to Galveston from College Station. They began the group to do exactly what it ended up doing for Yvonne and Cherie: connecting its Galveston-area lesbian members for friendship and maybe more.

Yvonne works at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston in the neonatal intensive care unit as a health unit coordinator. A Palestine, Texas, native, she attended Vista College in College Station, where she received her associate degree in medical assisting.

Originally from Fort Worth, Cherie works at Home Depot as a specialty department supervisor, having graduated from Galveston College where she majored in science and received her associate degree.

It was an ideal match for both women. "We hit it off from day one, and started dating a couple months after that," Yvonne says. "I knew I wanted to marry Cherie because she completed me and helped me change my life for the better. She was always there when I needed her, and vice versa."

Yvonne proposed to Cherie on a cruise to Cozumel on August 25, 2019. "I will never forget that day. We were at dinner. It was me, Cherie, and Chris. I had an ice cream box because she loves ice cream. She looked at it, confused at first. That's when I got down on one knee and said, 'Cherie, I love you. Will you marry me?' She said, 'Yes, of course!'" Yvonne recalls.

The couple got married on October 31, 2020, at the historic Lyceum in Galveston. "We love Halloween, and wanted a Halloween wedding where our guests could wear costumes," Yvonne says. →

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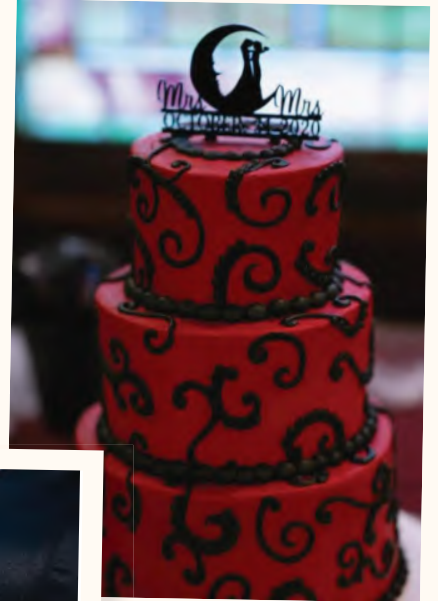
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A Unique Celebration

Cherie Beasley Tutt and Yvonne Tutt asked guests at their October 31 wedding ceremony to get in the spirit by wearing Halloween costumes.



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When Yvonne saw Cherie walking down the aisle, she could not help but cry. Apparently, she was in good company. “Our vows were so beautiful, and we had all of our guests crying,” Yvonne says.

The couple skipped the old-school wedding traditions that didn’t really suit them. “We didn’t toast, and we didn’t do the dance with our parents. We aren’t really the traditional type, as you can see. The wedding was how we wanted it,” says Yvonne. The couple has no regrets about the way they decided to celebrate their big day.

Naturally, the vendors they chose were LGBTQ-friendly, including Chef Marshall of Coastal Catering (and his wife, Stacey Monroe) along with ceremony officiant Lee Ann, of Weddings by Lee Ann. Heather Barker, who is a fellow GIRLS member, served as the couple’s wedding planner.

Yvonne notes that everything was “pretty much the same” as it would have been had COVID-19 not imposed restrictions. (They did trim their guest list down to 100, from 150.)

“It was the wedding date we wanted, so we stuck to it. We had been waiting all year for this perfect day, so there was no postponing it,” Yvonne adds.

Sadly, some of their guests were unable to join them because of the pandemic. “Some people were afraid to be in a large group setting,” Yvonne says. Their original honeymoon plans included a trip to Miami and a cruise to the Bahamas. However, due to COVID-19, they settled on a weeklong trip to San Antonio to enjoy the River Walk.

Yvonne describes Cherie as “the sweetest, most forgiving person that I have ever met. She is beautiful inside and out, and I couldn’t imagine a day without her.”

Cherie’s love for Yvonne is equally apparent, and her simple words of admiration say it all: “Yvonne is funny and perfect.”

Nothing scary about that. ▼

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April 8	July 8	October 14	

Council meetings are open to the public and although only Council members are allowed to vote, Public Comment is welcome at the beginning of every meeting. **The Council currently meets virtually via Zoom Teleconference** on the 2nd Thursday of each month at 12noon.

You are also welcome to attend committee meetings. Committees include Affected Community, Comprehensive HIV Planning, Priority and Allocations and Quality Improvement. Public comment is also welcome at the beginning of each of these committee meetings.

Call the office for the date/location of meetings, to request a calendar, membership application or more information -- or check our online calendar. Meeting materials and the Zoom link (or physical location) are posted on the calendar about one week prior to each meeting.

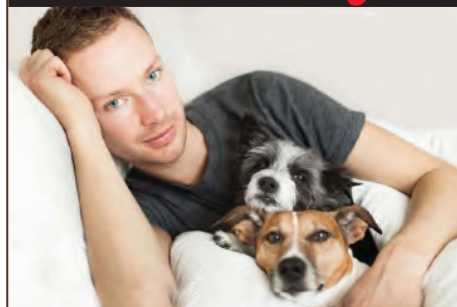
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A wealth of information is available on our website: www.rwpcHouston.org. Check the calendar regularly for topics of specific interest to you. Join our E-List to receive info about Council and community events. We hope to see you soon!

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OUT THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & EDGARDO AGUILAR



December 3, 2020

The Montrose Center's virtual **Out for Good** gala was streamed live from the home of Jason and Julia Wang. During the event, longtime OutSmart photographer Dalton DeHart was presented with the Center's LGBTQ Community Vision Award—a high honor that has only been awarded to seven other Houston activists and public servants.

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What is your favorite shot to make? To drink?

I like to make Lemondrops and Starf--kers—a tasty Crown Royal and Red Bull shot!

Where is your favorite place to drink when not on duty?

I'm a non-drinker, so you can usually find me out riding my bike.

What is a current bar drink trend you'd like to see end?

Please end the Mexican Candy Shots (tequila, watermelon liqueur, and hot sauce).

What are you best known for?

I've been with Mark DeLange, the owner of the Eagle, for 10 years since he opened. Most people know me for my Blue Balls Shot, which is a blueberry vodka mix.

What is the best and worst holiday to work?

Best holiday: I'm going to count Pride as a holiday, so Pride and Halloween are the best because people are in great spirits. Worst holiday: New Year's Eve and St. Patrick's Day, when all of the amateurs are out!

Biggest tip from one customer?

\$500 during a big party when a major

sporting event was in town—\$500 on a two-bottle champagne tab!

Who are the hardest customers to please?

Young drunks are the most stubborn.

If you weren't a bartender, what career would you choose?

I think I always wanted to be a commercial airline pilot.

Favorite restaurant?

The small neighborhood taquerias in the Second Ward.

Favorite travel spot?

Playa del Carmen, Mexico.

Dream vacation?

A European tour starting in the boot of Italy, then Greece, maybe France, and the UK.

Best advice to a new bartender in an LGBTQ bar?

Be real, be humble, and smile. Remember that *everyone* is welcome!

Desired super-power?

Gotta be the power of *flight*—in my dreams, I fly!

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Time to Reconnect

A great month for getting engaged in community efforts.



As our month begins, we are under the influence of Mercury retrograde in Aquarius. This is a good time to take care of past and present issues or tasks, but

it's best to wait until February 28 to begin something new. February 12 is the Lunar New Year, ringing in the year of the Ox! We are slowly moving out of the difficult planetary alignment that plagued us throughout 2020. We should feel some sense of relief by mid-March, although we may not see real change until June. Positive days this month are February 11, 13, 14, and 25. Days that have more tension are February 1, 6, 8, 10, 17 and 19.

With a majority of the planets moving through Aquarius, this is a good month to connect with your community, work for equality and justice, and help improve our social environment. This is a good time to reconnect with organizations and friends!

ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

This month, you are more aware of your community and the environment around you. This is an excellent month to reconnect with old friends, former business partners, and business organizations. You are also reviewing your resources and investments, and considering new forms of currency. You will have a strong tendency to make quick decisions about finances. It may be easier than usual to spend money this month. By the end of the month, you are moving into a rest-and-retreat mode. Although your social activities will continue to be strong, you will be more selective about the people you allow into your life so that you can have more time to yourself.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

The activity this month is taking place in your career and social relationships area, with Mercury retrograde in those same areas. Overall, you are focusing on improving your career and long-term goals. You are more than willing to take on a leadership role and challenge the existing atmosphere. This will be all too obvious with Mercury retrograde there, pointing out the same old problems you always encounter with your work conditions. This month is a good time to

really assess your current career and get yourself back on track—or onto a track that takes you in another direction. Hold off on making any permanent changes until the end of the month. You are in a strong growth period!

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

With your ruler, Mercury, retrograde, this is a time to rethink and review. You are considering new routines, office hours, and improving your health habits. This is also a very good time to improve your social-media connections. You want to develop that part of your life, as it will give you some alternate career paths. This can also be a time when you are reconsidering going back to school, working on your blog, or taking a teaching position. This is an excellent month to reconnect with old friends, since some of them could be very helpful in furthering your career and expanding your views. In the latter part of the month, your career becomes the center of activity. It's best to wait until the 28th before making any final plans.

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

Finances, shared resources, expanding

your client base, and lessening your debt are the areas that are being stimulated this month. You are working to remove the blocks that prevent you from freely expressing yourself. You are also wanting to have more intimacy in your relationship. With Mercury retrograde this month, it's a great time to confront problems, discuss them, and solve the issues. If the problems are unresolvable, you may have to make other decisions about the viability of your relationship. Your social and group associations are being stimulated through the middle of March. Wait until the end of February before you make any commitments to those areas in your life. Your relationship also needs some stimulation and renewal this month. You will be the beneficiary if you succeed!

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

Relationships and partnerships are being highlighted this month, especially with the Mercury retrograde active in that area. This is a time to renew those bonds by focusing some healing and nurturing energy on that part of your life. If you are single, this can be a good time to reconnect with old friends and partners, but

it's not a good time to see someone new. If your relationship is having problems again, this time the problems will be pushed to the surface so they can be dealt with, one way or another. You are looking to find a new career path (or to reinvent the one you have) by focusing on the parts you like and eliminating the parts you don't like. Your patience there is very short, and you will want to take on a leadership role. You may also be considering starting your own business, but that decision should wait until after February 28.

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

With your ruling planet, Mercury, retrograde through the end of the month, this is a great month to clean up, review, organize, and improve what you do! The majority of the planets are in your health and work habits area, so you are trying to get yourself back into those routines that the virus interrupted. This is an excellent month to resume exercising and improving your health. You will have good motivation there for at least a year, but it's just more highlighted this month. You may be upgrading your office or creating



AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

This is a very active time for you. You are more conscious about your career and long-term plans for safety and security. This month, the sun, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn are all in your sign! And with Mercury retrograde in your sign, this is an especially important time to rethink your relationships, your career, and what is really important to you. You will want to redefine your schedule and the priorities that you want to emphasize. This is all taking place during your birthday month, when you naturally look back on what you have accomplished. You are more introspective throughout the entire month. As Mercury goes direct on the 28th, you will be ready to make some decisions about where you are headed in the future. You will want more control and fewer demands on your time. All your choices and decisions will be under review—from your relationships and friendships to your career choices and personal hopes and dreams. Take time to give yourself all the space you need this month!

space for your home office. By the end of the month you are beginning to shift your focus to your relationships, so it's a good time to renew those bonds, both personal and business. Get away from your obligations and rediscover your muse! You are back on track after the 28th.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

This is a more playful and creative month for you. Even with Mercury retrograde, you will find yourself getting back to the things you used to do just for fun. If you have children, this is an excellent time to be with them. They seem to be growing fast and becoming more mature each day. You are also feeling the restraints of debt this month. You have lots of motivation to find a way to free yourself from this burden. With your work, you are distracted from your normal obligations and drawn to the projects that you enjoy. You can be productive this month, but you should focus on what you *want* to do instead of what you *should* do! Work routines become more important at the end of the month.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

Despite the Mercury retrograde this month, you are super-busy—and that is likely to continue through the summer.

Throughout 2021, you'll find new opportunities opening up around your career and your long-term life goals. For some, this is the time to start your own business. For others, this can be a time when you are winding down and focusing on the projects you like, instead of having to run the whole show. This is also a time of change within your family hierarchy. Family members are getting older, and the power base is being shifted. It's likely that they are looking to you to take on a more dominant role in the family. This can also be a time when you are remodeling or looking for alternate places to live. And finally, your partnership needs some attention. This is a great month to get away from the usual routine and reconnect. If you are single, this is a good time to look but not a good time to make a choice. Conditions improve by the 28th.

SAGITTARIUS

(Nov.22-Dec.21)

Communication is the primary topic for you this month. With Mercury retrograde influencing that area of your life, this is an exceptional time to connect with old friends from childhood, update your skill set, and get your day-to-day life more organized. You are also in an introspective time, and you may want to choose your

company carefully so you can have more time to yourself. There could be problems at work with your computer or your Internet connection. You'll also notice that you need to upgrade your electronics, but it's best to wait until after the 28th before you do that. This continues to be an excellent time to start or restart your health and exercise programs. Home and family take over the spotlight by the end of the month!

CAPRICORN

(Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

The Sea Goats are feeling some signs of relief, even with Mercury retrograde. For the past year, you have had three big planets pressing down on you and forcing change, regardless of whether you were ready for that. Now this intensity has lessened, and you are working on getting back to "normal" (whatever that is). You are examining your finances and resources closely this month, and you may feel the need to put yourself on a budget. But there are also new options opening up with your job and your finances. You will be very cautious about your decisions, and it may seem like you are dragging your feet. By midmonth, you are starting to talk about your plans. This is a good month to look into how social media can help you and your business prospects.

Relationships are generally more peaceful, since the problems you had in the past should be cleared up. You will need more time to yourself this month!

PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20)

This is the month before your birthday, which is a time of rest, retreat, and reflection. Your psychic sensitivities are turned up, and you will need more time for yourself. You'll also need to be more careful about who you spend your spare time with. You are examining your spiritual views, looking for clarity and stepping beyond the beliefs you once held. This is an excellent month to get away from your obligations and visit a lake, a beach, or some quiet places where nature flourishes. You are direct and to-the-point in your communications this month. You may have a hard time dealing with boring people, or those who demand too much of your time. By the end of the month, you are beginning to come back to the village, but you are still guarded about who you engage with. You are interested in finding like-minded people. Your creative energies are strong at the end of the month, and that carries through into March.

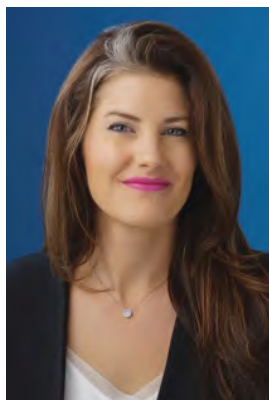


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Diva of the Dance Floor

Drag is just the beginning for **Lexús Chandelíér**.

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



Just like an ABBA song, Lexús Chandelíér is the twirling, whirling queen who can dance, jive, and have the time of her life keeping the party pumping.

When this showgirl finishes slaying the dance floor, whipping her hair back and forth, and landing in a perfect split, she uses one simple motto to evaluate her performance: Wigs over heels. In other words, as long as the feet land on the floor and the perfectly styled wig stays on top, everything is good to go. Get to know more about why Lexús is one performer to keep an eye on.

Pronouns?

She/her/hers.

Hometown?

Born in Huntsville and grew up in Beaumont.

Drag Birthday?

March 23, 2015.

Describe your drag persona.

A dancing queen, but with multiple talents in the performing arts such as acting, comedy, and creativity.

Favorite artists to perform?

Beyoncé and Ciara.

Who are your drag idols?

The beautiful Tommie Ross, Jazell Barbie Royale, and Naomi Smalls.

What does Black History Month mean to you?

Black History Month reminds me about all those who sacrificed their lives and freedoms for me to be able to speak freely. [Because of them, I can] respond in confidence that I am my own person and that, ultimately, I'm free.

Who are your Black History Month heroes?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the famous Rosa Parks. I love her.

Any Valentine's Day plans?

Performing at Hamburger Mary's and enjoying a night out on a beautiful, planned date with my boyfriend.

How do you spend your free time?

I definitely spend my free time singing and spoiling my boyfriend.



What's something that people would be surprised to know about you?

People would be surprised to know that I love singing.

What do your fans in the audience do that you appreciate?

I love that they smile during my performances. That makes my day.

Farthest distance you've traveled to perform?

Hawaii's Club Scarlet.

What have you learned from drag that you use in your day-to-day life?

I keep superglue and scissors everywhere I go. They're lifesavers.

Advice for up-and-coming performers?

Never feel like anyone owes you anything. Get out there, and don't stop. Closed mouths don't get fed.

What would you say to the world about the LGBTQ community?

I would say to the world that we just want to be able to love who we love without persecution, and to be treated equally.

When we're finished socially distancing, where can people see you perform?

They can see me perform at JR's Bar & Grill, Hamburger Mary's, Rumors Bar & Grill in Galveston, and The Corner Bar and Rooftop Grill in College Station.

Any final thoughts about Lexús Chandelíér, Houston's LGBTQ scene, and drag?

Everyone knows I'm a fun, outgoing person. Stay tuned to these next couple weeks, because I might have a surprise for my fans. Houston's drag scene is supportive of its queens, and is always changing. Drag is a way to be someone else sometimes—or maybe just a different version of yourself. But ultimately, it's a way to be free and happy in the midst of people who are like-minded. ▼



Follow Lexús on Facebook at Lexús Chandelíér, on Instagram @theonandonlylexus, and on Snapchat @Keepcalmitsjtj.

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