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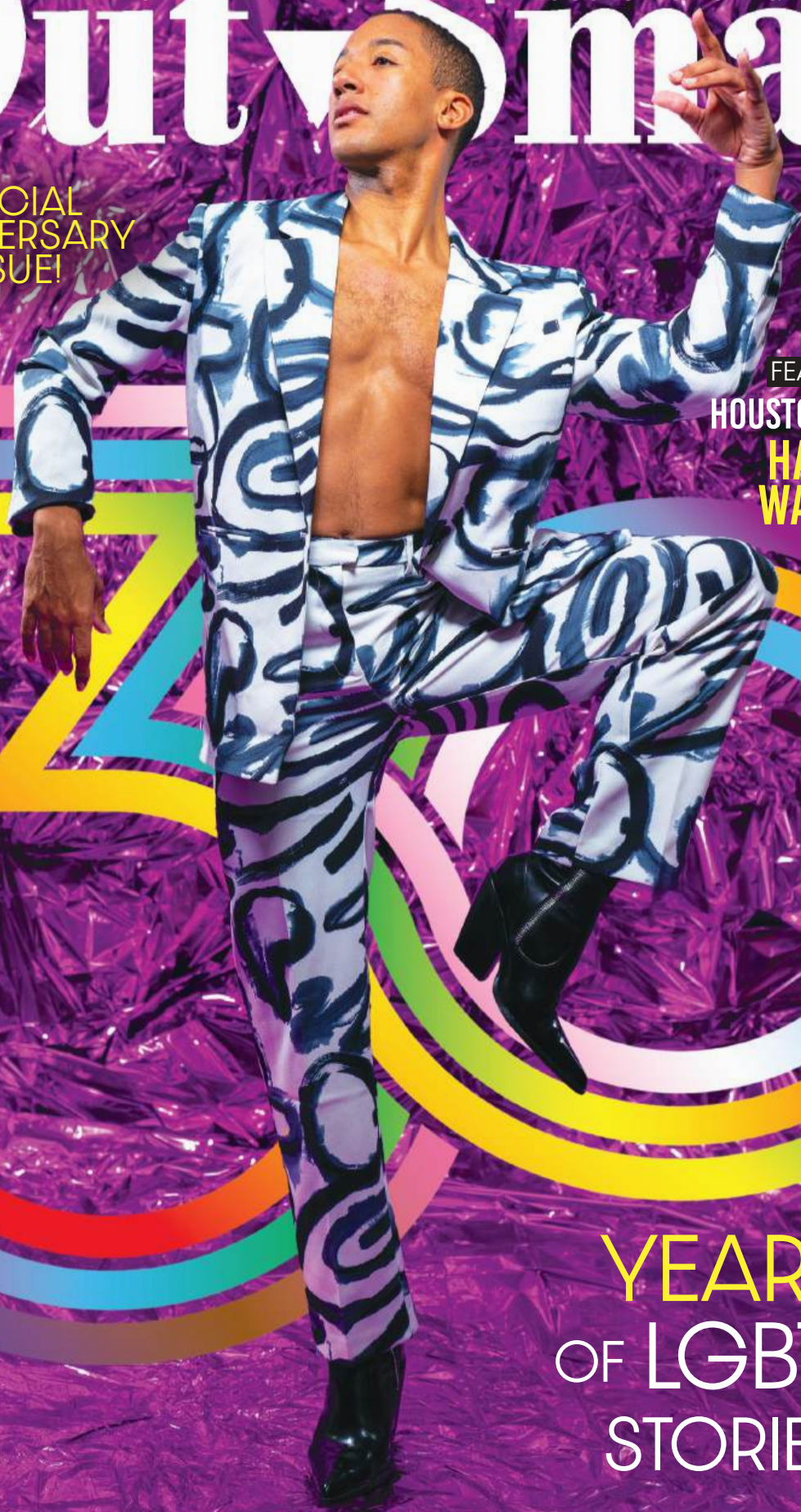
APRIL '23

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

SPECIAL
ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE!

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YEARS
OF LGBTQ
STORIES



THE NORMAL ANOMALY INITIATIVE PRESENTS



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44
**A 30-YEAR
RETROSPECTIVE**

A look at the stories that have inspired and challenged Houston's LGBTQ community

50 COVER STORY
THEN AND NOW

Local LGBTQ personalities update us on their lives since appearing on previous OutSmart covers

61
FRESH LOCAL SEAFOOD

Two local chefs are serving up tempting regional flavors

65
**LOCAL REAL-ESTATE
TRENDS**

Houston real-estate professionals respond to the changing market

80
DIALING UP DIVERSITY

Galveston Realtor Tom Schwenk supports a national industry diversity program

84
A STAR'S TURN

Billy Porter's nationwide solo tour comes to Houston May 13

86
**AUTHENTICITY
THROUGH ART**

Caleb de Casper will appear at the Legendary Art Car Ball

88
THE KIDD'S GOT IT

Rapper Kidd Kenn will perform at the Black Queer AF Music Festival

90
SHERLOCK REIMAGINED

Alley Theatre's latest Sherlock Holmes mystery promises a few new twists

114
WIGGING OUT

Estella Blow works the party with unforgettable style



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DEPARTMENTS

NEWS & COMMENT

18 NEWS

Trans-hate laws advance in Austin;
Local drag performers weigh in on anti-drag
legislation that threatens businesses

26 SMART HEALTH

28 MONEY SMART

33 COMMUNITY

Thomas Street Clinic relocates; AIDS Foundation
Houston's Jeffrey Campbell becomes CEO

41 OUT FOR CHANGE

Pasadena's gay City Council member Jonathan
Estrada; Judge Beau Miller's speech at this
year's LGBTQ+ Victory Fund Brunch (Pg. 42)

97 READ OUT

A photographer's new book highlights the
stories of queer youth in rural America

OUT & ABOUT

12 CALENDAR

16 SCENE OUT

100 WEDDING GUIDE

102 OUT THERE

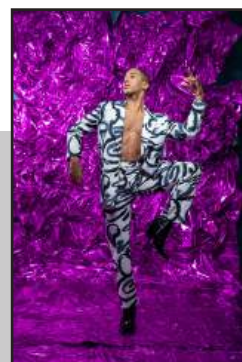
109 BAR GUIDE

112 SIGN OUT

ADVERTISERS INDEX

106 ADVERTISERS

108 CLASSIFIEDS MARKETPLACE



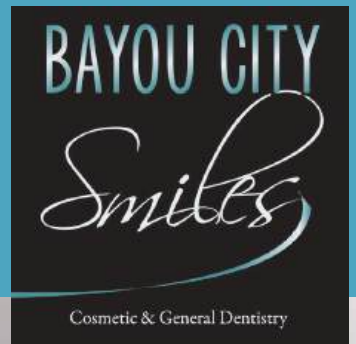
**ON the
COVER**

30 YEARS OF LGBTQ STORIES

Houston Ballet's Harper Watters
Photography by Frank Hernandez
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Publisher/Editor-in-Chief Greg Jeu

Creative Director Alex Rosa

Copy Editor Howard Maple

Contributing Writers

Olivia Flores Alvarez, Rich Arenschieldt, Bill Arning, Susan Bankston, Connor Behrens, Jenny Block, Sam Byrd, David Clarke, Dick Dace, Blase DiStefano, Andrew Edmonson, Ste7en Foster, Alys Garcia Carrera, Martin Giron, Lillian Hoang, DL Groover, Marene Gustin, Kim Hogstrom, James Hurst, Lisa Keen, Ryan M. Leach, Zachary McKenzie, David Odyssey, Joanna O'Leary, Lilly Roddy, Terri Schlichenmeyer, Gregg Shapiro, Janice Stensrude, Sheryl Taylor, Terrance Turner, Grace S. Yung

Photographers/Illustrators

Edgardo Aguilar, John-Paul Arreaga, Victor Contreras, Dalton DeHart, Yvonne Feece, Frank Hernandez, Ashkan Roayae, Alex Rosa

Operations Manager Michael Gurnas

Business Development Aryeh Gruber

Sales and Marketing Dept.

Local Advertising Reps 713.520.7237

Tom Fricke, Aryeh Gruber, Joanna Jackson, Chris Lew, Gene Mikulenko

National Advertising Representative

Rivendell Media - 212.242.6863

OutSmart Media Company

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Since the first print issue of OUTSMART magazine hit the stands in 1994, much has changed for Houston's LGBTQ community. With this issue, we celebrate being 30, flirty, and thriving as we look back at everything that's happened since our 25th birthday.

In this issue, Zach McKenzie looks back at our past five years of reporting—from Pride Houston's 40th anniversary in June 2017 to mourning the death of trans activist and journalist Monica Roberts to, just last month, ringing in The Diana Foundation's 70th year and spotlighting Pearl Bar owner Julie Mabry. We are grateful that OUTSMART's family of readers, advertisers, and contributors continues to support our efforts in bringing you these stories.

We also check in with four local personalities who have appeared on previous OUTSMART covers—including this month's cover star, Harper Watters. Thanks to local photographer Frank Hernandez and OUTSMART's talented creative director, Alex Rosa, for collaborating on our second cover featuring Houston Ballet's dynamic and gifted first soloist.

Elsewhere in this issue, we chat with Jonathan Estrada, the gay Pasadena City Council member who is seeking a second term. He talks about the progress he's made in his majority-Hispanic district while noting that Pasadena is just beginning to elect officials who are more representative of the city's diversity.

As the housing market shifts this year, we check in with real-estate professionals across Houston who answer the questions on many of our readers' minds: Is it time to buy, sell, remodel, or just wait?

Finally, we join the community in offering a hearty congratulations to Harris County Judge Beau Miller, who recently accepted the Mayor Parker Leadership Award at the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund's recent awards event. As a public official and co-chair of the Houston Bar Association's LGBTQ+ Committee, Miller has continually given back to and advocated for Houston's queer community. Don't miss his inspiring acceptance speech on page 42 that details his 2015 ordeal with his father, a conservative Texas legislator who filed a House bill in Austin that would have abolished local protections for LGBTQ citizens, including his own son.

And speaking of the legislative battles in Austin that demand our attention, this month's OUTSMART news section features a look at the anti-trans and anti-drag show legislation that is currently being debated. It's encouraging to see so many protesters in Austin who have swarmed the State Capitol to advocate for equality.

The inspiring words of Judge Beau Miller should be resonating with our local LGBTQ community this month as we continue to move forward in the face of adversity: "You have to answer the call. Step up, no matter how scary it seems. We have to act to make our lives better. And acting requires more than just showing up."



Greg Jeu
Publisher



Harper Watters



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QUEER THINGS to DO

For a weekly roundup of LGBTQ happenings, visit **OutSmart-Magazine.com**



DALTON DEHART

COMMUNITY

April 9

BUNNIES ON THE BAYOU

Hop into Easter weekend with Bunnies on the Bayou, a nonprofit organization working to promote human-rights awareness and improve the quality of life for Houston's LGBTQ community.

Their fundraising calendar culminates in a downtown outdoor festival on Easter Sunday at Sesquicentennial Park, featuring bars throughout the festival grounds and a lineup of entertainers who are ready to impress.

Featuring DJ Drew G of Dirty Pop, Lexus Chandelier, Miss Toto, DJ Corey Craig, and DJ Aracely Manterola, Bunnies on the Bayou brings some of the best and brightest DJs together to celebrate Space City's queer community.

Tickets are available for purchase online in advance, with early-bird tickets discounted and an array of VIP tickets available. tinyurl.com/2p8td3yp



ART

April 15

ART CAR PARADE

The Orange Show's Art Car Parade returns for its 36th year with Bun B as grand marshal, culminating its weeklong lineup of artsy events April 6–16. The parade will make its way through the streets of Houston, with prime viewing areas near City Hall. tinyurl.com/28nwadjz



JOAN MARCUS

STAGE

April 4–16

LEGALLY BLONDE

Whether they're "gay or European," audiences are sure to love this Theatre Under the Stars production of Broadway's ultimate tribute to girl power. Enjoy a post-show reception at Out@TUTS April 13. tinyurl.com/3wwtrtur

COMMUNITY

Through April 23

WOMAN, THE SPIRIT OF THE UNIVERSE

The Houston Holocaust Museum presents an installation of bronze collars inspired by 23 women's-rights activists from the late 1600s to the present, including Governor Ann Richards and Sojourner Truth.

tinyurl.com/2mhtd3sx

ART

April 14-15

FEMINIST VISUAL CULTURES

Rice University's art history department and its Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality partner to host a conference asking, "Where are our women artists?" A wide range of time periods and cultures will be explored.

tinyurl.com/yphn6bh8

NIGHTLIFE

April 7-9

REVELRY WEEKEND

Celebrate Easter weekend with five parties at five venues and nine DJs, culminating in the Bunnies on the Bayou after-party.

tinyurl.com/bdh3r8k6

COMMUNITY

April 7

FIRST-FRIDAY POETRY

Houston's oldest poetry reading series relaunches post-COVID at InPrint House. The re-inaugural reading features poet-activist Marlon Lizama, author of *My Spanglish Hip Hop Story*.

tinyurl.com/4tzwtk2b

NIGHTLIFE

April 8

FURBALL HOUSTON

Visit KIKI'S to celebrate Bunnies on the Bayou weekend with hot dancers, hot men, and more. Leather gear is encouraged but not mandatory, and a clothes-check is available.

tinyurl.com/4rantv3y



COMMUNITY

April 13

BIG GAY MOVIE NIGHT

Sir Rat Leather and Slut Monkey's April movie night will feature *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Come out to enjoy the show and connect with other LGBTQ community members.

tinyurl.com/4xsv6mj4



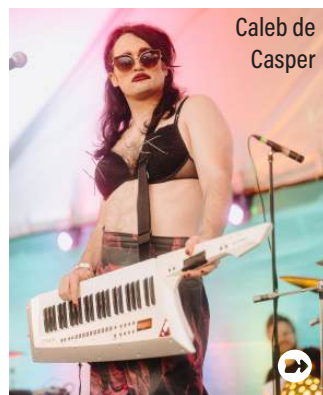
STAGE

April 14

BALLET FOLKLÓRICO LOS ANGELITOS

Miller Outdoor Theatre presents an evening of dance from the diverse regions of Mexico. The Folklórico troupe will enliven the stage with music, dance, and vibrant costumes.

tinyurl.com/ft7x9eu



Caleb de Casper

ART

April 14

ART CAR BALL

The Orange Show's ball features a slate of artists (including LGBTQ musicians Boyfriend and Caleb de Casper) for a night of live music, interactive and performance art, food and drinks, and fire-breathing art cars.

tinyurl.com/mpk8n3z9

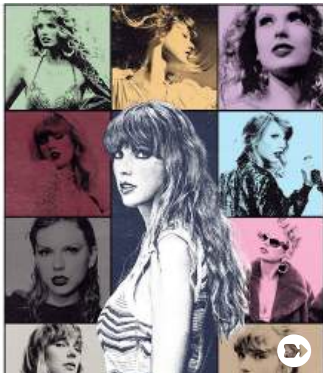
COMMUNITY

April 15

NO SAVIORS, NO PRISONS

UH Q+mmunity is hosting four panelists with experience in the sex trades who will challenge the community to rethink traditional social-work practices. There will also be tabling from local organizations and free food.

tinyurl.com/5n7p8nmX



STAGE

April 21-23

ERAS TOUR

Taylor Swift's Eras Tour, with an opening act by bisexual musician beabadoobee, has been the hot topic in congressional hearings and on social media.

tinyurl.com/268nhdcp

COMMUNITY

April 28

TRANS MEN OF COLOR SOCIAL

The Montrose Center hosts Save Our Sons and Brothers, a social for trans men of color in Houston to connect with each other through casual discussion and games.

tinyurl.com/29t82z9w

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QUEER THINGS to DO

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COMMUNITY

May 6

BLACK QUEER AF MUSIC FESTIVAL

The Black Queer AF Music Festival returns to Houston for a second year that promises to be bigger and better than ever. In addition to a full schedule of music and entertainment, highlights include immersive games and a launch celebration for 14 businesses that are part of the Project Liberate program. This festival has been created and produced with Houston's Black LGBTQ community in mind. tinyurl.com/32bfm4k7



COMMUNITY

May 29

GAY 10K

No matter your experience level, join the Gay 10K for a 5K/10K walk-or-run event to raise money for Legacy Community Health. tinyurl.com/3hajvt33

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STAGE

May 24-June 5

DIVERGENCE

The Houston Ballet presents a trio of performances: *Angular Momentum*, which pays homage to Space City architecture; and *Divergence*, returning to the stage as a complete work for the first time since 2012. A new work by choreographer Justin Peck, the mind behind Golden Globe winner *West Side Story*, will also make its premiere. For a reception before the show and during intermission, join OUTSMART June 6 for Out at the Ballet. tinyurl.com/bdznf9f3

STAGE

May 12-June 4

TORERA

Developed as part of the Alley's new-plays festival, *Torera* follows Elena Ramírez as she enters the male-dominated world of bullfighting. When she discovers she's up to beat even the most accomplished toreros, she has to make a decision between accepting society's limits or breaking boundaries. tinyurl.com/33z793zh

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Photos by Dalton DeHart

ALLEY THEATRE

Congratulations to OutSmart Magazine on your 30th anniversary. A standing ovation on this outstanding accomplishment!

Alley Theatre celebrates and thanks you for supporting our LGBTQ theatre event, ActOUT.

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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



On March 4, 2023, the Heights Crawfish Festival was held at Resurrection MCC. Pictured are **Aaron Rublein, Kedric Brown, Ernest Alejandro Ramirez, Jennifer Hicks, Suzzette Cotto, Reinel Solano, and Eduardo Sagrera.**



Victory Fund held a reception for Tammy Baldwin at the home of Richard Holt and Mark McMasters on March 4, 2023. Pictured are former **Mayor Annise Parker, US Representative Tammy Baldwin, and Richard Holt.**



Nick Hellyar, candidate for Houston City Council At Large Position 1, held a reception on March 5, 2023. Pictured are **former Houston CM Mike Laster, CM Robert Gallegos, former CM Sue Lovell, CM candidate Nick Hellyar, and CM Council candidate Mario Castillo.**



On March 11, 2023, international drag chanteuse Varla Jean Merman presented *Ready to Blow* at MATCH. Pictured are **Gerald Goode, Varla Jean Merman, Brian Johnson (with Jasper), and Brian Walker.**



The MSLA Silver Balls and Fireballs held a fundraiser at George Country Sports Bar on March 11, 2023. Pictured are members of the two teams.



On March 14, 2023, a book signing and discussion of *Before Lawrence v. Texas: The Making of a Queer Social Movement* was held with author Wesley G. Phelps. Pictured are **Shaun Nelson, Dr. Blake Ellis, Dr. Wesley Phelps, Devon Phelps, and Dr. John Boles.**



The Greater Houston LGBTQ Chamber's 3rd Thursday Breakfast at Harold's on March 16, 2023, featured Olivia Lee, director of boards and commissions for the City of Houston; and Maria Montes, Harris County's director of boards and commissions. Pictured are **Alli Jarrett, Maria Montes, Tammi Wallace, and Olivia Lee.**



On March 16, 2023, ActOUT at the Alley Theatre for Cowboy Bob was held. Pictured are **Alvin Weingartner, Kiki Neumann, Susan Rice, Tina Berry, Kelly Dempsey, Lauren Pellitier, and Michael Shanks.**



OUT at the Ballet for *Summer and Smoke* was held at the Wortham Center on March 17, 2023. Pictured are **Dennis Nance, Elizabeth Sosa Bailey, AJ Morton, Gayle Collins, Michael Collins, Dee Kreft, JD Bartel, Jeff Hoffman, James Hays, and James Harris.**



On March 25, 2023, the Miss LSAV Pageant was held at South Beach. Pictured are **Shenita Q. Pon (the new Miss LSAV 2023) and Viva Vidalia (first runner-up).**



The Krewe of Olympus held its membership meeting on March 25, 2023, and an appreciation party the following day. Pictured are Krewe leaders **Rex Marzke, Clint Harwell, Andy Eversole, David Wallace, Debbie Helweg, and David Gandy.**



On March 26, 2023, Bunnies on the Bayou held its Bonnet and Basket Bash at KIKI. Pictured are present and past Bunnies hosts.

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Advocates for LGBTQ rights rally in the Texas Capitol Extension against HB 1686. (Photo by Stephen Miranda)

Trans Hate Gains Steam in Both Austin and DC

HB 1686 advances as “trans-shooter” rhetoric increases.

By MARENE GUSTIN



On Monday, March 27, HB 1686, a bill banning doctors from prescribing puberty blockers and hormone medications, and performing surgeries to treat minors diagnosed with gender dysphoria, had its first committee hearing in Austin. The bill would strip any doctor who provides such care of their medical license, and prohibit insurers from covering the costs of prescribing puberty blockers and hormone therapies.

Republicans say they have the votes to pass it through the 150-member house, as a majority of members have signed on as co-authors. The Senate has already passed SB 14, a similar ver-

sion of the bill. During the March 16 hearing on SB 14, Houston GOP activist Steven Hotze went on an anti-trans tirade, calling doctors who provide this type of health care “pedophiles.”

HB 1686 is one of a record number of anti-LGBTQ bills filed in the 88th Legislative Session. It has support from Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, although Gov. Greg Abbott has not endorsed it yet. In a March 27 “Fight for Our Lives” rally, 2,519 people signed up to speak against the bill, but over 400 were not allowed to speak at the state Public Health Committee meeting in Austin, which lasted around 11 hours.

“We know our kids deserve every opportunity to not only live as themselves, but to

thrive,” Landon Richie, with the Transgender Education Network of Texas (TENT), said at the rally, which was covered by KVUE-TV in Austin. “No matter what happens here today, at this session, or any future sessions to come, we will continue to care for each other. We will make sure transgender youth get the chance to be transgender adults.”

The American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Psychiatric Association consider transition care to be medically necessary. The Texas Medical Association has previously opposed attempts to →

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(Photo by Austin Davis Ruiz)

restrict or criminalize gender-affirming care.

Rep. Ann Johnson of Houston, one of three openly gay Democrats sitting on the House Public Health Committee (along with Jolanda Jones of Houston and Venton C. Jones of Dallas) invoked her own personal story to fight HB 1686.

"You may not remember the moment you found out you were straight. I remember the moment I knew I was gay, and it's because society told me there was something wrong about me," Johnson said, pushing back against the argument that there's an overwhelming reliance on youths' self-perception when doctors prescribe gender-affirming care. "I hope that this state will find a way to make decisions that are compassionate and protective of all Texas children."

Sadly, the bill's hearing came on the same day that a 28-year-old shooter, who identified as transgender, killed six people at a Christian school in Nashville, including three children under 9 years of age.

Georgia U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene immediately took to Twitter to write: "How much hormones like testosterone and medications for mental illness was the transgender Nashville school shooter taking? Everyone can stop blaming guns now." There was immediate backlash for the tweet from Democrats on the Hill. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) called the comments "disgusting," and Twitter moved to restrict Greene's account.

Trans-rights advocates, along with a majority of the medical profession, claim prescribing puberty blockers and hormone therapies are necessary for the mental health of trans youth. A 2015 report by the National Center for Transgender Equality found that 40 percent of the roughly 27,000 transgender people surveyed had attempted suicide—almost nine times the average rate in the country.

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Anti-Drag Show Legislation Threatens Local Businesses

Houston drag performers weigh in on the legislative hate and hypocrisy.

By SAM BYRD

Things are heating up in Texas, and it's not just the weather. Senate Bill 12 defines drag as a "sexually oriented performance" and threatens venues hosting all-ages drag performances with civil fines up to \$10,000, and individual performers with criminal misdemeanor charges. Senate Bill 1601 revokes state funding for any municipal library that hosts an all-ages drag story time.

These are only two of the 76 proposed bills by Texas legislators, and several other states have already passed laws or are trying to enact similar ones. The majority of them carry an undertone of demonizing LGBTQ spaces, and the language is vague enough to be interpreted in myriad ways.

If these bills do pass in Texas, they would likely have a far-reaching effect on Montrose businesses as well as their drag performers and patrons.

"The first impact that would be felt would be on the ability of the venue to generate profit. Being classified as a sexually oriented business requires specialty insurance with much higher premiums. Not to mention, any venue that is within a certain distance of a school or church would be shut down immediately, and reopening would require more resources than many queer and queer-friendly spaces can spare," explains drag king Ian Syder-Blake.

While many venues would try their best to fight for the entertainers who bring in patrons, it's not realistic to believe that the typical club could spend the time and money that a legal

fight would require.

"In the end, it would mean the destruction of countless small businesses, leaving our community with nowhere to feel safe and millions of dollars in City tax revenues lost. I believe the impact will be much farther-reaching than these legislators have considered," Syder-Blake adds.

Keep in mind that the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission already enforces decency and obscenity laws that bars and clubs must follow. Further, most people in favor of the odious bills are also members of the "limited government" party. The hypocrisy is breathtaking.

Drag performer Lana Blake shared



Ian Syder-Blake



Lana Blake



Marcus Pontello



Violet S'Arbleu

her thoughts on the situation, saying “The only thing I have to say about legislatures weighing in on drag performances is that if you don’t want to see a drag show, then don’t go to that establishment. But don’t tell others that they can’t go, as well. It’s that simple. The new legislation being proposed is exceptionally frightening because of the wording. It makes my mere existence illegal. If I go to the grocery store and there are children there while I’m wearing women’s clothing, I could be arrested.”

Blake’s comment underscores how the bills’ vague language also endangers transgender people. “If [you can be arrested] simply for wearing makeup or clothing contrary to your assigned birth gender [when you are] outside or buying groceries, the entire trans community is at risk,” notes drag performer Violet S’Arbleu. “This is a witch hunt. More cisgendered gay people should *really* be speaking up about this and helping to protect our trans community. Famously, trans people were at the forefront of the Stonewall Riots, which is what led to our Pride celebrations today. Trans people should be our idols, not our stepchildren.”

It’s also hard to explain why drag is suddenly such a problem, considering the number of famous straight actors who have appeared in drag for decades: Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze, John Leguizamo, Dustin Hoffman, Jared Leto, Barbra Streisand, Milton Berle, Flip Wilson, Tyler Perry, Shawn and Marlon Wayans, Cuba Gooding Jr., Martin Lawrence, Tony Curtis, Julie Andrews, Felicity Huffman, Hugo Weaving, and Robin Williams. And don’t forget Bugs Bunny.

It wasn’t until LGBTQ culture became more socially acceptable and visible that the fake outrage over drag performances began to take shape. Despite the fact that most Americans are in favor of marriage equality and LGBTQ social acceptance, legislators are now using the

queer community as a political football, with drag performers serving as the most visible lightning rod.

“The facts don’t support anything being claimed about us—just the opposite,” Syder-Blake emphasizes. “These conservatives call us groomers, but they are by far the greater threat to children. They say we’re dangerous to society, when they have been the driving force behind [everything from] institutionalized racism to child abuse. We cannot continue fighting if we don’t use facts and evidence to show that [most] of what these people do is meant only to maintain their control.”

“We must absolutely draw a line [and defend] our gender expression. I am literally just trying to live my life, do my job, pay my bills, and be happy—yet, these politicians want to pander to the religious right and claim that we are horrible people, for some reason,” Ian Syder-Blake adds.

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—Ian Syder-Blake

S’Arbleu pokes holes in the logic that the bills are intended to protect children. “If minors sneak into an R-rated movie, they get kicked out of the theater; that theater is not sued or criminalized, and the child isn’t sent to jail. But [under the proposed laws], if parents bring their children to a drag show designed for children, the venue can lose its license,

the performers can be charged with crimes, and everyone involved in the show is open to lawsuits—all because the parents [have chosen] to teach their children about acceptance and freedom,” she says.

“If these bills were really about protecting kids from sexualized content, they would also be banning minors from Hooters. Suspiciously, I see nothing about that in any of the 76 bills currently working their way through the Texas Legislature.”

Local performer and artist Marcus Pontello is upset that the bills stem from a long history of oppression against people who are typically not straight. “The whole purpose of these bills is [part of] a larger agenda to keep society heteronormative. Bills like this won’t stop at a drag show. People will continue to assault any form of society that deviates from a heterosexual vision of the United States. So every aspect of [queer life] is at risk, not just drag performers. Transphobia is at the root of all of this interest in banning drag shows. It’s about the fear of boys not being boys and girls not being girls. If drag was about biological men performing masculine roles and biological females performing feminine roles, there would be absolutely no issue.”

The words of German pastor Martin Niemöller can hopefully serve as a rallying cry for those fighting against the proposed bills. Reflecting on the Nazis’ rise to power before World War II, he said the following:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

A full list of anti-trans and drag show bills under consideration can be found at equalitytexas.org/legislature/legislative-bill-tracker-2023.

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Dozens of community members and allies gathered at Ripcord to show their support for Transgender Day of Visibility. The event, organized by Montrose Angels and Eden Rose Torres, and sponsored by Somos Loud, featured several speakers who addressed the crowd about the importance of trans visibility and the challenges that trans individuals face.



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Are You Busier Than Ever?

Make a plan to slow down and get your life back.



“Is it just me, or does life feel busier than ever?”

Perhaps one of the most under-recognized yet pervasive consequences of the pandemic is that we have col-

lectively amped up our activity levels to a point that feels breakneck and chaotic. When looking around at our friendship groups, scrolling through social media, or examining our own schedules, there now seems to be a consistent theme: “I have so much—probably way too much—going on!”

It’s natural that we might feel this way. First, the demands of life really have increased. At work, we are so overscheduled with back-to-back meetings that we barely have any time for bathroom or coffee breaks.

And if you have been feeling like your email burden has increased, you might not be just imagining things. Studies show that the average office worker sends approximately 40 emails per day, and over 120 business-related emails are received. Some estimates suggest that we spend as many as 15 hours per week on

email alone.

Taking time for self-care during the day also seems like a distant and impossible task. Studies suggest that over 60 percent of American workers eat lunch at their desks. Alarmingly, an increasing number of workers have been shortening or canceling their vacations. One study found that personal time off (PTO) days reached an all-time low post-pandemic, and workers gave up around 169 million PTO days per year.

And outside of work, we aren’t necessarily doing any better with our overly scheduled personal lives. We have become constant multi-taskers, and our collective difficulty with sustaining attention and focus shows it. People are on their phones while driving, either talking or texting with friends. While we’re supposedly relaxing to watch television, we scroll through social media or play games on our phones.

Struggling with excessive screen time is a common complaint these days, and it has negative implications for not only our sleep quality but also for our activity levels and mood.

If you are burning the candle at both ends, the question is: When will you put out the fire?

Start Small

If your sense of burnout has only been increasing over the past several months, perhaps it’s time to try something new and shake things up a bit. But change can be hard, and sustaining those changes can be even more challenging. Rather than embarking on a complete revamp of your life, pick one goal and start there. The best goals are those that are consistent with our values—and realistic. Going to the gym seven days a week is a setup for potential failure and disappointment. Instead, think through a specific area where you might like to see a shift, and start there.

Perhaps you can take a look at your work schedule and build in a 15-minute block per day to do nothing. You can use the time however you like—as long as it is not work- or task-related. No email, no calling people back, no screens. Maybe

can take a walk indoors—or better yet, outdoors. Or perhaps you can practice a breathing exercise or listen to music. Whatever you choose, the point is to intentionally set aside time for yourself to slow down and recharge.

Detach from Your Phone

Experts estimate that the average screen time for adults increased 60 to 80 percent during the pandemic. They suggest spending 3 to 4 hours per day away from our screens, limiting time on social media to between 30 and 60 minutes, and stopping screen usage at least one hour before bedtime.

Using apps or setting alarms to limit phone use can be helpful—if you use them. Again, creating realistic goals is the best approach. Perhaps you can charge your phone overnight in another room, or log out of social media at a specified time each day. Store your phone out of sight while driving—greater than an arm's distance away. Ultimately, building in phone breaks can become just as much a part of your schedule as work-related activities.

Take a Break

The practice of taking time for yourself can begin during the work week and expand from there. You might begin by taking time for lunch each day, rather than eating at your desk or skipping lunch altogether to keep working. While you may not necessarily use a full hour, being deliberate about stepping away from your desk to have a snack or meal provides an important opportunity to reset. This simple practice can prepare you to step away from work and even plan a vacation for longer periods of time.

Be Present

Tell your friends and loved ones that you're making changes and you would like their support. Let people know that as you slow down, you hope to become more present in your activities with them. Make agreements to not use your phones while having lunch or dinner together. Make plans for a phone-free walk in the park.

While each of these changes may seem trivial on their own, their collective impact could create substantial gains, both personally and professionally, by helping you to step into your best version of yourself.

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. Dr. Shorter can be reached at dr.darylshorter@gmail.com.

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A Fresh Look at Bank Failures

It's wise to develop a plan to protect and diversify your assets.



The recent news about bank failures filling the airwaves might be making you wonder if the money you have in a savings and/or checking account—as well as in various

other bank products—is safe.

The federal takeovers of Silicon Valley Bank, Signature Bank, and others remind us that even institutions like banks might not always be iron-clad in terms of safety in an uncertain financial world.

The good news is that the typical checking- or savings-account balances that most people keep at a bank are protected through FDIC insurance if the bank fails or files for bankruptcy. But even so, it is important that you know exactly what is and isn't protected.

How FDIC Insurance Works

FDIC deposit insurance can protect bank customers in the event that an FDIC-insured depository institution fails. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) is an independent federal-government agency that insures deposits in commercial banks and thrifts. Federal deposit insurance is mandatory for all federally chartered banks and savings institutions.

As the customer of a bank, you do not need to actually purchase FDIC insurance coverage. That protection is automatic for any deposit account that is opened at an FDIC-insured banking institution.

There are different types of bank accounts that are insured by the FDIC. These include checking accounts, savings accounts, Money Market Deposit Accounts (MMDAs), and Certificates of Deposit (CDs).

The amount of FDIC insurance coverage that you are entitled to depends on your account's ownership category. This refers to the type of products you have your money in at a bank. For instance, deposits are insured up to at least \$250,000 per depositor, per FDIC-insured bank, per ownership (or account) category.

So as an example, if you have a \$200,000



CD and another \$25,000 in a checking account at a particular bank, the total (\$225,000) would be insured by the FDIC. Should that bank fail, the FDIC would pay you that amount of insurance coverage. In the past, the insurance coverage from the FDIC has been paid within just a few days after the bank has closed.

Your FDIC coverage may be paid out to you in various ways. These can include, but are not limited to:

- Providing you with a new account at another FDIC-insured bank in an amount that is equal to your insured balance at the failed banking institution, or
- Issuing you a check for the insured balance of your account(s) at the bank(s) that have failed.
- Further, if you have money deposited at other FDIC-insured banks, these funds may also be insured up to the \$250,000 limit if those banks fail, as well.

Bank Reserve Requirements

A bank's reserve requirement refers to the amount of money that the bank must keep on hand, as a percentage of its total deposits. This ensures that the bank has enough funds to meet its depositors' demands, while at the same time providing loans to customers and allowing the Federal Reserve (The Fed) to manage the money supply effectively. So, reserves can, in some ways, be considered like "collateral."

As an example, regional banks operate within a particular community or region of the country. These are typically smaller than national banks, and because of that, regional banking institutions usually have lower reserve requirements.

Alternatively, because national banks may operate across the country—or even internationally—they are generally exposed to more risk. Therefore, their reserve requirements are typically higher than those of local or regional banks. →

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Another key factor in banking is “leverage.” This refers to the use of borrowed funds to invest in assets with the goal of increasing profits. However, while using leverage can certainly help to increase a bank’s profits, using too much leverage can also expose that institution to more risk.

Here again, because national banks are usually larger and more spread out than smaller regional banks, they are subject to more stringent regulatory oversight and have higher capital requirements in order to ensure that they can absorb any potential losses that may occur.

Keeping Your Savings Protected

If your bank-account balances exceed the limits of FDIC insurance coverage, you should consider taking steps to protect those excess funds from a bank failure. One solution could be to diversify some of your money into other investments. There are strategies that offer both diversification and protection, and a qualified financial professional can help you develop a strategy that makes sense for you.

Understanding how and where FDIC insurance works is an essential component of your financial strategy. So is having a financial plan in place that can help you weather various economic uncertainties. If you do not have a specific plan in place for your financial goals, or if you have not updated your plan, it is a good idea to work with a financial-planning professional on both your short-term and long-term goals and challenges.

An experienced professional can help you with your financial goals and guide you on a path toward achieving them. Additionally, working with a financial specialist who is also well-versed in LGBTQ community issues can help you keep your plan updated as laws and regulations change over time.

Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ 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. Visit letsmakeaplan.org or midtownfg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm through LPL Financial, a Registered Investment Advisor. Member FINRA/SIPC. For more information, visit: www.midtownfg.com

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Thomas Street Clinic Relocates

HIV/AIDS care will now be offered at the renovated
Quentin Mease Health Center in Third Ward.

By KIM HOGSTROM

Since 1989, the Thomas Street Health Center has provided a beacon of hope for many thousands of Houstonians facing HIV/AIDS. The Center, located at 2015 Thomas Street on Houston's north side, was the first freestanding AIDS-treatment clinic in the US. It is operated by the Harris Health System and enjoys a tremendous reputation for treating the often-stigmatized populations suffering from the disease.

News that the beloved clinic is moving to a better facility across town was bittersweet for many Thomas Street supporters and patients. Early next month, the Quentin Mease Health Center, located at 3601 N. MacGregor Way, will serve Thomas Street patients after a massive renovation. The new multi-floor clinic allows Harris Health to provide more services to more people, all under one roof.

The stately building currently housing the Thomas Street Center was built as The Southern Pacific Railroad's Sunset Hospital in 1910, and would have required substantial upgrades to continue in operation. Its historic-landmark designation protects it from the wrecking ball, but also limits the options for necessary additions. Operating the second-largest HIV clinic in the country and serving an estimated 5,700 patients in such a limited facility presented Harris Health with a significant challenge.

"We have taken this beautiful old building as far as it would go. If we add one more office to Thomas Street, it would have to be in an elevator," states Michael Ruggerio, Harris Health's HIV Project Manager and a 15-year employee at the Center. (Harris County Commissioner Adrian Garcia has not yet announced how the county-owned building will be adapted to serve his constituents in Precinct 2.)

Thomas Street holds a special place in the hearts of many in Houston's LGBTQ community. When HIV/AIDS first appeared in the US, it was largely limited to gay and bisexual men. Thomas Street was on the front lines fighting against the epidemic in those dark days.

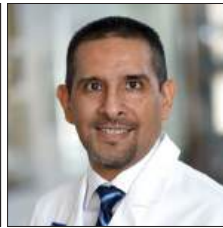
As a young man in 1993, Ruggerio started working with AIDS patients in Houston prior to holding a post in Washington D.C. back before effective treatments existed. But by the time he



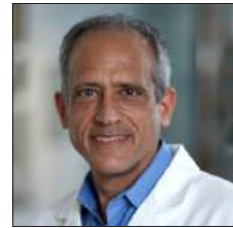
The clinic's original 1910 building on Thomas Street.



Michael Ruggerio



Dr. Jose Serpa-Alvarez



Dr. Thomas Giordano



Dawn Jenkins

landed a position at Thomas Street, HIV medications were starting to drastically reduce the number of AIDS-related deaths. But by the time he landed a position at Thomas Street, HIV medications were starting to drastically reduce the number of AIDS-related deaths.

"When I started at Thomas Street, I began to see people who really got better! That was the first time hope entered the picture for me. A couple years after I got to Thomas Street, a father literally carried his son into the Center and I thought, 'Oh, he will not do well.' Not only did he get better, he became a volunteer and then joined our team. I rely on him regularly now, and he's never missed a day of work!" Ruggerio remarks with joy.

"It's the people who work at Thomas Street that make the difference," he continues. "We have people on staff who have been here 20-plus years, and even since the beginning! This is really a team, and I feel so fortunate to be a part of it." Over the years, Thomas Street has gained national and international attention for its cutting-edge services, excellence in treatment, and expertise in HIV/AIDS care.

These factors, combined with the new therapies available today, allow thousands of people in Harris County to "manage" the illness rather than die from it.

"There's so much life after a diagnosis now. Our goal is to work our way out of business," says Dawn Jenkins, Harris Health System's Director of Ambulatory Care and HIV/AIDS Services at Thomas Street.

"We have come such a long way. We have phenomenal doctors here working on research and advancing our ability to treat HIV. Thomas Street and its team of health care professionals are among the best in the nation," Jenkins adds with a smile.

For those who ask why so many public resources are devoted to HIV/AIDS treatment, it is easy to forget that HIV is still a contagious virus that results in death when left untreated. If Thomas Street had relinquished its mission of treating infected people and preventing new infections, the disease could once again rage like wildfire through the community. →

Even with all of the resources aimed at prevention and treatment, Harris County is seeing an alarming spike in HIV infections in young adults ages 18 to 24. As HIV treatment becomes more available and more effective, today's youth are taking the threat less seriously, so the work of public-health professionals is by no means finished.

Dr. Jose Serpa-Alvarez is an infectious-diseases specialist with Baylor College of Medicine and the newest medical director of HIV services at Thomas Street Health Center. This experienced doctor has been working in the HIV/AIDS arena for 18 years in various capacities, and has witnessed many changes over time.

"In the last two decades, things have transformed," Serpa-Alvarez explains in his gentle manner. "Our patients are living longer now, so we are seeing the same complications we see in the aging population as a whole. That's great! For those of us who have been doing this for a while, we are seeing people live 'normal' lives."

With that kind of success at Thomas Street, he is even more excited about the clinic's move next month. "The new

facility is state-of-the-art, and one of the most modern in the country. Everything is brand-new, and all of the care providers at Thomas Street—without exception—will be going there, too. So we will deliver that same quality of care with better tools!" Serpa-Alvarez says.

Dr. Thomas Giordano, who served as Medical Director of HIV Services at Thomas Street for 17 years prior to Dr. Serpa-Alvarez, played a leading role in developing the clinic's outstanding reputation. In 2021 he was appointed as the Chief of Infectious Diseases at Baylor College of Medicine and received a grant to develop a center for AIDS research, so he turned over the reins to Dr. Serpa-Alvarez.

But Dr. Giordano considers himself a "Thomas Street lifer" and will continue seeing patients at the new facility. "We still see people who come in really sick with AIDS, people who are near death. Thanks to new treatments and great care, we see them get better within months or even weeks. It is very, very rewarding," he adds.

"A lot of credit goes to the exceptional care our patients get at Thomas Street. The staff is remarkable, but it was not always like that. There have always been people who were deeply committed, but there were also those who just couldn't make it elsewhere in the

system. Over time, that changed. The people who are there now are there because they want to be. It is not just a job for them, it's a mission," Giordano notes.

"And Thomas Street offers an opportunity to treat people who have nowhere else to turn. It is one thing to care for people who have resources and advocates, but our patients are marginalized in numerous ways. And we help them! That's why I love Thomas Street," he concludes. "It is such a wonderful, amazing place."

The newly renovated Quentin Mease Hospital in Third Ward, will now be Quentin Mease Health Center and will house several specialty clinics, including HIV Services which will occupy the largest portion of the six-floor facility.

To honor its legacy and history, the services will be named Thomas Street at Quentin Mease. "With retaining our name," states Ruggerio, "we are celebrating our past while embracing our future."

Those who are mourning the loss of the old Thomas Street space can be reminded that it's the people that give a building its life, and every one of them at Thomas Street is making the move to better serve those in need.

➔ For more on the Thomas Street Health Center, visit nextlevelharrishealth.org/thomas-street.

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Faithful Leadership

**W. Jeffrey Campbell becomes
AIDS Foundation Houston's first Black CEO.**

By ZACH MCKENZIE



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA FOR OUTSMART

After more than 40 years of serving the Greater Houston population, AIDS Foundation Houston (AFH) has welcomed their first Black chief executive officer. W. Jeffrey Campbell, the charismatic leader with an ambitious vision of eradicating the HIV epidemic in Houston, understands the importance of leading strong teams, covering all bases when it comes to prevention and health care, and engaging with communities that are often untapped in the HIV/AIDS conversation.

"Prior to coming to AFH, I worked at the City of Houston's Health Department as the HIV program manager," Campbell explains. "In September 2019, I came in as AIDS Foun-

dation Houston's chief program officer and oversaw our prevention department, which included our PrEP program. That developed into clinical services, housing, and supportive services. Everything was growing, so last year we brought in a new chief program officer that was assigned to oversee housing and supportive services. On March 1, I became the first Black person to lead the organization as the chief executive officer."

Leading the longest-standing HIV service organization in the state, Campbell's passion for the plethora of community services AFH offers is palpable. "We provide housing and supportive services for people living with HIV as well as persons who are not living with HIV but are experiencing some level of homeless-

ness," he says. "That's important, because housing really is a part of treatment. Persons living with HIV tend to live more healthily and stay treatment-adherent when their housing is stabilized."

He sings the praises of AFH's HIV testing team that executes numerous programs throughout the city, including their B.E.S.T. Box test-kit distribution. Those "Be Empowered to Self Test" kits allow people to test themselves at home for HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and hepatitis C.

Educating the masses is a tall order, so Campbell and his team are grateful for their community collaborators. "We have a great partnership with two other organizations—Normal Anomaly and The Mahogany →



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Project,” he says. “They serve their populations by educating them and [promoting] the B.E.S.T. Box test kit.”

Campbell also touts the effectiveness of two other AFH programs—Wall Talk, a sexual health education program for inmates in Texas; and Camp Hope, which offers children living with HIV an annual camping experience at the barrier-free camp Camp For All in Washington County.

As an ordained minister, the Texas native’s goals for his organization involve tapping into an unlikely outlet. “Growing up in the small town [of Cuero], and in the church, I knew that I was something other than heterosexual. I just couldn’t figure out how being gay and Christian could live in me,” Campbell recalls. That early soul work paid off. “When I really fell into my life’s work and my passion, I began to make that shift. Now I understand that I could never have done what I believe I’ve been created to do without being out, walking in my truth, and standing with my community.

“I volunteered with a church member of mine who worked with women with HIV, and I saw how HIV was impacting Black

“I SHARE THIS WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE JUST AS PASSIONATE ABOUT IT AS I AM.”

—W. Jeffrey Campbell

folks, and Black women in particular,” he explains. “I recognized that the space where Black folks gather a few times a week was the church—a space where we were not talking about HIV. Engaging the African American community is incredibly important for me, because I really do believe that until we’re able to end the epidemic in the African American community we’re going to always be at epidemic proportions, because it is African Americans who are leading in the numbers of newly diagnosed cases.”

Growing up as an only child, Campbell finds respite in going on solo travels and sur-

rounding himself with good friends that he can rely on for good times and lots of laughs. “Spending time with my friends gives me a space to just breathe and not have to be CEO,” he admits.

Campbell also highlights his team at AFH. “We’ve got about 70 employees, a whole suite of chiefs and executive leaders, and there are other people that I share this work with, gratefully, that are just as passionate about it as I am.”

While Campbell’s appointment as CEO is an AFH milestone, he is quick to point out that AFH is just getting started. “When I came to AFH, my tagline was, ‘Let’s make history.’ That means even more to me now as I sit in the CEO seat and I think about ending the HIV epidemic in the Greater Houston area. I’m the first Black CEO, I’m an openly gay Black CEO, and we have an openly gay board chair that is serving simultaneously with me. Our goal is to end this epidemic, so I will be using that tagline as a guide—and certainly to empower my staff to not just say it, but to live it out every day.”

➡ For more info, visit afhouston.org.



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A Pasadena Progressive

Gay Pasadena
City Council member
Jonathan Estrada is
seeking a second
term in office.

By RYAN M. LEACH



COURTESY

Victory Fund-endorsed candidate Jonathan Estrada, 31, is seeking re-election to the Pasadena City Council, representing District E. The Pasadena native beat four other opponents in his first bid by knocking on over 5,000 doors and meeting constituents literally where they live. He secured a win with over 60 percent of the vote, and he hopes to do it again by running on his record of accomplishments and service.

“I ran for City Council to see progress on different issues and to bring a different insight to the City Council,” Estrada says. “Running as openly LGBTQ+ allows me to connect and serve a greater group of people. One of the great things about City elections is they are nonpartisan, [so they] give me the ability to talk with everyone—Republican, Democrat, or independent. And that I enjoy.”

Estrada notes that during his first term, \$20 million was allotted for municipal infrastructure improvements. This was especially important to his district in the historical part of Pasadena.

“I live on the north side of Pasadena, centrally located in the historical and old part of the city. I like Pasadena’s diversity and the people, and I enjoy living in a calm neighborhood,” he says.

Estrada notes the support that City Council provided to first responders and other City workers by giving them a cost-of-living wage increase. He has also been able to enhance constituent services in his district, allowing the people of Pasadena to better connect with the services the City provides. A second term would give Estrada the opportunity to do more.

“There are challenges ahead of us. [We need to] continue identifying areas that need infrastructure improvement. Still, I would like to see the city move in a creative direction [by continuing] to enhance our City services.”

Pasadena is located just southeast of Houston, near the Ship Channel. Despite its majority-Hispanic population, many of its elected leaders have not historically reflected that demographic. This appears to be changing, though, and Estrada’s election is proof of that.

“Pasadena’s demographics have changed in

past years. The city is about 70 percent Hispanic, and my district is about 75 percent,” he notes. “More Hispanic candidates are on the ballot for the City Council this year than ever before. More people are becoming aware of the issues and deciding to run for public office.”

Estrada does not take his initial electoral victory for granted, and he knows he still has a job to do. He must show voters that he will keep providing results if they choose to keep him in office.

“Voters should vote for me because we have made significant progress in less than two years. I am the most prepared, qualified, and experienced person to keep doing the critical work on the City Council,” Estrada concludes. “Serving the people of the city that I love has been one of the greatest honors of my life. Public service is the calling of a lifetime.”

 *Early voting in Pasadena is April 24–May 2, and election day is May 6. Follow candidate Estrada at EstradaForPasadena.com or on social media.*



Judge Beau Miller accepts his LGBTQ+ Victory Fund award from former Mayor Annise Parker last month.

Be Someone

Stand up and be heard, no matter the cost.

By **THE HON. BEAU A. MILLER**

Photo by **DALTON DEHART**

This moving speech was given by Judge Beau Miller on March 5, 2023, upon receiving the Mayor Parker Leadership Award during the annual LGBTQ+ Victory Fund Brunch at the Post Oak Hotel. Former Houston Mayor Annise Parker is the president and CEO of the Fund, which is the largest LGBTQ political-action committee in the United States and one of the nation's largest non-connected PACs.



Thank you, Mayor Parker and the Houston Committee, for thinking I am someone who deserves this tremendous honor.

Mayor Parker, I will endeavor to live up to the fine example you have set for our community.

I also need to acknowledge my parents and

my appreciation for them, because they taught me by example that the greatest contribution any individual can give is through service to others. My parents' example is a major reason I stand here today to accept this award.

Of course, the first thing you do before running for office is talk to your spouse—whose unconditional love and support I am most thankful for.

But then I decided my next calls should be to Mayor Parker and Richard Holt. I knew the strength and importance of having not only their personal support and the Victory Fund's early endorsement, but also the importance of getting into the Victory Institute's candidate-training program.

Their responses were immediate yeses, and "What can I do to help?"

Within weeks, I was accepted at the Victory Institute's summer candidate training at a school-like campus near Seattle. There, I learned the essentials of how to run for office, I met lifelong friends, and I pulled at least one all-nighter preparing for our group's presentation. We covered the gamut, from campaign staffing and budgeting to fundraising, and so much more.

When I returned back to Houston, we ran the largest judicial campaign ever! We could cover six simultaneous events across Harris County in one night, without blinking an eye. We sent hand-addressed mailers and raised a ton of money (for a non-incumbent). And in the end, we

were successful—and the rest is history!

I became the first openly HIV-positive elected judge in Texas. And while I appreciate the significance of that, I don't strive to be the best HIV-positive or the best LGBTQ judge, although that would be great.

I strive to be a judge who is fair, respectful, and respected—a hard worker who follows the law and rules timely. And my goal is that one day, I will simply be regarded as a great judge who just happened to be HIV-positive and who happened to be gay.

My path to today was not without challenges. And I would like to share a few of those challenges. It all started in 2006, when I was diagnosed with HIV. Although not a death sentence at that time, it was certainly life changing and life challenging. And I struggled—culminating in an AIDS diagnosis in 2009.

I had hit rock bottom. But it was only then that I could start to get my life back on track. The first question I had to answer was how I ended up where I was. And I realized that a large part of what happened to me resulted from self-loathing—which, in part, derived from my fear of being stigmatized because I am HIV-positive.

That is why, in part, I founded LIVE Consortium in 2009—a nonprofit founded to reduce and eliminate the stigma associated with HIV so that everyone, irrespective of their HIV status, can live a healthy, productive life. In 2009 when starting up LIVE Consortium, I had no idea how many people we would help, the lives we would help save, or how many incredible people I would meet on my journey.

Then in 2014, while still running LIVE Consortium and practicing law, a friend and I had a crazy idea that our Houston LGBTQ legal community should do better to help fund and advocate for LGBTQ legal efforts. So, we founded the Lambda Legal Houston Leadership Committee in 2014.

Each of these experiences prepared me for 2015, which I have not talked about in a public forum until today. So, what happened?

My dad, a conservative Christian, was serving his second term in the Texas House, representing a district largely based in Sugar Land. And the Legislature was in session.

Out of the blue, I received a voicemail at my office from a reporter at the Texas Tribune seeking a comment. I remember asking myself, and my friend who officed next to me, “A comment for what?” She immediately started researching until I

heard, “Oh my God!” She then ran back into my office to show me what my dad had done. He was the first, and only, legislator in any state to file a bill that would permit people to discriminate against his own child.

Specifically, the bill would prohibit and nullify any non-discriminatory ordinance by a local government from protecting classes of individuals not already protected by the State of Texas or the federal government. For example, the bill would protect individuals based on race, religion, and national origin, but all other ordinances protecting LGBTQ individuals, students, veterans, and so many more would be eliminated.

**“MY PATH TO TODAY
WAS NOT WITHOUT
CHALLENGES... I REALIZED
THAT A LARGE PART OF
WHAT HAPPENED TO ME
RESULTED FROM SELF-
LOATHING—WHICH, IN PART,
DERIVED FROM MY FEAR
OF BEING STIGMATIZED
BECAUSE I AM
HIV-POSITIVE.”**

—Judge Beau Miller

This was a direct action against the idea of HERO—the 2014 Houston Equal Rights Ordinance—that was originally passed under Mayor Parker's administration but later repealed in 2015.

So, before I called back to the Texas Tribune—and by that time to several other reporters—I had one decision to make: would I take a stand? The price of doing so could be high—placing more strain on an already strained relationship with my parents, and the inevitable negative emotional and physical toll on my body.

But I quickly realized I did not put myself in this position. My dad did. This was his making. He didn't have to file that bill. And although I didn't want to do it, it was my turn to step up.

So, I started making calls to people I met through events for the Victory Fund and Lambda Legal. Within a day, I was put in touch with LGBTQ political organizations that would help me navigate the process. And within a couple of

days, we had a two-step strategy. First, I would travel to the Texas Capitol to meet with my dad to reason with him and members of his staff, to see if he would withdraw his bill. If that did not work, I would sit for an interview with the Associated Press—probably one of the scariest things I have ever done because I had no idea what they would ask or write.

With the aid of a media consultant, I practiced and practiced and practiced for that interview. And I would like to think I did a really good job because of it. In short order, the article was released and made the front pages of papers across the country—from the *Dallas Morning News* to the *Chicago Tribune*. It was a good article, balancing our two views and highlighting our differences.

I am relieved to report that my dad's bill died in committee without a hearing.

But the process did take its toll on me and my relationship with my parents. I came down with a pretty bad case of pneumonia—the worst illness I have ever had—and my parents and I did not talk for a while. We never did reconcile on his filing of the bill.

And with regard to me and my dad today, we have a pretty good relationship. It's not perfect, but we enjoy the time we spend together.

My very personal experience with my dad taught me that when the time comes, you have to answer the call. Step up, no matter how scary it seems. We have to act to make our lives better. And acting requires more than just showing up.

Do something affirmative. Don't be a spectator. In Houston terms: Be Someone. Take some meaningful action sometime this year for something you believe in. Whether it is volunteering, donating in a way that is significant to you, or really putting your convictions on the line by running for office, our community gets better—or worse—by our action or inaction.

I want to end by stating that I stand here today fully recognizing that the challenges I just shared with you were easier for me to overcome than it would be for many others, for two reasons. First, my challenges were lessened because I was born with the privilege that automatically attaches to white men in our society. And second, I have the privilege of having so many incredible friendships—so many people who have helped me persevere and have made my life easier.

I accept this award not just for myself, but for you all, as well. Without you, I would not be standing here, on this stage, at this time. I appreciate you. I honor you. I am privileged to have you in my life. Thank you—to each of you, to Mayor Parker, and to the members of the local committee—for bestowing this award on me.

 *The Honorable Beau A. Miller has been Harris County's 190th Judicial District Court since 2018.*



A 30TH RETROSPECTIVE

By ZACH MCKENZIE



The first print issue of OUTSMART magazine landed on newsstands 30 years ago, in an era much different than the times we live in today. When Houston's premier LGBTQ magazine began reporting on local news, it was still illegal for non-heterosexual couples to marry, RuPaul was gearing up to release his debut studio album, *Supermodel of the World*, and President Bill Clinton would soon sign into law the infamous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy that prohibited openly gay and lesbian Americans from serving in the military, while also prohibiting the harassment of "closeted" homosexuals. Different times, indeed.

In 2017, OUTSMART celebrated its milestone 25th anniversary with a retrospective of the previous quarter-century. In the five years since that landmark issue hit the newsstands, our community has experienced immense changes, survived historic events, and faced new hurdles in the ongoing fight for equality. We've endured a pandemic together, which (on top of the obvious health crisis) made safe spaces for queer people less accessible for a long period of time. Drag queens became the newest target of the conservative right wing,

while Donald Trump and his Supreme Court appointees waged war on women's rights. Republican politicians nationwide set their sights on dismantling the rights of LGBTQ teachers, artists, parents, and more. On the home front, our city endured Hurricane Harvey and the deadly winter freeze of 2021.

Throughout this turmoil, OUTSMART has worked tirelessly to highlight the positive aspects of our community and all that it has to offer. We published our first cover featuring a nonbinary model, celebrated the rise of drag kings in Houston, highlighted the local queer members of Black Lives Matter: Houston, and so much more. We've been on the front lines of reporting on HIV health care, entertainment, politics, emerging artists, star athletes, and other community heroes who strengthen the fabric of our community.

As we look back on the last 30 years and recognize how far we've come—and how far we still have to go—the OUTSMART staff is honored to continue sharing these stories that all too often go unheard. We look forward to the next 30 years and well beyond, thanks to our family of readers, advertisers, supporters, and allies like you.



June 2017 Pride Houston's 40th anniversary

Pride Houston marked its 40th anniversary, and OUTSMART shined a light on the faces of LGBTQ activism in our community with a Pride

Portraits collage. This retrospective issue celebrated how far we've come as a community while looking forward to the work still to be done. June stories included a look back at "Houston's Stonewall" moment in 1977 when anti-gay celebrity Anita Bryant's appearance in Houston sparked a massive downtown demonstration; an interview with Moses Mbai, the first openly gay Mr. TSU; news of two fathers fighting for their trans kids; and a feature on the Transform Houston campaign whose mission was to change hearts and minds about LGBTQ rights.

October 2018 Beto runs for Texas governor

In a story that offered a glimmer of hope that Texas would finally rid itself of prominent anti-LGBTQ conservative Senator Ted Cruz, OUTSMART featured Congressman and



Senate hopeful Beto O'Rourke on its October cover. O'Rourke ascended to the national spotlight as he aimed to end Texas' 24-year Democratic drought in statewide elections. As a skateboarding, Whataburger-loving, progressive symbol

of change, O'Rourke discussed his vision for a more inclusive state, which resulted in a generation of newly engaged voters and hope for a better tomorrow. Politicians Lupe Valdez and Lizzie Fletcher were also featured, along with RuPaul's Drag Race winner Aquaria.



December 2018 Pioneering local activist Ray Hill dies

Houston experienced an immense loss in November 2018 with the passing of activist and community champion Ray Hill. One of the strongest voices in the fight for LGBTQ

rights took his final breath at Omega House in Montrose—the very place he helped launch in the 1980s as a refuge for dying AIDS patients

who were often shunned by the larger medical community. Hill lived a thousand lives in his short time on earth, touching countless people through his fearless advocacy work, his local radio show, and even the documentary *Loud Mouth Queer* that told his story for those not fortunate enough to have met him in person. Hill's legacy is one for the record books, and OUTSMART was honored to pay him homage.

June 2019 Pride Houston names its first Black male grand marshal and four trans women of color as honorary grand marshals



OUTSMART's 2019 Pride issue celebrated the "Fresh Faces of Pride" and the history-making grand marshals who represented our city during that year's Pride celebrations. Pride Houston's male grand marshal Harrison Guy and honorary grand marshals Monica Roberts, →

Ana Andrea Molina, Atlantis Narcisse, and Dee Dee Watters were all featured on the magazine's cover. The June issue's "Pride in the Media" feature looked at the many local media outlets that support inclusion. News of an HIV-prevention campaign and a conversation with a nonbinary actor rounded out the issue.



September 2019
Local drag kings featured in a cover story
 In a world of queens, drag kings were gaining prominence in 2019, so the September issue highlighted the drag-kings collective known as The H-Town Kings

by featuring local drag king Hugh Dandy on the cover. The issue also included an interview with Theatre Under The Stars artistic director Dan Knechtges, stories on PFLAG president Janice Anderson, State Representative Garnet Coleman, visual artist Lovie Olivia, and more.



April and May 2020
Local LGBTQ heroes respond COVID

When the first local COVID-19 infection was documented in 2020, no one could have predicted just how drastically this new virus would alter our lives. The term "frontline workers" was quickly adapted and used to describe vital employees who were unable to work from home, many of whom were facing the health crisis head-on in the heart of hospitals across the country.

The April OutSMART cover story paid homage to frontline gay nurses Nicholas Olaverria and Akil Jones, who spoke about their hospital ICU experiences during a time when much was still unknown about the virus. Read more about these hometown heroes on pages 26 and 28 of this issue.

As the pandemic continued well beyond the original two-week timeframe we were expecting, food insecurity became a huge issue as



many families and workers suddenly without a job looked to local food pantries for support. OUTSMART's May cover featured several LGBTQ representatives from the Houston Food Bank, Brighter Bites, and the YMCA of Greater Houston, who all spoke about their efforts to combat food insecurity during the lockdown crisis.

While COVID made impacts on several OUTSMART stories moving forward, these two pandemic covers marked the beginning of the magazine's efforts to highlight queer community members making a difference for those most in need.



July 2020
LGBTQ leaders of the local Black Lives Matter group speak out following George Floyd's murder

The murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers sent shockwaves throughout the

country and led to new forms of activism aimed at ending racism in America. The July cover featured the LGBTQ leaders of Black Lives Matter: Houston (BLMHOU) and their work on the front lines in the fight for systemic change. Brandon Mack, Ashton P. Woods, and Kandice Webber discussed their advocacy work in the cover story, and encouraged all of Houston's diverse communities to get involved with their work. Queer lawyer Tatiana Holland also spoke with OUTSMART about her work representing those affected by police brutality. Stories about an openly gay pastor and a boutique owner rounded out the July issue highlighting life in Galveston.

August 2020
Actor and model Chiugo kicks off OutSMART's annual 'Beyond the Binary' series
 Nonbinary model and artist Chiugo dazzled



us on the August cover. The native-Houstonian trailblazer spoke about their relationship with gender identity and how, by simply existing "loud and proud," they can be a positive example

of gender-nonconformity for nonbinary youth. Three other nonbinary activists and changemakers also appeared in that "Beyond the Binary" feature that now runs each August. Also featured in the issue were Houston's Kai Shappley, a young trans activist who starred in Netflix's *The Babysitter's Club*, and a conversation with DJ HYPERFEMME.



November 2020
Trans activist and journalist Monica Roberts dies

In November 2020, OUTSMART mourned the loss, and celebrated the life, of local trans activist and journalist Monica Roberts, who passed away due to natural causes on October 6. The founder of *Transgriot*, a blog that spotlights Black trans stories that are all too often ignored by the media, Roberts left behind a legacy of progressive and life-saving activism that other trans community members are carrying on. Roberts once wrote, "We do all of this not for ourselves, but for the trans kids." An inspiration to many and a guiding light for all, Roberts' legacy lives on as we work to combat the current tide of anti-trans legislation nationwide. →

DO IT BEFORE DINNER

A photograph of two men in a warm embrace, smiling at each other. The man on the left is wearing a red t-shirt and glasses, and the man on the right is wearing a yellow shirt. They are both holding glasses of wine, suggesting a social gathering like dinner.

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May 2021
Legislative attacks on trans youth continue in Austin
As travel and tourism began to bounce back from the ongoing pandemic, OUTSMART highlighted numerous Texas getaway destinations in May 2021.

From cruises to campsites, African-inspired hospitality, and more, this issue served as a guide for those looking to get away to an affirming and fun environment. OUTSMART writers also brought much-needed attention to the 2021 legislative attacks on trans youth. Firsthand stories from families of trans and nonbinary youth illustrated the impact that discriminatory laws were having at the local level. Brad Pritchett, Equality Texas field director, spoke to OUTSMART about what he and his team were doing to combat Republican lawmakers in Austin. Doctors, politicians, and social-justice visionaries also spoke out against the bills aimed at ending trans rights in Texas.



June and July 2021
Houston re-opens as COVID vaccines make in-person events possible
Blackberri, aka "The Bearded Beauty of Texas," shined on the June cover and chatted with OUTSMART about her journey from humble bar gigs to being featured in a Facebook Super Bowl commercial. The hilarious drag queen described her adventures on the front lines of putting drag on the map in our city. This annual Pride issue also featured trans activists and artists, out local journalists, and more.

Nonbinary filmmaker Marcus Pontello struck a fierce pose for the July cover and spoke with OUTSMART about their documentary focus-



ing on the historic Numbers nightclub in Montrose and its impact on generations of Houstonians. Also included was a profile on the nightclub's owners and DJs who discussed the lasting legacy of the local nightlife haunt. Stories about the Galveston queer scene, a look inside the downtown Comicpalooza convention, and a Q&A with local drag artist Kymber Devine rounded out the July issue.

January 2022



New HIV-prevention drug introduced, local researcher Jonatan Gioia describes his role in that breakthrough
The January wellness issue celebrated a medical milestone that proved to be a game-changing step toward ending the HIV epidemic. OUTSMART spoke with UThHealth's Jonatan Gioia about a new long-lasting injectable version of the PrEP medication that can eliminate HIV transmission. Gioia, a queer medical professional and native of Buenos Aires, was part of the research team that led to the landmark medical advancement. The issue also featured spin instructors and other fitness trainers, interviews with queer comedians Matteo Lane and Fortune Feimster, and more.



spoke with OUTSMART about the importance of trans visibility, particularly for Black trans women in the media. Sis, who was also featured as a background actor on the FX show *POSE*, brought a spotlight to the importance of trans actors portraying trans characters on screen. Also featured were interviews with artists, trans activists, and a local out meteorologist. Local fitness guru and author Shana Ross chatted with OUTSMART about her memoir, which discusses her search for her birth family and

her journey to coming out as a lesbian in a deeply conservative family.

January 2023

Houston drag performer Mistress Isabelle Brooks stars in 'RuPaul's Drag Race'

RuPaul finally put some respect on Houston's name and welcomed local drag performer Mistress Isabelle Brooks to the main-stage for the 15th season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. OUTSMART chatted with the self-proclaimed "Heavyweight

Champ" about her rise to stardom and the impact of being H-Town's first queen to appear in the globally recognized TV series. Also featured were mind-and-body wellness stories from local yogis and spiritual healers. To highlight Holocaust Remembrance Week, Holocaust Museum Houston librarian Joel Bangilan spoke with OUTSMART about the surge in anti-semitic attacks across the country.

March 2023

Julie Mabry, local owner of one of the nation's few remaining lesbian bars, leads the Women's Month coverage



For International Women's Month, OUTSMART highlighted leading local women who are making a difference. The cover story featured Julie Mabry, the owner of Pearl Bar—one of the last remaining lesbian bars in the country. Mabry shared her story of achieving sobriety, operating the popular Washington Avenue bar, and being dedicated to the larger queer community both locally and nationally. Stories about love, advocacy, and transgender advancement were also featured in the March issue, plus a story about The Diana Foundation's landmark 70th-anniversary event celebrating the country's oldest continuously operating LGBTQ charity organization. ▼

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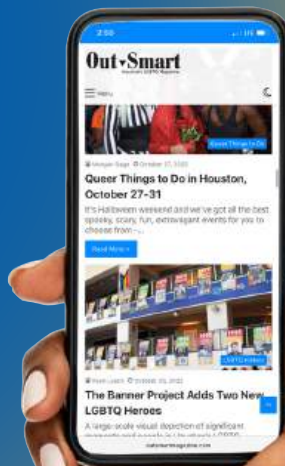
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Then and Now:



A lot can happen in five years. Since OUTSMART commemorated its 25th anniversary in 2017, 71 editions have hit the stands with hundreds of stories about and for Houston's LGBTQ community.

In this issue, we check in on four brilliant personalities who have graced OUTSMART's covers since 2017. While much has stayed the same—our cover star Harper Watters is still single and checking his DMs, just so readers know—plenty more has changed.

Nicholas Olaverria, who was working on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, is no longer a hospital ICU nurse. Instead, he has been reprioritizing his career goals with a strong focus on his mental health.

Jessica Zyrie has been keeping busy modeling in New York City since she last spoke with OUTSMART for her February 2019 cover story—back when she was modeling locally and working at the Montrose Center. She was even a featured model on *Project Runway* in 2021.

And finally, native Houstonian Alan Gonzalez is also making his mark on the New York fashion scene since being featured on OUTSMART's December 2019 cover. He recently won an Emmy Award for his costuming work on Disney's *The Quest*.

Read on for more on these OUTSMART cover stars who graciously took the time to catch us up on their careers.

DANCING BEYOND LIMITS

Houston Ballet's Harper Watters on his social media growth, career ambitions, and breaking stereotypes.

By MARENE GUSTIN
Photo by FRANK HERNANDEZ

Marene Gustin: First of all, do you still have those fabulous sky-high pink platforms you wore on your September 2018 OutSmart cover?

Harper Watters: Yes, I still have Kelly and Michelle, however they reside now in the social-media Louvre of my house otherwise known as my office. After filming a treadmill video, the ankle strap popped on one of them and officially put them into retirement! They had a fabulous run—or, I guess, a fabulous *strut*.

Back then, you had just finished appearing in filmmaker Scott Gormley's documentary *Danseur*. You had been with Houston Ballet for seven years, and you were already a big social-media star with 147,000 YouTube followers. How have things changed, and how have they stayed the same since then?

Well, I've managed to gain 100,000 more followers on IG, and then this little app called TikTok arrived in 2020 where I've amassed 580,000 followers. Putting value in follower count is probably worthy of some side-eye, but for me I'm really proud of the community I've built. I put a lot of thought and intention into my posts, so

to have them resonate with people is really powerful for me.

Beyond the social-media growth, I've risen through the ranks at Houston Ballet to become the highest-ranked Black dancer and queer dancer of the company. I take class every day, I try my hardest to never become complacent, and I always continue to seek inspiration and stay curious. That mindset and work ethic has remained the same. That's what has allowed me to keep an upward trajectory, both inside and outside of the dance studio. I also became

a homeowner, which I think makes me an official Houstonian.

I look back at participating in *Danseur* and where I was in my career. When I did my first OUTSMART cover, I had aspirations of leading a three-act ballet and getting to the top of my company. To have accomplished both of those while also planting roots in Houston makes me incredibly proud. My first OUTSMART cover had me jumping with a suitcase, which for me was like saying I was on a journey, and with this cover I feel like I'm saying that I've arrived.

You were also single back then. Is that still the case?

Drag me! Yes, I am single, but when you're so booked and busy, it's hard to find time for a man! But also, my DMs are open, so whoever is reading this article and seeing this story, I am ready to be wined and dined! Let's manifest that by my next cover, so I'll be gushing over my man in the article.

You've talked before about the challenges of being a Black, queer male in ballet. Has the ballet world become more accommodating?

The simple answer is yes. I'm the first Black and queer first soloist of Houston Ballet, and →



September 2018 cover
Photo by Ashkan Roayae



**"I PUT A LOT OF
THOUGHT AND
INTENTION INTO
MY SOCIAL-MEDIA
POSTS, SO TO HAVE
THEM RESONATE
WITH PEOPLE IS
REALLY POWERFUL
FOR ME."**

—Harper Watters

that's a testament to the work that's taken place over the past few years motivated by the global movement to bring justice, healing, and freedom to Black people everywhere. As a result of this movement, ballet companies had to look within, realize what this art form is built on, and how to make intentional changes. Ashton Edwards of Pacific Northwest Ballet is just one example of the growing number of nonbinary dancers feeling comfortable to dance as their authentic selves. One of my best friends, Chun Wai Chan, just became the first Asian principal at New York City Ballet. The work is working, and the results are giving success, and we love to see it.

At 31, where do you see your career in dance going from here?

There is still so much I want, and will, accomplish in my career. I'm a first soloist at Houston Ballet, a rank just below the highest rank of principal. It would be a dream to reach that rank, not only for myself but for everyone who loves and looks like me. It would be the ultimate permission for anyone who feels like they can't try.

I'm still waiting for the chance to collaborate with Queen Bey! Yes, I have my Renaissance tickets, but the ultimate gig would be working with her! I moved to Houston for ballet when I was 16 years old and on my own, and to look back at what I've been able to create from ballet and a pair of heels blows my mind. The sky's the limit, and I'm so excited to continue increasing visibility, breaking down stereotypes, and doing it fabulously!

Fashion is very important to you. Do you see a career in that world after you retire from dance?

What I love about fashion is its transformative powers. There is something so thrilling about putting on different garments and creating a narrative with them. I feel so lucky to be able to do that in ballet, and on my own with my social media. I don't think I'll be sending any Harper originals down the runway anytime soon, but maybe there's a runway or editorial that I could grace. That iconic monologue delivered in *The Devil Wears Prada* by Meryl Streep speaks to the influence and power of fashion. You might not

be aware of it, but you are participating in fashion whether you're shopping at Marshalls or on the cover of *Vogue*. I not only try to tap into that world because I love clothing, but also as a tool to have ballet be featured on a larger scale. From now to when I retire, and after, I will always rely on the art of fashion to bring me inspiration—but also to bring new audiences to ballet.

Fashion, dance, social media—what is the one thing you want your legacy to be?

It feels fitting to quote the Queen of Houston (and the world). Beyoncé has a lyric that says, "When I leave this world, I'll leave no regrets. Leave something to remember, so they won't forget I was here." I want my legacy to be my work, my passion, my legs, and my fearlessness.



Keep up with Harper Watters on Instagram @theharperwatters.





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Husbands Joaquin (l)
and Nick Olaverria

PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH

Nicholas Olaverria speaks out on his experience during the pandemic.

By RYAN M. LEACH



Nicholas Olaverria, 28, appeared on the cover of the April 2020 OutSMART issue, dressed in hospital scrubs. At the time, he was an intensive-care unit nurse at Memorial Hermann Hospital in the Texas Medical Center. He was outspoken about the hospital's lack of PPE resources and the dangers it presented to him and his colleagues—much to the chagrin of his bosses. He left the Hermann ICU later that summer to pursue other opportunities, burned out and disheartened by the nation's pandemic response and his hospital system's lack of regard for the front-line nurses who were saving lives.

"Thinking about the years 2020 and 2021 literally sends chills down my spine," Olaverria admits. "When I interviewed with the magazine in April of 2020, we were seeing the initial

influx of COVID patients in the ICU. I stayed working bedside in the COVID ICU until fall 2020. I received a bit of a professional whiplash after speaking with OutSMART and Houston's local news networks, spreading the word that Memorial Hermann was not providing an adequate supply of PPE. I experienced a lot of frustration with hospital management, and I felt like [my concerns were being dismissed]. I was a bit discouraged and upset that a billion-dollar industry could not provide their workers with basic necessities. It was a bit embarrassing, but more so dangerous."

After leaving the hospital, Olaverria made some personal changes. He started to focus more on his mental health, and began visiting a therapist to deal with the "trench" in his life that felt devastating. He continues to benefit from therapy, yoga practice, and his commit-

ment to prioritize mental health above all.

"My choice to become a nurse and help people felt all of a sudden like a silly dream when I realized I was working in such a toxic hospital system. I made the decision to move into the biotechnology sector, and I now work completely from home as a clinical-data associate for oncology trials. The company I work for, Seagen, was just purchased by Pfizer. We are very excited about this acquisition because it will expand Pfizer's research portfolio by adding targeted cancer-cell therapies to Pfizer's wheelhouse."

Olaverria notes that he was met with a variety of responses to being featured in OutSMART and other local media outlets. "It was interesting to see the hospital's reaction to the article and my interview with a local news station. I received pointed conversations from hospital management about [my decision to speak out], but I was unbothered by this. I spoke with a handful of other ICU nurses at the time about creating a focus group to [explore the option of] going on strike, but unfortunately the grasp of the hospital system scared some of them and we did not proceed before I quit.

"My mom is also a nurse, and was very happy when she saw this article because she was experiencing the same headaches in San Antonio within her hospital units. I felt happy that this article was published because it solidified, at least within myself, that as a unit, nurses could really make a difference."

When he isn't working on cancer research, Olaverria is focused on spending time with his husband, Joaquin, and limiting his access to social media. In fact, he deleted most of his social media in the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

"I deleted Instagram back when our country removed the protection for women to make decisions regarding their reproductive health. It was then that I decided a social-media cleanse was necessary to focus on my friends and family and really get back to Earth, in a way. I'm back on it now, though. I scroll randomly now, and take breaks as necessary. I try to FaceTime, call, and text my friends [rather than sending Instagram] messages, although I *love* to share funny Instagram videos."

To that end, Olaverria has no social-media links to share, and he hopes to keep it that way as he continues his personal wellness journey.



April 2020 cover

Photo by Alex Rosa



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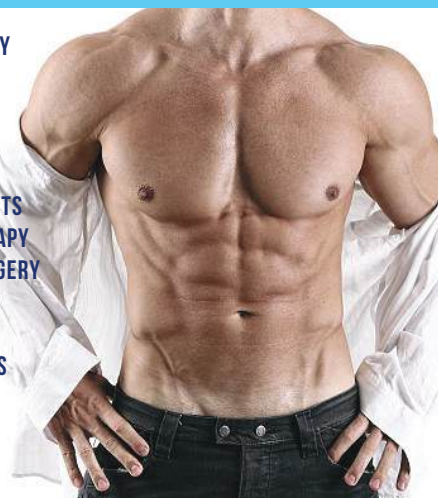
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SHATTERING BARRIERS

Re-focusing
on Jessica Zyrie.

By RYAN M. LEACH
Photo by DAMETREUS WARD



Jessica Zyrie, 30, graced the cover of *OUTSMART* magazine in February 2019—the first of what promises to be many covers to come. As a Black trans woman and model,

Zyrie uses her platform to bring focus to the issues impacting her community. Now living in New York full-time, she continues breaking barriers in a career that hasn't always given Black or trans women the credit they are due.

"After appearing on the cover of *OUTSMART* in 2019, I became more intentional with solidifying my roots in New York," Zyrie says. "My time in Houston was crucial to my development, and my cover on *OUTSMART* was such a special part of the journey to me. It was empowering to have something tangible that unapologetically represented parts of me that I didn't always love about myself.

"The reaction [to that magazine cover] that stands out the most was my grandmother's. She had three sons, but she always wanted a daughter. There was an indescribable joy on her face holding that magazine. It felt as if that magazine represented all of the things she'd ever want to share with a daughter or granddaughter—resilience, beauty, drive, and fearlessness."

Zyrie's appearance on the *OUTSMART* cover occurred when she had been working both as a model and as an HEI counselor at the Montrose Center, assisting clients with early intervention HIV resources. She remains dedicated to working with underserved communities now that she is in New York.

After moving to the Big Apple in 2021, she landed her first major gig as a featured model on *Project Runway*. Her Houston community was proud to see one of their own doing what they love on national television, as many of us were still staying at home as the pandemic dragged on.

"I am still modeling, dipping my toes into acting, networking with grassroots organizations, and I work with a special-needs insurance plan serving marginalized communities. Though New York is a difficult city to live in, I've grown tremendously as a person," she

notes. "I have been able to simultaneously feed my soul and my passions—all the while discovering more of myself."

Follow Jessica Zyrie on Instagram @thejessica-zyrie, Facebook (Jessica Zyrie), and TikTok @jessicazyrie.

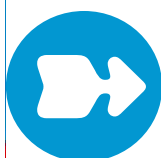


February 2019 cover
Photo by Christelyn Nash

ALANTUDE TAKES MANHATTAN

Native Houstonian
Alan Gonzalez is
expanding his brand
following an Emmy win.

By RYAN M. LEACH



In December 2019, fashion designer Alan Gonzalez was featured on the cover of OUTSMART magazine. The reboot

of *Project Runway* was about to hit the small screen, and Gonzalez was hopeful that he might follow in the footsteps of Houston designer Chloe Dao and take first prize.

While he didn't win on *Project Runway*, he did go on to win an Emmy Award for his costume designs and has found new direction and a new city along the way.

"After *Project Runway*, I moved to New York City and immediately started working on making costumes for TV," Gonzalez says. "My first job in the city was on HBO's *Legendary*. After that, I went on to make costumes for *The Quest* on Disney+, which was Emmy-nominated for Outstanding Special Effects Costumes, Hair and Makeup. And we won! I can now say I am an Emmy Award-winning designer."

Houstonians who remember Gonzalez may also recall his signature brand of "Alantude." Although his career shifted to focus primarily on costume design during the pandemic, that signature Alantude attitude lives

on. Gonzalez still creates custom designs for clients, and he hosted the web series *Project Runway Redemption* next to Nina Garcia, so his ties to the show that gave him his boost remain strong.

"Had I not done the show, I would not have made the jump to a new city. I wouldn't have made the friends I made through the show, and I wouldn't be working on all these projects I'm so grateful to have my name on. It helped grow my audience, and was able to keep me and my family afloat throughout the pandemic," he says.

His own brand took a back seat while he worked on the TV shows, but Gonzalez says he is happy to be getting his focus back on designing and further developing his brand.

➡ Follow Gonzalez on all social media @Alantude



December 2019 cover
Photo by Ashkan Roayaei

He intends to establish a presence in several stores across the country very soon.

"I have worked with several manufacturers that can make on-demand clothing as we grow. Last season was the first time I showed in New York during Fashion Week, and I plan to continue to push my brand in New York more—while still keeping Houston on my side."

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Mario Piña,
La Fishería

Fresh Local Seafood

Mario Piña and Alli Jarrett are both serving up tempting regional flavors.

By MARENE GUSTIN



Houston may be best known for Tex-Mex, BBQ, and steak houses, but when it comes to eating, the Bayou City is also very fond of its seafood. From fancy white-tablecloth seafood emporiums to all-you-can-eat crawfish joints, Houston's proximity to the Gulf Coast ensures an abundance of fresh-from-the-water options.

Two members of Houston's LGBTQ community are making the most of that deliciousness in two very different ways. Chef Mario Piña's La Fishería restaurant, located in

downtown's historic district on Milam Street, was started by celebrity Mexican chef Aquiles Chavez in 2012.

"I came here in 2017 from Monterrey," says Piña. "One week later we had Harvey." The devastating hurricane shuttered the restaurant for seven months, and it didn't reopen until March of 2018. Since then, the chef has built a steady following of fans. And one of the things they come for is his grandmother's flan.

"When I was a child, I would sit on my grandmother's porch and eat her flan," he recalls. The Flan de la Casa is a creamy Mexican-style crème caramel served with Kahlua caramel sauce. Other specialties include the Pulpo a la Parrilla, a tender grilled octopus in

lime plated with veggies and yucca; a trio of seafood tacos; and the Pompano al la Limón, a whole pan-seared and roasted pompano fish with a buttery lime sauce.

Plus, he's just added a few new dishes like the seafood linguini. "Even though we're a seafood restaurant, a lot of people ask for pasta, so I created this dish," Piña says. The bar features cervezas, wines, and an impressive menu of whiskeys.

The chef is also a food blogger whose Instagram handle is Memo Rex Commander, after the third album of the Mexican band Zoé: *Memo Rex Commander y el Corazón Atómico de la Vía Láctea*. When he's not in the kitchen you'll find Piña at concerts. →

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"I went to 30 concerts last year," he says proudly.

Meanwhile, over at Alli Jarrett's Low Tide Kitchen & Bar in Spring Branch, the menu evokes the childhood flavors of Jarrett's East Coast upbringing.

"I'm from South Carolina," she says. "I grew up going to the beach at Pawleys Island, so I love seafood."

Jarrett also owns the popular Harold's Restaurant, Bar, and Terrace in the Heights, as well as Harold's Tap Room.

Low Tide Kitchen & Bar started life in downtown's Finn Hall food hall, but that location ended with the pandemic. In 2022, Jarrett relocated to Spring Branch to open another version of the restaurant.

"Spring Branch reminds me of the Heights when I first moved there 20 years ago," she says. "There's a lot happening here, it's really growing."

Dining here will evoke the smell of salt marsh air and the sound of the waves from the Low Country, and the menu is drool-worthy. From the shrimp burger to the oyster nachos, everything is fresh and simple.

"Just good, honest seafood," Jarrett says. Her partner, Karin, craves the simple fare

"I'M FROM SOUTH CAROLINA, SO I LOVE SEAFOOD—JUST GOOD, HONEST SEAFOOD."

—Alli Jarrett, Low Tide Kitchen & Bar

like the fried shrimp and hushpuppies, while other best-sellers include the crawfish dip and chips, crab cakes, and stoneground grits and shrimp.

"And our ceviche is award winning," Jarrett says. The dish of white fish, cucumber, onion, cilantro, citrus, and tomato took home the top Trailblazer Appetizer Award at the 2023 Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo's Roundup & Best Bites Competition.

There's also a darn good burger made with 44 Farms beef, a butter bean burger for vegetarians, and the popular Sister's Fried Chicken and Mash.

Both Piña and Jarrett feature signature dishes inspired by their grandmothers.

"Sister's Fried Chicken is similar to the fried chicken that we serve at Harold's," Jarrett notes. "It's based on a family recipe that my grandmother used to make."

At Low Tide's raw bar, you can get Gulf Coast oysters like the Oysters NOLP (North of Long Point) or East Coast oysters on the half shell. Wash them down with a Low Country cocktail of whiskey and fruit juice, and it's all good.

Jarrett, a longtime golfer, stays busy with her restaurants these days, but she's also very active in charities, her church, and the industry as an advisory board member of the Texas Restaurant Association.

While very different in regional flavors, both Chef Piña's La Fishería and Chef Jarrett's Low Tide Kitchen & Bar serve up seafood that is some of the best in Houston.

► *La Fishería is located at 213 Milam St., For more info, visit lafisheriahouston.com.*

► *Low Tide Kitchen & Bar is located at 2030 Bingle Rd., For more info, visit lowtidekitchenbar.com.*



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A LOOK AT HOUSTON HOUSING

Local real-estate professionals respond to the changing market.

By MARENE GUSTIN
Photo by RUCK PHOTOGRAPHY



Short of using a crystal ball, the Houston real-estate market can be hard to predict.

The market in 2022 saw record-high average and median prices, but also declining sales—particularly due to a lack of inventory and rising mortgage rates, according to Norada Real Estate Investments. June had the year's strongest sales volume, with 9,844 single-family units sold. Despite this, new listings boosted inventory levels, which hit a high of

2.8 months' supply in October and November.

So, what about 2023? The pandemic housing boom has cooled as interest rates go up and inflation eats away savings. Should you buy, should you sell now, or wait? Should you remodel? We asked some industry experts about the effect of higher interest rates, their tips on staging a home for sale, and their overall approach to marketing in a difficult economy. Here's what they had to say:

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One of the opportunities that we are utilizing—that was not available during the 2008 depression—are buy-down points to lower the interest rate. Historically, the current interest rates are not high compared

to normal market situations, so it's still a good time to buy a home. The higher interest rates do give the opportunity to push down the inflationary prices on purchases.

As for marketing, we are excited about our polo events, and we are bringing back our annual golf tournament that raises money for veterans.

My quote is that "Empty houses do not sell," so staging is very important. However, I do not like virtual staging because I think it gives a false concept and image to the buyers. We don't really utilize AI, because our relationships require us to have that connection to our clients. Personal interaction is what they demand, and they want that personal attention. AI is

not really used except on the back end when processing some repetitive documentation and paperwork.

Our business is not only local, but national and international. Our inventory is everywhere that we have clients who want to purchase homes in the world.

DAVID BATAGOWER BAYOU CITY PROPERTY GROUP BY COMPASS

bayoucitypropertygroup.com



We have definitely started seeing more creative solutions come about as interest rates have adjusted over the last year or so. For example, interest rate buy-downs, where the seller or builder credits the buyer a set dollar

amount to buy the interest rate down for the initial one to two years of the loan. The thought behind this is that when rates decrease, you can refinance—but have a manageable rate until then. This is just one of the more common options we are seeing. We are huge believers in staging, because we have seen the success. As

they say, the proof is in the pudding. One of our recent listings sold in 12 days. Average days on market for the community is 50 days. Because of staging, [combined with] a strategic approach to prepping the property and targeted marketing, we were able to sell 76 percent faster than the average property in that community. Although there is an expense associated with staging, we find our sellers still net more because of increased interest and fewer days on market. In instances where staging isn't possible, we definitely look to virtual staging as an alternative.



KAREN DERR KAREN DERR REALTY GROUP

karenderrrealty-group.com

For sure, sellers are giving more concessions than they had to in early 2022. I've seen builders with their lenders offering rates in the fives—and cash toward closing costs—to entice buyers who are on the fence. I have one client →



Karen Derr
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offering owner financing with a large down payment. Since COVID, we are back to having client appreciation parties and fun events, which is so nice. I've recently treated clients to a yoga class at a new studio. And open houses are going to be back full-force this year because we are going to have a little more time to market properties and plan events. I've gotten a lot more casual, but I don't wear athletic wear for work. I mean, if I'm leaving a workout and get an impromptu request to show from a client, I'll do it. [But aside from that], I dress for work every day. I think showing a sense of style and good taste is most important. I'll admit that I text with friends or for business pretty much until I fall asleep at night, but that's just what I'm comfortable with. I try to be considerate of other agents and clients who get worn down by [all of their daily] screen time. Monday is my favorite day to take off.



THOM EICKLEBERRY
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pridestreetrealty.com

Now, more than ever, buyers and sellers are having to offer value. Buyers

are aware that the cost of real property is very high. Builders and sellers must put their best on the market if they hope to attract buyers. High-end flooring, high-end fixtures, higher-end appliances. The home or business must wow the buyer. The buyer must feel they are getting something exceptional for their dollar. Just putting a sign in the yard isn't getting the job done any more.

I do recommend virtual staging. Consumers buy with their eyes. Physical staging is expensive. Virtual is a cost-effective alternative. Even if you just put out some rugs and tchotchkes, it brings warmth and soul to any bare space.

The outside-of-the-loop communities are getting more interest now with high housing prices. Bear Creek Village at Highway 6, and the Colonies off of West Little York, are great options for budget-conscious buyers. Copperfield is a great option, too. LGBTQ+ buyers are calling these communities home, more and more, all the time. My home is there, and my partner and I just love it. Our neighbors love having us there, too. Our home and yard add value to their homes, and they are very appreciative to have us there.

JOHN GERLACH MR. HANDYMAN OF NW HOUSTON AND JERSEY VILLAGE

mrhandyman.com



Even with the housing market cooling off, the handyman business is holding steady. One week we are really busy; the next week, not so much.

I would tell first-time home buyers to

buy enough house, even if it stretches you a bit. Your increasing income may make it easier down the road. Also, consider neighborhoods with potential to be up-and-coming. It can be very rewarding down the road. If you're looking to sell your home, the first thing you want to do is make the house look clean and well-maintained. It's not expensive, but it really opens up the market to more buyers. And if you're looking to stay long-term in your home, I suggest repairing and updating the windows, doors, and insulation. →

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With prices of everything everywhere continually rising, house prices are not expected to be any different this year. The housing demand is still here, and the inventory is still considered low.

Rates will most likely stay where they are or possibly go down, but I do not see them going down to what we were used to over the last few years. Don't let rates and prices discourage you. This is a cycle, and it is better to get into a house at a set price now and refinance later if rates go down. Rent is continually going up, along with the price of homes. There are still a lot of options for us to get you on track to homeownership.

I don't think you can go wrong anywhere in Houston and the surrounding areas, due to the demand for housing we currently have.

JASON KNEBEL GREENWOOD KING PROPERTIES

greenwoodking.com



Greenwood King reintroduced our Lobby Speaker Series last December with the amazing architect Tom Kligerman. Our Heights office continues to host our annual pumpkin patch, and our Spring Concert in the

Park on April 29. I am also a sponsor for various neighborhood events near The Woodlands.

Physical staging is preferred to help buyers visualize the context of a space. Virtual staging is great to show a room's potential, backyard pool capabilities, even how a remodeled space could look. I think we are just at the beginning of what AI can do in real estate. I utilize a tool to measure rooms to create detailed floor plans, as well as software that assists in market analysis from multiple data points.

I work a lot with clients relocating here from other parts of the country. Sometimes they know where they'd like to live, and other times we may tour them across the city. My favorite area outside of the city is The Woodlands. The area is consistently voted a top place to live,

is overflowing with amenities, has a dynamic and vibrant energy, and you're surrounded by nature. What's more to love?

RICHARD RAY DOUGLAS ELLIMAN CO.



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What we are seeing is that with lower inventory in many areas, homes that are priced right and in good condition are

still selling fairly quickly. Buyers seem to be getting more used to the current rates. And if they need to buy now, they are going ahead with their purchase of a new home with the hope that they could refinance at a later date if rates begin to decrease.

Since COVID, I have noticed a much more relaxed dress code for many professionals in all sorts of industries, and in real estate, generally we have seen the same. Now, my personal policy has always been to dress like a million bucks if you want to sell a million-dollar house. However, that can have many variations depending on the client you are working with at the time. →

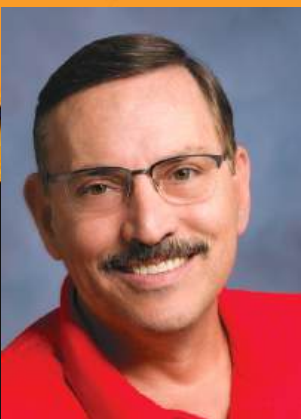


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A day off? My day off comes when I physically leave town. But of course, I take my laptop with me, just in case! Yes, being a real-estate agent involves a lot of hours. I always tell new agents, "Remember, we work when others are off, so they can look at houses." It comes with the profession. But when you love what you do, it's easy.

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With rising interest rates, [which are] attempting to combat inflation, I think the housing market will decline nationally. However, the Texas economy continues

to flourish, bringing in people from other states such as California, New York, and Oregon that could result in the Texas housing market staying steady—hence the rising interest-rate backlash.

I do think there will be a spike in Houston and outlying residents staying in their current homes and choosing to remodel and update rather than move to a new home.

My advice to clients is to consider the market, economy, and their potential profit they stand to make or not make by selling. Also consider the market trends over the previous two years in their neighborhood. If their home has considerably risen in value and they like the part of town they live in, then staying put and remodeling or renovating might be the wise decision. Everybody loves the kitchen area, and that's where most people congregate during get-togethers, including immediate family. Refacing existing kitchen cabinet doors and drawers, and adding new countertops and plumbing fixtures, is way less expensive than replacing full cabinets—and it will make the kitchen look completely different.

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years and could cite countless situations that arise in which a title policy protects the consumer from [property disputes]. In the past few months

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alone, we have had to litigate boundary-line disputes, prior unpaid taxes due, [or a] change in exemption status—challenges from heirs of the estate and liens that were not paid because a seller did not close at a title company when he [originally] purchased the property. An experienced escrow officer can navigate the parties through the process, regardless of the challenges before, during, and after the closing. It is important to have a solid underwriter for the title-insurance policy. Considering what has recently occurred with banking institutions, you should know the financial stability of your title-insurance company.

I have repeatedly seen new contracts where the sellers are offering contributions to pay down interest rates for the purchasers. There are limits on the amount of the contribution a seller may provide, depending on the type of loan and the loan amount. The contribution credit appears on the settlement statement at closing, which offsets the amount due at closing by the purchaser.

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When compared to the same time last year, listing inventories are higher as home purchases have declined. For the first time in 131 consecutive months, the

median home price in the US decreased. Since we are the oldest family-owned real-estate company on Galveston Island, we love to introduce clients to everything outside of the loop with our motto: Own a Piece of the Island, Own Peace of Mind.

Sellers need to be more realistic on the selling price in this current market. We have a slightly different market composition on Galveston Island, as we have a very strong secondary home and short-term rental market, and that can present unique challenges. Sellers with these types of properties will liquidate these properties from their portfolio first, and right now we are still seeing many overpriced listings which creates longer holding periods.

COVID gave us a false sense of security on market prices that we are still trying to combat. →



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No matter what the market condition is, a well-appointed home will sell fast and at a good price. Renovations and upgrades can always help, such as fresh paint, new flooring, replacing

lighting, or a kitchen or bathroom remodel.

I have also seen sellers offer incentives such as closing-cost credits or a home warranty to potential buyers.

When working with sellers, I always work to ensure we are reaching our target audience with marketing that is proven to be the most successful. Proper staging can also be very beneficial in making the home as show-worthy as possible.

Finally, the market has not cooled as much for sellers as one might think. Inventory is very low by historical standards. Since both supply and demand for real estate is low, we aren't seeing the downward shifts in pricing that we would have expected. As a result, it is still a great time to sell.

I host meet-and-greets at my home, and I recently hosted a holiday party in December at Rockefeller's for my clients and friends.

Compass is very involved with the community, and giving back with community outreach. I endorse political candidates who will be champions for our community, and I host events and fundraisers for them, too. I have already endorsed a great candidate for mayor.

The market is not like it was a year or two ago, but I have a good network that I'm constantly looking to expand on. I am always excited to grow the buyers and sellers that I can work with. For the client wanting to move outside the loop, I like to introduce them to Spring Branch, Garden Oaks/Oak Forest, and Meyerland as great neighborhoods that are close. For the true suburbs, I like The Woodlands, Sugar Land, Katy, and Kingwood! ▼



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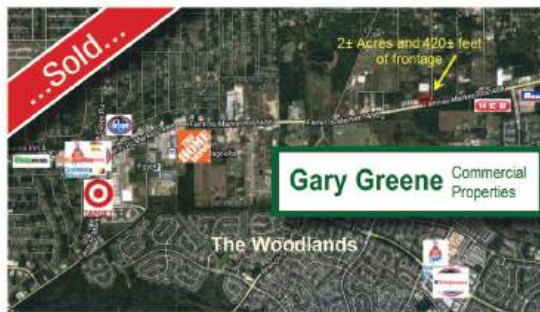
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Dialing Up Diversity

Galveston Realtor Tom Schwenk partners with an industry inclusivity program to increase LGBTQ representation.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



For more than 20 years, Tom Schwenk has been a fixture on Galveston Island, helping those who are looking for their home-sweet-home.

Now, the gay real-estate agent is giving back by supporting an inclusivity program that aims to increase LGBTQ representation in the real-estate industry.

Tom's Galveston Real Estate (TGRE) joined the Coldwell Banker network late last year, and he now operates as Coldwell Banker TGRE serving Galveston County. Coldwell Banker's Inclusive Ownership program is part of this business venture, an initiative to recruit and support people of color, women, LGBTQ, and veteran entrepreneurs looking for a career in the real-estate industry.

"I'm passionate about customer service and helping people buy, sell, and lease in Galveston," Schwenk says. "Coldwell Banker has wonderful tools for sellers and buyers, and they offer an incredible marketing reach. Like me, they are committed to creating a team of professional Realtors focused on what's best for their clients. It's a good match."

It's been clear to Schwenk since moving to the island that the community welcomes people from all walks of life. The Inclusive Ownership program is a great way to help other people like him get a fair chance at building a career in the real-estate business.

"Galveston is a diverse, welcoming place, which is one of the reasons my husband, Jack, and I love life on the island," he says. "Diversity is also important to Coldwell Banker. They have some great programs in place to increase diversity within the real-estate industry.



"Being a visible role model is important to me. Being a successful entrepreneur and professional Realtor is a great way to change people's minds. Inclusion is important to Coldwell Banker, and their program offers help and mentoring to minority businesses. As a successful gay-owned real-estate firm with a proven track record, I was invited to become a Coldwell Banker affiliate. Our partnership is

amazing, and being celebrated and wanted as a gay 65-year-old feels unbelievable."

Galveston is not only a great place to live, but it's also become a strong real-estate market over the past 20 years, Schwenk notes. While some may be wary of buying a house due to the current rising interest rates and recession worries, Schwenk believes Galveston's market is in good shape. →

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"Not only am I a Realtor and homeowner, but I also have investment properties on the island," he says. "Things have stabilized since the high prices and low inventory of the past two years. While the high interest rates may be a concern for some, real estate consistently comes out as a good investment over time. Galveston has such diverse housing options. I think there will always be interest in what this unique place has to offer. While prices have increased, Galveston is simply catching up to other beachfront communities. I also think that there will be more price adjustments in the midrange price points.

"Thanks to the cruise ships, we have a vibrant downtown with restaurants, cafes, and boutiques that are the envy of larger cities," he explains. "We have wonderful parks, wild spaces, fascinating history, historic homes, and fun festivals. Of course, all of this is made possible by the people. Galveston is diverse and welcoming, people here have an independent spirit, and they care about each other. People want to live here because you can really get involved in so many fantastic things. So many clever and passionate people have invested time,

**"GALVESTON IS A DIVERSE,
WELCOMING PLACE,
WHICH IS ONE OF THE
REASONS MY HUSBAND,
JACK, AND I LOVE LIFE
ON THE ISLAND."**

—Tom Schwenk

energy, and money to keep Galveston growing and developing while still retaining its special historic charm," he explains. "I see this area continuing to be a popular spot for those looking for a residence."

Schwenk's advice to people looking for a property in the area is to make sure they know what their needs are. "Think specifically about what you value. What is really important to you? Is it being able to walk to a cafe? Is it hav-

ing an extra bedroom? Talk to local lenders and get your finances sorted out so that when you are ready to make an offer, everything is ready to go. Don't forget that this is an emotional adventure, so try to be long-range in your planning."

Going forward, Schwenk will continue to focus on helping people—something that's guided him throughout his life. "What I do is ultimately all about people," he concludes. "I love helping people buy, sell, and lease. I've had lifelong clients who started with me out of college renting their first place. Then they get married and buy a home, and they want me to find a bigger place for them when they have children. Other clients want second homes to enjoy a beach lifestyle or even to have an investment property. There is always something different—a different problem, a different angle—and it's great to get out and be part of it. One of my clients said I was the "unofficial mayor of Galveston" because I knew everyone and how to sort out any problem. I thought that was the highest compliment. Keeping my clients happy is what it is all about."

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A Star's Turn

Billy Porter's first nationwide solo tour includes a stop in Houston.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Photo courtesy of Republic Records



It's Billy's world, and everyone else is finally catching up to him. Star of stage and screen, Billy Porter is sashaying onto stages across the country as he embarks

on his first national solo tour. The Grammy, Emmy, and two-time Tony Award-winning singer, composer, director, author, actor, and playwright is bringing his trademark sass, show-stopping voice, and unapologetic authenticity to Houston on May 13.

Porter's six-week tour, *The Black Mona Lisa Tour: Volume 1*, is dazzling audiences with 90-minute performances of brand-new songs, including his recent release "Baby Was a Dancer."

Speaking by phone from New York City, Porter expressed excitement about bringing some joy and love to H-Town. "Audiences can expect real music with a message—music that is celebratory. We're celebrating life, we're celebrating love."

Audiences will also enjoy the full band backing Porter as he tells his life story through song. His iconic career has made him a worldwide superstar, having gained a large following of Broadway fans and viewers of the FX show *POSE*, to name just a couple of his career highlights. "I'm taking everybody on a little bit of a journey through my life," he teases. "I am in so many different spaces, so I'm going to use this concert to bring all of my audiences together from all the different spaces [that they know me from], because music is a universal language."

With a professional career that began decades ago, Porter has a lot of ground to cover in 90 minutes. "This tour is all about me, and this moment is on my own terms. My first R&B album came out in '97. It was not a safe place for queer men of color—or anybody who was

queer—at that time, really," Porter recalls. "It's so wonderful to be back and doing it on my own terms. I'm grateful to have lived long enough to see the day where my true, authentic self is celebrated, and my queerness is my superpower. So, you can expect that we're going to be celebrating all of that."

Porter promises that this tour will be a treat beyond compare for his tried-and-true fan base. "There's a bunch of new music, and I'm also going back to my first album and doing a medley of that, so we'll see who the *real* fans are!" he laughs, offering a glimpse of his set list. "I have a *Kinky Boots* section and I've gotten some requests from out in the world, so I'm open to ideas."

**"AUDIENCES CAN
EXPECT REAL MUSIC
WITH A MESSAGE.
WE'RE CELEBRATING
LIFE, WE'RE
CELEBRATING LOVE."**

—Billy Porter

Always aiming to please his fans, Porter explains that some songs didn't make the cut this time. "You know, I'm not trying to be up there for four hours!" he exclaims humorously. "There's a lot to discover as one is putting something like this together."

Aside from the wide-ranging set list, Porter has been putting his stamina to the ultimate test as he gears up for his 25-city run of shows—including cycling while singing to make sure he can maintain his endurance.

"I've started yoga and I'm going to Pilates. I'm just getting back into it and jumping back on the horse. I've gotta be a good boy for the next couple of months. No smoking!"

The out-and-proud performer looks forward to bringing his unique perspective and his message of love and inclusion to his fans nationwide. "I'm very political and I'm very outspoken. I'm a person who speaks the truth and speaks my mind, and I will continue to do that," Porter says of his stance on political issues. "My tone when speaking about what's happening right now comes from a place of positivity and a place of healing, as far as I'm concerned, because the change has already happened—which is why there's so much pushback. That's why it's so difficult right now."

Porter invites all Houstonians to join him in celebrating life, and he especially encourages the LGBTQ community to double down on "what we know is true and real, and to show up as our authentic selves, always and forever." He adds that the simple fact of our existence is a political act, in and of itself.

Porter hearkens back to his childhood as he speaks directly to those who aren't as confident or ready to live their lives outwardly and honestly. "I told myself, hold on. I told that to myself—just hold on. Keep putting one foot in front of the other and keep believing in yourself and keep doing it. You keep showing up, the doors will open. But you have to put the right energy out. And the energy is to keep moving forward. Always."

WHAT: Billy Porter's *The Black Mona Lisa Tour: Volume 1*

WHEN: May 13, 8:00 p.m.

WHERE: Bayou Music Center, 520 Texas Ave.

INFO: theebillyporter.com



Authenticity Through Art

Caleb de Casper comes to Houston for the Legendary Art Car Ball.

By MORGAN GAGE
Photos by ROGER HO

When Caleb de Casper performs at the Legendary Art Car Ball later this month, audiences can “expect a little bit of fire.” Casper’s showstopping feats might be flashy, but they’re grounded in authenticity. Musically inclined from an early age, the performer has found a voice in music and uses his art as a way to be true to himself while advocating for the LGBTQ community.

“That was a way for me to be powerful and show people who I was when I walked into the room, instead of letting them make their own assumptions about me,” Casper recalls. “I feel like a lot of queer people had to grow up feeling like they had no power at all in social situations. [Performing] is just a way to feel that I have a lot of power. I figured that out very early—I figured out how to basically control a room through my energy, and just take the reins.”

While the LGBTQ community throughout history has toned down their queerness out of necessity, Casper explains that queer artists are now creating and performing in a time where they don’t have to do that anymore. “Visibility as an out queer artist is more important than ever as the community continues to fight against the demonization of queer people.

“My biggest thing is authenticity. If I’m going to do something, I want to make sure that it is my decision, because at the end of the day, art is a way for us to see each other. Especially right now in this really shitty political climate that we’ve all been thrown into, I think it’s really important that we *see* each other—[and not

just] caricatures of each other on the news, or sound bites of each other.”

For Casper, this means being authentic even when authenticity is difficult. In the past year, the pianist and songwriter had to leave a job that didn’t like their public image, or that they identified as “genderqueer in everyday life.”

While Casper worried that his art might have ruined his relationship with his employer, his students, or their families, he found that the opposite was true. Since leaving his previous job, he has started his own teaching studio and

now has people who come to him for lessons *because* of his authenticity, rather than in spite of it.

“My community supports me. The relationships that you make with other people in your community are [based on your] authenticity, and being a trustworthy person,” he says.

The Texas-based artist is excited to come to Houston, which they say “has the same electricity as New York” while still retaining its Southern charm. Besides looking forward to revisiting NUA Thai in Midtown,



Caleb de Casper

Casper is excited to bring to life an Art Car Ball “production fantasy.” While details are still being hammered out for the performance, Casper is working through “schematics, blueprints, and logistics” to bring an electrifying performance to the event.

Casper continues to pen songs and perform for larger and larger crowds, with growing production values to match. His album *Femme Boy*, which was released in 2019, represents the range that the artist is capable of, with 12 songs performed in various genres and styles.

“Three years ago now, I was told—for what I deemed to be the final time—that I was too gay to be successful with mainstream audiences. Fast-forward now to 2023, and I feel like every week I get more and more successful,” he observes.

Casper’s shows bring together a mix of perspectives in the audience, from those having more mainstream tastes (including many straight listeners) to LGBTQ fans of her music. The shows also serve as a link between queer or trans identities and the larger heteronormative culture.



With the mounting threats against the LGBTQ community, Casper believes it is more important than ever for queer artists to be heard. Recently speaking on a panel discussing art advocacy at South by Southwest in Austin—and then testifying against Texas Senate Bill 12 (known as the “Drag Queen Bill”)—Casper remains authentic to himself in the face of fierce opposition as he advocates for the LGBTQ community in the public arena.

“Visibility is very important, because we

exist to connect with each other. We use music and art to show each other who we are, and to connect. Right now in this world, where they’re trying to demonize people who are different, it’s just so important,” Casper emphasizes. “It’s so important to be a queer artist.”

What: The Legendary Art Car Ball

When: April 14

Where: Orange Show Headquarters

Info: thehoustonsartcarparade.com/art-car-ball

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The Kidd's Got It

Rapper **Kidd Kenn** comes to Houston as a headliner for next month's Black Queer AF Music Festival.

By ZACH MCKENZIE
Photo by JASPER SOLOFF



Having made waves with his national television debut at the 2021 BET Hip Hop Awards, rapper Kidd Kenn's career has been blasting off ever since. Attendees of Normal Anomaly's second annual Black Queer AF

Music Festival on May 6 are in for a treat as Kenn lands on the headliner stage for a performance that the artist promises will be one festival-goers won't soon forget.

Kidd Kenn made history in 2021 as the first openly gay rapper featured in the BET Hip Hop Awards' annual cypher, and he stole the show with his unabashedly queer lyrics and lightning-fast raps. With lyrics like *"Kenn going up is the only way / Benjamin is my only bae / eat me up like I be on a plate / they hella mad, I'm hella gay"* it's not hard to imagine why fans have been reacting so passionately to the performer and his rhymes.

"To be honest, it was the feeling I had being on stage seeing people's reactions to my craft that just gave me like a rush," Kenn says of his motivation to pursue rap full-time. "It's something I believe I can see myself doing for a long time."

The festival, which will include immersive games and activities along with local and national celebrity entertainment, is on track to be 2023's premier "party with a purpose." The team at Normal Anomaly has put plenty of thought and care into the event, with "community" top of mind during the planning process.

Kidd Kenn's story is one of following his artistic passions from an early age—a

journey to success that can inspire anyone who is on a quest of pursuing their own dreams, regardless of age. “I started around sixth grade. I would go home after school, write little raps, and post them online,” the 20-year-old explains.

Building off the rap muscles he’d been developing since elementary school, Kenn took a more intentional step into the world of rap as a teenager. “I started actually putting out songs and videos in 2018.”

A combination of reality and fantasy guides his writing process—a writing style emblematic of the dichotomy between real life and escapism that most queer people can relate to. “I write literally about stuff that I go through on the regular degular. Like, it be just real-life stuff. Sometimes I’ll take it to a fantasy moment—a place I would want to be at. There are just a lot of different ways I come across.”

Scrolling through Kidd Kenn’s Instagram page, it’s immediately clear that he also uses fashion to show the world how out, bold, and fierce he is. “Fashion is for sure another way I express myself, both through my outfits and my hair—just my whole look,” he says. “It is a part of the look, because, you

“I ENJOY SHOWING HOW OUT I AM, AND HOW I’M ALWAYS JUST BEING ME.”

—Kidd Kenn

know, I am Kidd Kenn and it’s all got to make sense at the end of the day. And to be honest, I just really love fashion. I was always a fashion girl, and I just couldn’t wait to get a little bit more money so I could do a little bit more.”

With his coin secured, Kenn is ready to bring his energy, talent, and queerness to the Black Queer AF Festival stage next month. “I’m gonna be onstage breaking it down, looking real good,” he says without missing a beat. “It’s gonna be a movie—the biggest, the baddest performance of the year. It’s gonna be everything they want it to be, and that they know it’s going to be.”

Kidd Kenn joins fellow headliner Ken-TheMan and performers Martell Lacey, Jazell Barbie Royale, and Keke Wyatt, to name just a few. The festival’s celebration of Black queer-

ness is something Kenn doesn’t take lightly, as he’s aware that his existence and his commitment to authenticity is something others can look to for inspiration. “[Being an out, Black artist] means the world to me,” he says. “I enjoy showing how out I am and how outgoing I am as a person, and how I’m always just being me.”

As for those looking to make their own mark in the rap world as a queer artist, the rapper who gave us “Vroom Vroom,” “Want Not a Need,” and “Get Lit” is adamant in saying that what worked for him can work for others: stay true to who you are, and celebrate all aspects of yourself. It’s a message he hopes his audience will hear during his performance at the festival—advice that should also resonate with anyone looking for fresh motivation. “Always be 100 percent yourself, because this is what made people fall in love with you. Stay consistent, and go do it.”

Keep up with Kidd Kenn on Instagram @kiddkenn.

WHAT: Black Queer AF Music Festival

WHEN: May 3–7

WHERE: Stampede Houston, 11925 Eastex Fwy.

INFO: normalanomaly.org/bqaf



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Sherlock Meets Oscar Wilde

Todd Waite returns as Sherlock Holmes in Alley Theatre's new production.

By OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ

Photo by LYNN LANE

Expect a slightly different version of Sherlock Holmes in the Alley Theatre's *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily*.

Written by actor-turned-playwright Katie Forgette, *Jersey Lily* mixes the usual Sherlock cast (Sherlock, Dr. Watson, and Professor Moriarty) with historical characters Oscar Wilde and Lillie Langtry.

Alley resident acting-company member Todd Waite returns as Sherlock—his fifth turn at what has become his signature role.

"I just love the scope of this show," says Waite. "Of the five *Sherlock* scripts that I've done, this is by far the best one."

Here, the famously gay Oscar Wilde (played by Christopher Salazar) asks Sherlock to help his friend, actress Lillie Langtry (Krystel Lucas), who's being blackmailed. Wilde also needs a little help from the master detective on his latest project, *The Importance of Being Forthright*.

In previous staged incarnations, Sherlock has been, at best, asexual and indifferent to women and, at worst, an outright misogynist. His relationship with Watson has frequently bordered on a full-blown bromance.

The addition of the foppish Oscar Wilde obviously inserts homosexuality into the story, allowing Waite to develop a more layered lead character. Although Forgette's script doesn't include any overt suggestion that the detective is gay, Waite and director Brandon Weinbrenner, both openly gay artists, each considered sexuality in building the Sherlock character.

"I have read and seen almost every Sherlock that's out there," says Waite. "Some writers think he's asexual because he's so focused on his work. I think that there's an enormous life force in Sherlock, which includes sexuality. I sometimes wonder if part of his drug addiction is how he deals with [his sexuality]."

Waite points to a moment in the *Jersey Lily* script when Sherlock seems to connect romantically with a woman as he starts to kiss her hand, but then stops. "She says, 'Could you

ever?' And Sherlock says, 'Perhaps in another time.'"

"At the same time, he's friends with Oscar Wilde," Waite continues. "I don't know that this famous gay guy, Oscar Wilde, and Sherlock didn't have some opioid-heroin-addicted, accidental tryst at some point. I kinda like to think that they did."

"To what degree is that sexual tension conscious or unconscious?" Waite muses. "I don't want to play that on the surface consciously. I think that would rob Sherlock of the mystery of it, and I don't think it would be Katie Forgette's play, exactly. It will play out in terms of intensity, if not necessarily in overt action."

"OF THE FIVE *SHERLOCK* SCRIPTS THAT I'VE DONE, THIS IS BY FAR THE BEST ONE."

—Todd Waite

Director Weinbrenner agrees, saying, "For me, it's not really supported in the play, but at the same time, there's room for Todd—for this Sherlock—to have that secret. People have attractions to other people that we don't say out loud, that we don't talk about. It's possible; it's just not played on."

"I love the tension, the ambiguity!" laughs Waite.

The seven-person cast includes other Alley audience favorites that Weinbrenner is a big fan of. "They're the best!" he says. "We have a resident acting company at the Alley because we're so selfish that we want to keep all the best Houston actors in our building. I'm joking, of course, but not really."

"We all know how great Todd is as Sherlock. And there's a juicy, villainous, and comedic

part for Elizabeth Bunch," he adds. "She has a wicked sense of humor, so this is pure candy for her to take on this role. I'm so excited to see her chew the scenery with her interpretation of Mrs. Irma Tory."

"With Christopher Salazar, I imagined him as Oscar Wilde when I first read the script. He's great with comedy. And he delivers the lines with the witticisms of Oscar Wilde, so I think it's going to be a really fun role for him."

"Brandon Hearnberger has been no stranger to Alley audiences. If you saw *Cowboy Bob*, his latest role, you saw his range. He can sing, and he's great with comedy. And I'm really ready to show the darker side of Brandon. He's so likable that when he takes on a villain role, it disarms you. I think he's going to have a lot of fun playing Moriarty."

And, of course, the audience is invited to go along with the fun.

"Alley audiences have always been smart," says Weinbrenner. "Some of my favorite memories of Alley audiences are from Summer Chills or Sherlock Holmes shows, hearing everyone during intermission talk about who they think did it, or what's going to happen. I love listening to those conversations."

For Waite, live theater in a post-COVID world is more important and more therapeutic than ever before. "To be in a dark theater and feel the energy, it makes for a unique connection."

Weinbrenner agrees, adding, "Theater should be fun—whether it's a cathartic release, or something that challenges your ideas and beliefs, or just escapism and a fun time. *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily* has the capacity to be all of those. Everyone's going to find something to connect to."

WHAT: *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily*

WHEN: April 19–May 7, 2023

WHERE: Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Avenue

INFO: alleytheatre.org or 713-220-5700



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Houston's Diverse Airport Art

Houston's Civic Art Program brings LGBTQ representation.

By MORGAN ASHLEY GAGE

Houston's Civic Art Program is partnering with the Houston Arts Alliance to welcome new art installations to George Bush Intercontinental Airport as it undergoes renovations. Many of the new installations will be featured in the new Mickey Leland International Terminal to welcome international travelers with art that best represents the Bayou City.

According to Civic Art Program manager Theresa Escobedo, this boom in public art is thanks to a mayoral administration that is particularly supportive of the arts and its role in massive civic projects such as the IAH expansion, with construction across the city generating funds for the civic art program.

When Escobedo began in her position in 2020, the Program did a survey of the artists included in the City's collection of 667 pieces. They discovered that about 62 percent of the art was created by white men, while only about 2 percent was by women of color. This motivated Escobedo to begin commissioning art that is more representative of Houston's diverse population.

In pursuit of this, Grace Zuniga, director of civic art and design for the Houston Arts Alliance, teamed up with Escobedo to select a panel that was representative of the diverse range of perspectives and experiences in Houston. This panel then went on to commission artists by issuing an open call for artworks that will be positioned around the airport, with the majority being placed in the new Mickey Leland International Terminal. Their internal focus was on selecting a diversity of artists who could tell the story of Houston, Escobedo says. What came together from that call had a synergy that couldn't have been planned. "It was as if we curated them," she adds. Out of the artworks commissioned, 50 percent are by LGBTQ artists.

"[Expanding the diversity of the City's commissioned art] is not a fad for us," Escobedo notes. "We are interested in creating a

collection that represents and tells the story of our city, and these artists are absolutely central to that effort."

At the IAH Terminal B Skyway, *Data Stream* by artists Billy Bacaam and Alex Ramos is coming together. The piece, a triptych with LED ropes that are programmed to create a matrix similar to a news ticker, took its influence from the airport itself. Ramos says that the piece was informed by early research highlighting economic disparities in the city, though they tried to focus on the city as a whole and avoid making a political statement.

Ramos says they originally focused on airport travelers as viewers, but they soon realized that their core viewers would be the employees working in the airport on a daily basis—who the artists developed relationships with while they were installing the piece.

"Actually, one of the gentlemen we met that does maintenance on the train was retiring, so our goal was to finish the piece kind of as a present to him," Ramos explains. "It was really beautiful to build these relationships at the airport and just →



IAH Terminal B Skyway Wall Niche by Xavier Schipani



IAH Terminal B Skyway by Input/Output

give people an opportunity to pause for a moment, because they had become so desensitized to these spaces.”

Gay artist Gerardo Rosales creates art that often draws on autobiographical elements with a political focus, such as his previous work denouncing police brutality against the LGBTQ community in Venezuela. His pieces are also inspired by the nature and landscape of Houston, which he says evokes memories of his native Venezuela.

“From there, I [plan] my design with the intention to create something really colorful and welcoming that will attract everyone—from adults to children—with imagery that is very colorful and easy to access,” Rosales explains.

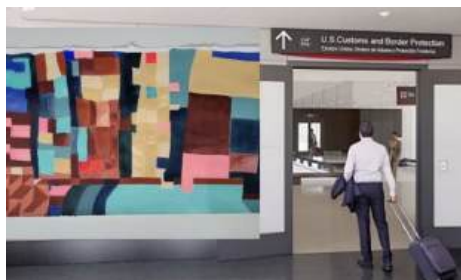
For interdisciplinary queer artist Lovie Olivia, the history of Gee’s Bend quilts sparked the idea of a community quilt installation in the new international terminal at one of the gates. She envisions it as a multicolored piece that pulls its colors from the city’s turquoise and muddy-green bayous as well as the vibrant orange and blue Houston Astros logo, with a pattern influenced by Santa Fe quilts.

Olivia also finds motifs and iconography from the many cultures of Houston, while using gold string to visually interlock these community symbols together to represent Houstonians like her who are multiracial and multiethnic.

“I’ve now collected about 80 quilts [from



Gerardo Rosales



Lovie Olivia

local thrift stores] so that I can actually use them as resource materials for the airport painting that I’m doing, Olivia says. “I think the fact that this oversized quilt is so large adds to this sort of covering and comforting ability [that quilts naturally have].”

The strong showing of LGBTQ artists in the City’s airport art initiative leads Jake Margolin to describe the airport commissions as his “dream queer art show.” Together with his partner, Nick Vaughan, he’s creating a piece

focused on Montrose that draws from a number of photographs taken throughout the neighborhood. The installation will also reflect their work and research on hidden queer histories across all 50 states.

“It’s largely about reclaiming agency and presence in a history that has actively erased queer people from the record,” Vaughan explains. “When you look at the landscape of Houston, the degree to which it has been shaped by queer culture is astonishing, right?”

Olivia emphasizes the importance of exploring Houston’s queer Black histories—from her own time at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in the heart of Montrose to her work at Project Row Houses in Third Ward. “I’m always digging into the African American queer history of Houston,” Olivia emphasizes. “I’m interested in the boundaries and intersections of communities.”

She does this by celebrating Black luminaries like Pat Parker, Barbara Jordan, and other significant figures. As a child, Olivia recalls hearing about Congressman Mickey Leland dying in a plane crash during a humanitarian visit to Africa.

“I now have an opportunity to celebrate his history in the airport, and sort of dig into that childhood memory when it was so devastating to hear that someone so generous had just perished,” Olivia says. “So it’s all that sort of interweaving. I’ve created a comforter.”

➡ For more info, visit houstonartsalliance.com.

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Stories from the Heartland

Photographer Maxwell Poth's new book highlights queer youth in rural America.

By ZACH MCKENZIE
Photo by LUKE FONTANA

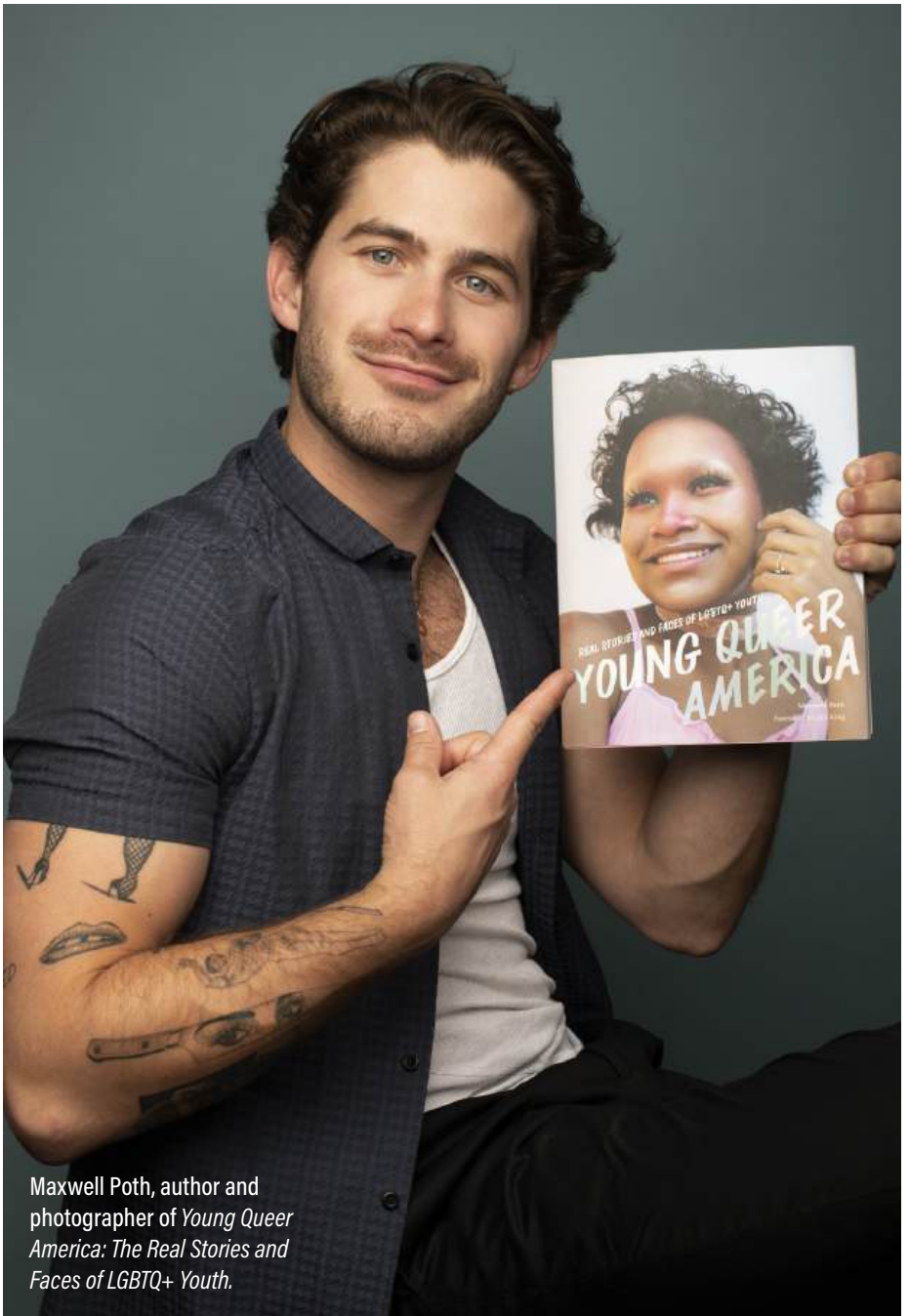
Recent efforts have been made in pop culture to depict the LGBTQ community's increasing visibility and acceptance. While the wheels of progress are certainly turning, photographer Maxwell Poth understands firsthand that the safe spaces for queer youth depicted on television and in film are often missing in the more conservative pockets of rural America.

Poth is a gay Utah native who has made a name for himself as a top photographer in Los Angeles. His talents and devotion to advocating for queer youth recently led him on a nationwide tour that has culminated in the publication of *Young Queer America: Real Stories and Faces of LGBTQ+ Youth*, a collection of interviews and stunning photography that reveals the true face of queer youth in America.

"I traveled to 16 states and documented a total of 73 young queer Americans, mainly throughout rural America but with some bigger cities included, as well," Poth explains. "I met with them, got to know their personal stories, and interviewed them on what it's like to be queer where they're from. At the end of their stories in the book, they give advice to other young queer kids."

Poth's journalism project, which took roughly two years to complete, was partially self-funded, with additional financial aid from Project Contrast, the nonprofit organization Poth founded to amplify voices of LGBTQ youth through the power of storytelling. While he was first outlining the project in 2020, Poth knew he needed to tap into the American heartland.

"I think it's really important to highlight these kids [in rural America] and paint a picture of what it's really like in this country. I decided to choose rural America to travel to and meet these kids because their stories deserve to be highlighted. Even though you'll read some pretty sad, moving stories, you'll also read a lot of positive ones. They're the true America—the people fighting just to live another day." →



Maxwell Poth, author and photographer of *Young Queer America: The Real Stories and Faces of LGBTQ+ Youth*.

The book project was also Poth's way of honoring a gay Utah teen who tragically took his own life. "The book is dedicated to a boy named Stockton Powers," Poth explains. "He's a boy from my hometown who took his life because he was gay. We went to the same high school, had the same teachers, and he really made an impact in the state of Utah. Even though he lost his life, Utah really started to listen."

Poth's search for young participants willing to be interviewed was easier said than done. His online searches—everything from hashtags to TikToks—eventually paid off, and even led Poth to Houston for two interviews.

**"THE POINT OF
THIS BOOK IS
TO HELP QUEER
YOUTH FIND
COMMUNITY."**

—Maxwell Poth

"Texas is a giant state filled with so many different types of people," he says. "I wanted to find interesting youth in Houston to really highlight a specific demographic. I worked with a trans boy named Hayden who is really amazing. Hayden is a born advocate who takes life by the horns. They wanted to see change, so they created change. They wanted to see community, so they created community. Hayden grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family and was not afraid to be themselves—not only [as a queer teen], but also as a confident individual in their Jewish community."

"I also worked with a Houston kid who was kicked out of their home. They had to figure things out on their own and they found safety in Houston before moving to Austin."

Reflecting on the potential impact of his project, Poth hopes his book is read by those who need it most. "My number-one goal is to make sure every queer youth in America has this book. It can also help a struggling parent accept their child, or bring an ally to understanding who these children are and what their lives are like," he says.

"I thought my life was going in one direction. Choosing the path of becoming a photographer in Los Angeles by following my heart ultimately led me to this project.



The four Texas youth who were featured in Poth's book (clockwise from top left): Nathaniel, Hayden, Trevor, and Nidhi

I hope I can keep doing this kind of work, and I plan to."

As Poth's years-long project is finally being released to the masses, he looks back on his travels with pride. "I have traveled all over the country. Even though geographically and demographically it's so different, you'd be surprised how similar all of the youth are. When the featured youth read these stories, even though they're all different, they will hopefully see that they're not so dissimilar, and how beautiful that is. The point of this book

is to help queer youth find community and realize that it exists all over the country—even in their own neighborhoods. That's something really beautiful that I got out of all of this. There is literally a beautiful queer community anywhere you go. You just have to find them."

Maxwell Poth's *Young Queer America: Real Stories and Faces of LGBTQ+ Youth* is available wherever books are sold.



Keep up with Maxwell Poth
on Instagram @Maxwell Poth.

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WEDDING GUIDE



Truett Manning (l) and Bimal J. Patel

Fairy-Tale Love

Bimal J. Patel and Truett Manning were wed in an Irish castle.

By **JENNY BLOCK**

Photos by **MOAT HILL PHOTOGRAPHY**



Houstonians Bimal J. Patel and Truett Manning love a fairy-tale setting. Luckily for the two of them, they've also found a fairytale kind of love.

Bimal, 37, is an optometrist at Focus Refined Eye Care and the director of medical affairs at Eye Care Leaders. He holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and an optometry degree from the University of Houston College of Optometry.

Truett, 33, a University of Houston–Clear Lake graduate, is a territory manager at Crowne Aesthetics. They currently live in Midtown while they have their “dream home” built in West University Place.

In November of 2018, they met on Bumble and had their first date at True Food Kitchen on December 4. What followed was true romance. “Skating at Discovery Green on one of our dates, sharing desserts (we both love sweets). Our first trip to New York City together was a magical one,” Bimal recalls with a smile. “We knew then that this was something special. Truett also met some of my extended family on this trip.”

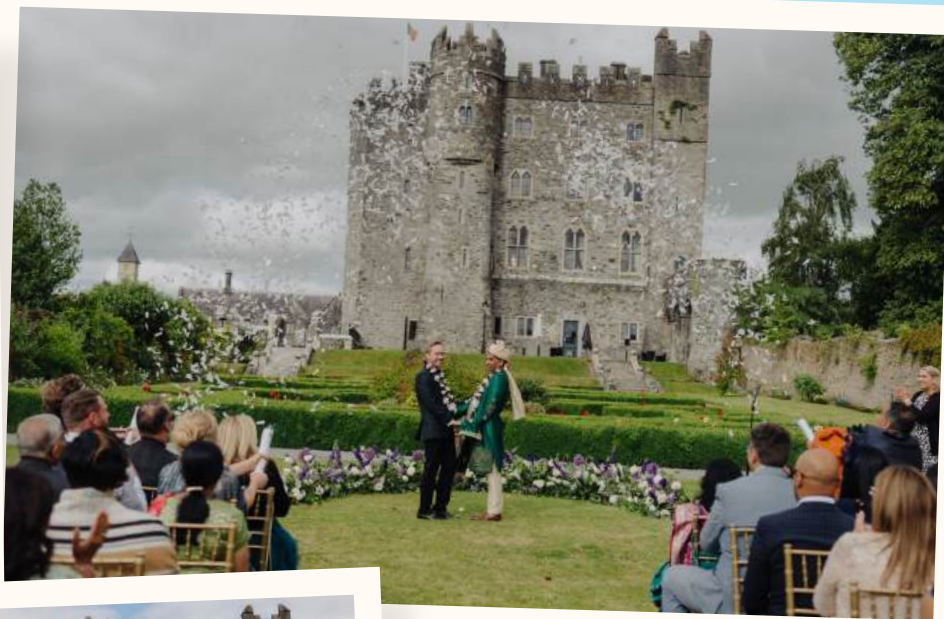
So, on the third anniversary of their fateful first date, Bimal proposed to Truett. They had discussed getting married, and even considered having the ceremony in Ireland.

Bimal had a “Love Book”—an original illustrated storybook—made as an anniversary gift for Truett. “I had a photographer come to the

house and told Truett she was there to take headshots of me for my business,” Bimal explains. “She was in on my surprise, and during the photo shoot asked if we wanted any photos taken together. Then she asked if we wanted to do a gift exchange.”

That’s when Bimal gave Truett the book. “At the end of the book was my proposal, and I got down on one knee,” Bimal says. “It was a beautiful day, and our rooftop deck overlooks the city [so we spent time up there] and it was all captured by the photographer.”

The two were wed on July 4, 2022, at the Kilkea Castle in County Kildare, Ireland, by officiant Romey McAuley. They describe themselves as big fans of *The Crown* and *Downton Abbey*. “We love the majestic



landscapes and castles,” Bimal says. “Truett has ancestors from Ireland, so we thought it would be fun to do a destination wedding there.”

Bimal and Truett also felt confident their family and friends would welcome the chance to travel after the lingering pandemic. With the help of a local planner, they were able to make their fairy-tale dreams come true.

“Planning a wedding overseas was a challenge, because it was hard to picture things, and only seeing some of our vendors a day or two before was stressful,” Bimal admits. “You have to put a lot of trust in your planner, and she was very helpful and made us feel at ease.”

Nine months before the wedding, the couple visited Ireland on a planning trip. “It was important for us to get legally married in Ireland on the day of our ceremony. Because there is a good bit of paperwork and docu-

mentation necessary, a planning trip is a good idea to ensure that you’ll have your wedding certificate to be signed on the big day,” Bimal explains.

“We really loved having the Kilkea Castle as the backdrop, and having an outdoor wedding. The weather was perfect, given that Ireland is very rainy and unpredictable,” Bimal adds. “We loved having an Indian/Irish fusion wedding. It was the perfect blend. We came in on horses, in keeping with the Baraat entrance of the groom that’s common in Indian weddings. Indian folk dancers led the parade in front of the castle. It was like a Bollywood film set in the Irish countryside!”

The couple also included the ancient Celtic tradition of handfasting, and included both of their parents in the ceremony. “In handfasting, we are essentially ‘tying the knot.’ The celebrant reads our promises, or vows, and after each one, our parents tie ribbons around our hands to connect them,” Truett says.

Both Bimal and Truett are very close to their families, and were delighted to have them be a part of the ceremony. They also exchanged varmalas (flower garlands) as their acceptance of each other, which is a Hindu tradition.

Bimal surprised Truett with a special performance during the reception. “Bimal sang ‘Latch’ by Sam Smith while my dad played the guitar,” Truett recalls. “It was so amazing and unexpected. Bimal loves to surprise me and make me feel special.”

But what Truett admires most about Bimal is his fierce determination. “When he puts his mind to something, he will not stop until his vision is a reality.”

Bimal adds that “Truett is so authentic and has a beautiful heart and soul, and that is what makes him so special.”

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OUTSMART'S MARCH ISSUE HAPPY HOUR AT PEARL BAR March 23, 2023

The Women in Power Issue happy-hour reception organized by OUTSMART was a fantastic celebration of powerful women in the LGBTQ community, timed to coincide with Women's History Month in March. Held at Pearl Bar Houston, the event was a chance to recognize the achievements and contributions of women who have made a difference in the lives of others.

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VICTORY FUND HOUSTON CHAMPAGNE BRUNCH 2023 March 5, 2023

Mayor Annise Parker and the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund welcomed hundreds of supporters and allies to the 2023 Houston Champagne Brunch at the Post Oak Hotel. The keynote speaker was US Senator Tammy Baldwin. Also in attendance were nearly two dozen LGBTQ elected officials from around the state and beyond.

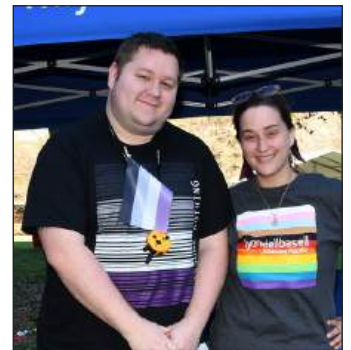
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AIDS FOUNDATION HOUSTON HOSTS WALK TO END HIV March 5, 2023

AIDS Foundation Houston's annual Walk to End HIV in Sam Houston Park drew hundreds of Houstonians to raise funds for local nonprofits, including The Truth Project, Lazarus House, Avenue 360, The Normal Anomaly Initiative, and Fundación Latinoamericana de Acción Social. The event aimed to raise \$300,000 to combat the HIV epidemic in Greater Houston. Attendees enjoyed an after-party with local food and drink, music, prizes, and outdoor activities. This year marks the 34th consecutive year of the event.



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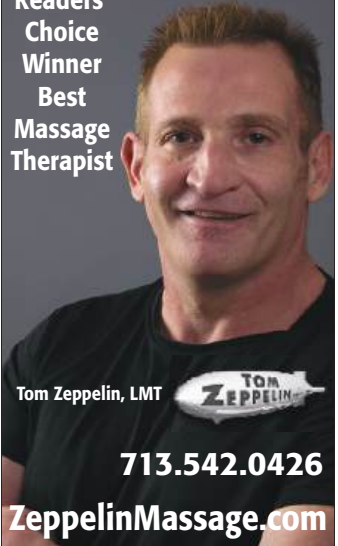


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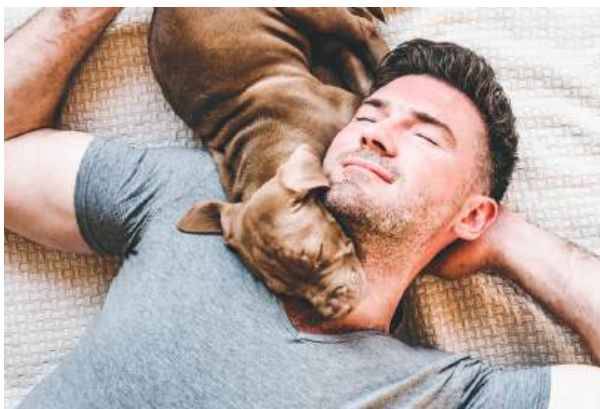


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Mercury Goes Retrograde

A powerful Aries solar eclipse on April 19.



Mercury, the planet of communication, will be going retrograde April 16–May 20 in Taurus. This will have a significant impact on the fixed signs of Taurus, Leo, Aquarius, and Scorpio, but everyone will feel its effects. This is a good time to review the past, complete unfinished projects, and reconnect with old friends—but try to avoid starting new ventures, as things may not work out as smoothly. On April 19 at 11:13 p.m., a powerful solar eclipse in Aries may have a significant global impact. The month starts with the sun in Aries, moving into Taurus on the 20th—the same day Mercury goes retrograde. Venus remains in Taurus until May 10, and Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto maintain their positions in Cancer, Aries, Pisces, Taurus, Pisces, and Aquarius, respectively. April 7, 8, 10, 11, 23, 25, and 29 are good days to look forward to, while caution is advised on April 3, 14, 15, 20, and 21.

ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

This is your yearly birthday, or “solar return” as we say in Astrologese—your personal new year for reviewing the past year and looking forward to the next year. This is an especially good time for you, with more opportunities to expand your life and your present goals. Family is definitely your focus this month. You may want to entertain more at home, consider remodeling or relocating, and deal with family issues directly. You will be acting more directly, and may have less patience than usual. You will want to find positive ways to release this energy through exercise, yoga, or martial arts. Later in the month, you look at your finances and your skills. You want to do something fun that inspires passion. The eclipse on the 19th may open new doors.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

This is a big month for you, with Mercury going retrograde in your sign on the 16th. As the month begins, you are in a rest-and-retreat mode. This is a good time to gather your thoughts and get centered for the rest of the month. You are more sensitive to things than usual. Later in the month, you will begin to stick your head out as your energy builds and you are feeling more grounded. You are exploring ways to make your dreams come to fruition. You are moving into a time of leadership and taking your life into your own hands. You may consider starting your own business, or if you are older, cutting back and enjoying a less demanding life. We have more energy for our daily activities and taking care of events from the past while Mercury is retrograde in your sign.

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

Overall, you are in a more stable time of decision-making and paying attention to your boundaries. This is a much better time for social activity, connecting with friends, or working for a community cause. This is a better time for business, sales, and presenting your skills. You will also want to have more fun this month. In the latter half of

the month, you are taking some time for rest and retreat. This is a great time to enjoy creature comforts. You may be questioning your spiritual beliefs, and you are more open to alternative views about spirituality and life after death. Watch your spending this month, as you are more likely to impulse-shop. Your ruler, Mercury, goes retrograde this month, so take time to focus on the past.

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

This is a busy, active, and energetic time for the Moon Kids. Mars, planet of action, self-protection, health, and instinctive responses, visits your sign for the next 54 days. Mars is always best for initiating new activities and ventures. Try to get as much as possible started before April 16 when Mercury goes retrograde. That's the time to focus on projects you have started, and work on planning for your next quests. This is an excellent time to focus on your health, diet, and just being generally more active. You Cancerians will be short on patience as you take life more personally! Your career area is very active with new opportunities. This can be a great time to take a leadership role, or expand into something you can be in charge of. Friends are much more supportive toward the end of the month.

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

This is going to be an active social and career-focused month. As the month begins, you are open to new ideas and furthering your education. This is also a very good time for travel and expanding your presence on social media. In the latter half of the month, you'll be paying attention to your career, family, and social expectations. Mercury will be retrograde in this area of your Zodiac. You may be rethinking decisions about career choices, or correcting some problems that were overlooked. You have been looking to do something new, and this may be the time when you are triggered to consider other options. Close friends can be helpful if you reach out for their help! This is also the time to pay more attention to

your investments and spending. Money may be tight, and you will want to be more conservative.

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

You are entering a time of improving your boundaries in relationships, both business and personal. In positive relationships, this is a great time to set new goals for the future. In difficult partnerships, this is the time to resolve those problems or move on. With your ruler, Mercury, going retrograde on the 16th, you should get as much started as you need to. After the 16th, it is time to review and focus on the past. In the first half of the month, you are paying attention to your finances, and especially to freeing yourself from debt. This is a good time for refinancing, especially with Mercury retrograde after the 16th. In the latter half of the month, you are more creative and want to share your knowledge with others. This is a great time for teaching or taking a class, stepping outside of your own culture, and taking a more global view of the world.

LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

The majority of planets are in the relationship area of your horoscope, so this is a great time to have a partner, look for a new partner if you are single, and just learn how to have a better relationship with yourself. If you are single, this continues to be a good time to meet new people. This is also a better time to deal with lawsuits or attorneys. In the latter half of the month, you are focused on your finances and the state of the economy. With Mercury retrograde in that area of your horoscope, this may be a good time to consider refinancing, getting rid of debt, and exploring new investment possibilities. This is a great time to do research, but taking action needs to wait until after May 20. The eclipse on the 20th could feel very personal. That could be a great mental-health day!

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

This is going to be a very busy month for you. Your work is very busy and perhaps even chaotic. This is a good time to get organized and re-establish positive routines in your life. Co-workers can be more difficult and demanding. The eclipse on the 20th could open new doors for you and break through the stalemate. In the latter half of the month, you are much more engaged in your relationships. Mercury will be retrograding there, and you will hear from people from your past. Mercury retrograde can be difficult if you are having partnership problems. You will not be able to move forward until those issues are addressed. In Mercury retrograde times, difficult partnerships often come to an end. Home and family are becoming more and more important in your life. Changes could occur that reorders the family.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

You are looking to have more fun and be more creative in early April. If you have children, this is a great time to be with them—they bring out the playfulness in you! This is a super time to enjoy your hobby or a get-away, but after the 16th it's time to get back to work. It's an especially important time to pay attention to details at work. You may need to go back and resolve some issues you missed. These are more likely to oc-

cur at your workplace. Your personal routines may seem off. This is an important time to pay attention to your health and exercise regimen. In the larger picture, you are reviewing your career path. You may be planning to do something entirely different. If you are older, you may be looking at cutting back and having more time to yourself.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

Home and family continue to remain one of the strong areas of focus in your horoscope. This can be a super month for a family reunion, remodeling, relocating, and expanding your family through births and marriages. You may want to spend more time at home and enjoy the fruits of your labor. Your partnership requires some attention this month and next. This would be a great month to get away and renew those bonds. If left unattended, there could be more disagreements and fighting. If you are single, the first half of the month is a good time to meet new people. After the 16th, it's best to keep your options open. In the latter half of the month, you are looking for ways to bring more joy into your life. You are more creative and are enjoying your life more.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

As the month begins, you should be fairly busy with lots of personal plans that you want to get done to make life easier. You may hear from family and siblings. The first

half of the month is better for learning new apps, replacing old equipment, and being more outspoken about what is going on in your life. In the latter half of the month, you are thinking about your family. It's a good time to connect with those you haven't seen in a while. You may also want to do some house repairs and even consider downsizing to give yourself more freedom. The eclipse on the 20th may provide clues on how to approach that. This is a very good time to restart exercise or diet programs—and get results!

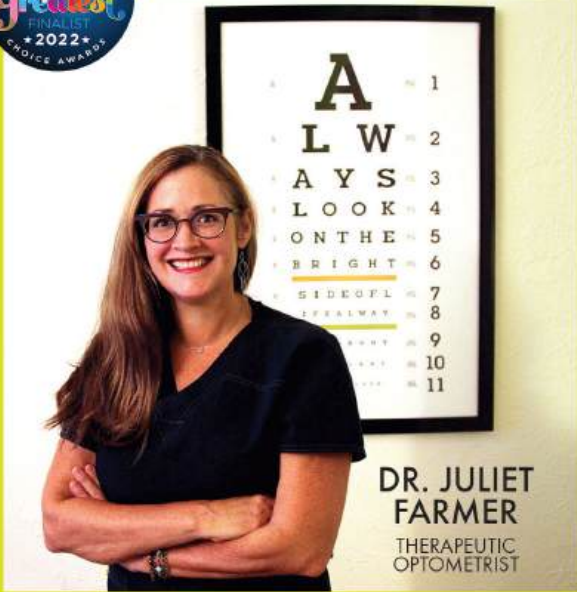
PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

Career and relationship decisions, improving your personal boundaries, and stability are all on the agenda this month. You are reviewing your sense of self-worth and looking at ways to improve your financial picture. You may be asking for a raise or increasing your fees. This is a much better time to market yourself. With your new boundaries, you are tired of being the responsible one who doesn't get the recognition. In the latter half of the month, you are more introspective. You want to change your routines so you have more flexibility. The latter half of the month is a better time to contact people from your youth. Your actions this month need to take you forward!

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Chaos Queen

Estella Blow works the party with her trashcan-turned-glam style.

By SAM BYRD | Photo by ALEX ROSA



When a wind stirs from the east these days, it's not Mary Poppins who's about to drift in—it's Estella Blow, the self-proclaimed "Roly-poly of Houston." This stellar

performer is equal parts glamazon and performance artist. She's edgy, unafraid to break the rules, and padded for the gods. Read on to find out her secrets to blowing away the competition.

Pronouns?

In drag: she/her. Out of drag: he/him. But honestly, anything's OK as long as you're not being disrespectful.

Inner Avatar?

Aang, the last airbender.

Hometown?

Houston

Drag birthday? March 2014 was my first performance ever, at Meteor.

What got you interested in drag?

Right after I got home from my Mormon mission, I came out to my family. Eventually, I went on a date and they took me to Meteor. I saw Kofi and thought, "Where are we?" I found out we were at an amateur drag contest. I eventually competed in that contest and made the Top 3. I'm competitive, so I went back to win, and that's that.

Describe your performing persona.

Estella is the party girl who's there for a good, gay time—but not a long time. I want to have fun and make sure everyone is enjoying themselves. Also, being bodied down and inciting chaos are always part of Estella's game.

Any story behind the name?

I knew when picking a name that I wanted a funny pun. I asked my cousin what one of the best things in the world is, and he said, "A good blow job." So, we came up with Estella Blow—as in, a stellar blow.

Ultimate goal as a performer?

My ultimate goal as a performer is to have people forget about their problems and just enjoy the chaos of Estella. Put down the worries and enjoy the moment!



Follow
Estella Blow on
Instagram
[@estellabl原因](https://www.instagram.com/estellabl原因)

What's your guilty pleasure?

Watching Facebook Live videos of queens who are delusional and think they are *it*.

Describe your aesthetic.

My aesthetic is stupid, body, and camp. If you've got the body, flaunt it! Even if you don't have the body, flaunt it.

What's your must-have accessory?

Platform shoes. I live, laugh, and love them.

Favorite drag character from the media?

My favorite drag characters are straight men who do it and everyone loves it, but when a queer person wants to, it's bad and dangerous [*eye roll*]. I also love Bugs Bunny drag!

What was your dream job as a child?

I wanted to be a plastic surgeon. But math is hard, and that's too much school.

Marry, Shag, Kill: Marge Simpson, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Marjorie Lee Browne?

We are shagging Marge Simpson at her house in hopes that Ned Flanders joins in. We are killing the Republican, and we are marrying Marjorie Lee Browne because she got A's in math. (Then maybe that way I would have money and she'd help me become a plastic surgeon.)

How would you describe Houston's drag scene for a visitor?

Houston's drag scene is so diverse and has so much talent hiding in it. We have a show for any kind of entertainment you want. We are *that* city—point-blank, *periodt*.

Any advice for up-and-coming performers?

Stick with a persona and don't change it every second. Also, you don't need 10 names to be a part of the family!

Anything else?

Drag is an art form, and we need to stand up for it—especially now. Make sure you vote, or go to the lawmakers and let your voice be heard! We are literally under attack right now.



James Carroll, MD



Maggie White, FNP



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