

MAY '23

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

# OutSmart



## THE BOHEMIAN SPIRIT LIVES ON

TUTS brings  
*Rent* back  
to Houston

Pg.58

Director Ty Defoe,  
actor Tomás Matos,  
and choreographer  
Monica Josette  
take the stage



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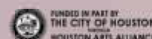
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BANK OF AMERICA





The cast of this month's production of *RENT* at Theatre Under The Stars

58

MELISSA TAYLOR



64



Gin Martini

68



74



76

## 58 COVER STORY 'RENT' RETURNS TO THE HOUSTON STAGE

Director Ty Defoe previews his Theatre Under The Stars production

## 60 DANCING THROUGH TIME

*Rent* choreographer Monica Josette brings her unique perspective to this month's TUTS revival

## 61 AN ANGEL AMONG US

Tomás Matos hits the stage with plenty of New York attitude

## 62 STAGES REVIVES THE 'WONDERETTES'

A whole new level of fabulous awaits fans of the *Marvelous Wonderettes* jukebox musical

## 67 FASHION THAT'S A DRAG

Gin Martini and Yaihara DeHill's designs are featured on *RuPaul's Drag Race*

## 70 AAPI LEADERS A CHAMPION FOR ALL

Poonam Kapoor is an advocate for equitable housing opportunities

## 72 AAPI LEADERS FORGING NEW PATHS

Rafferty Laredo's Filipino American heritage inspires his occupational-therapy work in the disability community

## 74 AAPI LEADERS CHALLENGING MUSLIM HOMOPHOBIA

Activist Sharjeel Hanif is encouraged by the progress he sees

## 76 AAPI LEADERS TEACHING THE FUTURE

HISD magnet-school instructor Namrata Subramanian talks education reform

## 98 WIGGING OUT

Preston Steamed brings the funk with punk





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## DEPARTMENTS

### NEWS & COMMENT

#### 21 NEWS

Opinion writer Ryan M. Leach surveys the judicial threats to healthcare access;  
Texas legislators advance three censorship bills

#### 26 LEFT OUT

#### 28 MONEY SMART

#### 30 SMART HEALTH

#### 36 COMMUNITY

Harrison Guy continues to break LGBTQ barriers;  
A promising new STI prevention tool (pg. 38);  
LGBTQ-affirming Conduit Coffee thrives in The Woodlands despite harassment (pg. 40);  
Ripley Tamborello's transition journey, and Loren Perkins defends trans rights (pg. 45);  
Rabbi Adrienne Scott and Ari Rosen speak out on their Jewish tradition of inclusivity (pg. 50)

### OUT & ABOUT

#### 12 CALENDAR

#### 16 SCENE OUT

#### 82 WEDDING GUIDE

#### 84 OUT THERE

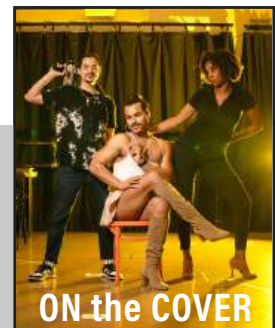
#### 93 BAR GUIDE

#### 96 SIGN OUT

### ADVERTISERS INDEX

#### 90 ADVERTISERS

#### 95 CLASSIFIEDS MARKETPLACE



#### THE BOHEMIAN SPIRIT LIVES ON

##### TUTS brings Rent back to Houston

Director Ty Defoe, actor Tomás Matos, and choreographer Monica Josette take the stage.  
Photography by Frank Hernandez @the\_creativex for OutSmart magazine. Shot April 20 at Hobby Center.



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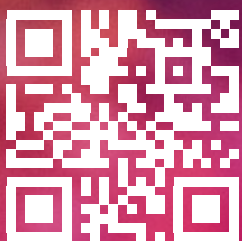
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# Savor the Taste of El Paso



Indulge in the warm and inviting culture of this thriving border town, home of exceptional eats and the iconic margarita. Whether you're looking for authentic street tacos, the latest in mezcal and tequila-infused cocktails, or tortillas as good as abuela used to make, El Paso delivers on its title as the Best Mexican Food in the country. **Scan the QR on the left to plan your next food adventure.**



There *may* be 525,600 minutes in a year, but we have only blown through 174,180 so far as we greet the new month. With Theatre Under The Stars bringing the queer classic *Rent*, a Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning musical, to the Hobby Center this month, we check in with director Ty Defoe for a preview of the production, which is showing May 16 through 28. We also hear from two other artists working to make Jonathan Larson's Broadway masterpiece come to life.

Our Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month features spotlight two AAPI leaders in the Houston LGBTQ community who are working to better the lives of all LGBTQ Houstonians, as well as the city as a whole. We talk with Poonam Kapoor, an advocate for equi-

table housing; Rafferty Laredo, a Filipino American whose heritage inspires his occupational-therapy work; Sharjeel Hanif, an activist working to challenge homophobia in the Muslim community; and Namrata Subramanian, an HISD magnet-school instructor who is a voice for education reform.

Also this month, we celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month with features on two local leaders. Ari Rosen, the director of philanthropy for the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, works to create more inclusive Jewish community spaces, while Rabbi Adrienne Scott fosters a spirit of inclusivity at Congregation Beth Israel for everyone seeking a Jewish faith community, including their LGBTQ members. She also creates spaces for gender nonconforming members of the congregation and emphasizes a focus on gender justice.

We're also observing Trans Visibility Month in the face of overwhelming anti-trans rhetoric. We talk with Loren Perkins, a genderqueer transgender woman whose speech at the State Capitol made headlines when she spoke out against a slew of anti-LGBTQ laws, including several that would prohibit drag performances across the state. These laws are being introduced because, Perkins says, "Lawmakers see the trans community as a threat to the straight-white-male status quo they've created."

Up in The Woodlands, Conduit Coffee has created an LGBTQ-affirming spot, both to grab a cup of coffee and as a space for LGBTQ community connection. Unfortunately, the coffee shop has faced pushback as an openly queer-friendly and queer-owned business.

As we prepare for a summer

of travel, we note that Olivia Travel is celebrating 50 years of cruise and resort vacations specifically for lesbians and other LGBTQ women. And Joanna O'Leary fills us in on the many vacation options in Norway, a country that welcomes LGBTQ travelers with attractions to suit every taste.

We want to wish all of our readers and family of advertisers a fruitful May as we look forward to our June Pride Month celebrations that you can read about in next month's issue!



**Greg Jeu**  
Publisher

# June 2023

# PRIDE

## Issue

THE JUNE ISSUE OF OUTSMART COMMEMORATES PRIDE, AN ANNUAL MONTH-LONG CELEBRATION OF THE ONGOING FIGHT FOR LGBTQ RIGHTS.

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**9**

JUNE

8:00 PM - 10:00 PM

### **Key West Pride Laser Light Show**

Celebrate Key West Pride with a 3-night laser light show replicating the Sea-to-sea diversity flag created by Gilbert Baker in 2003.

**10**

JUNE

10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

### **Key West Pride Street Fair**

Join us for our annual Pride street fair with different vendors from all over with a disco party immediately following!

**11**

JUNE

5:00 PM

### **Key West Pride Parade and post Parade Flag Ceremony**

Our Pride Parade will feature a laser light show stretching the length of Duval St. followed by a closing ceremony!

**AND SO MUCH MORE!!!**

**MORE**

**INFORMATION:** [www.GAYKEYWESTFL.COM/PRIDE](http://www.GAYKEYWESTFL.COM/PRIDE)



# QUEER THINGS to DO

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



KenTheMan

INSTAGRAM

## COMMUNITY

May 6

### BLACK QUEER AF MUSIC FESTIVAL

The Black Queer Advancement 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.

Hosted by the Normal Anomaly Initiative, attendees can expect performances by KenTheMan, Kidd Kenn, Keke Wyatt, DJ Sedrick DraytonSevnDeep, and more. Besides the music festival itself on May 6, there will be a pageant to crown Mr. and Ms. Black Queer AF

on May 3, a keynote by Greg Mathis Jr., and forums to explore important conversations—including a Black mental health town hall—on May 4 and 5.

This festival has been created and produced with Houston's Black LGBTQ community in mind. With a full roster of local and national celebrity entertainment, the festival promises to be the very definition of "partying with a purpose."

Tickets are available for purchase in advance online, as well as at the door. (Attendees can expect longer waits if they purchase them at the event.)

[tinyurl.com/32bfm4k7](https://tinyurl.com/32bfm4k7)



HOUSTON BALLET

## STAGE

May 24–June 5

### DIVERGENCE

The Houston Ballet presents a trio of performances: *Divergence* returns to the stage as a complete work, while *Angular Momentum* will pay homage to Space City architecture and Golden Globe-winning choreographer Justin Peck will premiere a new work.

Join **OUTSMART** before the June 6 show for its **Out at the Ballet reception**. [tinyurl.com/bdznf9f3](https://tinyurl.com/bdznf9f3)



## COMMUNITY

May 12

### HOUSING OUR FUTURE

Join the Montrose Center for its Housing Our Future gala to help end LGBTQ youth homelessness in Houston. Enjoy acclaimed LGBTQ entertainers and connect with community leaders and friends at this fundraising dinner.

[tinyurl.com/mr3k9atd](https://tinyurl.com/mr3k9atd)

## 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 bull-fighting and is forced to choose between accepting society's limits or breaking boundaries.

[tinyurl.com/33z793zh](https://tinyurl.com/33z793zh)

## COMMUNITY

May 29

## GAY 10K

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

[tinyurl.com/3bajvt33](https://tinyurl.com/3bajvt33)


## COMMUNITY

May 3–7

## NATIONAL AIDS MEMORIAL QUILT

The AIDS Memorial Quilt will be in Houston as part of a campaign to end HIV in Black and Hispanic communities. The Quilt display will be part of The Art of Black Pride exhibit at 1201 Main Street, and a quilt-making workshop will be offered to honor loved ones lost to AIDS.

[tinyurl.com/mtyykhbm](https://tinyurl.com/mtyykhbm)

## ART

May 3–14

## THE ART OF BLACK PRIDE

The second annual Art of Black Pride exhibit celebrates Houston's Black LGBTQ Pride Week with the work of local Black artists. The AIDS Memorial Quilt will also be on view during the first week of this art exhibit.

[tinyurl.com/2rvf74kx](https://tinyurl.com/2rvf74kx)

## COMMUNITY

May 18

## LGBTQ WRITERS WORKSHOP

Join Justin Jannise for a writing workshop open to any and all LGBTQ writers. The group will read the works of various queer authors, and your personal writing projects can be shared for group feedback.

[tinyurl.com/mc3m5a2m](https://tinyurl.com/mc3m5a2m)

## COMMUNITY

May 20

## MISS GAY SPARKLING DIAMOND AMERICA

The local preliminary pageant round will crown two Houston representatives who will travel to this year's state pageant.

[tinyurl.com/bd2ft3hr](https://tinyurl.com/bd2ft3hr)

## COMMUNITY

May 25

## DRAG BINGO

The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce and chamber member Eureka Heights present Drag Bingo hosted by Dessie Love-Blake, Miss Gay Southwest America. The game is free to play, so come out for the prizes and to learn more about the LGBT Chamber of Commerce.

[tinyurl.com/5n7vexcp](https://tinyurl.com/5n7vexcp)

## STAGE

May 12

## CELEBRATE MILLER

Miller Outdoor Theatre celebrates 100 years in Hermann Park with two hours of free pre-show activities, including birthday cake, performance artists, a juggler, face painting, and photo-ops prior to Houston Ballet's main-stage performance.

[tinyurl.com/mr8b34mf](https://tinyurl.com/mr8b34mf)


## STAGE

May 16–28

## RENT: THE MUSICAL

Theatre Under The Stars presents *Rent*, winner of a Tony Award for Best Musical and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

**The Out@TUTS after-show reception is May 25.**

[tinyurl.com/57h7yj7m](https://tinyurl.com/57h7yj7m)

The cast of the upcoming production of *RENT* at Theatre Under The Stars

## ART

May 13

## TROPICAL SUMMER DREAMS FASHION SHOW

Designers Gin Martini (known for designing costumes for Mistress Isabelle) and Angela Rose showcase their 2023 summer collections. Before the show, you can shop at local vendor booths and take advantage of photo opportunities. [tinyurl.com/3acc9epu](https://tinyurl.com/3acc9epu)



## STAGE

Through May 13

## JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH

Roald Dahl's classic children's tale *James and the Giant Peach* makes its way to the stage in this Main Street Theater adaptation. Its "cross-gender casting" recently caused nine local elementary schools to cancel field trips to see the show. [tinyurl.com/2z99m8kr](https://tinyurl.com/2z99m8kr)

## ART

May 13

## "NARRATIVE THREADS" CLOSING

Rice University's Moody Center for the Arts presents closing-day activities for Narrative Threads. Guests can enjoy snacks, weave a bookmark or bracelet, learn about weaving, spinning, and quilting, and attend a screening of the documentary *Yarn*. [tinyurl.com/yc2sdsax](https://tinyurl.com/yc2sdsax)

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## QUEER THINGS to DO

### SAVE the DATES

#### STAGE

**June 16-25**

### ALLEY ALL NEW FESTIVAL

Alley All New features both public and in-house programs that support new playwrights with a variety of world premieres, commissions, and other year-round programming. This year's Alley All New festival offers previews of new plays in development with readings and workshops that are free and open to the public.

[tinyurl.com/mrv8h2v4](http://tinyurl.com/mrv8h2v4)

#### COMMUNITY

**June 2**

### SENIORS HEALTHCARE SEMINAR

Join the Montrose Center for a free seminar with complimentary breakfast and lunch for a variety of presentations on topics of interest to the LGBTQ community, especially those interested in seniors health care for themselves or loved ones.

[tinyurl.com/36ync7zr](http://tinyurl.com/36ync7zr)



#### COMMUNITY

**June 24**

### HOUSTON PRIDE

Save the date for this year's downtown Houston Pride celebration. An entire month of events celebrating the LGBTQ community will culminate with the 45th annual parade centering around City Hall. [tinyurl.com/34waa92p](http://tinyurl.com/34waa92p)

#### COMMUNITY

**June 23**

### PRIDE IN BUSINESS

Hosted by the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Pride In Business Celebration & Awards is a gala luncheon event highlighting the unique role that LGBTQ and allied businesses play in strengthening the Greater Houston economy.

[tinyurl.com/bdapvhrj](http://tinyurl.com/bdapvhrj)

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## SCENE OUT

Photos by  
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



On April 1, 2023, the Diana Foundation held its 70th Platinum Jubilee Awards Show at The Ballroom at Bayou Place. Pictured are **Howard Huffstutler**, **Bianca Del Rio**, and **Christopher Jance Nodd**.



The Rising Leaders Spring Soiree was held at The Ballroom at Bayou Place on April 5, 2023. Pictured are **Connor Hart** and **Hunny Phillips**.



The Space City Pride FC hosted the Space City Classic at Houston Sports Park on March 8, 2023. Pictured is Space City Pride FC Team 2, the second-place winners.



On March 11, 2023, Space City Pride FC hosted the Space City Classic at Houston Sports Park. Pictured are West Hollywood Cosmos team members, the first-place winners.



Bunnies on the Bayou 44 was held at Sesquicentennial Park on April 9, 2023. Pictured are the Bunnies hosts and the board members.



On April 14, 2023, a screening of Pamela Ribon's short film *My Year of Dicks* was held at Sesh Coworking. Pictured are (standing) **Cameron Samuels**, **Gabby Mei**, **Pamela Ribon**, **Landon Richie**, (sitting) **Catherine Trumble**, **Tobin Wood**, and **Soha Jashwant**.



The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce held its Third-Thursday Breakfast with Josephine "Jo" Jones and other HPD officers at Harold's on April 20, 2023. Pictured are **Officer Don Vo**, **Lt. Dennis Tabora**, **Assistant Chief Megan Howard**, **Jack Berger**, **Officer Jo Jones** (HPD's LGBTQ Liaison), and **Officer Robert Ochoa**.



On April 15, 2023, the Human Rights Campaign's annual gala dinner was held at the Marriott Marquis. Pictured are **Heather J. Taylor** with **Cassandra James**, recipient of the HRC Visibility Award.



The Human Rights Campaign's 2023 Houston dinner was held at the Marriott Marquis, on April 15, 2023. Pictured are **Britt Kornmann** and **Randall Hance**.



On April 15, 2023, the Human Rights Campaign's 2023 Houston dinner was held at the Marriott Marquis. Pictured are **Chris Barry** with **Cameron Samuels**, recipient of the HRC Trailblazer Award.



The Meyerland Area Democrats held its monthly meeting in the Faith Lutheran Church gym on April 17, 2023. Pictured are **Mayor Sylvester Turner**, **Jeff Syptak**, and **Art Pronin**.



On April 18, 2023, the monthly meeting of ROADwomen was held at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Pictured are **Rufi Natarajan**, **Robin Fulford**, **Carli Mosier**, **County Commissioner Lesley Briones**, **Christyna Lewis**, and **Tania Gonzales Ingram**.



On April 26, 2023, Stonewall Law Association of Greater Houston held its annual meeting at Buddy's Houston. Pictured are Association members with bar owner Christopher Berry.



On April 20, 2023, City Council District H candidate Mario Castillo held a fundraiser at Sawyer Ice House. Pictured are **Mario Castillo**, **Commissioner Lesley Briones**, and **Joel Rottier**.



Pride Sports Houston Sand Volleyball held finals at Bumpy Pickle on April 20, 2023. Pictured are Division A winners on the God Serve These Queens team (top row l-r) **Adrian Santos**, **Jared Chapa**, **Brett Duesk**, **Arielle Marquez**, **McKayla Baylor**, (bottom row l-r) **Justin Ford**, **Travis Clark**, and **Xzache Mathis**.



On April 20, 2023, Pride Houston Sand Volleyball held its finals at Bumpy Pickle. Pictured are Division B Winners on the Bump, Set, Slay team (top row l-r) **John Valenta**, **Tyler Dollinger**, **Juan Martin Paez**, **Jeremy Whisenhunt**, (bottom row l-r) **Alejandro Martinez**, **Anthony Romanoski**, and **Colby Wulf**.



The Honorable Steven Duple's Investiture was held at the 1910 Courthouse on April 21, 2023. Pictured are **Hon. Steven Duple** and **County Judge Lina Hidalgo**.



On April 27, 2023, ActOUT at the Alley Theatre for *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lilly* was held before that evening's performance. Pictured are **Lukas Brown**, **Aurora Reddy**, **Matthew Janak**, **Lauren Pellitier**, **Kevin Pope**, **Tina Berry**, and **Alvin Weingartner**.



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# How an LGBTQ-Friendly Thrift Store is Changing the Wellness Landscape in Houston

**T**hrift stores are well known for providing budget-friendly vintage finds while supporting various causes, but not many are known for doubling as health and wellness providers. That's what makes Out of the Closet Thrift Store on Westheimer Road unique. They are single-handedly changing the way we think about our local secondhand shops.

This mecca of health and wellness provides discreet and high-quality HIV & STD testing and treatment, primary care services, and a specialty pharmacy, all under the same roof as a lively, vibrant, LGBTQ-friendly thrift store. Their ethos is to provide these free and low-cost services in a casual, friendly environment. You can get a rapid HIV test, shop while you wait for the results, and then fill a prescription or drop off donations to support HIV & AIDS services all in one place.



**This mecca of health and wellness provides discreet and high-quality HIV & STD testing and treatment, primary care services, and a specialty pharmacy, all under the same roof as a lively, vibrant, LGBTQ-friendly thrift store.**

Out of the Closet Thrift Stores have been offering HIV testing to their communities for more than 30 years. AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) wanted to give locals an easy, stigma-free way to get tested for HIV without having to deal with a sterile clinic environment. Their model helps community members feel empowered to get tested regularly. Since their inception, they've expanded to include primary care services, a fully staffed pharmacy, and state-of-the-art HIV and STD testing right here in Houston.

**Affordable & Affirming HIV Primary Care**  
AHF Healthcare Centers provide primary care services on-site. With more than 35 years of experience, these healthcare centers are the gold standard for HIV care across the country. Their staff are experts in the field and are committed to creating a safe, affirming environment to serve the LGBTQ+ community and beyond.

With an HIV diagnosis, stigma can still infiltrate primary-care providers who are not properly trained. That's what sets AHF Healthcare Centers apart. They understand the unique needs of their clients and work with leading experts to provide the most cutting-edge medicine available today. They also offer benefits coordinators, mental health referrals, transportation assistance, and telehealth appointments. Their goal is to provide a wide range of services to make staying healthy as convenient as possible.

## Free testing AND free condoms?

Yep, you read that right. Out of the Closet Thrift Store is also home to an AHF Wellness Center. They provide free HIV testing services, free condoms, STD & STI screenings, and PrEP & PEP referrals with no appointments necessary.

The traditional healthcare system can be full of red tape and roadblocks. That's why AHF Wellness Centers are committed to being your partner in care. They make treatment easy to access when and if you need it. You can talk to their counselors about getting PrEP or PEP without jumping through countless hoops.

## Helping the Community One Prescription at a Time

Your experience wouldn't be complete without a quick visit to the on-site AHF Pharmacy. They offer specialty HIV services and can fill any other prescription medications. AHF Pharmacies are unique as they work with your healthcare team to ensure your meds are optimized for your overall good health.

Their team is trained in the intricacies of HIV care and has an in-depth knowledge of the medications it takes to stay healthy while living with HIV. That's why they provide special "adherence packaging," which sorts your medication into either "on-the-go"

packs or convenient calendar packaging that makes staying on top of your prescriptions easier than ever.

They offer all the same services as big-box pharmacies, including discreet medication delivery and hassle-free refills (in-person, by phone, or online), but as a not-for-profit pharmacy, 96 cents of every dollar they earn goes back into HIV care and services. Filling your prescription with them does a world of good here in Houston and around the world.

## A New Mecca of Health and Wellness

As a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community, Out of the Closet Thrift Store is setting the tone for compassionate care in Houston and beyond. Visit their one-stop shop today at 1435 Westheimer Road or go to [Outofthecloset.org](http://Outofthecloset.org) for more information.

With all of your health and wellness bases covered, you can relax, shop, meet like-minded community members, and experience a thrift store that is truly one-of-a-kind.

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# They Are Coming For You Next

You may be thinking, “So what? Abortion isn’t an LGBTQ issue.”

By RYAN M. LEACH



It was not long ago that the LGBTQ community thought that it was making headway in gaining access to the rights enjoyed by their cisgender, straight counterparts. We had marriage equality. Trans visibility and representation was on the rise. LGBTQ people were being elected to office, and even running for president.

All of that progress is still there, but for how long?

It is important that we pay attention to freedoms that are being taken away from other groups of marginalized people around us in order to read the tea leaves about what is likely to happen to us next. We also have to shake ourselves awake and realize that we live in a country that has typically moved forward and not backwards when it comes to human rights. But countries fall and regress all the time, and that may be what is happening in America.

The 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* set off a series of events that has emboldened some states to ban access to abortion and limit bodily autonomy. This decision may have paved the way for similar dire consequences, primarily for the trans community. Because our Supreme Court has demonstrated that they have no regard for precedent (a pretty important facet of the judicial system) the door is now open for challenges to precedents that had historically failed. In deciding that access to certain “objectionable” kinds of health care, like abortion, can be constitutionally blocked, the Court has demonstrated that there may be no limit to imposing similar restrictions on other types of medical treatments and procedures.

Gender-affirming health care is a great example of health care that may not be constitutionally protected by this Court if the draconian, conservative laws are challenged in court. But it goes beyond impacting trans people. Certainly we see laws banning this care being put in place, as if gender-affirming care is somehow new, but two Texas rulings pose serious



consequences to other types of health care heavily sought by the LGBTQ community.

The most notable of these is the ruling in *Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine v. FDA*. The North Texas judge ruled that Mifepristone, a drug used to provide medical abortions, should be banned because the FDA violated their responsibility in approving the drug over 20 years ago. There is no empirical scientific evidence of this, of course. In the short term, this ruling could block Mifepristone from being used throughout the nation, including states that have not implemented abortion bans. Considering that more than 50 percent of abortions are provided through the use of this drug, that is a pretty significant step in creating what amounts to a national ban on abortions.

You may be thinking, “So what? Abortion isn’t an LGBTQ issue.” Well, a) you’re wrong about that, and b) the blocking of Mifepristone is the tip of the iceberg. If a judge can ban one drug they find objectionable, then they can also make the same determination about other types of drugs and treatments. Gender-affirming care is the most obvious issue in the news, but what about STI preventative health care? For example, PrEP. I know a lot of people in the LGBTQ community (mainly gay men) who *love* their PrEP. They may not realize that the courts are already making rulings that could limit or eliminate their access to PrEP.

For example, in *Kelley v. Becerra*, a Texas judge ruled that an employer could claim a religious objection to providing an employee with PrEP. The fact that PrEP is widely used by many people who are not LGBTQ-identifying seemed to make no difference. Because sexually active gay people use PrEP, and because the employer hates gay people (and especially gay sex), the

employer no longer has to provide it.

Now, I hate to be the one to break it to the judge and the employer, but PrEP is a relatively new invention. Gay sex? Not so much. With or without PrEP, I feel certain gay sex (and queer sex in general) will prevail.

But wait, there’s more. You may now be thinking, “What’s the problem? Don’t these Texas cases only impact Texas?” The answer is no. In the *Alliance* ruling, the restriction impacted the entire country because it was against the FDA approval, and not necessarily related to abortion specifically. It is a back-door way of eliminating abortion access. And when you ban a drug based on a determination of faulty approval, you ban it everywhere. But the problem is compounded by the fact that another ruling in Washington state, handed down moments later, said almost the exact opposite of the Texas ruling. This creates a situation known as circuit splitting. This is when two circuit courts, which have jurisdiction over different parts of the country, issue opposing rulings. This typically requires the Supreme Court to intervene, and the current Court appears to lean in the direction of the Texas case and not the Washington case.

If this happens, then expect more drugs like PrEP to be blocked—and this, in turn, will have a chilling effect on drug companies who will no longer be able to rely on the consistent and rigorous review process that is used by the FDA. These companies won’t invest in drugs that may become the center of controversy. They will invest in drugs that make money. It is amazing that HIV prevention is something controversial, but this is America in 2023.

The Court has the power to interpret the Constitution in any way it sees fit. Historically, the Court would defer to precedent when it decided cases. This is important because it stabilizes the law in a predictable way. But there is no constitutional requirement to abide by precedent. Sometimes breaking with it leads to progress (desegregation, marriage equality) and sometimes this turns back the clock (no constitutional right to abortion). And right now, it isn’t looking good for progress.

So, if we don’t vote, and we don’t do something about this now, trust me when I tell you: they are coming for you next. If they haven’t gotten you already.



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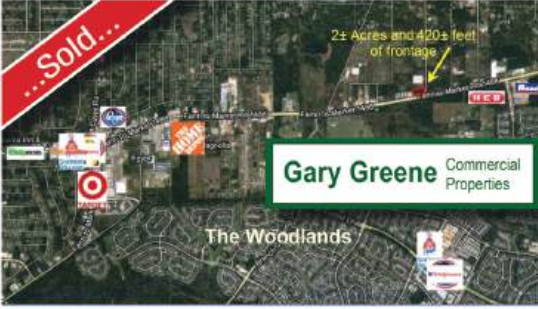


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# Texas Legislators Advance School Censorship Bills

Republicans take aim at books and discussions about gender identity.

By THE TEXAS TRIBUNE



GOP lawmakers want to limit classroom instruction, school activities, and teacher guidance about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools.

Senate Bill 8, a sweeping education bill that would create education savings accounts for every Texas student, also seeks to ban teaching gender identity and sexual orientation at any grade level. An earlier version of the bill would have allowed such lessons and activities if they were “age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate,” but now the restriction is up to the 12th grade, with very limited exceptions. The bill also would require schools to notify parents of any changes to their child’s mental, emotional, or physical health. On April 6, the bill cleared the Senate with a 18-13 vote.

SB 8 will likely face opposition from rural lawmakers over the education savings accounts because those legislators have historically opposed similar legislation, arguing it could siphon money from public schools.

But a separate piece of legislation, Senate Bill 1072, has now copied SB 8’s provisions about gender identity and sexuality. The bill passed out of the Senate on May 1 and it now moves to the House, where it could face an easier time than SB 8.

Critics say these provisions about LGBTQ lessons—patterned on controversial Florida legislation that opponents called the “Don’t Say Gay” law—contains vague language that could stifle even informal discussion about LGBTQ people, such as teachers discussing their same-sex spouses.

On April 25, the lower chamber passed House Bill 1804, which would allow the State Board of Education to reject textbooks for students below 9th grade if they include content on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual activity. Textbooks could also be rejected if they



LAUREN WITTE/THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

A city-wide student Pride event held last year in Austin at Eastside Early College High School.

fail to present US history in a positive light or “encourage lifestyles that deviate from generally accepted standards of society.”

During his State of the State speech in February, Gov. Greg Abbott accused schools of indoctrinating children with a “woke agenda,” though he didn’t provide specifics on what he meant.

Republican supporters of SB 8 and SB 1072 say the legislation is needed to expand the rights of parents, whom they say are the best people to teach their children about these issues. But opponents say the bill would violate constitutional free-speech protections, ban lessons on some aspects of American history, and force the Texas school system to ignore the existence of LGBTQ people.

Abbott and Patrick made their support for what they call “parental rights” a rallying cry,

both on the 2022 campaign trail and heading into this year’s legislative session. But the definition of “parental rights” remains nebulous. So far, it has largely centered on expanding voucher-like programs that would enable families to use taxpayer dollars to pay for schools outside of the state’s public education system.

These new bills come two years after the Legislature limited how America’s history of racism can be taught in public schools, which teachers say will hinder how students learn about race and current events. The new legislation also comes on the heels of conservatives pushing for school and public libraries to remove books with LGBTQ characters and themes. Texas banned more books from school libraries than any other state from July 2021 through June 2022.

## IMPORTANT FACTS FOR BIKTARVY®

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

(bik-TAR-vee)

### MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT BIKTARVY

**BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:**

- ▶ **Worsening of hepatitis B (HBV) infection.** Your healthcare provider will test you for HBV. If you have both HIV-1 and HBV, your HBV may suddenly get worse if you stop taking BIKTARVY. Do not stop taking BIKTARVY without first talking to your healthcare provider, as they will need to check your health regularly for several months, and may give you HBV medicine.

### ABOUT BIKTARVY

BIKTARVY is a complete, 1-pill, once-a-day prescription medicine used to treat HIV-1 in adults and children who weigh at least 55 pounds. It can either be used in people who have never taken HIV-1 medicines before, or people who are replacing their current HIV-1 medicines and whose healthcare provider determines they meet certain requirements.

**BIKTARVY does not cure HIV-1 or AIDS.** HIV-1 is the virus that causes AIDS.

**Do NOT take BIKTARVY if you also take a medicine that contains:**

- ▶ dofetilide
- ▶ rifampin
- ▶ any other medicines to treat HIV-1

### BEFORE TAKING BIKTARVY

**Tell your healthcare provider if you:**

- ▶ Have or have had any kidney or liver problems, including hepatitis infection.
- ▶ Have any other health problems.
- ▶ Are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if BIKTARVY can harm your unborn baby. Tell your healthcare provider if you become pregnant while taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ Are breastfeeding (nursing) or plan to breastfeed. Do not breastfeed. HIV-1 can be passed to the baby in breast milk.

**Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take:**

- ▶ Keep a list that includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, antacids, laxatives, vitamins, and herbal supplements, and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist.
- ▶ BIKTARVY and other medicines may affect each other. Ask your healthcare provider and pharmacist about medicines that interact with BIKTARVY, and ask if it is safe to take BIKTARVY with all your other medicines.

### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF BIKTARVY

**BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:**

- ▶ Those in the “Most Important Information About BIKTARVY” section.
- ▶ **Changes in your immune system.** Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections that may have been hidden in your body. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any new symptoms after you start taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ **Kidney problems, including kidney failure.** Your healthcare provider should do blood and urine tests to check your kidneys. If you develop new or worse kidney problems, they may tell you to stop taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ **Too much lactic acid in your blood (lactic acidosis),** which is a serious but rare medical emergency that can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: weakness or being more tired than usual, unusual muscle pain, being short of breath or fast breathing, stomach pain with nausea and vomiting, cold or blue hands and feet, feel dizzy or lightheaded, or a fast or abnormal heartbeat.
- ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
- ▶ **The most common side effects of BIKTARVY** in clinical studies were diarrhea (6%), nausea (6%), and headache (5%).

These are not all the possible side effects of BIKTARVY. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you have any new symptoms while taking BIKTARVY.

You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit [www.FDA.gov/medwatch](http://www.FDA.gov/medwatch) or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

**Your healthcare provider will need to do tests to monitor your health before and during treatment with BIKTARVY.**

### HOW TO TAKE BIKTARVY

Take BIKTARVY 1 time each day with or without food.

### GET MORE INFORMATION

- ▶ This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to learn more.
- ▶ Go to [BIKTARVY.com](http://BIKTARVY.com) or call 1-800-GILEAD-5.
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By SUSAN BANKSTON



## Think Again

DeSantis and Trump are no match for Mickey Mouse in Florida.



About 500 years ago, René Descartes, the French philosopher and mastermind behind the pageboy haircut, decided that the mystery of our existence

could be explained in three words:

*Cogito, ergo sum.*

Yep, that fancy-pants Latin phrase (“I think; therefore, I am.”) has been the philosophical foundation of existence for a long time.

Just think about it: when you think about the meaning of existence, you’re thinking—and that means you exist. Everybody thanked Descartes for alleviating their worries about whether or not they existed. He got paid money for thinking that thought, and apparently he spent most of it on frilly gowns and couture hosiery.

Descartes’ immortal words are a universal truth all over the world. Except in Florida.

Thinking is frowned upon in Florida. Florida has its own philosophy: “I don’t think, but I do vote; therefore, I also own a closet full of guns and hate gay people.”

It’s ironic that Florida—the most phallic-looking feature on every map of the world—is also the most anti-gay. They hate the gays, and they’ve come up with some strange ways to

make sure we know it. Hell, they even decided that the Gay is contagious. How else could you explain their new law that says Don’t say Gay within earshot of a child?

It’s gotten to the point that Florida’s biological diversity has been boiled down to two distinct life forms: humans, and redneck swamp creatures.

I think the whole thing is pretty damn warped. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (yes, the one with the fabulous white go-go boots) can’t even go head-to-head with a damn mouse. Every time he sues Disney, Mickey Mouse wins. That’s because he’s suing Disney over their “woke” ideas about empowering *all* of God’s children. I’m telling you, DeSantis is ten pounds of gall in a three-pound sack.

But the real splash of whiskey on the bread pudding is that DeSantis actually got married at Disneyland. Please, someone tell him that a Magic Kingdom wedding is just about the gayest thing you can do!



And one more thing, before I start planning my summer over here in our own swampy paradise: I just wanna say that I become inappropriately cheerful thinking about Donald Trump’s indictment. Even aside from Trump looking all miser-

able at being hauled in front of a judge, I’m savoring the hypocrisy coming from his Republican fan club in Congress.

So far, Congressvarmint Majorie Taylor Greene, the Queen of Whiners, is whining the loudest about the routine legal proceedings that Trump must sit through. To hear MTG tell it, you would think the judge had decided to ship Trump off to Guantánamo for a few weeks of “enhanced interrogation.”

Actually, the Stormy Daniels hush-money trial will be fun. Trump has the right to remain silent, but not the ability.

Hey, if you put Donald Trump and Clarence Thomas in the same room, the fumes from all of their ethical breaches and shady dealings would ignite like a California brush fire. We could bag up the smoldering remains and sell it as Insta-Crap fertilizer. It probably wouldn’t be a Home Depot top seller—unless we put the crap in big bags with a nice photo of a smiling Ted Cruz. Surely that would boost sales this summer, at least here in Texas!

*Susan Bankston lives in Richmond, Texas, where she writes about her hairdresser at The World’s Most Dangerous Beauty Salon, Inc., at [juanitajeans.com](http://juanitajeans.com).*



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# Financial Planning for Couples

Things to consider when there are two of you.



If you are in a committed relationship, as a couple you probably rely on one another to work as a team. It's a partnership, and that teamwork is also important when it comes to planning your financial future. With the two of you working together—especially if you're combining your incomes and savings—it may be possible to reach your financial goals faster.

But just like most other things in life, there are no guarantees. Unexpected illnesses and accidents can and do happen, so it is necessary to plan ahead. Doing so can help provide a financial safety net for a surviving spouse or partner, as well as a detailed plan that outlines what to anticipate going forward.

## Preparing for the “What If” Scenarios

There are a myriad of “what ifs” in life, and many of these can impact both you and your loved ones' financial security. These can include both happy and sad events such as marriage or divorce, retirement or a job loss, a loved one's illness or death, or the need for long-term care.

Because we don't know when (or even if) most of these events will occur, though, it would be prudent to “hope for the best but plan for the worst.” Otherwise, you or your surviving partner could end up spending down your nest egg and potentially incurring debt just to get by.

Even if something happens when you are still young, the financial impact could intensify over time due to lost savings (or even debt), which in turn can negatively impact your future retirement income and other financial objectives.

If you are developing a financial or retirement plan as a couple, it is important to factor in several potential “what ifs.” While it is tempting to imagine that you will both work hard, save money, invest wisely, live to age 95, and die at the same time, the reality is that things don't always go as we had hoped. And as difficult as it is to imagine, it is important to anticipate what would happen if one of you passes away prematurely—especially if that were to happen before retirement.

Keep the following in mind as the two of you create a long-term plan, and ask your



financial planner to model the scenarios that would apply to you:

*One of you dies prior to retirement* – There are some important scenarios you will have ideally planned for, such as:

- What will happen to any minor children
- What plans are in place to cover your children's college education
- Will the deceased's lost income be replaced so that the survivor can carry on without facing undue financial hardship?
- Are there (or will there be) enough savings for the surviving individual to have a secure retirement?
- Will the surviving spouse or partner be eligible for Social Security survivor's benefits?

These common questions—as well as other issues that may be unique to your situation—can and should be answered with the help of an experienced financial professional who can guide you along the way.

*One of you must survive several years in retirement without the other's income* – If one of you passes away early in retirement, it could cause substantial financial difficulty for the survivor, both in terms of income and expenses. While some things remain the same regardless of when a spouse or partner passes away, there are other areas that could require different strategies if the passing occurs after retiring.

For example, for an unmarried couple,

the decedent's Social Security income stops, which in turn can cause a sizable income gap going forward for the remaining individual. If a couple is married, the surviving spouse is allowed to keep the bigger of the two Social Security checks, but not both. So in either case, income will be reduced.

Unfortunately, though, many of your household expenses will remain the same, such as the monthly rent or mortgage, property taxes, home repair costs, and utility bills.

In Texas, individuals who are age 65 or older may qualify for a \$10,000 homestead exemption to reduce property taxes. But what if a surviving spouse or partner is much younger than 65?

There can even be areas where the survivor may end up paying more, rather than less after becoming “suddenly single.” One example is the cost of Medicare coverage. The income-related monthly adjustment amount, or IRMAA, is a surcharge that high-income individuals may have to pay in addition to their Medicare Part B (doctor's services) and Part D (prescription drug coverage) premiums. The Social Security Administration makes the determination about whether you are subject to IRMAA based on the income that you reported on your tax return two years prior. So, for instance, your Medicare Part B and Part D premiums in 2023 would be based upon your income in 2021.

The added Medicare Part B premium surcharges in 2023 can range from an extra \$65.90 per month to an extra \$395.60 per month per person, over and above the standard monthly premium of \$164.90. That can make a significant difference in the amount you pay for this coverage.

Many people don't realize that if they are married and their spouse passes away, the survivor could actually end up having to pay more in premiums going forward. This is often referred to as the “widow(er)'s penalty.” One reason for this higher cost has to do with the surviving spouse filing their future tax return as “single” rather than “married filing jointly.”

As an example, Chris and Jesse are married. In 2021, they are both 72 years old, and the couple has a total annual modified adjusted gross income of \$182,000. With the standard deduction of \$25,100 that year, the couple's total taxable income is \$156,900 in 2021. Therefore, they paid federal income tax of \$26,015. However, if Chris had passed away in 2020, then Jesse would have filed taxes in 2021 as a single individual—and also would have owed tax at a higher rate.

In this case, Jesse would have lost Chris's Social Security income. (For the sake of this example, let's say that this benefit was \$11,000 for the year.) But even with a reduced income of \$171,000 (versus \$182,000 if Chris was still alive), Jesse would only be allowed to take a standard deduction of \$12,550 rather than the \$25,100 deduction if Chris were still alive. This, in turn, leaves Jesse paying taxes on a taxable income of \$158,450—more than \$1,500 higher than what Jesse and Chris together would have been taxed on if both were still living.

But the bad news for Jesse doesn't stop there. That's because as a single tax filer now, Jesse will also have to pay a much higher premium for Medicare Parts B and D in 2023.

To view the 2023 Medicare Part B premium surcharge amounts, go to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services here: [tinyurl.com/4bwxbxxt](https://tinyurl.com/4bwxbxxt).

### Planning to Protect Each Other

There can be many "moving parts" involved in financial and retirement planning for couples. Your financial-planning professional needs to look at the entire picture, so your strategies can facilitate your ideal scenario as well as a "Plan B" if life doesn't go the way you had planned.

A qualified advisor who is well-versed in planning for the unique issues faced by LGBTQ couples can help you address issues that are often overlooked in traditional planning strategies.

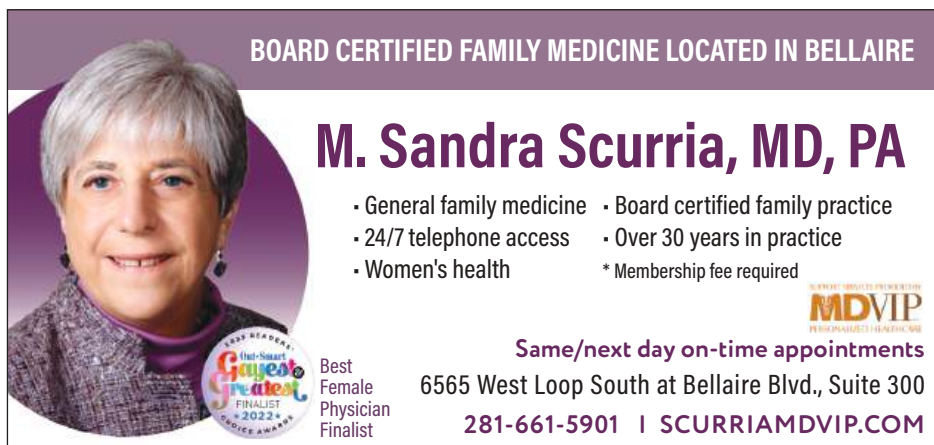
*Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Member FINRA/SIPC. For more information, visit: [www.midtownfg.com](http://www.midtownfg.com)*



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# Time to Look Within

## A call to action for Mental Health Awareness Month



Each May we celebrate Mental Health Awareness Month, an opportunity to shine a light on the importance of working toward our own individual best versions

of psychological wellness. This year's theme is "Look Around, Look Within," a call to both personal and community action as we also work to reduce the stigma and silence that so frequently surrounds mental-health conversations.

Our surroundings—homes, neighborhoods, and cities—can have a profound impact on our mental health. Growing up or living in economically challenged neighborhoods that lack a sense of cohesion can certainly engender negative feelings and increase stress. This stress is heightened even further through constant social-media feeds showing glamorous celebrity lifestyles that those living in lower-income areas can only dream about.

We are also bombarded with images of communities at war with each other and themselves. The frequency and deadliness of mass shootings continue to rise, substantially reducing our sense of safety and connection with others.

LGBTQ persons living in the ever-growing list of states where anti-LGBTQ legislation is now being signed into law are starting to realize the very real implications of having their rights threatened and eroded. We see there is a clear need for political involvement and action that will ultimately improve the mental health of the LGBTQ community as a whole.

It is impossible to separate our own mental health from the world around us. Acknowledging how we, as individuals, are impacted by world events is one way to reduce the divisiveness and separation from others. It is an avenue by which to see and remind ourselves of how we are more connected and similar than we are distant and unique.

This outward focus does not have to exist only in the abstract, however. For this Mental Health Awareness Month, perhaps the theme can also be taken a bit more literally.



Try this exercise: pause for a moment to look around your surroundings. Right now. Take a look around your home, office, or car. What do you see?

Is your home organized? If so, to what extent? Can you consistently get your trash into the proper bin? What about those dishes in the sink? Your laundry? Your mail and other papers?

What about your office space or vehicle? Are things put away? How are you managing the various spaces you inhabit?

In clinical practice, it has become increasingly common to ask people to reflect on the state of their homes and other spaces, since this may give clues about the state of their mental health. Perhaps this month's focus on mental-health awareness can begin much closer to home as you look around the room you're sitting in right now.

Popular television shows like *Hoarders* have certainly increased awareness of the

extreme challenges of hoarding disorder. Of course, difficulty with organizing and maintaining one's space might be related to other clinical conditions such as depression, attention-deficit challenges, or problematic substance use.

Just as a lack of organization might suggest deeper struggles, being overly controlled or strict about one's space can signal a different type of tension. Anxiety, or symptoms of obsessive compulsion, can be associated with an exacting tendency toward neatness and a feeling that everything must always be in its place.

Of course, a firm diagnosis of a mental-health condition cannot be solely based on one's surroundings. But evaluating one's space and pondering its relationship to our internal emotional state is worthwhile.

This month's awareness theme of "Look Within" should prompt us to more fully consider these relationships. →

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## Look Around (Again)

This time when you look around, really take in your surroundings. Is there something in your immediate space that you feel like expressing gratitude for?

Perhaps there is something outside that inspires you. Our relationship to nature provides a special sense of connection and wonder. Being outside with nature is one component of a mindfulness practice that can allow us to be more in the moment. And when we are grounded in the moment, our level of tension and anxiety is reduced. It's much harder to ruminate about the past or worry about the future when we're focusing on the present.

Just as nature can increase mindfulness, our bodies can greatly assist us with becoming and remaining in the present moment. Where are you right now? What do you see? Where are your feet? Are they planted with the soles on the ground, or crossed at the ankles? Can you feel your toes? What if you focus on your right big toe? Although it may feel a little silly, the practice of trying to feel your right big toe serves as an opportunity to separate yourself from your thinking.

## Look Within

How are you feeling? Has this feeling been a predominant and fairly consistent one for you throughout the past week? Two weeks?

Because one's mood and level of anxiety can sometimes change multiple times within the day (or the hour, for that matter), this month could be a time of self-evaluation and reflection. If you find that your mood isn't quite what it used to be, or that you're feeling more stressed out, then it might be a great time to reach out to that counselor or therapist that you've been thinking about calling. Allowing our awareness to lead to action is the primary way by which we can begin to make changes.

As this Mental Health Awareness Month progresses, how will you work to become more aware of your own mental health and the actions you can take to establish better connections with others and 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](mailto:dr.darylshorter@gmail.com).*

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APRETUDE is given every other month by a healthcare provider after initiation injections have been given 1 month apart for 2 consecutive months. Stay under a provider's care while receiving APRETUDE. You must receive it as scheduled. If you will miss a scheduled injection by more than 7 days, call your provider right away.

### IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT APRETUDE

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

AP-reh-tood

### MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT APRETUDE

Important information for people who receive APRETUDE to help reduce their risk of getting human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) infection, also called pre-exposure prophylaxis or "PrEP":



Learn more at [APRETUDE.com](https://www.apretude.com)

### MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT APRETUDE (cont'd)

Before receiving APRETUDE to reduce your risk of getting HIV-1:

- You must be HIV-1 negative to start APRETUDE. You must get tested to make sure that you do not already have HIV-1 infection.
- Do not receive APRETUDE for HIV-1 PrEP unless you are confirmed to be HIV-1 negative.
- Some HIV-1 tests can miss HIV-1 infection in a person who has recently become infected. If you have flu-like symptoms, you could have recently become infected with HIV-1. Tell your healthcare provider if you had a flu-like illness within the last month before starting APRETUDE or at any time while receiving APRETUDE. Symptoms of new HIV-1 infection include: tiredness; joint or muscle aches; sore throat; rash; enlarged lymph nodes in the neck or groin; fever; headache; vomiting or diarrhea; night sweats.

Please see additional Important Facts About APRETUDE at right.



Eligible patients may pay as little as a \$0 co-pay per injection on prescribed APRETUDE.

## IMPORTANT FACTS ABOUT APRETUDE (cont'd)

### MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT APRETUDE (cont'd)

#### While you are receiving APRETUDE for HIV-1 PrEP:

- **APRETUDE does not prevent other sexually transmitted infections. Practice safer sex by using a latex or polyurethane condom to reduce the risk of getting sexually transmitted infections.**
- **You must stay HIV-1 negative to keep receiving APRETUDE for HIV-1 PrEP.**
  - Know your HIV-1 status and the HIV-1 status of your partners.
  - Ask your partners with HIV-1 if they are taking anti-HIV-1 medicines and have an undetectable viral load. An undetectable viral load is when the amount of virus in the blood is too low to be measured in a lab test. To maintain an undetectable viral load, your partners must keep taking HIV-1 medicine as prescribed. Your risk of getting HIV-1 is lower if your partners with HIV-1 are taking effective treatment.
  - Get tested for HIV-1 with each APRETUDE injection or when your healthcare provider tells you. You should not miss any HIV-1 tests. If you become HIV-1 infected and continue receiving APRETUDE because you do not know you are HIV-1 infected, the HIV-1 infection may become harder to treat.
  - Get tested for other sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea. These infections make it easier for HIV-1 to infect you.
  - If you think you were exposed to HIV-1, tell your healthcare provider right away. They may want to do more tests to be sure you are still HIV-1 negative.
  - Get information and support to help reduce sexual risk behaviors.
  - Do not miss any injections of APRETUDE. Missing injections increases your risk of getting HIV-1 infection.
  - If you do become HIV-1 positive, you will need to take other medicines to treat HIV-1. APRETUDE is not approved for treatment of HIV-1.

**If you have HIV-1 and receive only APRETUDE, over time your HIV-1 may become harder to treat.**

#### ABOUT APRETUDE

APRETUDE is a prescription medicine used for HIV-1 PrEP to reduce the risk of getting HIV-1 infection in adults and adolescents who weigh at least 77 pounds (at least 35 kg). HIV-1 is the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It is not known if APRETUDE is safe and effective in children younger than 12 years of age or weighing less than 77 pounds (less than 35 kg).

#### DO NOT RECEIVE APRETUDE IF YOU:

- **already have HIV-1 infection.** If you are HIV-1 positive, you will need to take other medicines to treat HIV-1. APRETUDE is not approved for treatment of HIV-1.
- **do not know your HIV-1 infection status.** You may already be HIV-1 positive. You need to take other medicines to treat HIV-1. APRETUDE can only help reduce your risk of getting HIV-1 infection **before** you are infected.
- are allergic to cabotegravir.
- are taking any of the following medicines: carbamazepine; oxcarbazepine; phenobarbital; phenytoin; rifampin; rifapentine.

#### BEFORE RECEIVING APRETUDE

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

- have ever had a skin rash or an allergic reaction to medicines that contain cabotegravir.
- have or have had liver problems.
- have ever had mental health problems.
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if APRETUDE will harm your unborn baby. APRETUDE can remain in your body for up to 12 months or longer after the last injection. Tell your healthcare provider if you become pregnant while receiving APRETUDE.

#### BEFORE RECEIVING APRETUDE (cont'd)

- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. It is not known if APRETUDE can pass to your baby in your breast milk. Talk with your healthcare provider about the best way to feed your baby while receiving APRETUDE.

**Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take**, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Some medicines may interact with APRETUDE. Keep a list of your medicines and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist when you get a new medicine. You can ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for a list of medicines that interact with APRETUDE.

**Do not start a new medicine without telling your healthcare provider.** Your healthcare provider can tell you if it is safe to receive APRETUDE with other medicines.

#### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF APRETUDE

**APRETUDE may cause serious side effects, including:**

- **Allergic reactions.** Call your healthcare provider right away if you develop a rash with APRETUDE. **Stop receiving APRETUDE and get medical help right away if you develop a rash with any of the following signs or symptoms:** fever; generally ill feeling; tiredness; muscle or joint aches; trouble breathing; blisters or sores in mouth; blisters; redness or swelling of the eyes; swelling of the mouth, face, lips, or tongue.
- **Liver problems.** Liver problems have happened in people with or without a history of liver problems or other risk factors. Your healthcare provider may do blood tests to check your liver function. **Call your healthcare provider right away if you develop any of the following signs or symptoms of liver problems:** your skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow (jaundice); dark or "tea-colored" urine; light-colored stools (bowel movements); nausea or vomiting; loss of appetite; pain, aching, or tenderness on the right side of your stomach area; itching.
- **Depression or mood changes.** Call your healthcare provider or get medical help right away if you have any of the following symptoms: feeling sad or hopeless; feeling anxious or restless; have thoughts of hurting yourself (suicide) or have tried to hurt yourself.

**The most common side effects of APRETUDE include:** pain, tenderness, hardened mass or lump, swelling, bruising, redness, itching, warmth, loss of sensation at the injection site, abscess, and discoloration; diarrhea; headache; fever; tiredness; sleep problems; nausea; dizziness; passing gas; stomach pain; vomiting; muscle pain; rash; loss of appetite; drowsiness; back pain; upper respiratory infection. These are not all the possible side effects of APRETUDE.

Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects. You may report side effects to FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088.

#### GET MORE INFORMATION

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

December 2021 APR:1PIL

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CBTADVT220018 September 2022  
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## THEN & NOW:

# Trailblazing Journey

**Harrison Guy** continues to break barriers at City Hall and in the arts.

By SAM BYRD  
Photo by KEDA SHARBER



When Harrison Guy appeared on the 2019 OUTSMART cover, he had been recently elected as the first Black male grand marshal in the more than four decades of Houston

Pride celebrations.

"The fact that you get nominated is really an honor, and then when I did the research and confirmed there weren't any Black men [who had earned the title] before me, that made it even more special," he says.

During his research, he found out that Larry Bagneris, a Black Houston activist, had actually organized the city's first Pride parade in 1979.

"I was super-excited to research Larry and find him," Guy mentions. "It all came full circle for me when I was able to find him in New Orleans and bring him to Houston to talk about his story. And I'm continuing that relationship."

Never one to slow down, Guy has been busy lately as an artist, activist, and community leader. He was appointed to Mayor Turner's LGBTQ Advisory Board in 2016, and when he took over as chair of the committee in 2019, he ushered in the structural changes he knew were needed to further the group's impact.

"When I was invited to the mayor's board, I learned very quickly that Houston had crowned and ordained a very small group of people that [became the face of] the LGBTQ community. It was the same leaders being recycled through different organizations for decades," he recalls. "By the time I became chair, I made it my mission to change the room, so I on-boarded a lot of people, brought a lot of new voices in, and then I made sure that the upcoming chairs would be people who were



young and had things to say who had not been listened to before.”

Guy’s involvement in the community has only grown over the years. Since OUT-SMART last spoke with him, he has moved from working in higher education to a full-time job with the 5th Ward Cultural Arts District. Most recently, he helped pull together the tenth annual Alliance at the Renaissance Festival, with more exciting events on the horizon.

“I get the awesome pleasure of working out of the historic DeLuxe Theater on Lyons Avenue. And I get to manage the theater as well as facilitate the cultural-arts plans that the community came up with,” he notes. “We have a large public art installation that went up recently. We just opened a portable housing complex for artists right behind the DeLuxe. There are more than a dozen affordable housing units for artists, and we just got our first artist-in-residence for that.”

Through the 5th Ward Cultural Arts District, Guy also helped launch a musical-theater program for young people in the community, as well as a program that

provides children with violin lessons.

“Work keeps me very busy with all things arts-and-culture here,” he adds.

His involvement in the arts, which has also included choreography work, extends well beyond the Fifth Ward. In 2021, his original



Harrison Guy on the cover of OutSmart’s 2019 June Pride issue.

Photo by Ashkan Roayaei

modern-dance work *Colored Carnegie* was featured in a Performing Arts Houston *New/Now* program at Jones Hall. And for the second year now, Guy is assembling the work of local queer Black artists and allies this month for a show entitled *The Art of Black Pride: Black LGBTQ Art Exhibition*, running May 3–13 at The Mag, 1201 Main St. Suite 101. The show coincides with Houston’s Black LGBTQ Pride Week, and in addition to the local artists being featured, a portion of the national AIDS Memorial Quilt will be on display.

As he looks toward a future filled with possibilities, Guy muses about how his previous work will likely influence his future path. “I am still figuring the future out. I have some big goals I would like to accomplish, but I think what I want to do now is cultivate an organization that fills in the gaps that I’ve encountered from all the work I’ve been doing. There’s a lot of community-building that needs to happen, and that takes a lot of time.”

 Read more about Guy’s connection with Larry Bagneris, the Black founder of Houston’s Pride parade, at [tinyurl.com/GuyHarrison](http://tinyurl.com/GuyHarrison).

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# A New Tool for STI Prevention

DoxyPEP can be an effective treatment for chlamydia and syphilis.

By RYAN M. LEACH



Although April's Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) Awareness Month is behind us, it's still a great time to reflect on what you are doing to help prevent

the spread of STIs for yourself and for others. Being educated about the resources out there is one way of doing that. And a new treatment, DoxyPEP may help further curb transmission of STIs.

Most of us are familiar with the effectiveness of condoms in preventing most STIs, or the success that PrEP has had in preventing HIV. Now DoxyPEP has been shown to be very effective in preventing some bacterial-based STIs like chlamydia and syphilis. It is apparently less effective at preventing gonorrhea, and it will not prevent non-bacterial infections like hepatitis.

DoxyPEP (or doxycycline post-exposure prophylaxis) is a low dosage of the antibiotic doxycycline that, if taken within 24 hours after having unprotected sex, has been effective in preventing some (but not all) bacterial STI infections. A statement released by the Centers for Disease Control in July 2022 revealed encouraging results:

*"The first look at the data presented at the 2022 International AIDS Conference showed doxy-PEP demonstrated significant effectiveness and tolerability against these common STIs (gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis) in gay and bisexual men and transgender women with HIV or taking HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) over the course of this study."*

Dr. Vandana Shrikanth is the medical director for adult services at Legacy Community Health, the Montrose-based clinic that provides services to a large swath of the LGBTQ population in Houston. She has been with Legacy for eight years. She explains that DoxyPEP is not a necessary treatment for everyone, but it may be effective for some gay and bisexual men or transgender women.

"It's important to first say that treatments like DoxyPEP or PrEP, although effective, should not be viewed as a license to have unprotected sex," Dr. Shrikanth notes. "Condoms are still one of the most effective ways to prevent STIs. Also, DoxyPEP is not recommended as a routine. It is intended for only out-of-the-ordinary encounters you might be having. If you know that you are not sexually active or if you are only active with one partner, then DoxyPEP may not be necessary for you. If you know that you might have a vacation or a party

and you want to be more prepared just in case, then you should speak to your doctor about your options."

There has been some concern lately about the over-prescription of antibiotics that have caused some bacterial infections to become more resistant to antibiotics. Although the CDC is still looking into the data relating to the use of DoxyPEP, Dr. Shrikanth says that infrequent or occasional usage should be OK.

She also cautions that DoxyPEP should not be confused with HIV PrEP. "PrEP is for HIV only. It protects against HIV infection, whereas DoxyPEP is effective at preventing you from acquiring syphilis and chlamydia. It is not as effective at preventing gonorrhea. If you think that DoxyPEP will also protect you from HIV, that is not the case."

Dr. Shrikanth recommends talking to your healthcare provider about your options regarding DoxyPEP. You should also get regularly tested for STIs if you are sexually active. And remember that condoms are always a good first line of defense.

"DoxyPEP is another available tool in the doctor's toolkit to prescribe to prevent some STIs," she concludes.

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# A Safe Haven in The Woodlands

Conduit Coffee is the suburban LGBTQ-affirming spot.

By MARENE GUSTIN



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA FOR OUTSMART

Christina Reece, 34, and her life partner, Robin Farrar, 40, opened Conduit Coffee in 2021 in The Woodlands as a conduit to better understanding between people and as a safe and affirming space for all.

"I want everyone to feel seen and loved and celebrated, because I don't know if that's happening when you leave my doors," says Reece.

The LGBTQ-friendly neighborhood coffee shop boasts Pride flags and cute bathroom signs depicting a stick figure in a skirt, a stick figure in half a skirt, an alien, and a two-headed stick figure. "It's just a fun way to show who we are," Reece explains. "We've never hidden the fact we're a queer business.

It's not a secret."

But not everyone in The Woodlands, a bucolic and conservative township north of Houston, is a fan. On April 8, Reece posted this message to her Instagram account:

*Well y'all, just another day of someone NOT minding their business. I had this guy open our door today and shout very aggressively, "If you took down your flag maybe you'd get more fucking business, this is the fucking Woodlands."*

That wasn't the first time, and, as Reece says, it likely won't be the last time her business faces pushback for being queer-friendly. And while they've also received hateful messages on social media, the April 8 incident

brought an outpouring of support and an influx of business.

"I hate that this is happening at Conduit. They are good people with really good coffee," says Jason Rocha, founder and president of The Woodlands Pride organization. "Anti-queer protests are pretty passive in the 'burbs. I can count on one hand the number of protests we've had at the festival."

Last year's Woodlands Pride event garnered around 7,500 festival-goers with only about three protesters who were harassing some of the booth operators. Rocha asked them to leave, and they did leave the park but stood outside with signs for a while. "Most queer people leave the 'burbs for the

city, but there are still some of us here.”

“I think sometimes the universe can use a bad situation for a good purpose,” says Farrar. After the incident in April, she and Reece had T-shirts made up that proclaimed, “I became a lesbian at Conduit Coffee.”

“They’ve been selling out,” Farrar adds. “A lot of white men buy them, and the printer said he even printed up an extra one for himself! If they want us to be less gay, we’ll just be even more gay.”

Conduit Coffee recently celebrated its second anniversary, and the place was packed with supporters. At the time it opened, it was one of only three LGBTQ-affirming entities in Montgomery County. Ranch Hill Saloon, a gay bar in Spring, moved out of the county in late 2021, leaving just Conduit Coffee and The Woodlands Pride organization. Conduit Coffee is a family-friendly place with games for kids and the occasional visit from the couple’s 2-year-old half lab, half golden retriever, Hendrix (who is also known as Henny).

“We keep dog treats for him here,” says Farrar. “He was born on the day we opened the shop, and he was supposed to be the

**“MOST OF THE STAFF IS QUEER, AND THEY WANT TO KEEP THE FLAGS UP. BUT THEY ARE YOUNG, AND I HATE IT WHEN PEOPLE COME IN AND YELL AT THEM.”**

—Christina Reece

store dog but he’s young and still a bit ram-bunctious, so he only stops by occasionally.”

The shop has built connections with other local businesses to sell their products, including pastries from Chic Sweets Fine Desserts, ice cream from Luliet Creamery and Bake Shop, and homemade coffee syrups. Reece says the community has been supportive, but it’s not uncommon for people to make remarks like the one from April 8.

“We had a woman come in here once as her husband was parking the car,” Reece recalls. “I was sitting outside with some friends, and he came up and saw our Pride sign, ran in, and grabbed his wife and dragged her out. He couldn’t get her out of there fast enough—like he was going to catch the Gay.” She’s also had

derogatory comments posted on Google, but those unusually get taken down.

“Most of the staff is queer,” Reece says, “and they want to keep the flags up. But they are young, and I hate it when people come in and yell at them. We are a family-friendly place. We have a community of LGBTQ people and allies, but it’s not easy.”

When asked why she stays, her answer is simple.

“Somebody has to!” Reece says. “It’s beautiful here; I love the trees. And our community here is beautiful. Not everyone is cut out to build bridges, to talk to people with different beliefs, but that’s my purpose.”

That’s a purpose Farrar also believes in, and she’s grateful that her partner is such a fearless advocate. “Christina has known she was different since she was 5 years old,” Farrar explains. “I’m 40, and just discovered I was queer four years ago. We built Conduit Coffee as a safe space where people can just be themselves. I didn’t know that I needed it just as much as anyone. Now, I feel that Christina and I have a fairy-tale life. She changed my world.”

 Follow Conduit Coffee  
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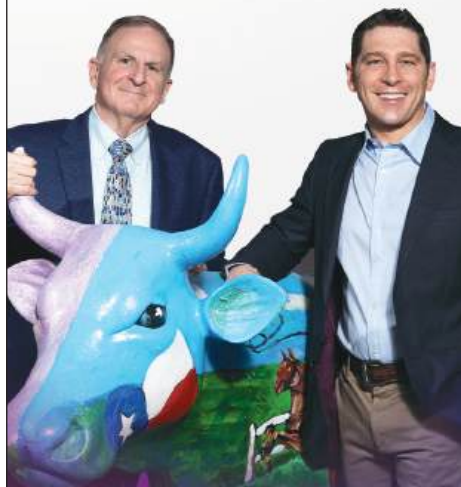
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# This Is Ripley

Ripley Tamborello reflects on her gender-affirming transition journey.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



On March 28, 2023, Ripley Tamborello publicly introduced herself to her social-media followers, and to the world, as a proud transgender woman. Aware that she

has indeed been trans her entire life, today Tamborello finds herself in the early stages of her public transition journey. Crediting Planned Parenthood, her family, and her former life as a cis man for her survival, Tamborello is finally stepping into her womanhood and loving every moment.

“There’s no set way to transition, which was one of the things that helped me accept that I was trans,” Tamborello explains. “I watched psychologists on YouTube who talked about what it means to be trans. I was at a crossroads in my life where I knew what a trans person was, but I had never accepted that I was trans myself.”

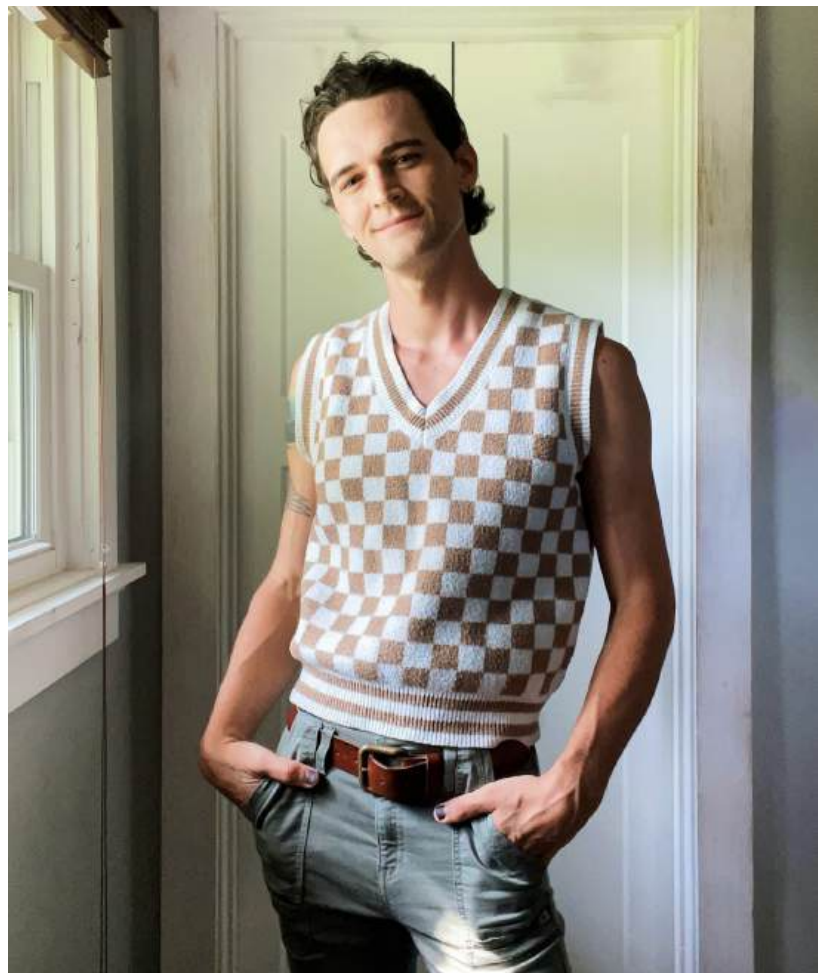
Tamborello didn’t have the vocabulary to identify her trans identity until she found some new alternatives to her old depression medications that opened her mind to a new awareness. “I struggled with depression my whole life. I have gone through every antidepressant there is, and nothing has ever worked for me,” she admits. “I had been reading more and more studies about how ketamine and psilocybin were helping people with long forms of depression who had never [found anything else] that helped. I sought out those forms of plant medicine and was able to accept deep truths that I had never brought to the forefront of my mind before.”

Since her childhood days, the farmer and beekeeper had developed coping skills to subconsciously suppress her trans identity. “Growing up, my mom would say things like, ‘Don’t be a girl’ and ‘Don’t be a sissy,’” Tamborello recalls. “Anytime I would show any emotions, she would say, ‘Stop crying.’ I learned throughout my life

to just compartmentalize those parts of myself. I did it so well that I tucked away who I really was deep inside to protect myself.”

Ultimately, with help from online message boards and other resources, Tamborello decided to reclaim her life. “I’m in my 30s and I thought, ‘Who am I living for?’ There came a moment of clarity where I questioned why I wasn’t living an authentic life,” she says. “Now that I have accepted this deep truth, this calm

has entered my life. The last four months have been incredible. I was reading about what it was like to transition and learned that a lot of people stop experiencing depression a couple of months into gender-affirming hormone therapy. I’ve been struggling with depression—even wanting to die at times—for so long. The moment I realized who I truly am and that I was living my life for the wrong person, my depression literally just melted away.” →



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The mental-health benefits of seeking gender-affirming care have proven to be undeniably more important than the physical changes she's experiencing. "My hips are getting wider. My skin is like, oh my God, it's so soft these days! Getting into bed, I understand why women want to shave their whole bodies. When you shave and you slide into bed at night, it is absolute bliss. I'm developing breasts slowly, but they're definitely there," she says. "The physical effects are great, but the mental benefits overshadow everything."

Tamborello describes the process of seeking gender-affirming hormone therapy at Planned Parenthood as "one of the easiest processes I've ever been through," adding that the organization was a lifesaver. Tired of seeing her deadname on social media, Tamborello came out via her Instagram post in March. "I was ready to tell people, 'This is who I am. If you have a problem with it, you don't need to be in my life anyways. I'm going to need people in



Tamborello's new first name was inspired by *Alien's* Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver.

**"THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS  
ARE GREAT, BUT THE MENTAL  
BENEFITS OVERSHADOW  
EVERYTHING."**

— Ripley Tamborello

my life who uplift me, understand me, and love me for who I am, down at my core."

She made a point to come out to her mother before hitting the Instagram Share button. The results were hilariously surprising. "My mom was so supportive! I didn't think she was going to be. I was crying before I called her, but when I told her I was trans, she was like, 'Well, I figured you probably were.' And I was like, 'Why didn't you tell me?!'"

Honoring herself with the name Ripley (an homage to Sigourney Weaver's character in the film *Alien* that was originally written for a male actor), Tamborello is grateful for her past life, but looks ahead with wide-eyed optimism. "This is who I am inside, not that person that I was," she emphasizes. "I'm really, really grateful for the person I was, because he kept me alive up to this point, but I've got the journey from here. He and I had a good time together, but it's time for Ripley to take over. And I think she's going to be much better at navigating life."

 Follow Ripley Tamborello on Instagram @ripleytamborello.

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# A Voice for Trans Equality

Trans activist  
**Loren Perkins'** State  
Capitol speech goes viral.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



Loren Perkins, a genderqueer transgender woman, recently made headlines after appearing at the Texas State Capitol in Austin to publicly speak against

proposed anti-LGBTQ laws, including several that would prohibit drag performances across the state. At 39, the Austin-based activist is just getting started as she sounds the battle cry for equality.

"I don't have a choice but to fight," she says. "They are coming for us. I cry about it a lot, and I'm tired of crying, so that's why I'm fighting."

Perkins' testimony in March went viral after footage emerged of an LGBTQ activist blocking the Texas Senate's sergeant-at-arms from taking the mic away from Perkins during her speech. In her biting critiques of the Texas lawmakers, Perkins compared them to Nazis by bringing up the fact that the first books burned by the German fascist group in the 1930s and '40s were those published by Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Research, an organization that embraced transgender and queer people.

"I decided to speak because I wanted to stand in solidarity with my community," Perkins continues. "I also wanted to show my kid what's possible when people get together and believe in protecting each other."

While Perkins may be new to this kind of spotlight, she has been fighting her entire life.

"I didn't grow up in a very supportive household," she says. "When I was young, my mom would find me asleep in her closet wearing her blouses and shoes. That behavior was discouraged. It wasn't until I was in my thirties that Tumblr introduced me to the concept of being nonbinary or genderqueer. I finally came out in my late thirties. The hardest part of this journey has been settling into an identity that society isn't willing to make room for."



COURTESY

Perkins believes the recent rollback of abortion access was the first step for lawmakers determined to dictate what people can do with their bodies, which directly impacts the trans community.

"Once the government can start making rules about what you are and are not allowed to do with your body, that does not bode well for anyone," she emphasizes. "That erodes so many liberties and freedoms. It's the tipping point. We have to be here and show up for trans people because that's how we fight for ourselves, and that's how we fight for the rest of us."

Lawmakers see the trans community as a threat to the straight-white-male status quo they've created, which is why so many new bills are being introduced across the country, Per-

kins says. "They want to defend that status quo, and trans people are at the forefront of dismantling it. This system does not allow everyone to be free."

Earlier in April, Texas lawmakers got one step closer to banning puberty blockers and hormone therapies for transgender youth after the House Public Health Committee advanced Senate Bill 14 and House Bill 1686. The current versions of these bills, which will now have to go through the Calendars Committee before getting to the House floor, would require trans youth already receiving puberty blockers or hormone therapy to be "weaned off the prescription drug over a period of time and in a manner that is safe and medically appropriate."

It's overwhelming and incredibly depressing to try and follow the hundreds of bills that are being proposed across the country, Perkins says.

"It is difficult to [know] which bills to pay attention to when there are so many. They are coming at us from so many different angles and so many possible ways. SB 14 and HB 1686 are rather insidious. Gender-affirming care can help with suicide rates. These surgeries can save lives, but lawmakers want to take that ability out of the hands of doctors and parents. These politicians are essentially saying they don't care if trans kids die."

Perkins adds that politicians need to focus on the bigger issues at hand and worry less about what drag queens are doing. "The recent rhetoric about drag performers is ironic, because priests and youth pastors do more damage to children than drag performers do."

The country is in a dark place after recent abortion laws and anti-LGBTQ legislation, and Perkins believes people with hatred in their hearts aren't fearful of speaking their minds anymore.

"I don't think we are regressing as a soci-

TWITTER



Loren Perkins testifying at the State Capitol in Austin.

ety," she notes. "It's more of an airing. People have finally been given permission to do what they want to do in their hearts and say what they want to say. Quite honestly, the lawmakers are just responding to this hatred."

While it's challenging to stay positive in these dark times, Perkins says she will continue to fight for the transgender community. "I want trans people to live to a ripe old age," she says. "We deserve the same life as anyone else."

Perkins calls on the larger cisgender community to start paying more attention to what

is happening to LGBTQ rights, because nobody is truly free until everyone is free.

"I have bigger hopes for the cis community than I do for the trans community," she concludes. "I hope they can see our plight and realize that our fight is *their* fight. Because, at the end of the day, I am just a regular person, just like anyone else. I am just your neighbor—your neighbor that's being immediately impacted by these bills."

Follow Loren Perkins on Twitter @lorenperkins...

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# Honoring Tradition and Welcoming Change

Congregation Beth Israel is a local voice for inclusivity.

By SAM BYRD

Photo by LEE BECKMANN

**R**abbi Adrienne Scott sums up the motto of Houston's Congregation Beth Israel as "relevant, modern, and joyful." As one of the city's largest Jewish congregations, she helps lead the effort to foster a spirit of inclusivity and welcome to all who seek a connection to Jewish life, whatever their needs or backgrounds—including their LGBTQ members.

"I always appreciated that I knew many same-sex couples who are affiliated in the congregation. I remember watching my first betrothal blessing on the bima between two men, and attending my first gay wedding in our grand chapel," the senior associate rabbi recalls. "This is a place where we're not just toeing the line, but we're believing that we can be a supportive environment for all who want to be Jewish. I've gotten to know more same-sex couples over my years here, and have since spoken to many who are gender-fluid or in transition."

Scott was introduced to the Bayou City through her work with the Houston Hillel student group before returning to the Midwest. She eventually moved to Houston in 2004 and started at Beth Israel in 2005. She mentions Houston's progressive attitude as one of the things that she looked forward to experiencing again, both around the city and among the worshippers.

"One of the aspects of Houston is that lifestyles of the 21st century aren't just for 'out there.' They're happening in here," Scott notes. "People are coming to our congregation because they're seeing that we are not just officiating bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah, but brit mitzvah, too—where the young person does not have one gender preference over another, or prefers they/them pronouns."

Scott says the congregation is also taking steps to address gender justice. Last month, Beth Israel hosted a panel featuring three congregants who each have a unique take on the idea of gender justice, which is part of the faith community's larger emphasis on inclusion.

"Although we're seeing a lot of LGBTQ rep-



Rabbi Adrienne Scott

resentation, I think there's also a lot of interest in women's rituals in general, which, for a long time, was very quiet," she states. "Now, as a female rabbi, I am delving into a lot of those issues like divorce, miscarriage, and infertility. All these things have been a part of my rabbinic studies over the years."

A fine example of Scott's commitment to sparking societal evolution, especially for transgender members, is her sermon from earlier this year entitled "Building an Inclusive Community." In it, she says, "We strive to make our days count in meaningful ways. Despite divisions and separations, we are sustained

by opportunities to honor one another. The length of our days is not about the number of years lived, it's about the quality of our actions, measured by our deeds. We can't delay in welcoming the whole person, the real identity of another, full of complexities, colors, and beauty.

"With an emphasis on gender justice, we will be a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, where everyone feels safe and protected," she continued. "With support from our leadership, Congregation Beth Israel will thrive and grow [by] fully investing in the inclusion of every member of our →

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congregational community.”

Scott happily reports that she received nary a single complaint about the sermon, and instead was praised for her commitment to inclusivity.

Beth Israel is a Reform Judaism congregation. The Union for Reform Judaism’s website (urj.org) describes this practice as one that is faithful to the covenant between God and Israel as expressed in the teachings of an ever-evolving Torah and tradition.

“It’s a liberal movement that was established in the 1800s, and has always been grounded and founded on these ideas of a progressive lens,” she explains. “The reform movement was the first of the liberal movements to ordain women as rabbis in 1972, and to raise the question about having gay members in our community. It’s been a great voice of reason [and progressive] Jewish values for us, so we take it very seriously.”

May is Jewish American Heritage Month, so for anyone interested in Judaic life, Scott says the doors are always open—both in-person and virtually.



Congregation Beth Israel

“We are welcoming to all. Anyone who’s interested in learning about Judaism can be involved in our basic Judaism class that meets online. Anyone who wants to see what a worship service is like is welcome to attend. They’re held at 6:30 every Friday evening throughout the entire year. You can watch online or you can come in person. We have staff and clergy who provide outreach and support for learning and participating.”

“We host regular scholars and artists who come here throughout the whole year, visiting from Israel, New York, or California.

They share their wisdom about their values of inclusivity, tradition, and perspectives on Israel and democracy—all kinds of things,” she adds. “It’s not just about seeing people from afar. It’s about getting to know people and individuals one-on-one. We have a lot of people who grew up with this congregation who are fifth- and sixth-generation, and we also have people who move here as transplants and find their home here just as easily.”

For more information, visit [beth-israel.org](http://beth-israel.org) or call 713-771-6221.

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# Creating Shalom and Safe Spaces

**Ari Rosen** fights for inclusion and empowering others.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



The term “hineni” translates to “here I am” in Hebrew. As a transmasculine, nonbinary member of the Jewish community, Ari Rosen embodies what

it means to be fully, authentically themselves. The fundraiser and activist fights for visibility in their community, all while championing the causes they hold near to their heart.

“I am the director of philanthropy at the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston,” Rosen explains. “Our purpose is to strengthen and sustain the Jewish community through fundraising. We create programs that help Jewish families engage across the widest spectrum of Jewish life, and in Houston we feel like a big tent. We want to include as many folks [as possible] who identify as Jewish—be they multi-racial, LGBTQ, different ages, [or from] different denominations within the Jewish faith. Our tagline is that we are the convenor, connector, funder, and innovator of the Houston Jewish community.”

Rosen is in a unique position at their full-time job, saying, “I’m definitely the only trans or nonbinary person at the Federation. There are times when it’s been kind of lonely—a little isolating, where you just feel like you kind of have to navigate all of this on your own. After I got top surgery, however, my colleagues were super supportive and even offered to send a Shabbat dinner for our family. It really highlighted how I am able to bring my full self to work.”

Inspiring colleagues to include their pronouns in email signatures is a step Rosen has taken toward championing inclusion in the workplace. “There’s such a range of Jewish practice and different denominations, so I’ve never felt like I had to choose between being queer, trans, or Jewish. I’ve always been able to find a synagogue, or a community that welcomed me. And if one didn’t exist, I’m the kind of person that is going to build it.” They fondly reminisce about one such initiative. “When I lived in Seattle, a friend of mine and I started a queer Jewish



group for folks in their 20s and 30s. That group is still going today, and it’s amazing to see.”

The two-gendered verbiage in Jewish teachings has proven taxing for Rosen. “In Hebrew, everything is male or female, so it’s been challenging from a language perspective,” they explain. “If you’re called to read from the Torah, there’s certain components where you’ll be referred to as the son or daughter of so-and-so. Another example is the bar and bat mitzvahs for boys and girls.” Rosen is hopeful for a pendulum swing in a more inclusive direction, saying, “There’s been amazing stuff happening across the country where people are coming up with new words and versions of all

of these things that aren’t so gendered.”

When Rosen isn’t fighting for change, having recently led an LGBTQ forum for the Greater Houston Jewish community and fundraised for the Federation, they’re raising two children with their partner, Elaine. “We’ve been together for about eight years, and we met in Seattle,” Rosen explains. “I always joke that I had to go all the way to Seattle to find a queer, Jewish Texan. She grew up in San Antonio and we met through a mutual friend. We always joke that that’s one way we knew we were meant to be together. The other is because our last names go together so perfectly to make a new last name for our children—Rosenklein.”→



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Ari Rosen (center) with their partner, Elaine, and two children.

Rosen also proudly serves on the board of directors for Grace Place, a local non-profit that supports and empowers youth of all sexualities and gender identities experiencing homelessness. "Grace Place's model and approach is the complete opposite of the 'savior' mentality. The system has failed these youth, and there's nothing wrong with them whatsoever. We're going to meet them where they're at and find

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—Ari Rosen

out what they need and what they want," Rosen says passionately. "We give them opportunities to advocate for themselves, and leadership skills to build connections. To me, it's the gold-standard model for this type of work."

Having been accepted unconditionally by their family, including their father who is a prominent rabbi in Houston, Rosen still understands there is much work to be done each day to create a more inclusive world. "My family was super-accepting and made it clear that they love me. My dad even began speaking from the pulpit about different LGBT issues."

Ultimately, despite the country's ongoing political antagonism, Rosen is guided by faith and hope in the future, citing the progress already being made and the youth who carry the torch of queer Jewish people from the past and present. "This next generation of queer and trans youth is not putting up with anything! They're saying, 'You will provide a gender-neutral bathroom, and you will call us by the correct name.' It's obviously a big challenge. We're getting a lot of opposition and terrible laws passed, but I've just been really encouraged by this next generation."

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# LA VIE BOHEME

Director Ty Defoe previews his  
Theatre Under The Stars production of *Rent*.

By ZACH MCKENZIE  
Photos by FRANK HERNANDEZ



A story about young people facing hardships while attempting to create a community for a better future. That synopsis of the iconic

hit musical *Rent* has been interpreted in a number of ways since it officially debuted in 1996. According to director Ty Defoe, the stories and themes within the musical are more applicable to our contemporary political and social climate than ever before.

Defoe, a two-spirit, indigiqueer creator, is the brilliant mind behind the performance piece *Two Spirit, One Dance*. His song “Come to Me Great Mystery” appeared in a collection that won the Grammy Award for Best Native American Music Album. He channels this lived experience as he collaborates closely with the TUTS creative team to bring the show’s story of struggle, love, and hope to the Hobby Center this month.

Speaking to the topical relevance of the production, Defoe explains, “This story is something that, at the time it premiered, wasn’t seen. The contemporary nature of the musical is seen in the overturning of the parts that the dominant society has shied away from talking about, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and the evolution of interpersonal connection and human existence.”

The Tony Award-winning musical tells the story of young, struggling artists living in Lower Manhattan while the AIDS epidemic rages on throughout the 1980s. Defoe, a citizen of the Oneida and

Anishinaabe Nation, views that story from the perspective of a queer indigenous creator. “It’s about a group of young people who are connecting with each other at a very important time. When I think about something like *Rent*, I’m seeing it as a historical piece that’s still alive and very much present today. The musical blends the past, the present, and the future, just as indigenous lifeways do. It’s the past, present, and future that is still in existence against 500 years of colonialism. When I relate that to something like *Rent*, it’s this idea, right at its core, of young people trying to create a new Bohemia for the future.

“I like to think about these ways of seeing the world as almost like superpowers, where I get to see into the full complexities of gender, human nature, and interpersonal relationships,” Defoe adds. “As an indigenous person, I experience these cultural ways of viewing and seeing the world that have always been present. It’s almost like pulling them down to give messages, not only on a local level, but on a state and national level, and then on a global level.”

Critics will assert that the show’s 1980s subject matter is outdated. Defoe wholeheartedly disagrees, saying, “It’s very contemporary. We just went through a pandemic together where we had to stay inside of our houses. We couldn’t leave our apartments, we couldn’t make theater, we couldn’t see each other, except people that were in our bubble. How is that any different from [the character] Mark, for example, staying in his apartment for weeks on end? Or Mark getting obsessed with making art as a means of expression, or being a person trying to relate to others? People

change and evolve, and so does a show like this. [Its plotline is] built around these characters from a time when gathering together in unity was so needed. That’s the contemporary part of this piece.”

The New York City native is thrilled to be in Houston, collaborating with artists from across the country and from right here in H-Town. “What was really exciting about this opportunity to direct *Rent* is being in Houston. Just getting to know Texas and Texans, really thinking about the conversations that *Rent* can [spark among] intergenerational groups of older folks, queer and non-queer folks—[especially] with the younger generation coming up, and with people of a multiplicity of gender and racial identities and backgrounds.

“I hope folks within the city and the surrounding areas come to see the show. Because of the political tenor of what’s going on in America, I feel like it’s a necessary piece that needs to be seen and heard by all.”

Referring to the hometown talent in the production, Defoe notes that some of the actors are returning to Houston for this TUTS production. [We have] actors, singers, and designers who didn’t get a chance to [tell this story] when they left Houston to pursue their careers and dreams. So getting to be in a room full of these creative people to create joy and laughter and healing—I am, as we hear the character Maureen say, over the moon!”

**WHAT:** TUTS’ production of *Rent*

**WHERE:** The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, 800 Bagby St.

**WHEN:** May 16–28, 2023

**INFO:** [tuts.com/shows/rent-2](https://tuts.com/shows/rent-2)



The cast of Theatre Under The Stars’ production of *Rent* during their first week of rehearsals.

PHOTO BY RUBEN VELA

# Dancing Through Time

Houston choreographer **Monica Josette** brings a unique perspective to TUTS' production of *Rent*.

By **ZACH MCKENZIE**  
Photos by **FRANK HERNANDEZ**



A hometown force of nature will be sharing her talents with audiences at Theater Under The Stars (TUTS) this month. Choreographer Monica Josette is one of the many creatives behind TUTS' new production of the musical *Rent*. This ally of the LGBTQ community is thrilled to be adding a unique contemporary feel to the musical through her diligent research of various dance styles.

"This is my first time choreographing *Rent*, and it's been going fantastic," says the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) class of 2000 alum. "In the beginning of the process, I did so much research. For the character Angel, I didn't want to appropriate styles such as ballroom, whacking, or punking, but I still wanted to try to bring some of those things to the table. Sometimes hip hop can be assimilated and used in a way that [feels] appropriated and not really authentic. I did a lot of research and bought so many books. I rewatched *Paris Is Burning*, like, 18 times!"

Josette, whose older sister is a member of the LGBTQ community, says that audiences

will see plenty of her flair mixed into the onstage choreography. "I've been able to have a lot of fun with my personal perspective, and gaze on movement as a character in the piece. I've been really able to bring my personality, along with information about the styles of the '90s. You'll see some random hip hop things, and dances that will have you, like, 'Wait a minute! Did they just do the butterfly?' That, mixed in with some rock things for the opening title-track piece, and more. And in 'Tango: Maureen,' I studied ballroom and those kinds of dance styles, as well."

The intimate and tragic nature of the musical's storyline has emerged as the main source of creative struggle for the choreographer, whose goal is to protect the integrity of the performance and, above all else, the comfort of the performers. "Making sure that there's a safe space for everyone, and that people feel comfortable with what they're doing, is hugely important. There's an insane amount of touching, groping, and moving, so as a person who deeply cares about making spaces safe for other people, I stayed up late at night trying to make sure I dotted all the I's and crossed all the T's. Then I asked all the questions, and had conversations about how to move forward in this process of actually constructing each piece."

The Montrose resident, who performed in *Singin' in the Rain* on the TUTS main stage 20 years ago, has also choreographed a number of performances for the musical theater company, most recently *The Secret of My Success*. She ponders the impact of this current project, saying, "America has a tendency to repeat itself over and over again, and we don't tend to learn lessons quickly when it comes to rights for marginalized communities. We're still in the same bag. The conversation about the AIDS crisis, for example, creates room for a new understanding of what that must have been like to [be dying of] something that no one really understood."

"I think there's a lot of contemporary parallels. *Rent* may be viewed as a time capsule, but there are plenty of shows that are time capsules, and it doesn't make them any less relevant. I think that TUTS has done a great job of positioning creators that have new perspectives. They bring so much of themselves to this project that there's no way it can be the same, original *Rent*."



Keep up with Monica Josette on Instagram @monijomagic.



# An Angel Among Us

Tomás Matos hits the stage with plenty of New York attitude.

By ZACH MCKENZIE  
Photos by FRANK HERNANDEZ



Houston, get ready: Tomás Matos has arrived! The fabulous New York actor, rapper, writer, and model is strutting onto the stage at

Theatre Under The Stars for the company's production of the musical *Rent*. Matos, who portrays the character Angel Dumott Schunard, says their portrayal of the character is rooted in love and will speak to audiences far and wide.

"Angel is an unapologetically femme light in the world of the '90s in New York City," the nonbinary powerhouse explains. "She helps tell the story of queer love, through the lens of someone who is living their life with AIDS. In my perception, Angel is a nonbinary individual who participates in the art form of drag and uses it to step into themselves even more authentically."

Matos, who identifies as trans-femme, explains that this is not their first time portraying the character. "When I was 15 years old, I played Angel in a youth theater production in New York City," they recall. "I was part of this youth theater company called Kidz Theater, and we performed *Rent* down in the Lower East Side in Alphabet City—pretty much where *Rent* takes place. I was 15, but still a city girl. I was one of the girls just living my damn life in New York City, and I was able to pull a lot of inspiration from my surroundings. I think for this production, I'm able to make nods to that 15-year-old me who played Angel, just now as an adult."

The impact of portraying a character living with AIDS is one Matos takes seriously. "We're still living in a time when the stigma around HIV and AIDS is very much alive. You can look on any queer dating app and find someone who uses the word 'clean' in a way that it shouldn't be. The more we can eradicate the stigma

around HIV and AIDS by telling stories about people like Angel, Roger, and Tom Collins, I think the better our chances will be to keep moving forward."

A born entertainer, Matos is simply thrilled to be back onstage, performing alongside so many talented actors who are bringing the iconic show to Houston audiences. "There's something so beautiful about walking into a rehearsal space. I'm very excited to do that again—to play with all these amazing actors that I just met, and have someone like Ty Defoe directing and allowing the space to feel safe and inclusive enough to actually want to play. I'm really excited about that!"

Matos can relate to the character Angel, saying, "At the core of who and what I am is love and light. I think there's a lot of that in *Rent*, and especially in Angel, despite all of what she's going through. I'm really excited to lead with love."



The AfroLatiné star of stage and screen, having made their feature debut in the queer rom-com *Fire Island*, hopes this production of *Rent* will be an invitation for all to live authentically and be more open-minded. "It's especially timely to do *Rent* at Theatre Under The Stars, in Texas, to really tell people that our stories matter, our lives matter, and you can't get rid of us," the performer emphasizes. "Someone once said that in order for you to make change, you have to shove yourself into people's faces. I think that's unfortunately what it's starting to come down to. We're not going anywhere. And I think, specifically for me, being able to be unapologetically myself on a stage, telling Angel's story, is imperative. I know that there are people here in Houston who can look at someone like myself and be like, 'Oh, I belong here, too.'"



Keep up with Tomás Matos on Instagram @tomatos...

# A Whole New Level of Fabulous

*Drag Wonderettes* come to Stages this month.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



COURTESY OF STAGES



There's a show coming to Stages that's a real drag! Mitchell Greco, Stages' associate artistic director, is putting on his director's hat to bring *Drag Wonderettes*

to the stage this month. The director takes us behind the scenes of this re-imagining of the jukebox musical comedy *The Marvelous Wonderettes*, featuring hits from the 1950s and '60s. This production is putting a fresh and fabulous spin on a classic with plenty of sass, big hair, and campiness that will have audiences screaming "Yas, queens!"

Greco, a Sam Houston State University alumnus, summarizes his production's source

material saying, "The plot of Roger Bean's original *Marvelous Wonderettes* is four girls in 1958 singing at their senior prom during act one. Then, act two takes place in 1968 at their ten-year high-school reunion. We find out where they ended up and how their friendship evolved and survived."

The new production is a re-imagining of the classic original, and audiences will delight at the structure of the fresh script. "Much like the original *Marvelous Wonderettes*, I think the show is a celebration of friendship, love, and music," Greco explains. "The basic structure is the same as the original, [but now] it's a show within a show." This fresh take opened creative doors for Greco and his team.

"The performers in *Drag Wonderettes* portray drag artists who are part of "The House of Amandas." The queens find themselves at the local Elks Lodge putting on their own production of *The Marvelous Wonderettes*. There are two storylines going on at the same time. There's the actual plot of *The Marvelous Wonderettes*, and then there's the behind-the-scenes subplot of the House of Amandas."

When it came time to cast the drag performers, Greco saw artists from across the drag spectrum. "We saw a good mix of folks who have done drag in their past, but also folks who [are excellent singers] who haven't really done much drag," he explains.



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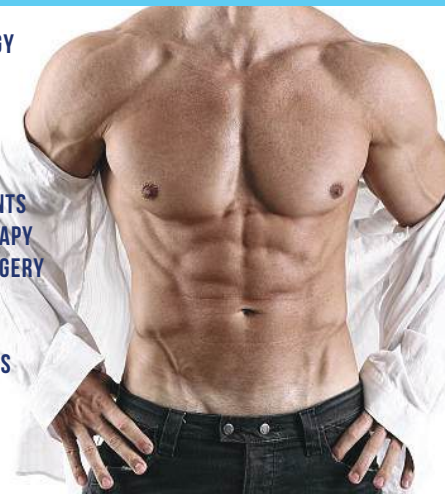
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The cast features Marco Comacho as Betty Jean, John Ryan del Bosque as Missy, Mark Ivy as Suzy, and Austin Colburn as Cindy Lou.

"We [wanted to] honor the fact that drag is an art form," Greco adds. "We were figuring out how to thoughtfully meld the two worlds of really difficult musical theater—[the challenge of singing] tight, four-part harmonies for the entire show, and the art and celebration of drag."

Greco is immensely grateful for the chance to work directly with Bean, the original show's writer. "My favorite part is when we get everyone in a room," he says. "I'm not the kind of leader who thinks my idea is the best and only idea. Most of the time, the group assembled is so talented and unique, so the best ideas come from collaboration. I look forward to whenever it's not just me walking around with my dog thinking about the show every day."

Greco promises that the show will have plenty of visuals to tickle the senses. "You can expect taffeta, feathers, and sequins—a heightened [sense of glamorous camp, compared to] the original show." Greco even



COURTESY OF STAGES

Drag Wonderettes  
director Mitchell Greco

teases a surprise at the end that audiences will want to stick around for. "As a whole, the show is bigger, brighter, and more sparkly with bigger hair, bigger dresses, and bigger shoes."

The show's timing is purely serendipitous, having been scheduled long before the current wave of legislative attacks on drag artists across the country. Greco hopes the pure joy

that the art form elicits will resonate with all audiences. "Drag is such a huge spectrum. You can see it in bars and on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Those styles are not the same, and they shouldn't be the same," he notes. "I think it's a real opportunity, both for lovers of drag and folks who aren't really that familiar. People who may not have even seen an episode of *Drag Race* will have an amazing time and sit in awe of the incredible artistry that these artists are capable of. And above all, everyone will have an incredible time with each other."

"The show remains what it has always been about: friendship, love, and music," Greco concludes. "That's why this new version of the show will resonate with fans of the original production. We're all people on this earth, we all have friends, we all love, and we all go through times that we only get through because of the love of our friends and the community we surround ourselves with."

**WHAT:** *Drag Wonderettes*

**WHEN:** May 19–July 2

**WHERE:** Stages, 600 Rosine St.

**Info:** [stageshouston.com/event/drag-wonderettes](https://stageshouston.com/event/drag-wonderettes)



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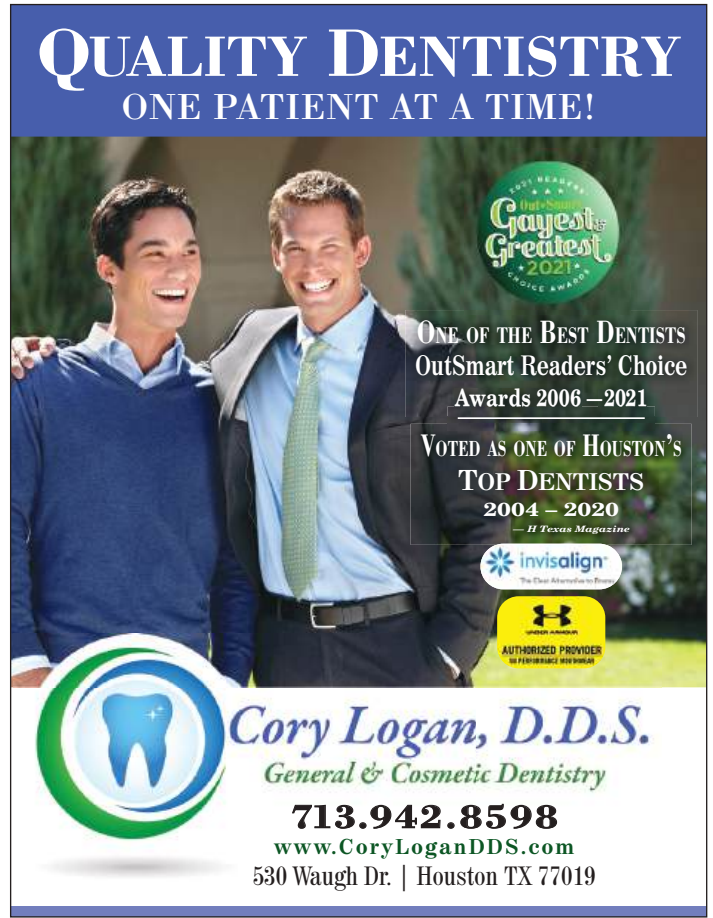
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# Fashion that's a Drag

Gin Martini and Yaihara DeHill's designs are a favorite of local drag star Mistress Isabelle Brooks.

By MORGAN GAGE



Mistress Isabelle Brooks appeared on *RuPaul's Drag Race* Season 15 wearing fashions by Houston designers Yaihara DeHill (left) and Gin Martini.



When Mistress Isabelle Brooks took over the screens of the world on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Houston was cheering her on from her hometown, and that support went two ways. Many of the looks that Mistress dominated in as the self-proclaimed “heavyweight champ” of Season 15 were created by Houston designers Gin Martini and Yaihara DeHill.

Even those who haven't kept up with *Drag Race* have perhaps seen the work of Martini and DeHill on stages around Houston, since both of the designers are active in the local drag scene with multiple costume projects in the works.

Even before Martini discovered their passion for designing costumes for drag performances, they say, “I couldn't *not* do fashion if I wanted to. This shit is in my blood.” From their mother to their great-great-grandmother, whose sewing machine sits in their studio, Martini was destined to pursue a future in fashion.

Martini, who is pansexual, started designing clothes in high school and founded the school's fashion club. Their confidence grew after being asked to create “simple dresses” for local drag performers, which led to enrolling in HCC's school of fashion design. “If it weren't for them getting me to do things, I probably wouldn't have as much confidence, because they loved all my original sketches. They literally would look at my sketchbook and be like, ‘I

want that,’” Martini recalls.

“It snowballed from there. Honestly, a lot of it is just doing things for my friends—who ended up doing really great things with [my fashions]. Mistress Isabelle was somebody that was just like, ‘Hey, girl, I need to use your machine, because mine broke,’ or something like that. And then she ended up using things on *Drag Race* that I made her, and I was like, ‘Oh, sick!’”

When DeHill became involved in designing costumes for drag shows, she already had an illustrious history of creative endeavors under her belt. After graduating from Prairie View A&M with a degree in architecture, she began designing cakes and then got involved in recycled runways, which sparked her involvement in Houston's fashion world. →



Gin Martini at work in her studio  
Keep up with Gin Martini on  
Instagram @ginmartinidesigns...

Around six years ago, DeHill and her husband attended a Dessie's Drag Race show at a local club and "fell in love." From there, her husband began competing in drag competitions, with DeHill constructing his costumes and doing his makeup for performances.

"At first, the family thought it was weird, because they were like, 'What are you doing? Why are you putting your husband in makeup?'" DeHill recalls.

Now, DeHill says, her mom is one of her biggest supporters and helps out with sewing. She will be joining DeHill at her first DragCon this year, and is now "a part of this world."

"I think that people don't really know what's going on [with drag]. They just *think* they know what's going on, and cross it out right away," DeHill muses. "But once they get to know the whole community, they fall in love with the people and the culture."

When others in the drag community learned that DeHill was designing and creating her husband's costumes, they began asking her to construct their costumes. "I had to learn stuff quickly. Sometimes I was making costumes for three out of the five people that were perform-

**"I COULDN'T *NOT* DO  
FASHION IF I WANTED  
TO. THIS SHIT IS IN  
MY BLOOD."**

—Gin Martini

ing [at a show], so I had to learn to be really, really fast," she explains.

That speed has continued to be a virtue with such a large customer base. She often has multiple projects going on at once. "There's a show every day. There's always a need for a costume, so it's like we can never go out of business," DeHill laughs.

Martini has had a similar experience, having forgotten long ago how many costumes they have masterminded. But she's well aware of how quickly they need to be designed and made.

Fashion and costume design, Martini notes, has always been a women-driven industry,

with many famous designers who have followed in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers before them.

"Even though there are a lot of male fashion designers, in the actual costuming departments and the nitty-gritty in these fashion houses, it's always women. You rarely see men on the floor. I'm not saying it can't be done by men, or something like that, but for the most part it's a women-driven industry when it comes down to it."

Martini, who also releases their own music and was the winner of Houston's Pride Superstar competition in 2015, believes there is no one "right way" to become a fashion or costume designer. For example, Martini was drawn toward creating designs for short films, music videos, and drag performers in particular.

"What drew me to fashion to begin with was that you have to create this character's look," Martini emphasizes. From the iconic dress of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* to Beetlejuice's signature stripes, "these characters can't exist without



A few of Yahaira DeHill's colorful designs. Keep up with DeHill on Instagram @yahairadehilldesigns.



Karina Love

these outfits, so for me, it's creating what that character is gonna look like. That naturally led me to drag queens, because a lot of queens have their own persona."

DeHill describes working with drag queens as a "dream"—a sentiment that Martini echoes. DeHill is spurred on by

competition and enjoys watching people showcasing what they love to do, whether that's on a Houston stage or on national television. With four sewing projects in her kitchen, three more in her studio, and a house currently taken over by preparations for DragCon, her passion for costume design shows.

"When somebody asks me for something, I try to make it happen. I try to make their vision and my vision—both things—come together," DeHill says. "It's just fun working with different types of people, and drag queens have just been just a dream to work with, because their costumes are crazy!"

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# A Champion for All

**Poonam Kapoor is an advocate for equitable housing opportunities.**

By ZACH MCKENZIE

**P**oonam Kapoor is the real deal when it comes to real estate. A combination of her passion for uplifting the queer community, her support for other marginalized communities, and her devotion to service have led Kapoor to excel in both her career and various high-level volunteer leadership roles. Kapoor's activism and career have made her a role model to her 4-year-old son, as well as the Houston community at large.

"I am a board member of the Victory Fund, which is a national organization with a mis-

sion to identify, endorse, and elect LGBTQ candidates at all levels of office," she says. "I also served as the co-chair for this year's Houston Champagne Brunch, which is the Victory Fund's second-largest community brunch event in the country. It serves as a way to provide visibility for candidates and fundraise for the organization. This year's event went really well. We had over 400 people turn out, including Annise Parker (our Victory Fund CEO, president, and former mayor of Houston) as well as Judge Beau Miller, Senator Tammy Baldwin, and other members of Congress."

Kapoor, whose parents are from the state

of Punjab in Northwest India, explains how being a part of a marginalized community makes her more empathetic to others. "I'm a Realtor, and I love to serve underserved communities. A lot of LGBTQ people are discriminated against, which goes against fair-housing rules. [Even with the laws in place], they're still not treated properly."

A heart for serving her community as a Realtor ultimately led her to connect with the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce. "One of the reasons I joined the LGBT Chamber of Commerce is because I'm a queer business owner, and I wanted to get the support of the Chamber of Commerce, as well as support [their work as a voice for our community]. Representation matters, and we want to make sure that we have our voices heard. Most of my clients are either queer, educators, or immigrants, so it's an honor to support my community."

In contrast to the real-estate companies serving the high-end luxury market, Kapoor focuses her efforts on uplifting those seeking affordable housing. "A lot of LGBTQ people may have been adversely affected by a lack of employment, by not having inherited wealth, or even just lacking the support from their families like a lot of folks have when purchasing real estate. I love to help provide housing as a way to create wealth for LGBTQ people and other marginalized communities like immigrants, women, and people of color. That allows them to take pride in owning a home, providing them with stability and a sense of community."

Of course, a love for service doesn't come without strife at times. "I enjoy service, but it can be frustrating when you feel like you're going uphill," she admits. "I always feel like I'm doing something in a positive direction that will hopefully affect people. I put a lot of purpose and meaning into the things I do, and sometimes I just need to relax."



One way Kapoor relaxes is through dancing that connects her with her South Asian heritage—specifically, the Punjab folk dance known as Bhangra. “I love it! It’s a great workout, and it puts a smile on your face. I feel very proud to be Indian. It’s one of the many identities that I have.”

Explaining the lighthearted nature of the songs associated with Bhangra, Kapoor says, “They tell folk stories of farming communities, and the disparities between rich and poor. There’s always this undertone of bringing people together, regardless of differences, as well as bringing them into the fold of something they may not have experienced—all for the true pleasure of music and movement.”

**“I LOVE TO HELP PROVIDE HOUSING AND A SENSE OF STABILITY FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE AND OTHER MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES.”**

—Poonam Kapoor

For those who may not be as dance-inclined as Kapoor, but who still want to balance their work with community service, the Realtor explains it’s simpler than most people think. “One way is to just be yourself—be unabashedly proud of who you are. Secondly, you could mentor younger people. It doesn’t have to take a lot of time. Just make yourself available to different communities. And lastly, donate! Queer organizations get so little funding. From a foundation perspective, queer organizations get one percent of all funding, maybe even less. We are the bottom of the barrel, so give your money to your community.”

Reflecting on how impactful volunteer service can be in today’s political climate, Kapoor muses that simply existing as an out queer person is a radical act, in and of itself. And for those in the trenches fighting the good fight, Kapoor sums it up well: “We’re so used to taking crumbs because we’re not used to moving forward enough. Even trying is a victory. We can’t feel defeated—we have to keep trying.”

For more info, visit [realestatealliance.org/members/poonam/](https://realestatealliance.org/members/poonam/)



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# Forging Paths for Disabled Americans

Rafferty Laredo's Filipino American heritage inspires his occupational-therapy work.

By DAVID CLARKE



"I feel like I got here accidentally, but I'm so glad that I'm here," says Rafferty Laredo, executive director of the nonprofit United Spinal Houston. It's a job that has

allowed him to build bridges between the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and disability communities. "I think there's a lot of wisdom that comes out of understanding how we are all so beautifully interconnected, despite how we might seem different. And to live and experience that every day through this nonprofit feels like a real gift."

The openly gay Filipino American worked with patients who had spinal-cord injuries as an occupational therapist for 12 years prior to founding United Spinal Houston. Laredo also worked in the United Arab Emirates as a private therapist in a rehab center serving Abu Dhabi's royalty, which is where he got the idea to start a nonprofit.

"I don't have a business background. I've never worked for a nonprofit or run a nonprofit, but I did know that there needed to be [a better way to serve the disability community]," he says. "Our insurances don't cover a lifetime's worth of therapy. So, I sort of naively went into it."

Laredo picked up a copy of *Nonprofits for Dummies*, reading the book page by page to learn how to make his idea a reality. "So much of building a nonprofit is connecting to people who are smarter than you—people who know things," Laredo explains. He turned to former patients and influential people he knew within the disability community, and invited them to join his board and his think tank. "I think we're past the 10-year mark now, and I can't believe we're still alive. There have been many times when I thought, 'What in the world am I doing?' I struggle with what many might call 'imposter syndrome.'"

Having traveled the world doing occupational-therapy work, Laredo was primed for thinking creatively about American health-care issues. But he also found himself questioning whether he truly had the capacity to be a leader in the disability community. "Working



COURTESY

in Abu Dhabi gave me some freedom to be even more creative, and just think outside of the box on what it means to help the disability community in a way that isn't direct medical care," he says. "It was through empowerment and advocacy work that we started using art as a vehicle [to give our disabled clients a means of] self-expression. We created these connectional opportunities for folks who might have thought they should just stay in their homes because their disability [made them feel like] it was the end of their life."

United Spinal Houston has brought added visibility to the disability community by highlighting all of the ways that life can be enjoyed after a severe injury or illness. And Laredo's

high-profile position as United Spinal's executive director has brought added visibility to the AAPI community, as well.

"It's funny for me to hear the words 'visibility' and 'Asian Americans' in the same sentence," Laredo admits, echoing a sentiment that may ring true for many Asian Americans. "I grew up in a really quiet Filipino family where we weren't really encouraged to be out there in the spotlight. We sort of stayed to ourselves. As I reflect on my parents, they just were really hard-working individuals who didn't pursue visibility."

"United Spinal Houston [works with] the largest minority group in the United States of America—the disability com-

munity. Within that, of course, are people within the AAPI community,” Laredo notes. “What I love about the Asian community is that we love to take care of each other, especially our elders and the people within our families that are disabled. And—maybe even to a fault—there is so much love and care, and maybe even fear, that visibility is not the first priority.”

**“WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THE ASIAN COMMUNITY IS THAT WE LOVE TO TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER, ESPECIALLY OUR ELDERS AND THE PEOPLE WITHIN OUR FAMILIES THAT ARE DISABLED.”**

—Rafferty Laredo

As a first-generation Filipino American, Laredo points to his heritage and upbringing as the basis for his desire to help others. His parents immigrated from the Philippines in the early 1970s, pursuing an opportunity to make a better life for themselves, and especially for their children. “I think all of that has really informed my work. I heard my parents’ stories about how people helped them when they first got here. They helped them with money, put a roof over their heads, and even gave them calling cards to call back to the Philippines in order to maintain some type of connection with friends and family,” Laredo recalls. “The local Filipino community became their family, and became my American-based aunts, uncles, and cousins that are still really close to me today, even though we don’t have a blood relationship.”

There is an undeniable power in community that allows individuals to truly flourish. “[Our local Filipino community that my parents helped build] has informed me to say, ‘I can do it, even though I’m in a foreign land and I don’t understand what this is going to be in the end. But I’m going to stick with it anyway, because I have this idea of something better,’” Laredo reflects. “And I think that building a sense of community is the way to do it. I don’t think my parents intended to teach me that lesson so I would become a nonprofit leader for the disability community, but when I think about what they did, and how our Filipino heritage spoke to them and how it still speaks to me and influences what I do, that’s awesome.”

For more info, visit [unitedspinalhouston.org](http://unitedspinalhouston.org).

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# Challenging Homophobia in the Muslim World

Activist Sharjeel Hanif is encouraged by the progress he sees.

By MARENE GUSTIN



For many people in marginalized communities, there is stigma and often hatred. But 31-year-old Sharjeel Hanif, a queer Muslim IT specialist, sees

the bigotry as a challenge that has only made him stronger.

“Being a minority within a minority has been one of the great blessings of my life,” Hanif explains. “It has enabled in me a sense of empathy for others and curiosity for knowledge that I do not think I would otherwise have. One of my favorite quotes from the Quran is, ‘We have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.’ I think this perfectly encapsulates the American (and increasingly global) experience. While we all have differences, we are here to learn from and appreciate one another.”

Born in Karachi, Pakistan, Hanif’s family emigrated to Houston’s Alief area when he was a baby, so he grew up in the suburbs. He currently resides in Sugar Land and works in IT operations for a major financial institution.

“I have always been curious about the way things work, and my job lets me pursue that on two fronts: understanding technology, and understanding how financial markets work,” Hanif says. “It’s been a journey getting to where I am, and I am grateful for the opportunities I have had as a ‘Generation 1.5’ immigrant.

“That is not to say it has not been without its challenges,” he adds. “Particularly in a post 9/11 America, it was common to hear stories in the community of discrimination, from businesses and homes being vandalized to bullying and harassment of students. That is on top of the very real policies that affected so many people’s lives—the racial profiling of Muslims at home and the indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Muslim-majority countries abroad, as well as the negative and stereotypical depictions of Muslims in media and Hollywood. On the latter front, we have come a long way. Today, we can even find queer Muslim characters



on television! That representation goes a long way, to be able to see yourself on screen.”

Hanif notes that today’s Muslim American community is generally not as conservative as other minority groups, so they are more accepting of their LGBTQ neighbors.

“In this environment, Muslim American support for LGBTQ+ rights has improved dramatically over the past decade,” Hanif says. “This is no surprise; people are beginning to realize that our collective freedoms are intertwined. Growing up, I would always see

the visibly hijab-wearing Muslim woman hanging out with the visibly queer person. This tended to surprise people, but it never surprised me. Both groups of people know what it feels like to be discriminated against or judged, based purely on how they look. That says something to me about what it means to build ally-ship across groups of people.”

Hanif is a member of an offshoot of the UK’s Hidayah LGBTQI+, a leading queer Muslim charity.

“Hidayah is an organization committed to challenging homophobia within the Muslim community and Islamophobia within the queer community,” Hanif explains. “They provide resources to LGBTQI+ Muslims—mentoring, workshops, networking opportunities, and spiritual resources as well as educational seminars for Muslims and the wider community. They have had a large presence in the UK, another country with a growing Muslim community, and are starting to expand to the US. As the US is a much larger geographical area than the UK, right now all of their US programming is virtual. The word Hidayah is an Arabic word meaning ‘guidance.’ I came on board to help get the organization officially launched as a 501(c)(3) in the US, which we are very excited about.”

Hanif is also involved in his company’s LGBTQ employee resource group (ERG). He says it has been a great way to connect with colleagues who may be going through some of the same things he has had to navigate in the workplace.

He is also a precinct chair for the Fort Bend Democratic Party, and he encourages anyone interested in getting into political activism work to become a precinct chair as a way to get involved in local campaigns and connect with other folks dedicated to advancing specific causes—something he is adamant about in these times.

“It is no surprise that this same Texas legislature and governor that are banning books about queer people are also banning books about people of color,” he says of the current Republican-controlled state government. “It’s the same folks wanting to ban drag shows [with Senate Bill 12] and gender-affirming care [with Senate Bill 14] that are also trying to prevent legal immigrants, including Iranian Americans, from purchasing homes in the state [with Senate Bill 147]. All of us have to stick together in pushing back against this nonsense.”

Hanif concludes with some final words of wisdom for all Texans: “For the broader community, my plea would be to be patient and aware that the gay Muslim experience is not always going to be the same as the broader LGBTQ+ experience. Show us patience, compassion, and empathy. Our experiences—particularly when it comes to the process of coming out and our relationships with family and faith—are going to be different. But that does not in any way minimize or diminish our queerness. My motto is, ‘Let people be!’”

 Learn more about the queer Muslim charity Hidayah at [hidayahlgbt.com](http://hidayahlgbt.com).

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# Teaching the Future

Namrata Subramanian talks education reform.

By MARENE GUSTIN

**N**amrata “Nam” Subramanian is taking some time for herself to look after her mental health these days. A nonbinary Indian American, who uses the gender-neutral honorific Mx., lost a tough race last year in the Democratic primary for Texas House District 147, in which there were seven candidates—three of which were queer women of color. Attorney Jolanda Jones won a runoff and then the general election.

“I wish I had done better,” Subramanian, 24, says. “But I’m proud of the race we ran.”

The decision to run for retiring Rep. Garnet Coleman’s seat was not a last-minute one. Subramanian had been preparing to run for the seat even before he announced his retirement, having begun her teaching career during the pandemic and seeing a lot of the problems faced by teachers and students in the state. At the time, she told OutSmart: “As a queer woman of color and an educator working with students from various backgrounds, I have seen firsthand how issues like the ERCOT electricity grid failure and the school-to-prison pipeline have affected District 147.”

Her issues included economic, educational, and environmental justice, as well as advocating for the LGBTQ community by supporting bills that will advance her neighbors and her community, and opposing bills that harm the community. She supported a nondiscrimination ordinance that included protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Her students, who found out about her District 147 race online, frequently asked her questions about it, and some turned out to help block walk. She thinks they learned a valuable lesson on how the system works.



COURTESY

A lot of her supporters, and some students, who liked her stances on education, the environment, and the economy, have been asking if she'll run for office again.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," she says. "I'm a little jaded by the process—the anti-LGBTQ and anti-Asian things that went on. Maybe in a few years. I need some time to recover."

Last year, she also volunteered to work on the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund's Champagne Brunch, even though the national political action committee didn't endorse her in the House race.

"They asked me, so of course I said yes," Subramanian says. Although she still follows politics and stays active in local Democratic groups, she's very career-focused at the moment. "Teaching is very time sensitive; it's my primary focus right now."

Subramanian, who has dual bachelor's degrees in economics and public health from the University of California at Berkeley, teaches math at HISD's Energy Institute High School, a STEM-focused magnet program where she recently earned a prestigious Tesla Award.

"The school is very supportive of the queer community," she says. "The kids call

## "THE SCHOOL IS VERY SUPPORTIVE OF THE QUEER COMMUNITY, BUT THE TEXAS LEGISLATURE IS MAKING IT HARDER FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS."

—Namrata Subramanian

me Mx. Nam; they are very excited about that. It's probably the first time they've met someone who uses that term. I couldn't have done that at my last school. Of course, there are some parents who don't use it, but that doesn't really bother me."

But politics has a way of creeping into her new job as she follows what's happening to education in Austin this year. "It's very disappointing," she sighs. "Anti-queer bills, school vouchers, book banning—the legislature is making it harder for teachers and students."

Subramanian says there is only one course of action. "We need to elect more young people and more people of color," she says. "And you

can't just vote Democratic. There are some Democrats in Austin who can be as easily swayed by corporate money as Republicans. You have to know who you are voting for."

But no matter how dark things look for Texas schools in this legislative session, Subramanian can't see herself quitting. "I hope not! Without teachers, there is no future generation."

In the little spare time she can find, she sponsors the school's student-Democrats club, as well as an after-school powerlifting club—one of her other passions. She spends an hour a day in the gym, loves the outdoors, and is very environmentally conscientious.

"I am a vegetarian, but I'm going toward being totally vegan, cutting out dairy and eggs," she says.

Besides diet, powerlifting—and a new boyfriend—she finds joy in dancing.

"I have a queer Asian woman as a partner, and we do traditional Indian dances with a modern twist," Subramanian says. "We practice and do our own choreography. We even performed at the Victory Fund brunch!"

Follow Namrata Subramanian at [facebook.com/nam.subra](https://facebook.com/nam.subra).

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# From Oslo to the Wilderness

Norway welcomes LGBTQ travelers with itineraries to suit every taste.

By JOANNA O'LEARY



For LGBTQ travelers in the Norwegian wilderness, there's a subtle but sophisticated way of indicating your relationship status: a woolen beanie. Created by the Norwegian Trekking Association, this cute cloche is reversible, so the green side signals you're gay, single, and looking for love, while the red side means you're gay but committed and just seeking friendship.

The popularity of this *singellua* beanie testifies to Norway's inclusive attitude toward the LGBTQ community: simultaneously sophisticated yet practical, serious yet playful and, above all, warm and welcoming.

Often overlooked in favor of the sexier Nordic vacation spots such as Sweden and Denmark, Norway boasts stunning vistas, ample opportunities for urban as well as rural escapades, and one of the world's most impressive hospitality industries. And if that's not enough enticement, the expansion of the affordable-quality carrier Norse Airways—as well as the proliferation of next-level tour services such as Up Norway—should put Norway at the very top of your vacation bucket list.

And though the allure of winter sports and the northern lights make winter journeys especially appealing, Norway's formidable Pride festivities (the largest of which are in Oslo and Bergen) make summer a terrific time to visit.

## Awesome Oslo

Oslo is the natural first stop on your Norwegian foray. The cosmopolitan capital is a cultural powerhouse as well as home to a variety of establishments that cater to every taste. Among the many terrific accommodations in Oslo, the Hotel Sommero stands out for its gorgeous Art Deco decor (think Gatsby meets Euro-chic). Amenities include a world-class spa and fitness center, a private movie theater with themed screening parties, and artful in-room period touches such as rotary phones, antique fixtures, and hand-picked literature by local authors.

Oslo's array of cultural attractions can be overwhelming, so to help you navigate while also saving yourself some cash, invest in an Oslo Pass for discounts on venue admissions and public transportation. Any itinerary should include the National Museum (home to



A moose-burger lunch at Skåbu Mountain Lodge



The cocktail lounge in the Union Øye Hotel



An outdoor hot tub at the Storjord Hotel

one of the copies of *The Scream* as well as numerous rotating collections), the Palace Park (where Norway's king and queen live), and the Vigeland Sculpture Park.

The carefree attitude of Oslo's residents means that virtually every eating, drinking, and shopping venue is gay-friendly. Places that prominently wave their rainbow flag include the eclectic Tronsmo Bookstore (where you can stock up on sex-positive books in English, prints by local artists, and Black Lives Matter buttons), and the Cesar Bar and Cafe, where pizza and people-watching on the terrace is the name of the game. Oslo's landmark gay

bar London Pub is a storied safe space that unsurprisingly remains a local favorite—but which was unfortunately the target of a terrorist attack last year. True to its roots, the venue has rebounded loud and proud, and deserves your patronage now more than ever.

Finally, the SALT complex is perhaps the city's most unique leisure spot, offering a combination sauna and food-truck park with relaxing harbor views, an enviable selection of local beers and spirits, and grill-your-own reindeer sausage and marshmallow platters.

### Feel the Beat in Bergen

No one could blame you for spending all your time and kroner in Oslo, but don't overlook Norway's collection of idyllic villages and al fresco adventures located (even farther) north in Bergen. This "City of Seven Mountains" is Norway's second-largest, but in no way plays second fiddle to Oslo. Among its unique virtues is the amazing street art (including works by Dolk, the "Norwegian Banksy") and an alternative rock scene.

In keeping with Bergen's musical heartstrings, book a room at Opus XVI, a breathtaking architectural homage to the famous Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg that is still operated by his descendants. Stroll around the picturesque Bryggen Hanseatic Wharf to get your bearings, pick up some souvenirs, and pop in to the Bryggen Museum to learn about Bergen's fascinating origins and artifacts dating back to the 14th century. For an elegant dinner (or Norway's cutest afternoon tea), seek out Restaurant

1877, which specializes in serving edible art (including suckling lamb with miso and black garlic) in an approachable setting. Then it's on to Fincken, the city's grandest and gayest club, for libations and dancing to the pulsating house tunes.

### Smitten with Skåbu

From Bergen, head to the criminally cute town of Skåbu, and the Skåbu Fjellhotell, its eponymous mountain lodge run by husband-and-wife duo Henrik and Jannike. In accordance with Norway's eco-friendly attitudes, this boutique hotel is committed to being environmentally sustainable. Its cozy common spaces—replete with local folk art, gourmet dining (ask for a chef-designed tasting menu!), rustic sauna, adorable 1980s-style mini fitness center, and valley views make it tempting to spend all of your time just lounging around. But more ambitious visitors will appreciate the lodge as the perfect launch pad for dog sledding, cross-country skiing, snow-shoeing, and local farm tours.

### Aquatic Adventures

From Skåbu, a tempting array of hamlets and *hytte* (residential cottages) awaits to charm the pants off of visitors (often literally, as many boast saunas that encourage relaxing *au naturel*). More active travelers should set up camp at the Storfjord Hotel, whose waterfront location means kayaking, sunbathing, and swimming (if you're brave) in an icy fjord. With in-room fireplaces and fluffy luxury sheets, the antler-adorned rooms (ask for one that overlooks the valley) are designed to soothe the weary traveler after a day of faffing around the fjords. In the evening, tuck into a supper of *fårikål* (a traditional stew made with cabbage, mutton, and root vegetables) at the in-house restaurant, paired with a robust red wine selected from their extensive wine list.

Observant LGBTQ hotel guests will notice the circular rainbow pins sported by the friendly staff. While they could easily be mistaken for a Pride accessory, the pins actually symbolize the hotel's dedication to environmental sustainability. (One employee told me, laughingly, that no Pride symbols are needed there since queer acceptance is par for the course.)

### Luxurious Nostalgia in the Mountains

Another train and ferry ride will land you at the Hotel Øye, a Victorian-era hotel whose former guests include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany. If you're a history buff, you will swoon over the period wallpaper, portraits, and crockery. The customer service and accommodations, however, are luxuriously up-to-date (think heated marble floors in the bathroom).

While sipping one of the hotel's signature cocktails inflected with locally-foraged ingredients (our favorite is the Tyttebær Punch made with lingonberry coulis), ask one of the hotel's gregarious employees to regale you with stories about the hotel's resident ghost, Linda—a former housekeeper who was jilted by her military inamorato. Follow up with a multi-course dinner in the observatory restaurant, then a nightcap (or two) in the game room before falling asleep in your classic four-poster bed. In the morning, room service can deliver fresh-pressed hot coffee and flakier-than-your-twinky-nephew croissants right to your door.

These brief itineraries are just a sampling of the myriad ways you can have a jolly gay time in Europe's most underrated country. Go with an open mind, a hearty appetite, and *tusen takk* (or "a thousand thank-you's") on your lips. I promise that Norway's warm and welcoming citizens will return the kindness.

▶ Joanna O'Leary is a travel writer. Follow her on Instagram @msbrideyleary.



Kayaking in Storfjord



Dog sledding in Skåbu



Outdoor grilling-and-chilling at Oslo's SALT cultural arena on a fjord in the heart of Oslo, overlooking the Oslo Opera House and the Munch museum. Both indoor and outdoor serving areas offer food and drinks.



COURTESY

## 50 Years of Empowerment

Olivia Travel vacations offer connection and community.

By JENNY BLOCK



"Life as it should be." That's what Judy Dlugacz, the founder of Olivia Travel, calls the experience on an Olivia Travel cruise or resort vacation. If you've ever

been on one, you'd find it near impossible to disagree. It's like summer camp for lesbians and LGBTQ women who all want one thing: to feel happy and safe and free while being true to themselves and allowing others to do the same.

Olivia is a travel company for lesbians and LGBTQ women. Over the years, they have curated over 300 trips for more than 350,000 women. They offer vacations on large cruise ships, small riverboats, and at resort destinations, as well as adventure travel. And they

always charter the entire ship or book the entire resort or adventure trip to allow guests to feel safe and free.

Olivia Travel sprang from Olivia Records, a company founded on and by the strength of women. They are celebrating 50 awe-inspiring years in 2023.

Olivia Records was founded in 1973, a time when few female artists were being recorded. So a few women decided to produce their own music. Once the label took off, an idea sprang forth: instead of just recording these artists, why not feature them in concerts on cruise ships? And so began Olivia Travel in 1990. Dlugacz chartered two cruises to the Bahamas, the women got on board, and Olivia has been hitting the high seas and resort destinations

ever since.

Earlier this year, Olivia offered two back-to-back anniversary cruises out of Fort Lauderdale, with stops in Turks and Caicos, St. Thomas, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and even the private Half Moon Cay island in the Bahamas.

Olivia is known for its top-notch entertainment—everything from outstanding musicians and hilarious comedians to she-heroes from all walks of life. The anniversary cruises included musical offerings from longtime favorites like Cris Williamson and original Olivia recording artists Linda Tillery, Teresa Trull, Barbara Higbie, June Millington, Deidre McCalla, Dianne Davidson, Lucie Blue Tremblay, and Tret

Fure. Musicians Sweet Baby J'ai, Julie Wolf, Zoë Lewis, Alyson Palmer, Shelley Doty, Kofy Brown, and Katie Cash also performed, as did the dancers of the Sarah Bush Dance Project.

Olivia also offered comedy shows starring Karen Williams, Suzanne Westenhoefer, Elvira Kurt, Lisa Koch, Roxanna Ward, and Vickie Shaw; dance parties with DJ Citizen Jane, DJ Christie James, and DJ Rockaway; and special guests including Dr. Bonnie Morris and Irene Young. Olivia Records founding members Judy Dlugacz, Jenna Woodul, Ginny Berson, and Cris Williamson also made an appearance.

One of the stars who performed on both anniversary cruises was famed lesbian comedian and activist Dana Goldberg. She was recently in Houston for the Human Rights Campaign's gala dinner, and served as the evening's auctioneer while also dishing out a hearty helping of her fantabulously biting political comedy.

Goldberg has been performing on Olivia trips for about 15 years now. "There's really something beautiful about being in a safe environment," she notes. "If you're on a ship, we have the entire ship. If you're at a resort, we have the entire resort. There is a safety and a family within that that money



Judy Dlugacz, Olivia Travel's founder

can't buy. And it is specifically tailored so that you feel that way. You're not going to get that anywhere else.

"It's also the totality of experience. It's the entertainment. It's the environment. It's the energy of what it feels like to travel with 500 to 2,500 women and LGBTQ people. It is an experience that is priceless. And you won't know until you go. So if there is anyone reading this and they're like, 'I'm not sure,' give it a shot. Because almost every single person who has traveled with Olivia will never travel any other way."

So what would Goldberg like to say to the

Olivia team on their 50th anniversary? "Oh my God! Well, first of all, you don't look a day over 49! I would love to just wish Olivia (and every single person who started this beautiful family) the happiest of anniversaries. They've changed millions of lives. So I thank you for changing mine. I thank you for the opportunity to continue to see the world and make people laugh and build friendships and grow as an artist and as a human being with such incredible energies and women around me. It's been a blessing. And here's to another 50 years!"

➡ For more info, visit [olivia.com](http://olivia.com).

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# WEDDING GUIDE



Tracy Daniel (l)  
and Deidre Mathis



## Love at First Meeting

**Deidre Mathis and Tracy Daniel** knew they were a match from the start.

By JENNY BLOCK



You might call Deidre Mathis and Tracy Daniel true explorers, both literally and figuratively. Travel is their passion. Curiosity is their inspiration. And love is their vehicle.

In 2015, the two Houstonians met on OkCupid. “Our first meeting was at Common Bond in the Montrose area, where I had a mocha latte and Tracy had a lavender latte,” Deidre recalls. “We talked for hours. I remember that being around her immediately felt easy, and like home. That first meeting sparked our love story.”

Deidre, 36, from Jacksonville, Florida, is the owner of Wanderstay Hospitality Group,

which currently includes Wanderstay Houston Hostel and the Wanderstay Boutique Hotel.

“I was inspired to start this business to merge my passions together: travel, real estate, and hospitality. After living and traveling throughout Australia, I knew that when I returned stateside I wanted to start my own travel and hospitality brand,” Deidre says.

Native Houstonian Tracy, 36, is an adjunct professor of history at Lone Star College. She admits that when she was in school, she didn’t appreciate history and did the bare minimum to get a passing grade. Her true passion for American history wasn’t sparked until after she graduated.

“It was then that I realized that students generally don’t hate history, they hate how

they’ve been *taught* history. My passion for history came when trying to uncover my own family history. History and genealogy commonly intersect, and it was on that journey that I discovered my passion. African American genealogy can be difficult to trace. I’m able to use my historical know-how and training to put the pieces together. I’ve also discovered a few familial secrets through my research,” Tracy notes.

Both women are two-time graduates of historically black colleges and universities (HBCU). Deidre earned her bachelor’s degree from Florida A&M University and her master’s from Bowie State University, while Tracy earned her bachelor’s from Xavier University of Louisiana and a master’s from



Texas Southern University.

"I knew Deidre was the one I wanted to marry after the first date. However, after being together for seven years, we felt it was time to make it official," Tracy explains.

Deidre felt the same way about their first date. "From day one, Tracy felt like home. I felt super-comfortable with her from the beginning. When I was around her, I could be my authentic self. We get along exceptionally well. She is also the smartest person I know. I am constantly learning from her.

"We knew that we wanted to get married, and I [came up with the idea that] 2/22/22 should be our wedding date," Deidre continues. "We had already been together seven years, had a baby, and owned real estate together. We both agreed it was time to make things legal and official. We each knew that we wanted to be with the other forever."

Tracy couldn't resist saying yes to Deidre's 2/22/22 idea. "It's such an epic

date!" Deidre adds.

The couple had a courthouse wedding because neither wanted to spend a lot of money for just one day. "We wore sensible yet fashionable white dresses and white Converse sneakers, because comfort comes first. We prefer to spend our money on properties and traveling the globe," Deidre admits.

The intimacy of their wedding was the thing that they loved the most about their choice to go small. Their then infant daughter was their unofficial flower girl, cooing and smiling from her stroller throughout the proceedings. "She had a white dress and sneakers on, just like her mommies!" Deidre says.

The couple wrote their own vows for the occasion. Although they used virtually no wedding vendors, they did support a local BIPOC business by choosing Rosegreen Florists in Lindale Park for their bouquets. "They came through with beautiful, classic rose bouquets that were perfect for our day," Deidre says.

The couple didn't opt for an official honeymoon because their life together feels like a honeymoon. Since they have traveled to more than 20 countries together (and can't wait to explore others), they enjoyed a simple staycation at Houston's Post Oak Hotel.

"Deidre is the most important person in my life," Tracy says. "She's a loving, compassionate, beautiful woman, inside and out. She inspires me to want to be a better person every day. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Every day with her is better than the day before."

"Tracy is the best person I know; I feel incredibly lucky to have met her," Deidre concludes. "We fit each other so well. She is my very best friend, an excellent co-parent, and an amazing individual. I look forward to living the rest of my life with her."

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# OUT▼THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



## **OUTSMART MAGAZINE 30TH ANNIVERSARY SUNDAY FUNDAY April 23, 2023**

OutSmart magazine celebrated 30 years of publishing with a Sunday Funday at KIKI Houston benefitting the Montrose Center. Cover star Harper Watters mingled with guests, who were treated to tasty bites from Dessert Gallery and entertainment by Blackberri and Queen Angelina. In addition to her rousing performances, Dina Jacobs also offered a heartwarming testimonial highlighting the importance of OutSmart's local LGBTQ journalism through the years.



# OUT▼THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW

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## HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN HOUSTON DINNER 2023

**April 15, 2023**

Human Rights Campaign Houston hosted their annual dinner at the Marriott Marquis in downtown Houston with appearances by US Representative Lizzie Fletcher and author and activist Karen Walrond. Cassandra James, of ABC's *General Hospital*, was honored with the Visibility Award, and the Trailblazer Award went to recent Katy ISD graduate Cameron Samuels, who was recognized for their work fighting book bans in Texas.

The Human Rights Campaign is America's largest civil-rights organization working to achieve equality and liberation for LGBTQ people.







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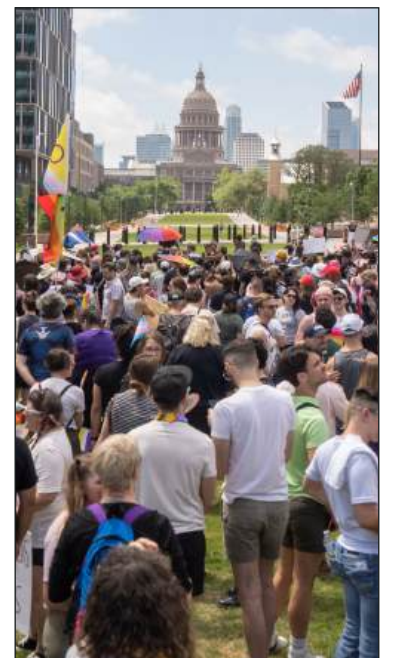

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# OUT THERE

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## QUEER MARCH ON THE CAPITOL April 22, 2023

The Queer March on the Capitol, an event aimed at protesting harmful legislation targeting the LGBTQ community, took place on April 22. Trans and queer Texans marched on the State Capitol, following in the footsteps of their queer elders who marched on the national Capitol 30 years ago for similar reasons. While much has changed since then, a lot remains the same. Despite the challenges faced during this session, with numerous anti-LGBTQ bills to keep track of, LGBTQ Texans and allies turned out in full force to make their voices heard. The message was clear: hate has no place in Texas.

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[817 Fairview St, Houston TX 77006](#)

### Blur Bar

This multi-level dance club features an upstairs lounge and balconies, with weekly events including Travesura Thursdays and Latin Saturdays.  
[710 Pacific St, Houston TX 77006](#)

### BUDDY'S

"EveryBUDDY'S welcome" at this modern LGBTQ bar with "events as diverse as Houston." The bar features cocktails, beer, karaoke, pool, DJ's, and more.  
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### Club Crystal

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### Club Geminis

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### Crocker Bar

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### George Country Sports Bar

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### Hamburger Mary's Houston

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# An Active, Intense Month

Taurus energy ushers in a period of introspection.



We start this month with Mercury in retrograde until May 19. This is always a good time to reorganize, clear out, and restart your health programs. It's best to delay starting new things during a Mercury retrograde. The lunar eclipse on May 5 will illuminate the deeper aspects of ourselves, particularly with the fixed signs of Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius. Good days this month are May 12, 13, 18, 19, 22, and 26. Days with extra tension are May 1, 4, 5, 7, 14, 20, 21, 23, and the 28th. May 4, 5, and 14 are particularly tense!

This is an especially active month, with the sun traveling through Taurus until the 21st when she enters Gemini. Mercury remains in Taurus, and Venus starts the month in Gemini but enters Cancer on the 7th. Mars continues his travel through Cancer, but changes to Leo on the 20th. Jupiter leaves Aries and enters Taurus for the next year on the 16th.

## ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

This month, you are focused on self-worth and self-improvement. You are paying more attention to your finances and how to improve your resource base. With Mercury retrograde, you could be exploring skills or assets that you may not have used in a while. Home and family also hold your interest this month. Tensions may increase, and people may have a harder time getting along. This can also be a good time for those home repairs you've been putting off. Personal relationships take on deeper meaning this month, and you'll be looking for more trust and connection with those closest to you. This can help positive relationships move forward, while difficult partnerships could have fault lines exposed so they can be addressed. This is very strong on the 5th and 14th. Your mood improves after the 19th.

## TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

This is an active year for the Taureans. Positive opportunities should improve after the 16th as Jupiter (planet of travel, improved social connections, and better attitudes) begins traveling through your sign for the next year. This month is especially intense, and you may be short on patience. Mercury retrograde continues in your sign until the 19th. Take action on unfinished projects and things you have been putting off. Mercury retrograde is also a great time to connect with old friends. You may need more space and fewer demands on your time on the 8th, 9th, and 10th. You may be thinking outside the box and looking for work that allows for more self-expression. Family matters need attention toward the end of the month.

## GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

This is a very introspective month for you, so try to take a break from the expectations of work. You are in a more sensitive mood, and negative elements will have a greater impact on you. This is a time to gather your internal

forces as you explore more of "the big questions" and try to connect with your life's purpose. This may continue for the whole year, but this month is especially intense. You will feel more active and more grounded when the sun enters Gemini on the 21st. Your career energies are very strong this year. You may be looking to take on a leadership role, start something on your own or, if you are older, cut back on career demands. You are going to make things happen in this area of your life.

## CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Career opportunities are still active for you this month. This energy shifts to working more with socially conscious groups and friends after the 16th. You will want to expand your connections and outreach. You are questioning the concept of community, and where you fit it. This can be a good month to market your skills and services. You are still very active and have a lot of energy through mid-May. This is an excellent month to improve exercise and eating habits. You are not very patient with yourself or others. Your magnetism increases after the 7th, which improves your relationships with everyone. You will want some time to yourself later in May, in spite of your busy schedule!

## LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

The heaviest activity is in your career and personal-responsibility sector this month. With Mercury retrograde there, you are rethinking your business commitments and goals, and possibly wanting to redefine what you do. You have been wanting to change things around for a while, and your career sector will be a lot more positive after the 16th. After the 19th, you may be deciding to start something on your own or take on more of a leadership role. You are being more real and direct in all your relationships and interactions. Relationship activity picks up after the 21st. If you are single, this is a good time to meet new people. If you are involved, this is a great

time to renew your bonds. In difficult relationships, this is a time to confront problems and come up with a solution! This is a busy time, so be careful not to overload your schedule.

## VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You are in a mentally active time of being exposed to new ideas and gaining a better perspective on life. This month can be good for improving your presence on social media, expanding your outreach to clients and colleagues, or working on your novel. You are in a new cycle of relationship energy. You are improving boundaries and expectations while setting new goals for your partnerships, both business and personal. In difficult partnerships, you will want some real change or you may be moving on. This is also a very good time for commitment. With your ruler, Mercury, retrograde until the 19th, wait until after that time to start new projects. By the end of the month you're on a more career-directed path.

## LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

As your relationship energy remains positive, you are looking for a deeper connection and a greater level of trust with your partner—looking behind the mask of politeness toward a more honest relationship. On a personal level, this can also be a time to look more deeply into your own psyche. You want to know yourself better, and understand the hidden motives behind your actions and choices. You will also be looking at improving both your diet and your finances (which may be related to improving self-worth and inner confidence). Your career area remains very active through the end of the month. You are more open and expressive at your workplace, so your impatience may show. After the 19th is a better time to look for a new position.

### SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

This is a big relationship month for you, and several things can be happening at the same time. You are more open to the idea of relationships and commitments. At the same time, the Mercury retrograde helps you rethink your past history of partnerships. You are looking for a partnership that provides real commitment and yet doesn't overtake your personal identity. You may be moving forward on a new commitment or revamping one that you have while setting new goals and directions. Both your personal and business partners will need to either step up or step away. Career and personal-responsibility energy picks up after the 21st. You will be feeling more confident and ready to take action. Family dynamics are shifting as younger people take the helm.

### SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

This month, your focus is on how well your work functions and how well you take care of yourself. This is an excellent month to revive your health and exercise programs. You may be replacing outdated systems at work as you get into reorganizing mode. You are taking care of projects you have put to the side. Home and family are going through generational shifts. This can be a time when younger people take on more responsibility. You may also need some

home repairs, or you may be considering relocating. You want to downsize your home and career responsibilities to make better use of your time. Relationships become more of the focus in late May.

### CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

You are going with the flow as this month begins, looking for ways to have more fun and increase the joy in your life. This is a super month to explore your creativity, engage in hobbies, and possibly spend more time with children to expand your own "inner child." If you have children, they will feel more mature this month. In your personal relationships, you are in a more playful and seductive mood. Your personal partnership needs some attention, and it's a great month for a getaway to renew those bonds. You are ready to get back to your routines in late May. You are looking for freedom from debt as you explore alternative resources. Trust and loyalty are very important to you!

### AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Home and family are where the action is this month. You may be looking to relocate or remodel, expand your family, and create a better foundation for yourself. This Mercury retrograde is a perfect time to go through those piles of stuff and get organized. Some real changes are taking place in your family hierarchy, especially with the

older folks. You are entering a time of redefining the very essence of your being. Those of you born in the early days of your sign are going through this now. You are letting go of activities that no longer serve a purpose, both in your career and relationships. For those of you born later in your sign, this will impact you later in your life. Your partnerships need attention, especially after the 21st. That would be a great time to get away and remember why you got together.

### PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

As you review your career and relationships, you are feeling more grounded and ready to make some decisions. While this will continue all year, this month's focus is on improved communications and more order in your daily life. You could have more interaction with your siblings or old friends. You may want to take a class, update your internet provider, or downsize to make things simpler. In late May, you shift your gaze to home, family and long-term security. You will want more order and less chaos, and you will be less tolerant of others. The end of the month is a very good time to improve your exercise routine and develop healthier eating habits

➡ For more astro-insight, visit [lillyroddyshow.com](http://lillyroddyshow.com).



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# Interview with a Vampire King

Preston Steamed brings the funk with punk.

By SAM BYRD | Photo by ANGELO S. ORTIZ VELA | Outfit by @MATT\_COVEN | Headpiece by @ELIZAPAUNMI



Preston Steamed brings a whole new twist to gender-bending illusions. He originally started as a drag queen, but switched to performing as a king who has soaked up his moment in the moonlight. Although his name suggests he's tidy and organized, he enjoys shaking things up with his raw, boundary-pushing performances. Find out more about this vampire king here.

**Pronouns?** He/Him

**Inner Avatar?**

A cat, because I'm very headstrong and self-sufficient but love to be pampered.

**Hometown?**

I'm originally from Central Texas, but moved a couple times. I spent the most amount of time in Amarillo before I moved to Houston.

**Drag birthday?**

I originally started as a queen on February 17, 2018, but I didn't perform as a king until June 28, 2018.

**What got you interested in drag?**

There were a few different things that really led me to drag. One of my first introductions was my cousin showing me Sasha Velour when she won her season of *Drag Race*. Then one night, a friend of mine in college randomly took me to go see *So You Think You Can Drag*. I started going to the show and really fell in love with the performances. But I didn't think that I really could do drag myself until I saw season two of *Dragula*. Before that, I had no idea that alternative drag was a thing, and seeing the top four from that season really changed everything for me and made me want to start performing.

**Describe your persona.**

Preston is a vampire, so he's been dead for a hot minute. He's a little bit spooky, a little bit stupid, a little bit filthy, and a whole lot of energy! I range from punk high energy to just



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unhinged, campy chaos. But no matter what I'm performing, I'll always be drawing you in with my stage presence.

**How did you pick your name?**

Preston wasn't originally my name. I started as Earl Grey, but was unaware there was another established king using that name in L.A. So, when I had to change it, my partner at the time was the one who came up with Preston Steamed, which I really liked because it's a great pun and it sounds a little steampunk, which was my main aesthetic when I started. It was either gonna be that or Edgar Allan Hoe.

**What's on your bucket list?**

Travel internationally, move to California, perform in *Princess* in San Francisco at least once, see *Night Gowns* in New York with Sasha Velour, work with Landon Cider, and one day when I've had my fun performing and being famous, I'd like to open a queer coffee shop.

**Describe your aesthetic.**

I take a lot of inspiration from the emo and punk scene in the 2000s. I like to think that Preston is the manifestation of what 13-year-old me wishes he could have dressed like. I like to blur the lines of gender a lot, as well, and like to bounce back and forth from masculine to feminine looks. I also take influence from vampire aesthetics like *Blade* and *Lost Boys*, as well as some steampunk and cyberpunk influence.

**What's your must-have clothing accessory or prop?**

You'll almost never catch me without a choker of some kind.

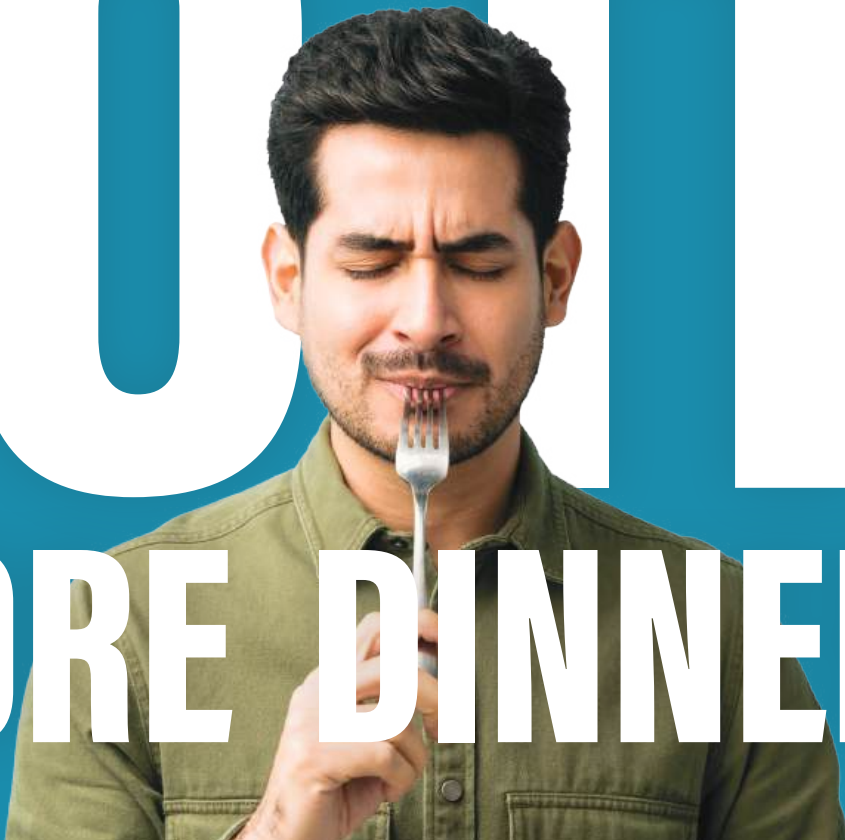
**Secret talent?**

I can walk on my hands.

**Where can we see you perform?**

I perform around Houston quite a bit, so it really depends on the month. I have a monthly cast spot every second Wednesday at Barcode. I also have been traveling for gigs in Austin, as well as out of state. I just debuted my very own show at Barcode called *Preston's Cabinet of Curiosities* that alternates every few months.

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