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JULY '23 HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

OUR 30th YEAR

LAWRENCE v. TEXAS

A MILESTONE FOR
GAY RIGHTS, BUT
TRANS EQUALITY
REMAINS ELUSIVE

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QUEER IN
GALVESTON

SEA CHANGE

LUCIO NIETO FINDS
HEALING AND COMMUNITY
ON THE ISLAND

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PLUS

HOUSTON PRIDE 2023

Photos by Dalton DeHart
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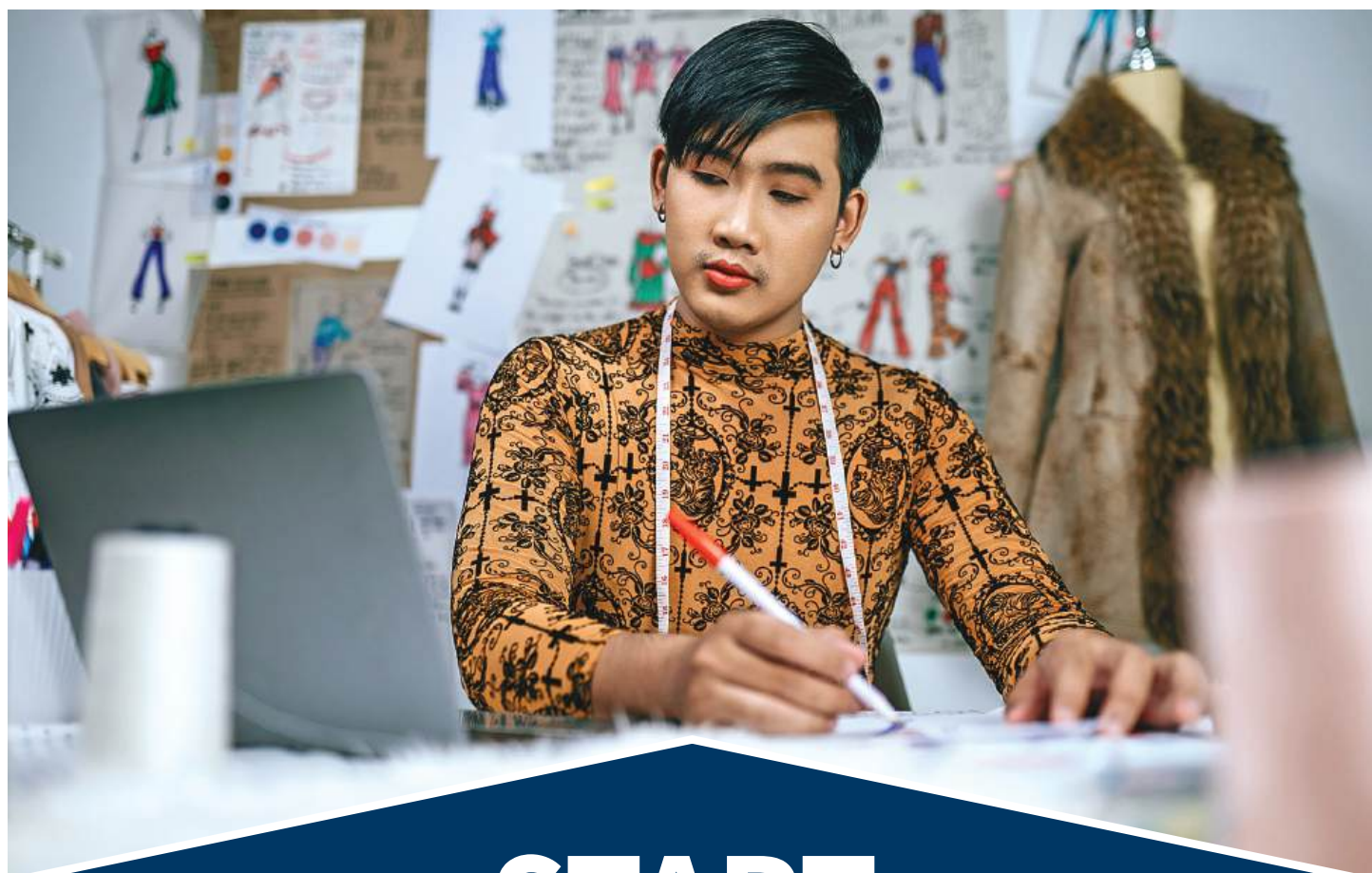
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SEA CHANGE

Lucio Nieto Finds Healing and Community on the Island

Photography by Natasha Norregaard



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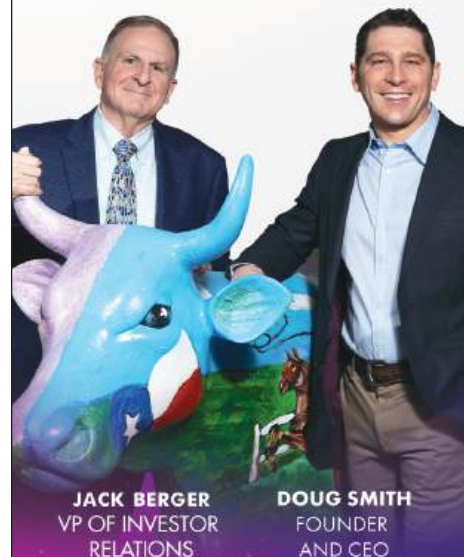
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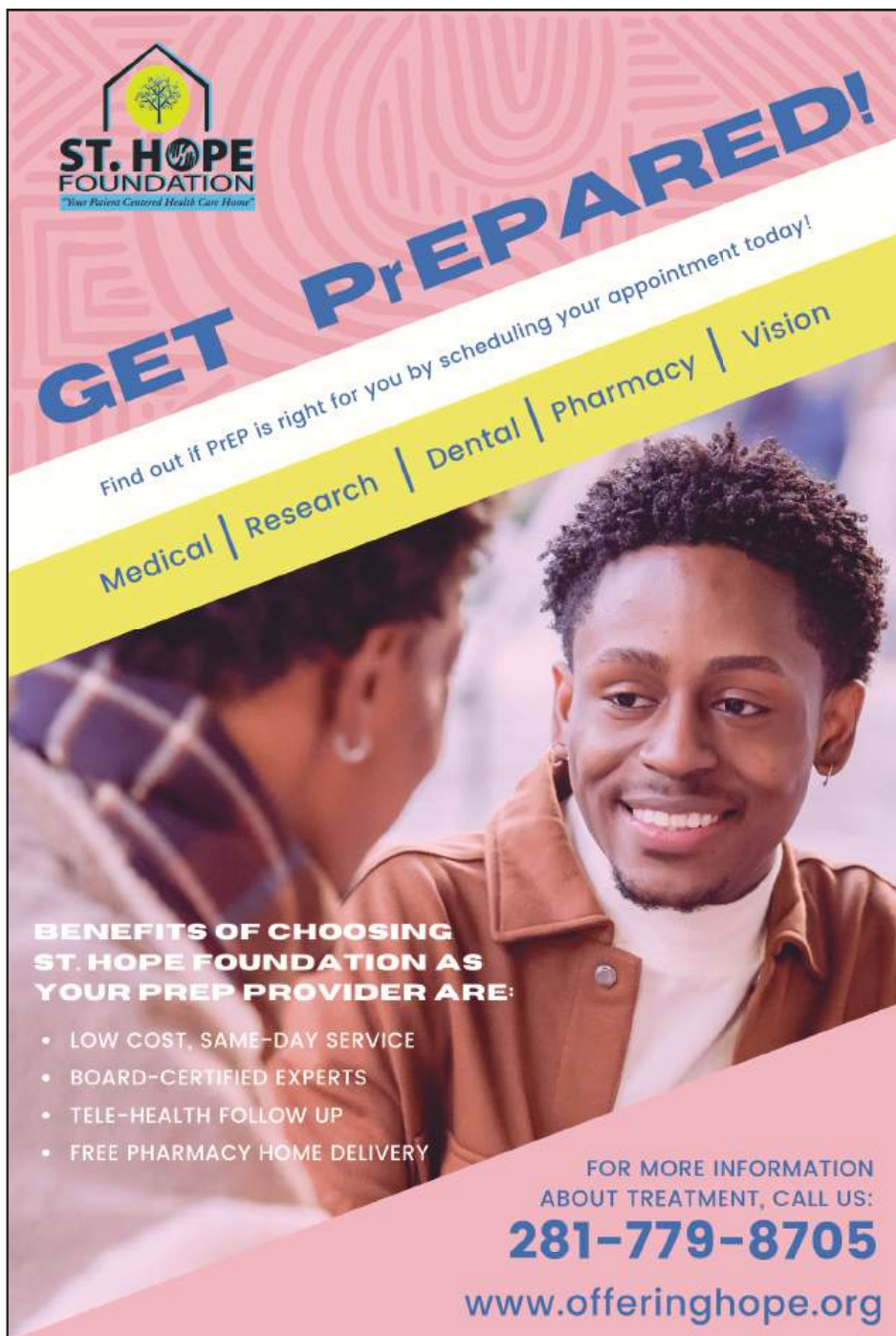
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TEXT US TO SCHEDULE





Happy July! All of us at OUTSMART were so happy to have the chance to celebrate

Pride Month with our readers, advertisers, and the Houston LGBTQ community.

In this issue, we mark the 20th anniversary of *Lawrence v. Texas*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that invalidated sodomy laws nationwide and established the groundwork for marriage equality and a new wave of LGBTQ activism.

We also note the new Montrose memorial honoring Monica Roberts, Houston's beloved and prolific trans-rights advocate. Sam Byrd writes about that mini-mural by local artists Brad Pritchett and Katherine Ligon, close friends of Roberts who wanted to create a fitting memorial to her tireless activism, both locally and nationwide.

July is National Disability Awareness Month, which columnist Dr. Daryl Shorter highlights in his call to confront our own biases and become better advocates for individuals living with disabilities.

Once again, our July issue spotlights the vibrant LGBTQ community on Galveston Island. Musician Lucio Nieto speaks with writer Connor Behrens about his journey from New York City and Los Angeles to Galveston, where he has found new inspiration that has energized his many creative endeavors. Then Behrens sits down with Island bar owner Michael Cassavaugh, who has been busy redefining Galveston's LGBTQ nightlife scene with his Island Time Beach Bar & Grill. Writer Zach McKenzie visits with shamanic practitioner Anthony Rios, who serves the Island's queer community with his spiritual and

emotional healing practices. And finally, NASA flight controller Lauren Maples shares her love of scuba diving and space exploration with writer Marene Gustin.

Over at the Hobby Center, Theatre Under the Stars brings us a provocative new Broadway touring production of *1776* this month. The show's multiracial cast of female, trans, and nonbinary actors puts the dramatic story of the nation's founding "in the hands of the humans who were left out the first time around."

Also in this issue, we meet three local LGBTQ TikTok stars who are using the platform to promote and connect with Houston's queer community.

Did you miss this year's Pride parade? Or do you want to relive a few highlights from Pride Month? Either way, you'll love community photographer Dalton DeHart's colorful photos documenting the

many ways that Houstonians were celebrating Pride in true Texas style. Like they say, *everything* is bigger in Texas, Pride celebrations included.

As our longtime readers know, OUTSMART's Gayest & Greatest awards honor our readers' favorite LGBTQ and ally businesses, personalities, and community leaders each year. Don't forget to vote online (until August 28) for your top picks in dozens of categories, and then watch for the announcement of all the winners in our October issue.

Until next month, we wish you the best for a safe and festive July!



Greg Jeu
Publisher



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QUEER THINGS to DO



Liz Mikel (she/her) as Benjamin Franklin in the national touring production of 1776

JOAN MARCUS

STAGE July 20-22 1776

Theatre Under the Stars brings a fresh Broadway touring production of the Tony Award-winning musical *1776* to the Hobby Center this month. The collaboration between the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University and New York's Roundabout Theatre Company produced this bold re-examination of a pivotal moment in American history. Watch as two dozen powerful, passionate, complicated, and "all too human"

historic characters come to life onstage as they shape the fate of a young nation bravely declaring independence from England.

The multiracial cast of female, trans, and nonbinary actors "puts history in the hands of the humans who were left out the first time around." Ultimately, the provocative musical asks audiences to ponder where we've come from and who we are as a country now.
tinyurl.com/yvccapth

For a weekly roundup of LGBTQ happenings, visit OutSmartMagazine.com



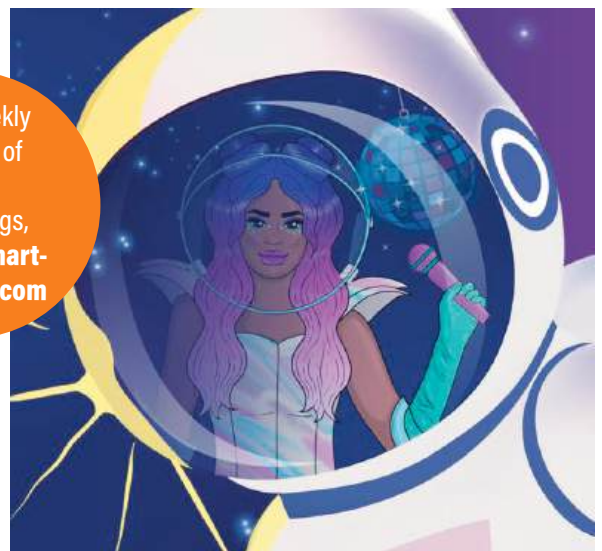
COMMUNITY

July 15

PRIDE FORUM

Join the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus for a discussion of Houston's City Council and mayoral races. The event includes a candidate meet-and-greet.

tinyurl.com/3kh3u9tw



COMMUNITY

July 16

LET'S BLAST OFF

Legacy Community Health's 21st Annual Mint Julep fundraising event at White Oak Music Hall promises to be a cosmic adventure honoring community contributors.

tinyurl.com/3manzf6e

STAGE

July 7-8

WHEN BOYS EXHALE

Enjoy this staged tribute to *Waiting to Exhale* with an LGBTQ twist—a hilarious and thought-provoking celebration of Black queer friendship.

tinyurl.com/5n7v3dy9



STAGE

July 7-22

SECRET IN THE WINGS

Mary Zimmerman's *The Secret in the Wings* follows a young girl whose parents leave her to be watched by “an amorous ogre” who offers her six increasingly deadly fairy tales.

tinyurl.com/3exxyjfx

STAGE

July 8-9

HOUSE OF PATRICK

Playwright Vincent Victoria will be on hand for his new play about Black fashion designer and gay icon Patrick Kelly. Stay for a talk-back with the playwright and actors after each performance.

tinyurl.com/sbd57396



COMMUNITY

July 9

OUR STORIES BELONG

Join the Montrose Center, Holocaust Museum Houston, and Brave Little Company for a children's story time featuring inclusive stories and creative activities. Perfect for families with kids ages 5-10.

tinyurl.com/2jfehuv6

ART

July 10

PAINT, SIP, AND PUFF

Join a “Paint, Sip, and Puff” event at The GETAWAY Place and participate in some or all of the events on offer.

tinyurl.com/5c93aznu

COMMUNITY

July 12

IMMIGRATION SUMMIT

The Montrose Center hosts a two-day bilingual training organized by the Houston Leads coalition, which confronts anti-Blackness in our immigration system and fights for increased immigrant social services.

tinyurl.com/2wenzk9t

ART

July 15

JAM AT THE MOODY

The Moody Center for the Arts hosts an indoor farmers market featuring face painting, a scavenger hunt, and more. And don't miss their current exhibition *Love and Wondervision*.

tinyurl.com/5n9xbu43

COMMUNITY

July 15

TRANS LEGAL AID CLINIC

Join Trans Legal Aid at the Montrose Center to get help navigating the process of correcting your name and gender marker on government ID documents.

tinyurl.com/ytktxr7e



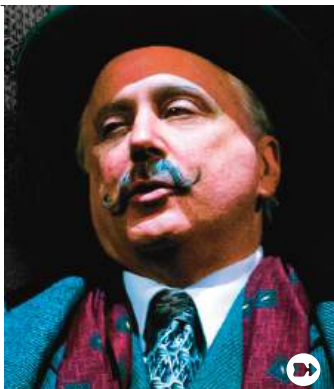
ART

July 15

INPRINT WRITING EVENT

Visit the Menil Drawing Institute for Inprint's free “writing workout” event. Flex your creative muscles while viewing the Menil's current exhibition *Hyperreal* by queer mid-century artist Gray Foy.

tinyurl.com/4awe3u7y



STAGE

July 21-August 27

THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD

Alley Theatre's “Summer Chills” series features Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Mark Shanahan adapted and directs the famous murder mystery in this twisty new theatrical whodunit.

tinyurl.com/yck9at7d

COMMUNITY

July 23

PARENTS SUPPORT GROUP

The Montrose Center hosts a support group for parents of trans, nonbinary, and gender-diverse youth. Come share your experiences and find support in community.

tinyurl.com/28wh96yn

COMMUNITY

July 29

BEYOND ALL LIMITS

The Montrose Center hosts a Beyond All Limits panel discussion focusing on mental health.

tinyurl.com/y76rnr2u

QUEER THINGS to DO

SAVE the DATES

STAGE

August 11-20

BONNIE & CLYDE

The Garden Theatre brings this Tony-nominated script to the stage. Revisit the infamous couple Bonnie and Clyde in this "electrifying" story of love, adventure, and crime.

tinyurl.com/2p8d32m7

STAGE

September 10

JAGGED LITTLE PILL

Theatre Under the Stars presents *Jagged Little Pill*. The Sept. 10 Out@TUTS performance brings Houston's LGBTQ community together after the show with a reception featuring drinks, light bites, and live music. tinyurl.com/4z9fe8w2



COMMUNITY

August 26

EDEN MUSIC FESTIVAL

Pearl Bar Houston will host EDEN, a music and lifestyle festival for queer women and their friends, featuring queer female DJs, go-go dancers, and more. Live performers will be announced soon. Tickets for sale online. tinyurl.com/tdfecued



STAGE

August 1

TWO DYKES & A MIC

Comedians McKenzie Goodwin and Rachel Scanlon host this comedy podcast and live show. Their raunchy and hilarious event at Houston Improv will have you rocking with laughter and sexual tension. Tickets available now online.

tinyurl.com/9ffz27yb

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Lawrence v. Texas Was Just the Beginning

Twenty years after a breakthrough Texas case launched a new era of gay rights, trans people are still in the fight.

By WILLIAM MELHADO, THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Seated on a parade float winding its way through Montrose, the heart of Houston's LGBTQ+ community, John Lawrence and Tyron Garner temporarily assumed the status of queer icons when they served as grand marshals in the city's 2003 Pride parade. Just days earlier, the two quiet men with working-class roots fused their names to a pivotal moment in America's gay rights movement.

"They were like celebrities," said Brad Pritchett, who now works as the field director for the LGBTQ+ advocacy group Equality Texas.

Twenty years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Texas' ban on sodomy, ruling that states could not criminalize homosexuality. Lawrence and Garner were the plaintiffs in that watershed ruling. Pritchett remembers Houston's Pride parade a few days later feeling different than it normally did, thanks to that 6-3 opinion.

Until then, LGBTQ+ people living in Texas and 13 other states lived under a dark cloud cast by laws that allowed law enforcement to arrest them for participating in consenting behavior among adults conducted in their private residences.

Lawrence and Garner were arrested and hauled to jail almost five years prior, on the suspicion of having sex in the privacy of Lawrence's apartment. The Supreme Court ruling voiding such laws was received by LGBTQ+ Americans as a long-awaited rainbow of recognition in the form of hard-fought constitutional protection. A ban on gay sex remains on the Texas books today.

In the 20 years since, advocates have secured major victories and cemented key rights including marriage equality, employment protections and the ability to serve in the military—victories that likely would not have been achieved without the foundation of *Lawrence v. Texas*.

Yet not all members of the LGBTQ+ community have equally benefited from evolving attitudes toward—and legal



PHOTO BY REUTERS/CARLOS A. MARTINEZ

From left: John Lawrence, attorney Mitchell Katine, and Tyron Garner at the 2023 Houston Pride parade celebrating their landmark Supreme Court ruling that invalidated sodomy laws nationwide.

protections for—the queer community. Notably, transgender people still face discrimination and violence at higher rates than their lesbian, gay and bisexual peers.

In recent years, as trans people have gained visibility in the public sphere, familiar anti-LGBTQ+ tropes have emerged in efforts to alienate this community. Advocates say this attention has prompted a new wave of legislation in recent years that targets LGBTQ+ people—with particular focus on transgender Texans—largely pushed by Republicans who have campaigned on these issues.

Andrea Segovia, the senior field and policy adviser for the Transgender Education Network of Texas, said the virulence and frequency of transphobia have increased alongside this political focus. Texas lawmakers for years have targeted trans Texans with a litany of legislation, to mixed results. But earlier this month, Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law one of the Republican-dominated Legislature's most consequential victories: a ban on hormone therapies and puberty blockers for trans minors over the outcries from parents and medical groups that say gender-affirming care saves young lives.

Segovia said hostility toward trans people reached new heights during this recent legislative session, and called it a "boldness of people to feel as though they can take other people's lives in their hands and not have repercussions for causing harm to trans people."

"Good, Average Guys"

Before the landmark Supreme Court case, Lawrence and Garner were not celebrities. They both lived on the margins of society, away from the limelight, like so many other LGBTQ+ Texans in the 20th century.

"They were just good, average guys just trying to get through life with the hand that was dealt them," said Lane Lewis, a longtime gay-rights activist in Houston who identified their case as an opportunity to challenge the state's sodomy ban.

The political climate in which Lawrence and Garner were arrested for allegedly having sex was not friendly to LGBTQ+ Houstonians, Lewis recalled. He remembers instances in the '90s in which trucks full of young men would drive around the city looking to assault queer people. →

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In 1991, a 27-year-old Houston resident named Paul Broussard was murdered in a gay-bashing incident.

Although anti-sodomy laws were rarely enforced, their impact cast a shadow over the lives of LGBTQ+ Texans—both privately and publicly.

“These laws were designed to justify rampant discrimination against queer people,” said Wesley Phelps, a University of North Texas associate history professor who recently authored a book on the queer rights movement in Texas. Phelps points to numerous examples in which LGBTQ+ Texans were denied employment, public assistance, housing and child custody because of their sexual orientation.

Lewis, the Houston LGBTQ+ activist, said overturning Texas’ anti-sodomy law wasn’t the end goal for the gay rights movement. He was after occupational equality, which was a necessary step for queer people to live without fear of losing their jobs because of their sexual orientation.

“Can you imagine the Supreme Court wanting to protect the marriage rights of gay and lesbian citizens when gays and lesbians were still considered criminals in 13 states?” Phelps said.

Private Lives

Accounts differ as to what happened in Lawrence’s apartment on September 17, 1998. Two Harris County sheriff’s deputies each claimed to have seen Lawrence and Garner having sex, though their reports varied considerably as to what type of sex Lawrence and Garner were having.

Alternatively, Lawrence and Garner maintained from the beginning that they weren’t having sex (though this detail wasn’t public until after the 2003 decision for fear it would derail the case). An abundance of evidence supports their version of events, said Dale Carpenter, a constitutional law professor at the Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law who wrote a book on the case. But ultimately, that detail wasn’t relevant to the outcome of the case at large.

What can be confirmed is that on that late Thursday night, Garner’s on-again, off-again boyfriend at the time, Robert Eubanks, called the police on Lawrence and Garner, claiming that a Black man was “going crazy with a gun” inside the apartment. Eubanks was reportedly jealous of the flirtatious relationship between Lawrence, who was white, and Garner, who was Black.

When Harris County sheriff’s officers responded shortly after, they entered

Lawrence’s apartment anticipating an armed individual and instead found the two men along with pornographic material in the home.

Regardless of whether Lawrence and Garner were having sex, officers arrested the men on the premise that they had violated the state’s law that considered sexual acts between people of the same sex to be “deviate sexual intercourse.”

On the night of the arrest—and in the years following—Lawrence was indignant that police had entered his private residence and arrested him and his friend. Both felt a deep sense of injustice at their arrests, and the discriminatory law’s continued existence.

“For an outdated law like that to make it all right for the police or government to walk into your house uninvited—I think that was a wrong thing on the police part,” Garner told Carpenter in a 2005 interview. “I felt like I had been taken advantage of.”

Lawrence and Garner were released from jail the day after the arrests.

When Lewis received a fax of the police report from the arrest, he was stunned because for so long the →

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gay-rights movement had been waiting for a case like this one to appear. Activists wanted to challenge sodomy laws, like the one in Texas, on constitutional grounds. Lewis immediately called Lawrence, who was then a stranger to him.

"I said, 'John, I think we have a Supreme Court case here,'" Lewis recalls telling Lawrence shortly after his arrest.

The case was considered a good one to challenge the constitutionality of criminalizing homosexuality because there was only one charge—based on Section 21.06 of the Texas penal code, the ban on same-sex intercourse—filed against Lawrence and Garner.

Lewis turned to Houston attorney Mitchell Katine, who was widely known in the LGBTQ+ community for his work with people with HIV and AIDS facing discrimination. Katine enlisted the help of constitutional lawyers from Lambda Legal, a group focused on LGBTQ+ rights, who would argue the case in front of the Supreme Court.

After winding through the Texas courts and eventually rising to the attention of the nation's highest court, on June 26, 2003, the Supreme Court handed down a decisive 6-3 victory for LGBTQ+ activists and sent a clear message about the unconstitutionality of sodomy bans.

"The petitioners are entitled to respect for their private lives. The State cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime," Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote in his majority opinion.

By establishing the precedent that all of the constitutional rights that were available to other people are now available for gay people—rights previously denied under the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision that enabled states to maintain sodomy bans—*Lawrence v. Texas* laid the groundwork for all of the benefits and protections of the Constitution to be equally applied to everybody.

"Because they were brave enough to let us do this, the whole country, and to some extent the world, changed as a result of their bravery," Katine said of *Lawrence* and Garner's participation.

Only a Partial Victory

The *Lawrence* decision kicked off two decades of advances in civil rights for gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Yet, the catalyst for the gay-rights movement—the 1969 Stonewall riots—were largely led by transgender people of color, a part of the LGBTQ+ community that is still fighting for equal treatment.



Longtime Houston LGBTQ activist Lane Lewis

Segovia, adviser for the Transgender Education Network of Texas, said *Lawrence* set a precedent for the right to privacy for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, but the transgender community has not secured the same freedoms and protections to privately make healthcare decisions.

"What has been the growth for lesbian, gay, and bi people versus trans people?" Segovia asked, pointing to the heightened level of discrimination and violence directed at trans people.

Trans people are four times more likely to be victims of violent crimes than their cisgender peers, according to a 2021 study from the University of California, Los Angeles' Williams Institute. This violence poses a particular threat to trans women of color. The National Center for Transgender Equality reported 70 percent of the trans women killed in 2022 were Black.

"It's a lot easier as a white, gay male to walk through Montrose now than it was in the early '90s. Simultaneously, it's just as unsafe for a trans or cross-dressing person to walk down the street today as it was in the early '90s," Lewis said.

Despite the persistent threats to the safety of transgender people, the state legislature has made several attempts to regulate the lives of trans Texans. This year, lawmakers restricted the rights of transgender youth to access gender-affirming care and of transgender college athletes to participate on sports teams that align with their gender identity.

"We saw over 140 bills, anti-LGBTQ+ bills, with the majority of those focused on the trans community," said state Rep. Venton Jones (D-Dallas).

Jones said he and his Democratic colleagues spent a significant amount of time during the legislative session trying to educate the public about issues like gender-affirming care and dispelling myths that drag queens were sexualizing and grooming children. He characterized the Republican-led efforts as perpetuating misinformation and hate.

Issues relating to transgender people have grown more prominent over the last decade as Republicans have realized the political benefits of pushing issues that more closely regulate the lives of trans people.

Recent polling from the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin found that almost 80 percent of Republicans surveyed thought athletic participation should be based on sex assigned at birth in both K-12 and university sports. Researchers also found issues related to transgender Texans are relatively unknown to voters; nearly 60 percent of Texans don't personally know a transgender person.

While three prominent bills impacting the LGBTQ+ community passed this session—including one that supporters say will restrict children from seeing drag shows—a proposal to remove Texas' unconstitutional sodomy ban didn't make it out of the House. Jones' bill would have removed Section 21.06 from the Texas Penal Code, which was used to arrest *Lawrence* and Garner almost 25 years ago.

While unenforceable, these laws are still a harsh reminder of the state's oppression of LGBTQ+ people.

"At a minimum, these laws are hanging on the wall like an unused whip," Carpenter said.

In the worst-case scenario, if the Supreme Court overturned *Lawrence*, consensual gay sex could again be illegal in Texas. That future seems less far-fetched in the wake of last year's *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, which revoked the constitutional protection for abortion and allowed Texas' near-total ban on the procedure to go into effect.

In Justice Clarence Thomas' concurring opinion of the *Dobbs* decision, he wrote that previous cases involving the 14th Amendment's due-process clause should also be reconsidered and overruled. Those included *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which made same-sex marriages legal across the country, and *Lawrence v. Texas*.

Some people, like Carpenter, don't believe *Lawrence* or *Obergefell* are at risk of being overturned, given how same-sex couples have come to rely on married relationships for financial stability. But others, like Phelps, point to the conservative composition of today's Supreme Court—which tilted further to the right after former President Donald Trump appointed three justices in his four years in office—as evidence that marriage equality is not a settled issue.

April polling from the Texas Political Project found that 62 percent of Republicans surveyed did not think same-sex marriage should be legal in Texas—evidence that continued advocacy to protect all LGBTQ+ people is an ongoing battle in Texas, even decades after major victories like *Lawrence*.

"The work is not done," Segovia said.

This article originally appeared in The Texas Tribune at www.texastribune.org/2023/06/26/lawrence-v-texas-lgbtq-rights/.

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Affirming Persons Living with Disability

Advocating for inclusion begins with addressing our biases.



July marks the observance of Disability Pride Month, an opportunity to commemorate the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in July 1990. This month allows us to

highlight the unique culture and identity of persons with disabilities, while also representing an opportunity to raise awareness about the experience of living with disability.

Broadly, when thinking about disability, it can be helpful to consider its dimensions: impairment, activity limitation, and participation restriction. Impairment refers to an individual's body or mental structure or functioning. Activity limitation refers to those physical and mental activities which might be impacted by an impairment, such as difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem solving. Participation restriction refers to those activities in daily living which are oftentimes not readily accessible to persons with disabilities. These can include working, engaging in social and recreational activities, and obtaining health care or other types of services.

Studies show that persons living with disabilities are more likely to have negative health experiences, such as being denied health care or being treated poorly within the healthcare system. Alarming, not all healthcare environments even have the necessary equipment to accommodate bodies of differing ability. For example, persons who use ambulatory assistance devices such as wheelchairs may not always be able to receive proper or thorough physical examinations in small clinical spaces, or when exam tables do not allow for easy transfer. Ultimately, these types of limitations in the healthcare system create disparities and worsen health outcomes for persons living with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities are also at increased risk for violation of their rights and victimization. They are 4 to 10 times more likely to be victims of violence, in addition to increased risk of abuse, disrespect, and preju-



dice. A pervasive lack of policies to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities further increases barriers for members of this community.

Disability: A Social Construct?

When thinking about disability, it is important not to focus solely on health conditions and/or the body and mind. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), disability “results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and depression and personal or environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support.”

In this theoretical framework, it is possible to consider that ‘disability’ is actually created by our society, rather than occurring primarily as the result of a physical or mental-health condition. Because of our tendency to focus narrowly on being non-disabled and providing services and opportunity primarily for persons without disability, we increase the difficulties and challenges often faced by persons living in different kinds of bodies or with health conditions.

It is our societal structure, physical spaces, and mindset that creates limitations and fosters ableism, the devaluation and discrimination that people living with disabilities can experience. However, we can challenge ourselves to recognize and support the abilities people living with disabilities *do* have. A mindset that is grounded in our promotion of what is

possible for persons living with disabilities can drastically shift the conversation and encourage thinking about how to create opportunities for greater equity.

Welcome to the Group

The disability community is the one group that we could all ultimately belong to. Even though the vast majority of people will personally experience disability at some point, why is it so hard for us to talk about disability and to meaningfully create space—both physical and emotional—for persons living with disability?

Denial.

We spend much of our mental and emotional energy in denial about the likelihood that we will experience illness, and about the certainty of our mortality. Thinking about sickness, death, and dying creates in us both conscious and unconscious anxiety based upon the many natural fears surrounding this process. There is fear of the possibility of pain or suffering, fear of not being in control of our brains or bodies, and the ultimate fear stemming from not knowing what lies beyond death. From a psychological standpoint, perhaps we link the experience of disability with our deepest fears about death; so, rather than sitting with these distressing thoughts and emotions, we deny their existence and try to ignore reminders of these fears—including people living with disability.

Erasure.

Media representation and our access to accurate images of people living with disabilities is sorely lacking. Just think: how many of your favorite television shows, movies, or books feature, or center, characters who are living with a disability? Which social-media platforms, newspapers, and magazines regularly feature photos, stories, or images of persons with disabilities?

Even in cases where persons with disabilities are included, negative stereotypes about disabilities are often portrayed, or the stories tend to focus on tragedy rather than showing balanced pictures of the lives and realities of people. This lack of representation highlights the important role media can, and should, play in combating ableism and promoting the rights of people with disabilities.

Not all disability is visible.

Although there is a tendency to focus on more visible types of disabilities, it is important to recognize that mental-health conditions, or physical illnesses without →




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readily apparent manifestations, are also significant contributors to disability. Because they are invisible, these types of conditions can be missed or ignored. Also, persons with mental-health conditions can suffer in silence due to invalidation by family, friends, or peers. If one's personal definition of disability focuses exclusively upon the presence of visible impairment, then it is possible to entirely discount the experience of a significant number of people within the disability community.

Excluding persons with disabilities in the conversation. Bringing about change and combating the forces of discrimination, victimization, and ableism requires that we all participate in creating a plan of action. Sadly, it is not uncommon for people with disabilities to be left out of this conversation. This might stem from a lack of school or workplace opportunities being afforded to persons with disabilities, which then results in limited representation of their perspective in these types of environments. It is also critically important to avoid tokenism, or including people with disabilities just to say they are represented but not truly listening to or considering their opinions.

From Awareness to Action

While awareness is certainly a start, it's not enough. Our advocacy for change can begin with educating ourselves on the topic of living with disability, and finding ways to promote both equity in access and the rights and dignity of persons living with disability. Being educated, however, also means being motivated to do something.

During this July observance of Disability Pride Month, how will you commit to promoting inclusivity and belonging for persons living with disabilities? How can you participate in this conversation and work toward reducing ableism in our community? And in the broader fight for LGBTQ equality, are you ensuring that *all* members of our community are represented?

Daryl Shorter, MD, is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and is board certified in both general and addiction psychiatry. His clinical practice focuses on veteran care, and he lectures widely on LGBTQ mental health. Dr. Shorter can be reached at dr.darylshorter@gmail.com.

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Calling It Quits

Retiring early is not always as easy as it sounds.



We've all heard stories about people who invested well or received a financial windfall that allowed them to retire early. While early

retirement may sound like a dream come true, it could turn into a nightmare if you don't have a strategy to account for the increasing costs of goods, services, and taxes over time—particularly if you will be out of the workforce for several decades.

It is estimated that one in six retirees considers returning to work just four years after leaving their job—even if they had a substantial nest egg built up. With that in mind, it is essential to plan ahead and make sure that you have a financial cushion available to cover costly emergencies that impact your savings.

Will You Be Forced to “Unretire”?

When you retire, your money can face the same risks that it did when you were working. These risks include stock-market volatility and fluctuations in interest rates. But once you start drawing income from your portfolio, other risks—like inflation, sequence of returns, and longevity—can also play a key role in impacting its value, especially if you've retired “early.” That is because your assets will face these risks for a longer period of time.

This could cause your portfolio to run out of money earlier than expected, and in turn force you to reduce your expenses or return to the workforce to fill in the gap between your income and expenses.

Take the case of Sam, for instance. With a \$3 million net worth, he retired at age 34 with a passive income stream of \$80,000 per year. But just 10 years later, Sam may be forced to become “unretired” as inflation erodes his purchasing power. In addition, Sam estimates that the college tuition cost alone for his children could top \$1 million!

Sam may also face other blows to his portfolio in the future if he isn't properly prepared. For example, high (and rising) healthcare and long-term care costs could



quickly deplete even the healthiest of portfolios.

As an example, a study found that a 65-year-old couple who retired in 2022 could face approximately \$315,000 in out-of-pocket healthcare expenses—even if they have Medicare or other insurance coverage. This figure doesn't include the potential cost of a long-term care need, which can add an additional five- or even six-figure outlay per year.

Therefore, having a proactive care plan in place can help you to transfer some—or possibly most—of the cost of future care services, either at home or in a facility. Many of today's plans offer a combination of benefits such as life insurance and long-term care coverage, so that regardless of whether you ever need extended care, you or a loved one can receive a benefit.

Even if your finances are firmly locked into place for the long haul, you could still be unprepared for retirement if you don't have a purpose or plan for occupying your time. Believe it or not, sitting on the beach or playing a daily round of golf can eventually get mundane, and it is estimated that almost half of early retirees get back into the workforce because they are bored.

Before You Retire Early...

While you may feel financially ready to retire early, there are some important items to consider before you move forward with trading your work shoes for flip-flops. Certainly, your current anticipated income and expenses are key, along with the cost of possible emergencies and healthcare needs.

It is possible that you could have several sources of guaranteed lifetime income, such

as Social Security or an employer-sponsored pension. But you must also include the impact of inflation over time. Using an average inflation rate of just 3.2 percent, your income would need to double over 20 years in order to just keep pace with your current lifestyle. So, if you're generating \$4,000 per month now from Social Security and other retirement income sources, 20 years from now you would need to bring in \$8,000 each month to maintain your present lifestyle.

Will your current retirement income plan do that? If not, you'll likely have to make some adjustments.

In addition, depending on how early you retire, you may or may not even be eligible for Social Security retirement-income benefits right away. You can access this income source once you have reached your “full retirement age,” which is between 65 and 67, based on the year you were born.

Alternatively, you could start Social Security as early as age 62. However, the dollar amount of your benefit will be lower than if you wait until your full retirement age—and it will remain reduced for the rest of your life.

Given that, it is important that you work with a qualified financial professional who can help you to maximize your benefits. Doing so can make a big difference, as Social Security will continue to pay you a monthly income stream with cost-of-living adjustments for life.

Further, according to Wade Pfau, a professor of retirement income at the American College of Financial Services in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, it is also important to consider your retirement income style, which can help you to stay the course and avoid making mistakes that are based on fear or other emotions. →



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In this case, it is critical that you understand how you deal with financial uncertainty, because this could dictate how likely you are to either stick with a plan or abandon it when the financial tides turn.

Moshe Milevsky, a finance professor at York University, adds that you should have a retirement-income plan in place that doesn't require you to make crucial financial decisions as you age. There are strategies and investment vehicles that can be set up to generate an income stream that will continue paying out for the rest of your life, regardless of how long that may be.

But because there is no single "right answer" that will address everyone's retirement-income needs, goals, and challenges, it is essential that you discuss your specific objectives with a financial-planning professional who is well-versed in income planning and asset protection.

Those in the LGBTQ community may have to keep some other criteria in mind, too, as they can face additional income-related challenges in retirement. For instance, future healthcare and long-term care costs may be higher for LGBTQ individuals, as they are less likely to have a spouse who could provide at least some care at home. Because of that, these expenses may be higher.

Also, because LGBTQ workers are more likely to be caregivers for their own parents and other loved ones, they may generate less income during their time in the workforce. That equates to less money saved, along with a reduced monthly income check from Social Security.

Preparing for Early Retirement

Retiring early requires a great deal of discipline, as well as the ability to weather many types of finance-related "storms" over time. Given that, it is vital that you have a financial professional on your side who can help you put a plan in place. Such a professional can allow you to look at—and plan for—the whole picture as you consider taking early retirement and enjoying all that this time in your life has to offer.

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



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We're Not Alone

Alien creatures come in all shapes and sizes.



ing around in their backyard. The tall, weird-looking things then left (probably for Los Angeles, where they'd blend right in) before the police arrived.

A few days later, some hot-shot former government UFO investigator spilled the beans about super-secret high-tech devices that were obviously made by non-humans. They were found by "the government" and reverse-engineered in order to build some newfangled devices for "the military."

I am not scared of non-humans. For Pete's sake, I can recall a few times when I've gotten a little baked and seen some weird things in my own damn backyard. I think these people who act all weird when they see non-humans have never been to Texas. I mean, "Here, hold my brain and watch me smoke this" is a popular phrase in these parts.

And I wanna know why these alien non-humans only leave behind information for making weapons. What about a cure for some awful disease, a new flavor of ice cream, a self-cleaning toilet, or maybe a Texas politician who doesn't act like a jackass? That's what I'm waiting for.

Darlin', I am not scared of these non-humans one little bit. Wanna know the kind of non-humans I'm scared of? Fire ants. They are non-human terror machines who get their marching orders from hell. Those little suckers

Last month, the news had a mess of stories about a meteor streaking across the sky and then falling in Las Vegas, where a family reported a couple of 10-foot "non-humans" walk-

are meaner than eight acres of snakes, and they are always plotting something. I can't help but wonder if fire ants are what happens when you put testosterone and LSD in a blender.

There are some fire ants who have their devil's command center out behind my garage. That sucker rises about five feet out of the ground, and I guess that means it's burrowed deep enough to poke through the bottom and spy on China. I'm pretty sure it has condos, hair salons, graduate schools, and a mini-Texas Legislature (which is surely superior to the one we're stuck with in Austin). It has research facilities that have cured the common cold, and I'm pretty sure the little devils have a time machine in good working order.

But I do not dare kick in their devil's den, and neither should you. We both know that fire ants, unlike those 10-foot-tall non-human aliens, fight back. They bite you, and then they giggle. You can hear it.

You can kick their command center over, and they'll have it rebuilt by tomorrow afternoon—but not before they cover you with enough bites to force you to go to confession and make a sizable donation to the Church of Fire Ants, LLC.

Years ago, I made a deal with fire ants: I don't disturb them, and they don't bite me enough to make me swell up like a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. Hell, then they'd prick me with a pin and watch my nekkid butt flying around in circles before crash-landing in the neighbor's front yard. (I'm sure I'm not the only one who has contemplated this spectacular end to an otherwise unremarkable life, which explains why there are so damn many fire ants.)

But Honey, this is Texas, where Republicans outnumber fire ants and are even meaner.

If you don't believe me, I give you this helpful list:

10 Ways Republicans Are Worse Than Fire Ants

1. Fire ants rarely burn books.
2. Fire ants don't get kicked off of Twitter.
3. Four words: No Ant Ted Cruz.
4. Fire ants just sting you. They don't sting you and then force you into gay conversion therapy when you swell up.
5. Fire ants have lively political events, but they don't resemble a Monster Truck Rally.
6. Fire ants are actually concerned about who gets assault rifles. Republicans are only concerned about which couples deserve wedding cakes.
7. Click-bait headlines that start with "Florida man..." are never about fire ants.
8. Although they are rarely seen in sequins, fire ants have no irrational fear of drag shows.
9. Fire ants don't seem to care what I do with my own uterus.
10. There are no fire-ant TV preachers begging for money.

Until next month, don't forget that we Texans only have three speeds in the heat of summer: Off, Almost On, and Don't Push Your Luck.

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



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The Freedom to Define Your Identity

Flawless Oz's journey to self-acceptance started with embracing the term 'nonbinary.'

By IAN L. HADDOCK



Flawless Oz has been in the business of doing drag for the last 27 years, but is just now finding the language to fully identify their self. When they arrived on the scene at 21, they felt

an overwhelming pull to become a drag entertainer. So just one year after attending their first drag show, they had created the persona that would become Flawless Oz.

Years before Flawless was created, Jonathan Barnett—their birth name—had started a budding record label. After struggling to get the business off the ground, they went to work in retail management. Helping popular drag performers find clothes at the time sparked conversations that enticed Flawless to visit a gay club for the first time.

"I walked into the club, saw Chanel Nicole and Tiffany Brooks onstage, and said, 'I want to do that.' People were tipping performers who were not celebrities to lip-synch over a song. I thought [if they can do this and] in six or seven minutes make a couple hundred dollars, I can do this, too!"

Drag was a new world that allowed Flawless to explore a new part of who they were. Still, they found themselves unsure of their sexuality years before as a young boy. Self-characterized as an effeminate man their entire life, they were primarily attracted to masculine-presenting women. Though often bullied for being what appeared to be gay, they didn't have any specific attraction to the same sex over the opposite sex. But there was always that binary idea that because they liked softer things, they must be a gay man. And when their pseudonym Flawless presented itself, they were almost sure it had to be true.

"I would ask myself, 'What straight man

wants to wear women's clothing?' From the moment I saw my mother's heels and dresses, I was drawn to them. Could I be straight and like to wear those things?"

They had their first child in 1998, two years into their drag career. That hugely momentous occasion managed to spark a lot of inner conflict.

"FOR A LONG TIME, I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHERE I EXISTED. YES, I CAN CHANGE A TIRE, BUT I LIKE ALL THINGS FEMININE. THE TERM 'NONBINARY' LET ME UNDERSTAND WHO I WAS, AND SEPARATE IT FROM WHO I LIKED."

—Flawless Oz

"There was only *gay* and *lesbian* back then. There didn't seem to be a belief in bisexuality, and transgender wasn't even a term used by the community. I wasn't a girl, anyway. I only wanted to wear girl clothes."

So after their relationship ended with the child's mother, Flawless started to date men. This lasted for a couple of years before they found themselves back with women. Over time, they ended up having a total of four children.

After struggling with their self-under-

standing, Flawless eventually gravitated to an attraction to the opposite sex as a drag queen. Though freeing, it left them at odds with the LGBTQ+ community that they had taken refuge in. Without the language to explain their sexuality—and, at this point, realizing that their identity was neither gay nor straight—they felt alone in a community full of people becoming increasingly proud to be who they were.

All of that changed when Flawless found the term *nonbinary*. "If I would have known that sexuality and identity were different, that would've given me much more comfort," they admit.

But more important than understanding the difference between "sexual attraction" and "sexual identity" is understanding the full spectrum of gender identity and its purpose in defining a group of people searching for clarity. UCLA's Williams Institute reports that over 1.2 million people in the US identify as nonbinary. But that term is still not fully understood because it has only been around for two decades.

Definitions are important—not just to expand the LGBTQ+ acronym, but to become conductors of a greater freedom of expression. After 22 years, Flawless found a term that explains this dichotomy of being enchanted by performing in drag and living day-to-day as Jonathan. Using both personalities throughout their life was the catalyst to an awakened journey of self-expression. Ridiculed for being an effeminate man for decades while mostly dating women, identifying as a nonbinary person allowed things to finally make sense.

"The woman that was inside of me channeled the feminine energy even when I was in masculine situations, and I finally had a definition for it," Flawless says.



Nonbinary people don't identify as either male or female, and they usually find themselves expressing parts of both genders. The distinction is that some nonbinary people identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer—and even straight. *Nonbinary* is an attribute of gender identity, and is separate from how people identify their sexuality and attractions.

"For a long time, I didn't understand where I existed. For all intents and purposes, I had a mostly heterosexual existence. Imagine living in a situation where I don't exist as a straight male. Yes, I can change a tire, but I like all things feminine. [The term *nonbinary*] let me understand who I was, and separate it from who I liked."

Though the term is new, nonbinary people have existed for millennia. From ancient Mesopotamia to India, and closer to home in Native American cultures, "third-gender," "two-spirited," and other nonbinary identities have been documented. More recently, we have seen stars such as Janelle Monae, Sam Smith, Alex Newell, and Shea Coulee identify with this term. Finding the ability to properly identify oneself is just as important as finding human connection. After all, fully knowing oneself is essential for fully connecting with other people.

For people like Flawless, that awareness has meant more than you could imagine. "Finding this definition made me more comfortable in the community setting. I often felt ostracized by both sides of the community as rumors and innuendo came back to me over time [regarding my sexuality], because

people assume they know you. Gaining the information about the definition of nonbinary gave me the language to not only tell them the truth, but also to find the words to be fully authentic for myself."

On July 14, the community celebrates International Non-Binary People's Day, designed to raise awareness and visibility of nonbinary people. This date (which was first observed in 2012) is significant, as it is the midpoint between International Women's Day and International Men's Day on the calendar. And with the nonbinary community's legacy of seeking freedom and liberation, there is some serendipity in July 14 being just ten days after we celebrate our nation's freedom on Independence Day.

Through it all, Flawless stands stronger and more connected than ever to an LGBTQ+ community that is growing in its understanding of their queer identities. "You no longer get to exclude me from my community," Flawless concludes. "This is my community, too!"



Follow @JonathanDemond Barnett (Flawless Oz) on Facebook, and @flawlessoz on Instagram.

Ian L. Haddock aspires to be a conduit of joy in all things activism and art. He is a published author and writer and leads a team of nontraditional activists at The Normal Anomaly Initiative, Inc.

SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



On June 1, 2023, the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce kicked off Pride month with the Dumpling Dudez at Sesh Coworking. Pictured are **Chelsea Sargent Lira, Tammi Wallace, Shenice Brown, Mike Dorsey, Chih Lin, Meredith Wheeler, Maggie Segrich, and Stewart Lira.**



DA Kim Ogg held her 2024 re-election campaign kickoff at Chapman & Kirby on June 1, 2023. Pictured are **DA Kim Ogg, and Daniel Itkins.**



Lambda Legal hosted Equality's Night Out Houston at Ronin Harrisburg on May 3, 2023. Pictured are **Jeff Watters, Kevin Jennings, Shelly Skeen, Alan York, and Michael Shutt.**



On June 3, 2023, the Mr. & Miss Gay Pride Houston contest was held at KiKi. Pictured are **Shawn Michaels, Talon Devereaux Whitney, Laisha LaRue, and Heidi T. Iman.**



Pride Chorus Houston held its "Love Who You Love" concert at Resurrection MCC on June 3, 2023. Pictured are chorus members.



On June 4, 2023, Pride Houston 365 hosted its Pride Market and the announcement of the 2023 grand marshals at Karbach Brewing Company.



On June 8, 2023, Chicago Title held its second annual Pride Houston Happy Hour. Pictured are Chicago Title employees and friends.



The Houston Dash held its Pride Night at Shell Energy Stadium on June 11, 2023. Pictured are **Sarah Pepper, Carra Sykes, Brian Hall, Tammi Wallace, and Alex Singer.**



On June 16, 2023, OUT at the Ballet sponsored by OutSmart magazine and Houston Ballet, was held at the Wortham Center. Pictured are: (l-r back row) **Michael Gurnas, Joe Sandoval, Aaron Rublein, Jerry Peterson, Reggie Domingo Ovalle, Elizabeth Sosa Bailey, Matthew Janak, Greg Duffey, Angela Lee, and Kevin Pope.**



The Law Harrington Senior Living Center held its June-teenth celebration on June 17, 2023. Pictured are HEB and Central Market volunteers.



On June 18, 2023, Six Actors presented Brad Dalton's dramatic adaptation of Robert W. Fieseller's book *Tinderbox* at Spring Street Studios. Pictured are **Dwight Clark, Michelle Elaine, Joel Sandel, Brad Dalton, Robert Fieseler, Blake Weir, Phillip Hall, and John Felch.**



ActOUT at The Alley Theatre for *The Servant of Two Masters* was held on June 22, 2023. Pictured are **Marck Steve, Alicia Ramirez, Priscylla Guzman, Lauren Pelletier, Aurora Reddy, Tina Berry, and Alvin Weingartner.**

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HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

Portrait of a Pioneer

A new **Monica Roberts** mini-mural graces a busy Montrose intersection.

By **SAM BYRD**



A beloved local activist has been immortalized at a busy corner in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. The likeness of Monica Roberts, the prolific transgender-rights advocate, adorns the utility box at the intersection of Montrose and Fairview, her silent gaze reminding passers-by of the need to continue the march toward equality.

City Council Member Abbie Kamin initiated the mural project to honor Roberts, and the location was selected to provide maximum visibility in the neighborhood.

Local artists and activists Brad Pritchett and Katherine Ligon were selected to paint the utility box. "[Abbie's] office reached out to us because we had both been close friends with Monica, but we also do art of various types," Pritchett says. "We were both excited to collaborate together and figure out what we wanted to do to honor Monica."

Pritchett recalls it took about a year to move from concept to completion, which included securing approvals from community partners, making revisions, and then painting the mural.

"Both Katherine and I were busy during the Texas Legislative Session, so it was very difficult for us to schedule anything," he adds. Pritchett works for Equality Texas, the largest nonpartisan statewide political advocacy organization working to eliminate discrimination targeting the LGBTQ community. "We picked Memorial Day weekend to complete the project because we knew we would have extra time to be present in that space."

In its finished format, the utility box displays a portrait of Roberts with the words "Griot, Journalist, Advocate, Friend, Auntie." A jet plane is also depicted flying above Houston's City Hall and leaving a pink, blue, and white trail that wraps around the box.

A quote from Roberts' speech at a Creating Change Conference completes the installation: "I never thought about the fact that while I don't have children of my own, I would gain a whole lot of nieces and nephews who chose me to be their Aunt Monica. But it's happening. I'm seen as a possibility model and an icon to a



Local artists and activists Brad Pritchett and Katherine Ligon

community that I am unabashedly proud of."

Pritchett explains how the quote highlights Roberts' importance to the trans community. "She was fiercely protective of queer kids, and in particular trans kids and nonbinary kids. She didn't have children of her own, but in a way, she kind of had all of these children who looked up to her, who were inspired by her, and who considered her to be a member of [their] extended family."

Roberts was indeed a surrogate to many in the LGBTQ community, and she used her strength to amplify vital community issues.

"Monica brought a presence that was undeniable [to] spaces where we don't traditionally have power as queer people. Monica would step into these places and people would listen and take notice because she knew how to navigate these spaces in a way that most people [can't]. It came very naturally to her," Pritchett emphasizes.

"I also miss being able to rely on the strength that she exuded in these spaces where we often had the deck stacked against us," he continues. "You could come into a situation, whether it was at City Hall or at



the Texas Capitol or the nation's capitol, and feel like [the LGBTQ activists were] being piled on by folks who love to misuse their power. But then Monica would show up and she'd give you a hug, or she'd speak—or just give you a look—and you'd immediately feel reinvigorated and re-energized because you knew that Monica was there to fight alongside you.”

Pritchett sees the Montrose mini-mural as a fitting tribute to the larger-than-life legacy Roberts left behind, and he hopes it inspires others to learn about who she was and the work she performed.

“If you look at the many murals [of deceased leaders] that are all over the city, they honor folks who have had an impact not just on Houston or Texas, but also on our nation or world, in some instances,” Pritchett says. “I think Monica definitely falls into that category as somebody who was unapologetic about who they were. She defended trans people, and especially children, in a way that reverberated across the world.”

In addition to her work as a speaker and a regular columnist for OUTSMART magazine, Roberts created the TransGriot blog as a pioneering resource to help identify and pay tribute to transgender murder victims across the country. The blog earned her a posthumous GLAAD Media Award in 2021.

Roberts passed away suddenly on October 5, 2020, and her passing sparked a wave of remembrances throughout Texas and the nation by news outlets including the *New York Times*, GLAAD, and the *Texas Tribune*.

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Innovation Insider

KHOU's **Stuart Boslow** keeps the station's news coverage looking good.

By **MARENE GUSTIN**

Stuart Boslow never wanted to work in television. The 43-year-old director of innovation at KHOU-TV Channel 11 was studying to be a radio professional at West Texas A&M University.

"I quite literally stumbled into TV news during college," Boslow says. "I had been studying to work in radio as a DJ and in programming until the summer between my sophomore and junior years. I didn't want to move back home, so I took a job as a producer at the local CBS affiliate, and I fell in love with it. The storytelling, the breaking news, the process of digging and informing became incredibly interesting to me. I was hooked, and that was 25 years ago now."

Like many in the business, he moved around a lot, working his way up—from a producer in Reno, Nevada, to executive producer in San Antonio and, many moves later, ending up as the director of innovation at Houston's KHOU-TV in 2021.

"Isn't that a fun title?" he asks. "As the station's director of innovation, I help oversee our news product. What does it look like? How does it feel? What does it sound like? Everything from the set and graphics to the words and phrases our producers, reporters, and anchors are writing. I'm a bit of a tech nerd, too, so this role has allowed me to dive into some of our newsroom and production processes and technology to help find solutions to better serve our audience by alleviating roadblocks that may have been getting in our colleagues' way."

Boslow lives happily in Houston now with his husband of seven years, Chad, and their fur baby, Dobby. But being gay and out hasn't always been easy for him. "Early on in my career, I did face discrimination," Boslow says. "I once had a colleague chastise me for putting in a story about a Pride parade. This person told me that I was 'pushing my agenda.' That wasn't the case at all. It was literally a 15-second story about a massive event in our community in which many of our community leaders were in attendance. It's a moment that's stuck with me for 23 years. It took me a while to realize that it actually had nothing to do with me, but



COURTESY

was about that person's ignorance and lack of education."

Since then, Boslow has found acceptance and enjoyment in television, particularly at KHOU.

"There are so many aspects of my job here that are fun," he says. "The thrill of chasing and covering weather will always be one of my favorite things I do. Getting to think outside the box on coverage of big events like the Final

Four that was just in Houston, or bringing things like last year's Pride parade in Houston to life for our viewers, is also incredibly rewarding. No day here is ever the same."

Last year, Boslow co-wrote an editorial for the Radio Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) on news coverage of the monkeypox crisis. "On the heels of the pandemic, we were being faced with yet another health crisis," he says, "one that was mainly

focused on the LGBTQ+ community. No, it wasn't fatal in most cases, but what people failed to realize early on is that monkeypox infections had very serious effects that reached far beyond a person's body. The LGBTQ+ community very quickly realized that we had to take matters into our own hands, and as such I needed to be the voice in our newsroom calling for coverage, demanding answers from our city, county, and state health leaders. I am incredibly proud of the work our station did to bring light to the outbreak, push for vaccine coverage, and educate our audience to dispel misinformation about what was happening.

"PRIDE ISN'T SOMETHING THAT JUST HAPPENS IN JUNE. IT'S A 365-DAY-A-YEAR MINDSET."

—Stuart Boslow

"When I connected with LGBTQ colleagues in other newsrooms, it was evident that they were feeling the same concerns and frustration," Boslow recalls. "That led us to sitting down together and writing that editorial piece to help engage newsrooms across the country to think more critically and effectively about their own monkeypox coverage, and I cannot thank RTDNA enough for giving us a platform to share that voice and experience."

So, what does Pride Month mean to Boslow? Quite a bit.

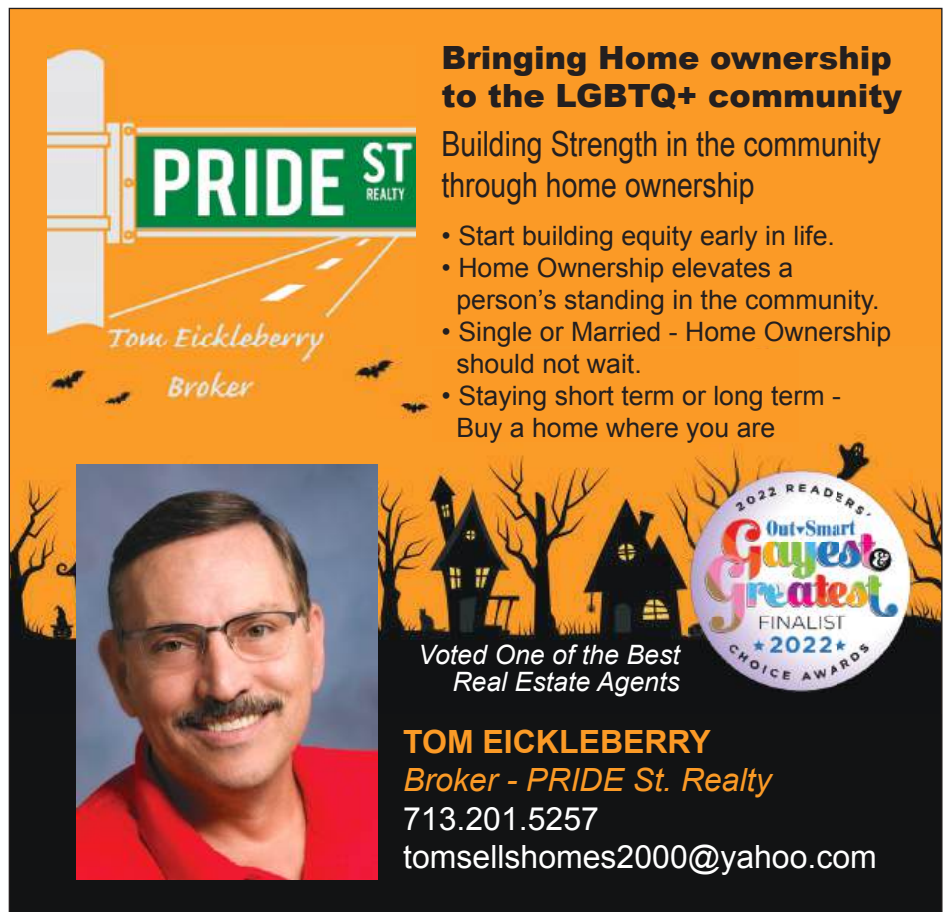
"Pride has evolved for me as I've grown, not only as a person, but as a gay man, and also as a gay person in news," he says. "Pride isn't something that just happens in June. It's a 365-day-a-year mindset. It never stops, because it can't. Honor the meaning of Pride in June, sure, but don't limit yourself to one month. Be engaged in it all year round. Speak up. Tell your story. Share your experience. And most of all, live your truth. That, to me, is Pride—no matter the month."

Keep up with Stuart Boslow on Instagram @stewieb80.



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A full-page photograph of a man with dark, curly hair and a light beard, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and white pants. He is standing on a sandy beach with shallow water at his feet. He is leaning against a thick, green-painted wooden post on the left side of the frame. His right arm is extended upwards, touching the post, and his left arm is slightly bent. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a bright, hazy beach scene with waves in the distance.

FROM CITY LIGHTS TO ISLAND BLISS

Lucio Nieto's move to Galveston sparked
a journey of creative growth and self-discovery.

By **CONNOR BEHRENS**
Photo by **NATASHA NORREGAARD**



Moving from the hustle and bustle of Los Angeles to the quiet tranquility of Galveston was quite the transition, but actor Lucio Nieto's journey to living on the Island has taken him on a path toward self-love and acceptance—messages that he says anyone can latch onto.

"I am focusing on learning how to love more," he says. "I am ready to learn healthy love, and be an example for it. Not just talking about it, but actually doing it. I'm learning how to remove everything that once got in my way and putting my intention on true, authentic love."

Hailing from New York City and Los Angeles, where he was heavily involved in the art and theater scenes, the openly gay actor had moved to the Island during the height of COVID-19, and it was only meant to be a temporary stay.

"By the time I moved to Galveston during COVID, the industry had completely shut down," he recalls. "TV shows that were filming halted production. Movies that were going to start were no longer going forward. I was out of work. Around that time, my mom had moved from Dallas to Galveston for a job offer to work on the Island downtown. One day, I called her and was very transparent and honest about what was going on. She showed me her apartment online, and said that I was welcome to visit whenever I wanted. Four years later, I haven't left!"

Working as a server at Gaido's, Nieto says he feels a passion for giving people the best service possible, while also leaving them feeling more positive and inspired by life in the process.

"I feel like this is my performance hall," he explains. "You know, as a server, I'm really there to give guests the best possible experience. I realized that it's such a powerful place to be within our community, and it's teaching me a lot about how I can really be able to offer my gifts in a way that is going to teach me humility, focus, discipline, and what it is to actually listen to the needs of those who are simply wanting a meal. Because in the grand picture of things, as my artistry begins to develop and as I begin to perform and create, especially here on the Island, it's only going to amplify my belief that we all need the resources to be able to heal."

When he's not busy serving the needs of his restaurant customers, Nieto makes sure he continues to give back to those on the Island by going back to his theater roots and performing at gay bars such as Robert's Lafitte and in community-theater musicals such as *La Cage Aux Folles* last spring at Galveston's ETC Theatre.

"My first time performing as a solo headliner singer was at Robert's Lafitte, the oldest gay bar in Texas," he notes. "I was there every week for six months. Performing for our community has been such a fulfilling experience for me. Galveston has really proven itself to be

something that I needed, but that I never knew I wanted. It was almost as if I needed to let go of all those things that I created in order to rediscover why those dreams are important, and why those dreams are still continuing on for me in Galveston."

Nieto has also been exploring his musical roots by composing and producing music videos—most recently a cover of "Over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz*. "That song has been received so well by those who have listened to the record or watched the music video," he says. →



LONNIE WINDHAM

**"THE PEOPLE WHO ARE
LIVING IN THE DARK
ARE ONLY AFRAID OF
THE LIGHT, SO SHINE
BRIGHTER!"**

—Lucio Nieto



NATASHA NORREGAARD

"This cover has such a special place in my heart because that film inspired me to become an actor. I've been writing a lot more music since I arrived in Galveston. That serves as another creative outlet, and has gifted me with my own form of therapy."

Galveston is a natural place for artistic people to thrive, and Nieto says he feels like an unofficial ambassador to the Island's many charms and emotional-healing properties.

"You know, I truly believe Galveston is a vortex," he notes. "I believe it's an uncharted vortex. The truth of it is, when you're surrounded by nature, you're more in line with your vessel than you can be when you're surrounded by a bunch of tall buildings in cities. I mean, if we look at what's happening with Los Angeles, so many people are fleeing the big city to places like Galveston so they can be closer to water. Water is the natural element of cleansing, restoration, and healing. So when you're surrounding yourself with water, that's the flow of creative energy in life."

Island living has indeed given Nieto a new lease on life, allowing him to explore who he is and what he wants from life—in the form of a

meditation practice and an exploration of spirituality. The last few years have been hard for many people, and Nieto suggests all of us can benefit greatly from meditation and a greater sense of self-reflection.

"Meditation doesn't necessarily mean 'close your eyes, breathe deeply, chant and bang on a bunch of drums,'" he says. "Meditation is a deep focus. That's all meditation is. There's such an element of spirituality in nature here on the Island. This is a space where it is safe for me to reinvent if needed, to remember, to be reminded, to grow."

In particular, Nieto encourages the gay community to take the time to regularly meditate and find a strong support system, because it's important to drown out all the homophobia and hatred sweeping the country.

"The people who are living in the dark are only afraid of the light, so shine brighter!" he emphasizes. "We are so vast and expansive that if we feed into the anxiety and we believe it to be true, then we're going to perpetuate it. Just keep shining. Be with your community who makes you feel safe. Put on some really good music. Tell yourself how beautiful you are.

Imagine yourself in white light. Visualize feeling safe. Visualize yourself in golden energy. Visualize yourself being a king or a queen. Visualize yourself having a team of angels around you. Do whatever you can. Tell yourself, 'I'm safe, I'm protected, I'm loved, I'm divine.'"

As Nieto sees it, leaving California and living a more peaceful life in Galveston has prepared him for the next step in his life: love.

"I'm now ready for the healthiest forms of love," he says. "That's what I'm ready for. That's the thing I'm calling it, and when I do that, it's going to affect my jobs. It's going to affect my finances. It's going to affect my creativity. It's going to affect everything. So baby, I'm ready for unconditional love! I am excited to find my divine partner, being openly gay with a man, doing my best to love and to change the world. That's the journey I'm on."

 *Keep up with Lucio Nieto
on Instagram @reikiminister.*

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Sailing Toward Inclusion

Michael Cassavaugh's Island Time Beach Bar & Grill redefines Galveston's LGBTQ nightlife scene.

By CONNOR BEHRENS
Photo by MAKAYLA MAISEL



Owner Michael Cassavaugh is bringing a brand-new beachfront bar to Galveston's Seawall with Island Time Beach Bar & Grill, an all-inclusive hotspot

that features a large dance floor, outdoor deck area, and a rooftop view.

For Cassavaugh, creating safe spaces for those in the Island's LGBTQ community has become a passion of his over the last few years, and Island Time, in the spot formerly occupied by Rumors, felt like the perfect opportunity to make that goal a reality.

"I've had the pleasure of working with the landlord for years, and we talked in great detail about bars of the past in Galveston that focused on the whole community, and not just tourists," he explains. "I wanted to create a space that put our community first, and that could be a gathering place for everyone. We are excited to be working with all of the LGBTQ+ bars and organizations on the Island, and we have already set up fundraisers."

While Cassavaugh has never owned a bar before, his years of experience in the hospitality industry have prepared him for this moment. "I've worked in hospitality for most of my career, and have worked with both bars and restaurants throughout my life. But this is the first one I've owned. I also own and manage 10 vacation rentals on the Island, and I have called Galveston home for seven years."

The bar will be home to a plethora of late-night attractions that should entice a diverse crowd, including big dance floors, outdoor seating, a spacious bar area, and



Michael Cassavaugh

food trucks on hand to feed hungry customers, Cassavaugh says.

The community reaction to his plans has been positive. "We kept the locals involved by holding open houses in the weeks and months leading up to opening, so they could see the progress and offer suggestions along the way," he notes. "That won't change going forward. Out of all the bar features, people seem most impressed with the air conditioning. No matter the crowd size, we are always comfortable inside. I'm very proud of the renovation. But more importantly, I'm proud of our staff."

That staff consists of a great team led by Josh Mills. "Josh is a staple in the community, having worked in bars here for over a decade," Cassavaugh says. "We are also lucky that we →

were able to convince Kymber DeVine (Kerry Chandler) to come on as our show director. She has decades of experience, is a Galveston County resident, and has done an amazing job creating a unique cast of performers, the Haus of Dolls. Haus of Dolls is made up of both queens and male performers, creating unique shows for all our guests.”

Cassavaugh is excited to show Island locals and visitors A+ service as they relax and dance during a fun night out in a safe space that allows for great conversation and fun times as people connect with each other.

“I’m hoping to create a space that’s great for locals and tourists alike,” he says. “A place for fun, a place for Pride—a place for all where we can host amazing drag shows, have great karaoke, live music, and food.”

Cassavaugh is grateful that the City of Galveston has been encouraging—a rarity in a state where so many officials currently work to discourage drag shows and LGBTQ establishments. Additionally, he says Galveston is supportive of the Third Coast PrideFest and Parade—a new four-day event involving Island



gay bars beginning October 19.

“The new event is a community collaboration involving the LGBTQ+ bars and a group working with the Galveston Downtown Partnership to create an amazing PrideFest weekend,” he says. “We will have events for people of all ages, ending with a Pride parade in downtown Galveston.”

“We are also proud to be joining 23rd Street Station and Robert’s Lafitte in serving our community, and both of those bars were amazingly supportive as we were gearing up to open,” he says. “We were honored to host many of their staff and management at our opening events in

early April.”

As Island Time builds up its regulars and becomes a staple of the community, Cassavaugh’s next goal is to create a gay-centric Island website.

“We have launched GayGalveston.com as a site that helps to promote all things LGBTQ+ in Galveston,” he says. “The site is a work in progress, but we are hoping to create more events throughout the year where we can all participate together. We all do better together as a community!”

➡ For more info, visit islandtime.bar.

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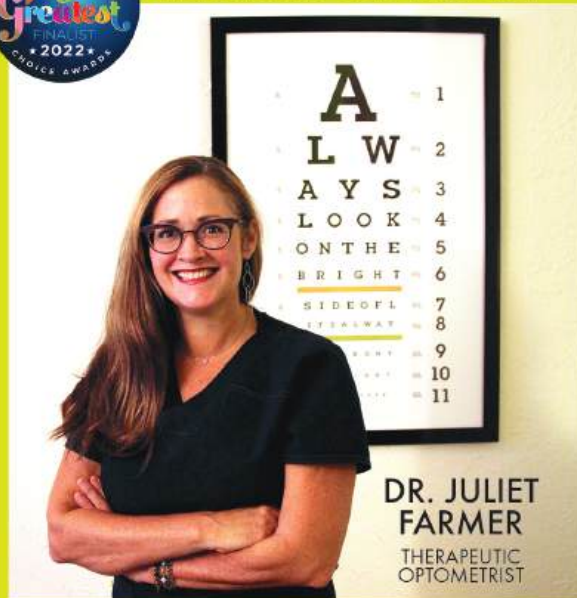
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Shaman by the Gulf

Galveston shamanic practitioner **Anthony Rios** brings a spiritual awareness to his work.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Healing comes in all shapes, sizes, and even sounds. Anthony Rios, a shamanic practitioner in Galveston who offers a range of physical, emotional, and spiritual healing services, offers a healing lifeline for queer folks who are harboring unresolved anger, hurt, and pain.

Rios has trained extensively as a healer, both locally and abroad, following a period of spiritual explorations. “When I was 29 years old, I had my break with the Catholic Church. I was going to Mass and I was part of Dignity Houston, an LGBTQ+ Catholic group,” he recalls. “I eventually left the church and was looking for something to fill that spiritual void. I hopped around and I looked at Buddhism, Wicca, and some other things that were interesting, but nothing really ever clicked. I came across a workshop on shamanism in Houston, taught through The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, called ‘The Way of the Shaman.’ I took that weekend workshop in 1999 and it all fell into place.”

Rios was pleasantly surprised by how his spiritual shift also helped him reconnect with his Mexican American culture. “Shamanism brought me back full-circle to my roots with traditional healing called Curanderismo,” he explains. “I go to Mexico, Belize, and Yucatán and study with teachers down there. That’s been a big part of my life in the last dozen years.”

Today, the experienced shamanic practitioner offers a range of services including extraction healing, soul retrieval, divination, power animal retrieval, psychopomp, and power renewal. He specializes in shamanic extraction with a focus on removing energies



“SHAMANISM IS THE OLDEST SPIRITUAL PRACTICE KNOWN TO HUMANITY, GOING BACK 30,000 YEARS. SOME SAY 50,000 YEARS, AND SOME SAY EVEN LONGER.”

—Anthony Rios

that don’t belong in the body anymore.

“People think that they need to burn a ton of sage and have 500 crystals,” Rios says with a laugh. “I work primarily with sound. I use drums and rattles—that’s the way I’ve been trained. I always start off with a blessing and ask for whatever divine energy needs to come in and work with us, so that that divine energy comes in and does that.” He has even used water from Hurricane Harvey and other weather events that he has saved and blessed.

His clients come to him with a num-

ber of issues, and the reactions they have continuously reaffirm the power of his work. “People come to see me for physical pain, and they get better. I remember a good friend of mine was having a lot of hip pain and he wanted me to work on him. He was able to move around so easily after our session. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes I wouldn’t have believed it,” Rios recalls. “That was a big confirmation for me. There’s something here that’s really powerful, and it works. I’m just a conduit for [these healings] to come through.”

As modern medicine continues to advance, skepticism about shamanic healing practices is to be expected. Rios assures those interested in exploring his services that these practices have been effective for generations. “I like to let people know that shamanism is the oldest spiritual practice known to humanity, going back 30,000 years. Some say 50,000 years, and some say even longer.” He encourages prospective clients to come with an open heart and a clear intention. “I tell people to come with an open mind if they’re serious about their



Anthony Rios

healing. They’ve got to be committed to their own personal healing.”

The former contractor, who owned a family business that worked on high-end homes and condos specializing in ceramic tile, can also point to the benefits he has seen in his own life since taking that initial class at The Foundation for Shamanic Studies over two decades ago. “My biggest personal benefit in practicing

and studying shamanism, and being with some wonderful teachers, is that I have been able to let go of a lot of anger and resentment that I had held on to for a long time, for all kinds of reasons. If you’re going to do spiritual healing on other people, you’ve got to do inner work on yourself first, or it’s just not going to happen.”

Rios specializes in helping others reconnect with their spiritual side and their divine self, and he encourages queer folks to consider the emotional healing that his services could provide. “The LGBTQ+ community has so much hurt that we’re holding on to, and we invest so much energy in putting up our own façade to look like everything’s cool. It always comes to the forefront for me during Pride Month. I used to do some work in gay men’s groups, and that was always something that would come up. There’s so much unresolved anger, sadness, and hurt that needs to be resolved. I know what that’s like, and I can serve [my queer clients] because I understand exactly what that feels like in the body.”

➔ *For more info, visit Rios’ Instagram feed @anthonyrios797.*



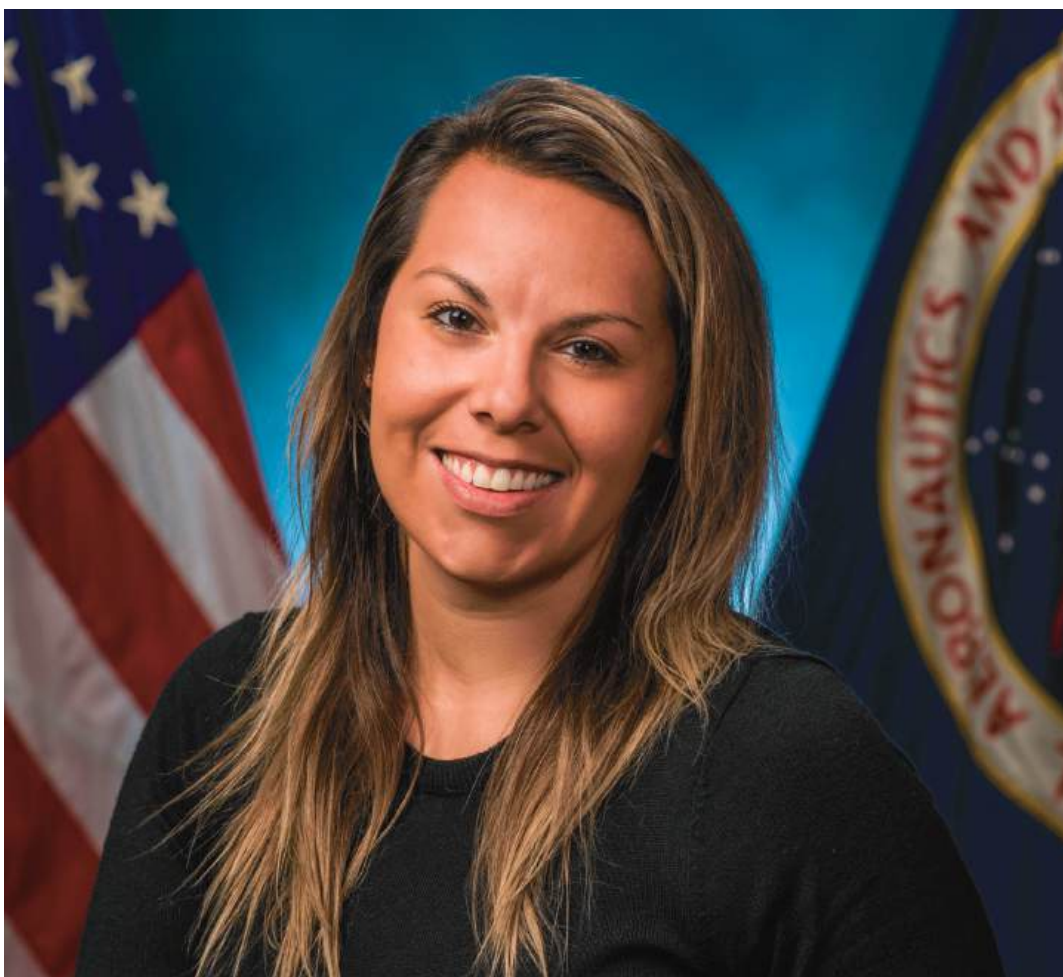


PHOTO BY NASA/BILL STAFFORD

Aerospace Adventurer

Lauren Maples' underwater training is leading her to shoot for the stars.

By **MARENE GUSTIN**

Thirty-three-year-old Lauren Maples and her wife, Kristen Simmons Maples, love their life together on the Island.

Kristen is co-owner of Galveston's Texas Scuba Adventures, where Lauren also works as a divemaster, so they share their love of diving in common.

Lauren, a Pearland native, first fell in love with diving while training for her job at NASA's Johnson Space Center.

The couple first crossed paths in 2011, but it would be another four years before they met. "There is a building—a community, really—in downtown Galveston called The National

Hotel Artist Lofts," Lauren explains. "I first moved there in 2011, my first place out on my own. I would see this woman in passing and do the 'What's up?' head nod. But honestly, I was a bit too shy back then.

"Then one day, I just never saw her in the building after that. Fast-forward four years, and I was swiping on Tinder and a familiar face pops up. I swiped right, and evidently she did too, and we matched! I then proceeded to bombard her with DMs like, 'Did you live in the Artist Lofts from 2011 to 2013?!?!'

"Anyway, I am surprised she agreed to meet up with me after sounding like a complete crazy person. But I am glad that she did. The Artist Lofts built out their street-level space

into a coffee, beer, and wine bar called the Proletariat Gallery and Public House, and our first date was there. We had an instant connection, and the rest was history! We will have been together for eight years in September of this year, and married for six years in October of this year."

The couple has a Catahoula Australian Shepherd Lab Mix named Kali who is almost five years old, and who is "unbelievably spoiled." They also love baseball in addition to their love of scuba diving.

"I absolutely love baseball. Go 'Stros!" Lauren says. "As far as my favorite restaurant, it is hard to choose between these two, so I'll just name them both: Galveston Island Taco, and Mr. Taco—both located in downtown Galveston. Best tacos you'll ever have!

"I've been here for 12 years and love it every day. While the commute to Johnson Space Center is about 45 minutes, there is nothing like coming over the Causeway at the end of the day," she adds. "I always roll the windows down in my Jeep, turn up the reggae, and cruise on home. It is a peace

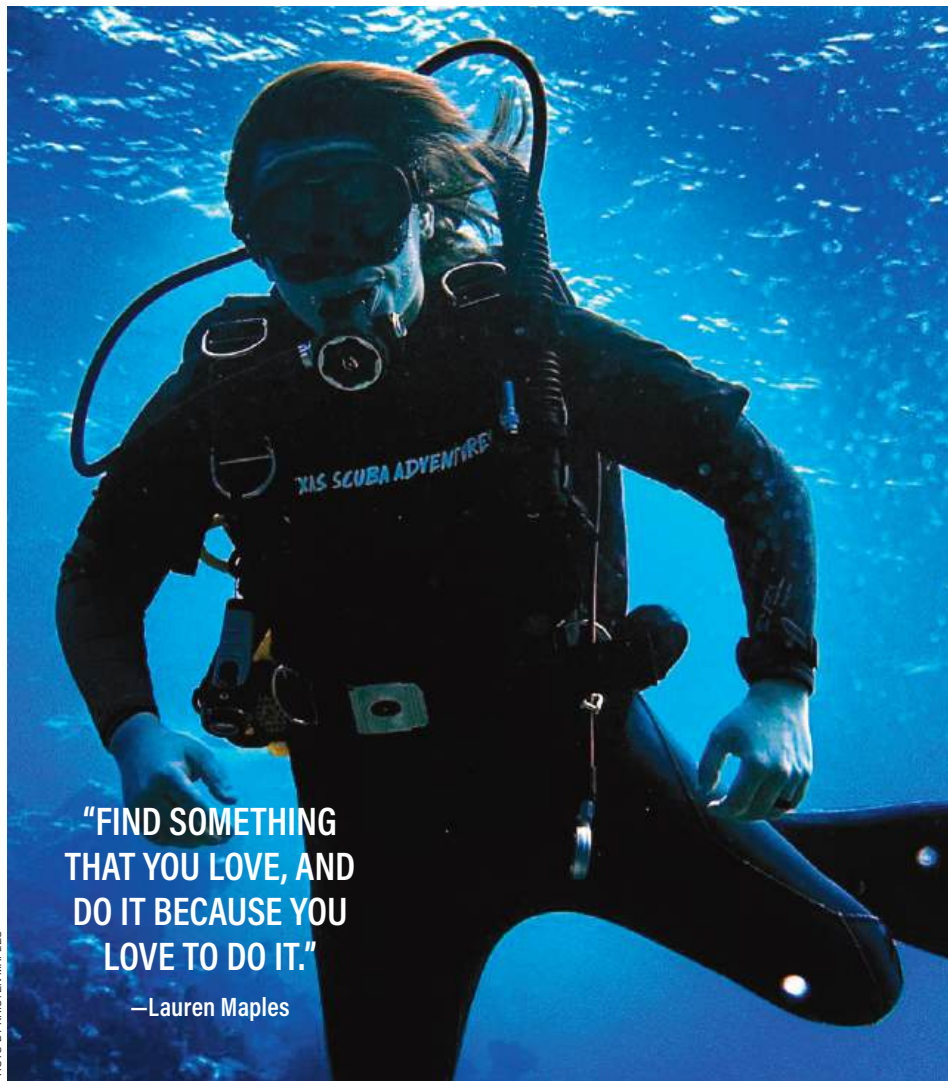
that is unexplainable. My hobbies include scuba diving, sitting on the beach, playing guitar, and looking up at the stars—on the off chance there's a clear night in the Galveston-Houston area.

"I began working at Space Center Houston's education department as an informal educational instructor," she says. "Space Center Houston is a nonprofit visitors center for NASA's Johnson Space Center. I worked in several of their educational programs, and one in particular was called Space Center University, where junior-high and high-school students from around the world would converge in Houston for a weeklong space camp. They would learn and perform activities in various areas of aerospace engineering, and one of them included visiting NASA's Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory (NBL) where they would learn how NASA uses a large swimming pool to train astronauts for extravehicular activities—EVAs, or space walks. The students would then go to a smaller public pool and do a scuba event with Texas Scuba Adventures and learn basic scuba skills and perform tasks underwater in their engineering teams to 'train like an astronaut.' I supported this program for six years, and I was able to get scuba-certified and provide instruction and safety measures for the students during their underwater simulations."

Lauren fell in love with space while working at Space Center Houston, and knew she wanted to work as a NASA diver. It was a lot of hard work, but she was offered the position of Dive Operations Specialist in 2015 to train astronauts.

"I would work there a little over seven years, from December 2015 to January 2023. During that time, I completed a bachelor of science in space studies and aerospace science at American Public University in 2020, and then went on to complete a master's degree in systems engineering at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in 2022. I then had a new calling as an EVA flight controller," she says.

"After completing my master's degree, I was hired at KBR in January to support NASA Johnson Space Center as an EVA flight controller. Our team focuses on the training, planning, and execution of EVAs (spacewalks). My position focuses on the training and overseeing of the tasks the crews perform during spacewalks. There is much to learn, and it is so much fun! This dynamic work environment also allows me to operate occasionally out at the NBL, where instead of diving I am in the control room talking crew through training procedures and observing the overall training event.



"On days when there is an EVA in space going on, the EVA team converges on Mission Control support rooms to follow along and listen to the comm loops as the crew completes the mission. In the event of a tool failure or unanticipated hardware complications, our team is ready to offer up recommendations to the crew to troubleshoot the situation to complete the mission and get the crew back inside the International Space Station safely."

Lauren notes that she has not only never

Top: Lauren Maples, a divemaster for Galveston's Texas Scuba Adventures
Left: Maples and her wife, Kristen Simmons Maples, at their beachfront wedding celebration

felt any discrimination at NASA, but was openly proud of seeing a NASA booth at Houston's Pride festival in 2010. "I knew I would be safe in an environment like that, and it's still so very true. I couldn't be more grateful to work in such an inclusive organization."

She also believes that other girls can excel in the scientific fields. "Find something that you love, and do it because you love to do it," she says. "Whether it's scuba diving, rocket scientist, guitarist, an artist, playing softball—whatever it may be, do it and do it well. Be disciplined, but still have fun! Laugh at yourself—it's OK, and it's important. The STEM field is awesome and so much fun, but so is being a teacher or a coach or a race-car driver. Be what you want to be, but mostly be unapologetically yourself and believe in yourself, always. To quote Babe Ruth ("The Great Bambino") from the 1993 movie *The Sandlot*, 'Follow your heart, kid; you'll never go wrong.'"



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The Mississippi-born Dr. Scurria majored in chemistry at the University of Dallas, a small Catholic university in Irving, Texas, then came to Houston to train as a medical technician before joining MD Anderson Cancer Center.

"While I enjoyed working in the lab, it turned out that the favorite part of my job was when I went up on the floors to collect blood samples," she recalls. "I realized that I wanted to do more and be able to help patients more directly."

So, it was back to school. Four years of medical school and three years as a Family Medicine Resident later, Dr. Scurria opened her practice in 1982 after being certified by the American Board of Family Practice.

"When I first started there were only a few patients each day and I loved seeing each patient, spending time with them and getting to know them personally," Dr. Scurria says. "I finally was where I wanted to be, and I was doing what I had dreamed of doing."

But over the next 33 years her practice changed. It grew to the point that she couldn't see every patient herself and had to rely on Physician Assistants (PAs).

"I was pleased to have a thriving practice, but I was not pleased to lose the ability to see all my patients myself," she says. "Over the years the healthcare environment has continued to push primary care physicians to see more and more patients and spend less and less time with each one. I was working 15-hour days, overseeing a staff of 11 employees, and directly supervising two PAs, making patient call backs until 8 and 9 at night and doing never ending paperwork to keep the insurance companies happy."

She rarely had time for her hobbies—playing golf and traveling. Even finding the time to volunteer for her favorite community organizations LHI, AssistHers, The Pet Patrol, KIDS Meals, and Houston Center for Independent Living became challenging.

"I still loved seeing patients, but I was

burning out," she says. "I recognized that I had to make a change."

In January of 2011, she made that change, becoming affiliated with MDVIP. In 2000, two physicians in Florida decided that they wanted a new approach to primary care that focused on helping people stay healthy. They developed a



"Together we develop a personalized wellness plan that focuses on areas that need improvement in each patient's life."

—Sandra Scurria, MD

personalized healthcare model that has grown to more than 1,200 carefully selected primary care physicians in 45 states. Now, MDVIP is the leader in personalized healthcare with a network of physicians across the country who care for more than 380,000 patients.

"In this country we spend over \$2.5 trillion every year treating people after they get sick," Dr. Scurria says. "Yet our health statistics are terrible. Almost one million Americans die of heart disease each year, 10 million Americans have osteoporosis and additional 34 million are at risk. Sixty two percent are overweight or obese, and one in six suffer from depression. In summary, we are spending more money than ever and are less healthy than ever."

"MDVIP's goal is to help people stay as healthy as possible for as long as possible. You select an MDVIP affiliated doctor as your primary care physician for your acute and sick care needs. There's an annual membership fee for the service which includes a wellness program. And MDVIP physicians still accept Medicare and most managed care plans."

The Wellness Program is the foundation for the MDVIP Care model. The Wellness Program

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part for Houston's
LGBTQ community.

By MORGAN GAGE



TikTok is flourishing as a venue for queer connection as its algorithm not only promotes but creates niche subcommunities for each user. OutSmart introduces you to a few of the LGBTQ creators who are making waves.

Sunny Daye

@thesundaye on TikTok,
with 74.1k followers on the app

"HTX. Queer. Musician."

How would you describe the content that you make for TikTok?

I make content for the queers! All queers of all colors, ages, shapes, and sizes. It's important for me to feel like a moving part of my community. I want to use whatever platform I have to be an advocate for us, and also showcase representation and relatability for those who need it.

How did you first get involved with posting on TikTok? What do you enjoy about the platform?

I kind of just started making videos. I got on the app much later than most people and felt a little lame at first, I'm not gonna lie. But as soon as I found my niche, I couldn't get off of it. I really enjoy how versatile it is; it can be informative, inspiring, or it can just be a good way to

release some serotonin and pass the time.

How do you think TikTok helps the LGBTQ community connect with each other?

TikTok helps connect the LGBTQ community in ways we've never seen before in terms of mutual aid, finding fellow queers in the area, or even finding your soulmate. It can connect you to queers on the other side of the world simply because you both like cat videos. It's honestly remarkable and a little scary.

What is your favorite part of the LGBTQ community in Houston?

My favorite (and consequently *least* favorite) part about the LGBTQ community in Houston

is its weblike connections. Houston is a gigantic city, but almost every queer you meet is only two or three degrees separated from you already. Let me explain: you meet a really cute girl, and you start dating. You tell your friend about said girl, and your friend says she and the girl used to be in a promo group together. Always almost connected.

What's your favorite spot in the city to visit?

My absolute favorite spot is the Montrose area. It's just so stinkin' cute. There are gays frolicking everywhere, rainbow flags decorate every porch, and the restaurants are to die for.



Emma Weyand

@this.iss.emma on TikTok,
with 42.3k followers on the app

"We're out here in H-Town!"

How would you describe the content that you make for TikTok?

I would describe my TikTok content as coming from a place of self-expression. Growing up, I felt like I couldn't be myself—which I think is what many people go through in the community. I was constantly judged by the way I look and the way I act. My content is a representation of self-love, self-expression, and self-confidence that I couldn't have when I was younger. It took a long time to be comfortable in my own skin. Being able to now be comfortable with myself and post on TikTok is a beautiful thing.

How did you first get involved with posting on TikTok? What do you enjoy about the platform?

I started posting on TikTok during COVID. Once everything shut down, I moved from Chicago back to Buffalo, New York. I had little access to LGBTQ friends and events, so I decided to build a community on TikTok through videos and live streams. I really enjoyed being able to talk to new people and get to know them. I made so many friends through live streams. I actually got to meet a lot of them in person when I moved to Houston.

How do you think TikTok helps the LGBTQ community connect with each other?

I've never felt like I was a part of such a close-knit community until I became active on TikTok. During COVID, it helped me make friends and find like-minded people. Now it's connecting everyone in the real world, as well. All across the world, everyone has their own communities and now we can showcase them on TikTok, which makes me feel more connected to the rest of the LGBTQ community.

What is your favorite part of the LGBTQ community in Houston?

How friendly everyone is. I've never met a community that is so welcoming and so judgment-free. There is an endless amount of support in all aspects of the community, and everyone just wants to hype each other up. It's so full of love, happiness, and support. I've never felt more at home than I have here.

What's your favorite spot in the city to visit?

My favorite spot is Pearl Bar Houston. It is the

only lesbian bar in Houston, and it is the best place to be. I've been working there for two years. You can catch me behind the bar Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday. Even when I'm not working, I stop by a lot of the time because it is such an inviting and friendly place. I mentioned how I've never felt more at home than I have here, and Pearl Bar plays a huge role in that. It's a safe space that everyone in the LGBTQ community can go to be themselves. Pearl Bar has changed my life for the better and is a home away from home for many people, including myself.





John Fuller

@_johnnyelvis on TikTok,
with 36.4k followers on the app

**"Constantly stressed, but
simultaneously blessed."**

How would you describe the content that you make for TikTok?

All of my content, for the most part, is about experiences in the Houston area. I've promoted bars, restaurants, retail stores, local businesses and charities, fundraisers, immersive pop-ups, as well as just info about the city itself. I'm a transplant to the city who moved here in May of 2019, and I found myself lost trying to navigate HTX. So I want my content to be for people who are genuinely trying to fall in love with living here, as I have.

How did you first get involved with posting on TikTok? What do you enjoy about the platform?

TikTok came into my life just like it did for most of us: the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. I was playing around with the in-app effects and posted it for my measly three followers. Around 2 a.m., I started hearing a bunch of notifications coming from my phone in the other room. It was TikTok notifications. I couldn't believe the first video I ever posted was on the For You page. The next day, I talked to many friends and family about it. They very much convinced me to 'run with it,' so I did. I made four more videos within the week (all about Houston), and each of those went viral, as well. I had garnered millions of views and 10,000 followers within a two-week span. I truly am lucky that my content stuck like it did at the beginning. That's the hardest part of being a content creator: getting seen!

Once businesses began reopening, I took my content out into the real world and off the green-screen in my closet. I was fortunate to meet RTB Event Group through the grapevine. They were crushing the club promotion game, so I made many colleagues and connections

through them. They opened many doors for me as a little content creator, and I hope they read this so they can see how thankful I am for them. From there, it just took off and I ran with it. Many restaurants and bars later, here I am now: nearing 40,000 followers, almost 1 million lifetime likes, and millions of views. I feel blessed in every way.

How do you think TikTok helps the LGBTQ community connect with each other?

The fact that TikTok had a small hand in me meeting my now-husband should speak volumes. I never saw myself getting married or falling in love, and this app handed me the man of my dreams on a silver platter. I think the fact it's so niche in its algorithm and what content you see makes it a special social-media platform. I've made so many friends in the LGBTQ community through TikTok locally and abroad. On top of that, this ability to connect and be [vulnerable with] people about your struggles, wants, specific interests, lifestyle, etc. can be valuable to many zLGBTQ people. As someone who grew up in a small trailer park in a small conservative town in Louisiana, having an app on my phone that would show me people who are just like me would have saved me many years of guilt and shame that I ultimately had to face when I was older.

What is your favorite part of the LGBTQ community in Houston?

The history of the LGTBQ community in Houston. HTX was making waves in the world for queer people years before the other big cities in Texas. That's something that should be noticed and respected by the rest of the state. Also, the diversity—which I know is a basic answer, but it's a noticeable feature of our community that most other cities don't have. And in my opinion, it makes us so much more glamorous, even if we don't get enough credit for it.

What's your favorite spot in the city to visit?

That's an ever-changing answer for me. Just when I think I have all my favorites picked, something comes along and completely changes my list. I absolutely *love* Rivas for brunch. BAE for ice cream. RAXX for vintage shopping. Tacos Tec for authentic Mexican food. Brass Tacks for coffee. Burger Bodega for lunch. Miyakos for sushi. MAD for birthday dinners. And Pergola is the newest restaurant on my list that's grabbing my attention.

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Let Freedom Sing

A provocative revival of the Broadway classic **1776** hits Houston this month.

By ZACH MCKENZIE
Photo by JOAN MARCUS



When Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* hit the stage in 2015, audiences were enamored and challenged by its contemporary retelling of a piece of our nation's history. The Tony

Award-winning *1776*, which was named Best Musical for 1969, is now enjoying a national Broadway tour that also sheds new light on a vital chapter in our nation's founding story.

This touring production of *1776* was originally developed at Harvard University's American Repertory Theater before moving to Broadway in late 2022. With its multiracial cast of female, trans, and nonbinary actors, that production set out to "put history in the hands of the humans who were left out the first time around."

Two of the *1776* cast members (who also happen to be romantic partners), Ariella Serur and Sav Souza, are thrilled to be bringing this story to Houston this month. The playfully charming couple spoke with OUTSMART from the tour's South Carolina stop and shared a bit about the characters they portray onstage.

"I play Judge James Wilson, who is a second fiddle to one of the villains," Serur, who uses she/they pronouns, explains. "He is working on finding his own voice in Congress."

Souza, who uses they/them pronouns, adds, "I play Dr. Josiah Bartlett, who is the delegate for New Hampshire. He is a pediatrician, and when we meet him in the play he is one of the people who is for declaring independence from England from the get-go. Many of the colonies were against it. Their mentality was, 'We don't care about it, we don't want to hear about it yet.

It's not time, we're not ready for it.' But John Adams was like, 'No, I think this is the moment,' and there were a couple of colonies that agreed: 'I see it. Let's do it.'"

The plot centers around Adams, who is tasked with convincing his fellow congressional delegates to vote for independence. "The main antagonist is the South Carolina delegate Edward Rutledge, who decides that ruling out slavery in the Declaration of Independence is not something that he agrees with," Serur says. "It winds up being this struggle about whether or not the slavery clause should be crossed out in order to get all of the delegates on board."

Serur goes on to explain the significance of that plot development. "It winds up being a very harrowing examination of what we actually did in order to create this country, where people had already existed and where other people were being so gravely mistreated, or 'treated like property,' as it's said in the show. It helps us re-examine the foundations of this country, [and what the founders did to make] independence something that everybody signs on to."

The depiction of the iconic *1776* characters by such a diverse cast is, as Souza says, an act of protest in and of itself. "Seeing these bodies saying these words really makes them hit differently. Not a single one of the folks on this stage were considered in the writing of the Declaration of Independence," they emphasize. "We are standing onstage saying these words written by these men. I think it's really effective and profound, for me personally as a trans person in America, to be sharing the stage with other queer nonbinary people of color and women who aren't getting the space to tell their



The *1776* cast performing in the current Broadway touring production

stories onstage."

With political temperatures rising across the nation, Serur says that the tone and energy of each tour stop is something they take into account. "It feels different in different locations, to be honest," she admits. "It feels a little different, especially because it gets personal. For example, South Carolina is the colony that wants to cross out the [Declaration's clause that would end slavery], so the character of South Carolina is the villain. How do we feel doing that show right now in South Carolina? It shifts."

Fortunately, the overall experience has been a positive one for Serur. "I think that



"THE SHOW'S PURPOSE IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THE PEOPLE TELLING THE STORY ARE ALL PEOPLE THAT WERE NOT ALLOWED IN THE ROOM, AND NOT CONSIDERED WHEN THE DECLARATION WAS SIGNED."

—Ariella Serur

our bodies saying this text makes us examine it. The purpose of it is to acknowledge that the people telling the story are all people that were not allowed in the room, and not considered when the Declaration was signed. It feels exciting to do it all around the country. We have been blown away by the audience's response."

Souza reflects on their experience thus far, and the impact the production has had, saying, "We are taking up the space of these white, straight cis men who were lauded as heroes in our history. But these were very complicated, flawed men who were making decisions and could not have imagined how the country would grow."

Souza is excited to delight Houstonians, alongside the production's eclectic cast. "Audiences are gonna feel connected to it, and realize the music is something they would listen to every day. You'll find yourself rocking out to the music, singing along, and bobbing your head. This production is really effective and really exciting."

What: The Broadway touring production of *1776*

When: July 20–22

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

Info: thehobbycenter.org/events/1776

A 'Modern Major' Musician

Dennis Arrowsmith brings new life to familiar characters

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **FIL NENNA**



If Houston became a stage show, Dennis Arrowsmith would be one of its most memorable characters. The multi-company staple will grace the Hobby Center stage

this month for Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Houston's *The Pirates of Penzance*.

This marks his third time in a *Pirates* production, and his first time in the role of Major-General Stanley. He's previously played the pirate king and the police sergeant.

"I'm very familiar with the show, but [for this role] I added a new highlighter color to my script. Now my script has yellow, green, and pink," Arrowsmith notes. "The Major-General is one of the most famous Gilbert & Sullivan characters out there. His patter song ('I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General') is certainly one of the most famous songs they've ever written."

Last performed by the local Gilbert & Sullivan Society in 2015, this year's production includes a new set and creative team. Opera and film professional Nicole Kenley-Miller has joined as stage director, and Opera in the

Heights general director Eiki Isomura is the music director. Together, their vision will offer a unique take on the popular operetta.

"It's sort of a new chapter for the Society, which I've been a part of since 2005," Arrowsmith recalls. "I've done 11 productions, so I consider myself a veteran of the Gilbert & Sullivan Society. There are people that have been in it for much longer, so I'm certainly not the eldest. But I've been around for a while."

Founded in 1952, the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Houston is a nonprofit theater company dedicated to preserving and sharing the delightful legacy of Gilbert & Sullivan's classic operas, which were a precursor to American Broadway musicals. They were wildly popular in the US in the late 19th century, and they have continued to delight large audiences ever since.

The Pirates of Penzance, one of the duo's most successful musicals, revolves around Frederic, who was mistakenly apprenticed to a band of tender-hearted pirates. Hoping to be released from his apprenticeship on his 21st birthday, Frederic soon realizes that his February 29 birthday means he must serve for

decades to come.

Meanwhile, Frederic meets the daughters of Major-General Stanley, including Mabel, and the two fall instantly in love. Young Mabel agrees to faithfully wait for him, but several questions loom: Will she really wait? What becomes of Frederic? Are the pirates as tender-hearted as they claim?

The show premiered in New York City on New Year's Eve 1879 to both audience and critical approval, and a London debut followed in 1880. Today's audiences likely remember the 1983 film adaptation starring Kevin Kline, Angela Lansbury, and Linda Ronstadt. Arrowsmith notes that *Pirates* is one of the easiest entry points into the Gilbert & Sullivan catalog. The plot is easy to follow and presented in English, which is a departure from some of their other works.

Arrowsmith just marked his 20th year with Houston Grand Opera, where he is a baritone in the chorus. His love of performing was sparked at an early age. "I was in my first musical in 8th grade, when I was cast as Jack in *Into the Woods*," he remembers. "It set me on my course of really loving mu-

sicals. All through high school, I did musical theater. Then, when I went to Rice University in the fall of 1999, I started learning about opera and classical music. Right out of college, I started working for the opera.”

In addition to performing with the chorus, Arrowsmith has also managed Houston Grand Opera’s Opera to Go! touring program at local schools, which included more than 250 mini-performances per year.

Now, he works for HITS Theatre as its education and engagement manager. Based in the Heights, HITS offers educational theater classes in acting, singing, dancing, and production to area youth. Arrowsmith focuses primarily on kindergarten through 6th grade, and he is currently directing the company’s production of *Finding Nemo, Jr.*

Arrowsmith’s love for involving youth in the performing arts led him to pen *The Armadillo’s Dream*, a storybook about an armadillo named Sandy who lives in a Houston bayou and dreams of singing. Though discouraged by the creatures he meets, Sandy is magically transformed during a storm and his shell becomes a part of a Houston Grand Opera production.



STEVE FEINBERG

Dennis Arrowsmith in his previous *Pirates* role as the Pirate King, with Sarah Lee as Ruth

“One of the great things, but also one of the sad things, about the performing arts is that it’s fleeting. You work for months on a show, and then you perform it,” he muses. “In the opera, we perform maybe five or six times and then it’s gone. Live theater doesn’t last, but that’s also what makes it exciting. The idea that I have something that will last is fulfilling,” he concludes. “I was very honored that I got to write *The Armadillo’s Dream*. That’s one

of my proudest achievements.”

WHAT: Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Houston’s *The Pirates of Penzance*

WHEN: July 22 and 29 at 7 p.m., July 23 and 30 at 2:30 p.m.

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

Info: gilbertandsullivan.org/pirates. \$39 to \$84, plus handling fees.



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From the Fields to the Front Lines

Attorney **Luis Ruiz** gives back to his community in many different ways.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



As a child, Luis Ruiz moved around the East Coast with his family, picking fruits and vegetables as a migrant farm worker to help make ends meet. Today, the out

35-year-old works as an immigration lawyer and owns a practice with offices in Houston and Baytown.

Ruiz, who once relied on the kindness of his community for basic resources such as school supplies, is passionate about giving back to the community he finds himself a part of today. One such effort is his annual backpack drive, meant to set local school children up for success and help them reach their full potential.

"I was born in Jalisco, Mexico, and grew up undocumented. I came to the United States when I was two years old, and when I grew up, I worked as a farm worker," the Houstonian explains. "Although I grew up in Baytown, there was a period where my family traveled all over the East Coast. As a farm worker, I would pick fruits and vegetables like oranges, apples, cucumbers, and blueberries."

The observant Mexican American learned at an early age that while his skin color and background were something to be celebrated, they also made him an object of ridicule. "I would see and pick up on how people would treat the migrant communities—how non-immigrants would treat immigrants," he reflects. "It was pretty awful and disgusting how others would treat me. I wanted a seat at the table, I wanted some power, I wanted to be able to have a way to give back. I wanted to be president, but I knew that wasn't possible."

Ruiz knew there were only a handful of ways to obtain that power. "In my opinion, there are a couple of careers that give you immediate respect in the eyes of others—lawyers and doctors. So that was the next step. I needed to be a lawyer so I could help the people in my community."

The University of Houston Law Center graduate was licensed on November 7, 2014, and opened his practice the following day.



Luis Ruiz with volunteers at his annual backpack drive for area children.

**"THERE'S SO MUCH
UNTAPPED TALENT
AND POTENTIAL IN OUR
COMMUNITY, AND I WANT
KIDS TO TAP INTO THAT."**

—Luis Ruiz

"I practice immigration law, and we deal mostly with family-based petitions. Ninety-nine percent of our workload is working with crime victims and domestic-violence survivors."

With a team of seven, there's never a dull day at the Luis Ruiz Law Offices. "We have clients all over the world—North America, South America, Central America, Kazakhstan, Norway," Ruiz notes. "I have clients in India, the Philippines—all over the world."

Ruiz is adamant that his identity as a gay man doesn't impact his work, but rather guides his life's mission and purpose. "I came out when I was 15 and have refused to go back into the closet. I think it's impor-



tant for other little brown queer boys to see somebody that looks like them, to identify with me, and to see that they, too, can reach success in whatever field they pursue.”

Despite his childhood encounters with racist educators, Ruiz chooses to find inspiration in the teachers and community members that gave him the support he needed to get where he is today. “Being a migrant farm

worker, I always needed school supplies. We were poor, so I often got help from community organizations. One of my favorite memories from childhood was during Thanksgiving when a bunch of bikers showed up at our house with bags and bags of food. I want to be able to give back to the community that I live in. The community helped me a lot along the way.”

Today, Ruiz is giving back to his commu-

nity with his eighth annual backpack drive on August 5 at his Baytown office. “For me, it’s important to put pens and paper in front of children, because you don’t know who the next great poet or doctor will be,” he says. “For immigrant children, their parents are busy surviving with multiple jobs, so they don’t have the capacity to sit down and do homework with them or read bedtime stories. I want to be able to put that power in kids’ hands. There’s so much talent and potential in our community, and I want kids to tap into that.”

Ruiz, who has supplied area children with 3,000 backpacks to date, suggests that others wanting to align with his mission should consider adopting a local public-school teacher by stocking their shelves with supplies, so they won’t be forced to buy supplies with their own money.

Ruiz grew up with the odds stacked against him, but he strived for excellence regardless and is now returning his gifts back to his community. “My event is open to the public—if you need help, it’s here. We have kids that come year after year, and now they’re in college. It’s amazing to see them grow through life.”

► For more info, visit luisruizlaw.com

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OUT THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



HOUSTON'S 45TH ANNUAL PRIDE PARADE

June 24, 2023

Hundreds of thousands of revelers braved the heat to celebrate Pride in downtown Houston. In a fitting demonstration of this year's theme, "All We Need Is Love," nearly 200 parade entries—a mix of corporate groups, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and elected officials—were seen along the 14-block route.

OUT▼THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



OUT THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



A PRIDE MONTH EVENT CELEBRATING THE MONTROSE CENTER'S 45TH ANNIVERSARY

June 17, 2023

More than 1,000 attendees celebrated Pride Month at the Montrose Center with live stage performances by Barry Mii Dandy, Tati Dior, DJ JOYCON, Chloe Crawford Ross, DJ Twerksum, Viva Vidalia, and Xepher Wolf. In addition, there was an LGBTQ history exhibit, a Rainbow Run and Stiletto Sprint, and special activities for youth and families including a bouncy house and balloon animals.



OUT▼THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



WEDDING GUIDE



Byron K. Menard (l)
and Joe A. Perez Jr.

Never Too Late for Love

Byron and Joe's wedding ceremony brought their families closer together.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Photos by MICHAEL SAAVEDRA



Byron K. Menard, 58, and Joe A. Perez Jr., 59, danced the night away to a mariachi band and “Love Takes Over” by David Guetta, featuring Kelly Rowland.

They were surrounded by their closest friends and family after exchanging wedding vows on June 10, 2023. The date was significant for the couple because it marked their seven-year anniversary. Their story shows that it is never too late to fall in love.

“We did find each other a little bit later in life, and we just plan on enjoying every single moment. It’s just been a miracle that we have found each other, and we don’t take it for granted,” Byron says.

Their story is one centered around the thriving neighborhoods of Montrose and their home in EaDo. After meeting briefly in 1990—a meeting Byron jokes that Joe did not remember—they finally connected at the place many gay men connect: the gym.

“We reconnected in 2016,” Byron continues. “Joe was working as a trainer at Houston Gym after recently retiring from a 30-year career at Shell. I observed how he handled himself with clients, and what an awesome personality he had. I had been single for around three years, and got the courage to ask him out for coffee. He said, ‘Let’s go on a real date and go to dinner.’ I loved his straightforwardness from the start.”

It just so happens that Joe had been observing Byron at the gym as well, and also recalls

that meeting. “I said, ‘Let’s go to dinner, I know where this is going.’ The reason for being so direct is because Byron never speaks to anyone at the gym unless he knows them. There were only a few people that he had had conversations with that I had noticed,” says Joe.

Byron hails originally from Lake Charles, Louisiana, where he also went to college before earning his doctorate from Texas Chiropractic College in Houston. Joe is a native Houstonian. The two men spend much of their time between Galveston, Houston, and, of course, Louisiana.

“I’m not sure when the exact moment was that I realized I wanted to marry Joe, but very early on, probably within three or four months, I brought him home to meet my



family in Louisiana and I saw the way they reacted to him. They instantly fell in love with him. I knew he was the man I wanted to spend my life with,” Byron explains.

Joe agrees that meeting Byron’s family had the same impact on his feelings toward his future husband. Both men also agree that it is honesty, faithfulness, and tender hearts that form the core of their love. They both cry easily at movies and *CBS Sunday Morning* pieces—a tenderness that they consider to be a sign of strength.

The two are also foodies who love to frequent all the great restaurants that Houston has to offer. Three pivotal moments played out for the couple in these restaurants: their first date at Tango and Malbec, and two years later at the same restaurant, when Joe presented Byron with a promise ring over dessert. Then Byron proposed at Sorrento on their fifth anniversary. Luckily, Joe made sure the two men were looking sharp, despite not realizing this night would forever change his life.

“I made sure we had new shirts to wear because Byron will post our whereabouts and food, and I did not want us in a shirt that social media had already seen us in,” Joe explains. “He told me that it was a special dinner because we had been dieting, and that he loves me so much and wanted to do that for us.”

Joe recalls his response to the big question: “‘Yes, I will marry you!’ The entire restaurant clapped and people congratulated us.”

Their wedding ceremony was held at Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church on West 11th Street, where the men are members. One of their favorite things about Resurrection is that it is a church for

all people. They were also honored to be married by Rev. Troy Treash.

The ceremony featured many special moments from family and friends. Joe’s niece, Angel Hernandez, gave a toast to her uncles that related to the community and their love. Joe’s sister surprised them with a mariachi band that he says his mother would have loved. His nephew, Christen Thurman, played the piano during the unity candle ceremony. Byron’s brother and sister also toasted the couple, and both men were escorted down the aisle by their sisters. In all, there were around 190 attendees.

“We had a couple of butch, manly-male

family members that I wasn’t even sure were going to attend the wedding that came up to me with tears in their eyes saying that was one of the most beautiful, warm, heartfelt weddings they had ever attended. Now *that* was special!” Byron says.

Joe was also pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming support. “My sister-in-law said, ‘Now, I am not going to a church wedding.’ Five years later, she was walking down that church aisle with Byron holding his arm with love, compassion, and joy.”

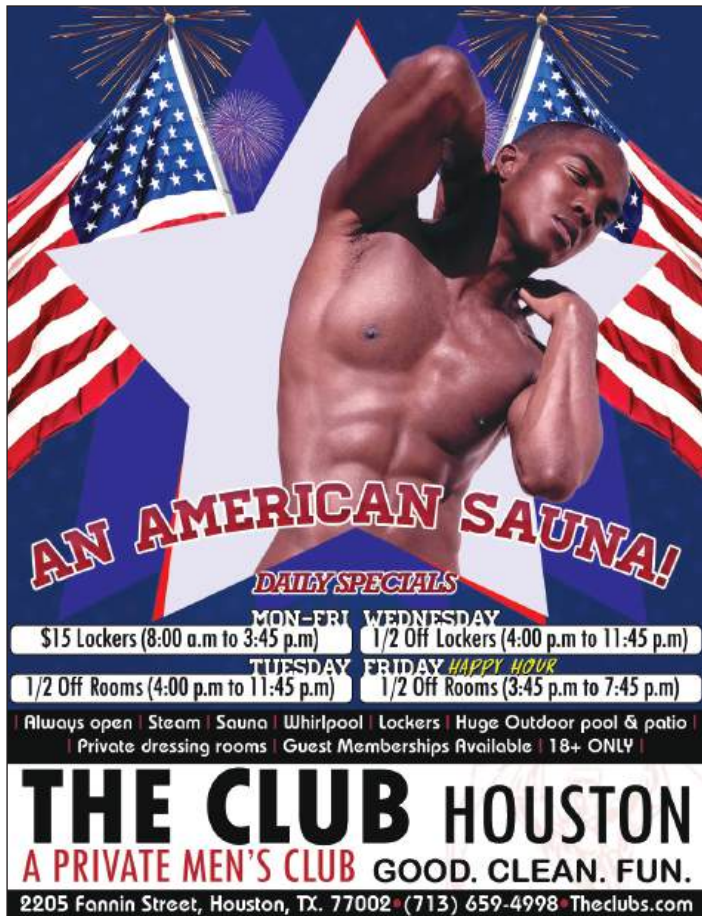
“Of course, the most special part of the wedding was Rev. Troy pronouncing us husband and husband, and saying that I could kiss my husband. I don’t think I could have possibly smiled any wider—a very magical moment!” Byron recalls.

The ceremony was also special because it featured several LGBTQ vendors from the Houston area. They include Elite Catering, which both men thought was amazing.

“To those who think that they will never meet their person, special someone, life partner—someone who will care and love them—I say, ‘Don’t give up!’” Joe concludes.

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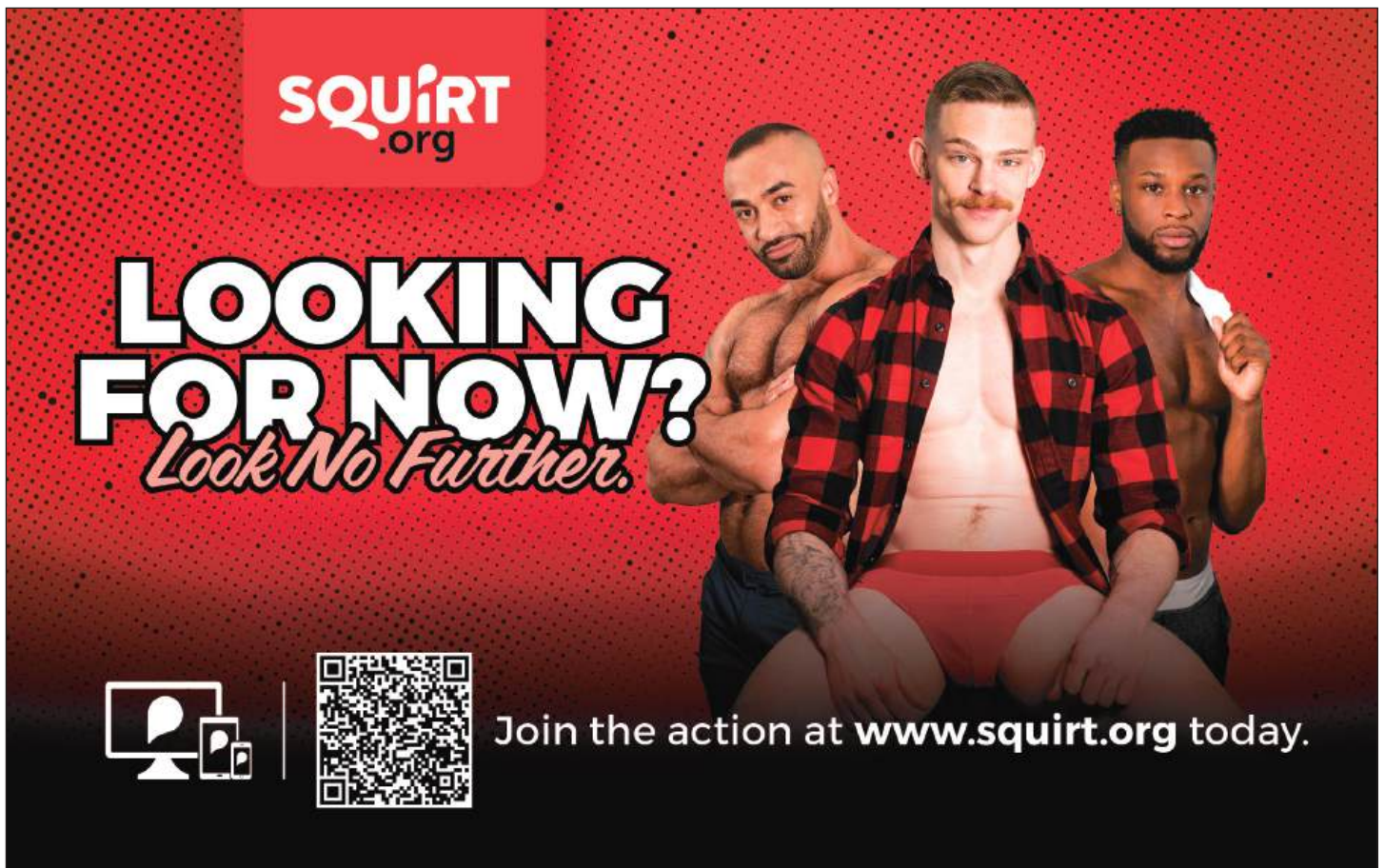
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817 Fairview, Houston TX 77006

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

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With roots going back to the iconic club Inergy, Club Crystal is Houston's original LGBTQ Latino nightclub. Find some of Inergy's décor at this two-room Latin/hip-hop club.
6680 Southwest Freeway, Houston TX 77036

Club Geminis

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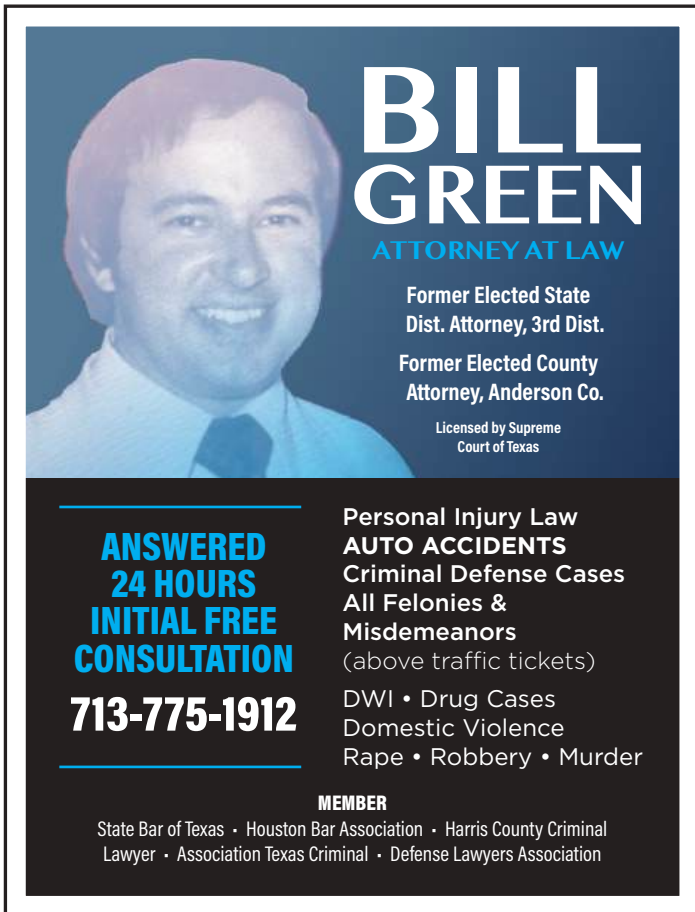
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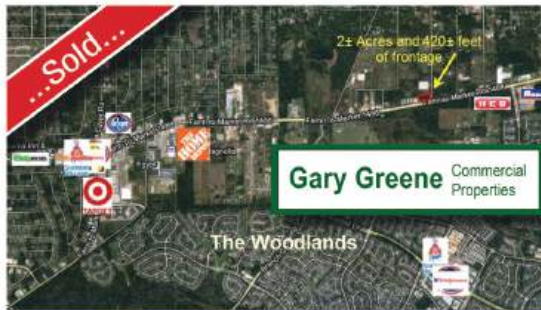
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By LILLY RODDY

Take a Step Back

The Venus retrograde ushers in a time for reflection and review.



This is going to be a busy and active month with Venus going retrograde on the 16th! Venus, our planet of love and money, will remain retrograde until September 15. If you need to get any new projects started, you'll need to do this right away. During this planetary retrograde, we will be looking back at our past relationships with friends and clients as we review what we have accomplished. Difficult relationships and commitment problems will have to be addressed with Venus retrograde. After the middle of the month, life slows down and delays will occur. Pay more attention to your bank balance, your investments, and what you are being charged. Mercury will be joining Venus in retrograde next month. Smooth days this month are July 1, 7, and the 20th. The more difficult days of tension are July 2, 9, 14, 15, 21, 23, 27, 28, 29 and the 30th.

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

Home and family are the main topics for this month. You could have more home-oriented activities, including your interest in genealogy. Home repairs or a relocation are also on your mind. You are more concerned about overall emotional and physical security. The fun and playful part of you continues to be active this month. You are wanting to have more time to enjoy your life as you shy away from the usual demands. Venus retrograde will be impacting the family relations area of your sign, so it can be a great time to reconnect with your children! This energy is even stronger in mid-July. By the end of the month, we are clearer in our communications. Make sure you take some time off to play!

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

This continues to be a positive and active time for the Taureans. It's a good time to pursue education, travel, and expanding your reach. This is an excellent time to promote yourself and your services. Communications are a primary focus this month. You are being clearer about what you want and need. This is also a good time to re-examine old habit patterns and eliminate wasted time. Home and family energies get even stronger by midmonth. You may be looking at making your nest more comfortable or perhaps moving. With Venus retrograde in your home and family area, you will want to renew contacts and resolve disagreements. Your past will be very important over the next two months.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Money and finances energy is active this month. With your career energies also active this year, you are reassessing your sense of self-worth. You are thinking more long-term about money, and you may want to improve

your skill set so you can charge more for your services. Later in July, you are being more direct in communicating your point of view. You are continuing to make headway in your career. This is a time to take a leadership role or maybe start something on your own. Venus will be retrograde in your family area, so this would be a super time to reconnect with close relatives.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

This month completes your yearly cycle when the sun returns to the place in the sky it was in when you were born—a Solar Return! This is an introspective time when you can plan for the upcoming year, perhaps setting new career and relationship goals and implementing ways to improve your health. Friends and associates can be very helpful in providing advice and even financial backing. As Venus goes retrograde, you may be holding off on investments as you review what you have. Later in the month, you are more conscious about your self-worth. You may be asking for a raise or increasing your fees. It would be best to put these new plans into action after mid-September. You are working on improving your efficiency in late July.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

July continues to be busy and active. You are feeling more confident, less patient, and ready to stand up and defend your position. You may also have a harder time sleeping if you aren't able to burn off the extra energy you are feeling, especially later in the month. Nevertheless, you are needing time to rest and retreat, especially in early July. Career activity continues to be positive. Some of you are feeling the need to reinvent yourself and find something that connects to your passion. You should be reconnecting with old friends, lovers, and

colleagues, and it's a great time for a family or high-school reunion. For positive relationships, this is a time to remember why you're together! In difficult relationships, this is the time to fix problems, move forward, or move on. Take your time.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You are in a sociable mood this month—a great time to get out with friends, connect with colleagues, and have some fun. You are balancing this with your need for personal time when you minimize your contacts and meditate. This continues to be a great time to expand your education or teach. What you say has a greater impact on those around you. This will enhance your career and social opportunities. In the latter half of the month, your psychic energies are very strong, and you will want to avoid people that are negative or play the victim. Venus will be retrograde in this psychic, retreat-oriented time. You may have very active dreams or reconnect with the spirits of people from your past. This will be strong through late September. Trust your instincts!

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Career activity is highlighted this month. It's a great time to assume a leadership role or start something on your own. If you are older, you may be cutting back and trying something that is more personally interesting. Friends and business groups can be extremely beneficial for you. With Venus retrograde by midmonth in your groups and friends area, you may reconnect with co-workers and friends. You are also being more social and wanting to reconnect with society as the pandemic recedes. By the end of the month, you may need to step back and find more

personal time. This continues to be a good time to improve your health and your work environment.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

You continue to be in a socially active time. Relationships are improving and you are looking for real changes in your life, even to the point of shifting directions and doing something totally unexpected. If you are involved, you are feeling more positive about your relationship. If you are single and looking, your odds stay good for the whole year. This is a good time for you to travel, write, and share your knowledge. Your career area is very active later in July. You may want to take on a leadership role. You may not be very patient with others, so slow down. This is where Venus retrograde will impact you by mid-July. This will be a time to review career commitments and social responsibilities. The need to find something you are passionate about is heightened. Take a step back and evaluate your position. It's best to make decisions about this area after mid-September.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

You have an overall theme of taking stock and considering your next moves. You are reinforcing your career foundations while also making sure your home is safe and stable. There could be shifts in the family hierarchy. This month, you are working to reduce your debt and improve investment returns.

You are looking at ways to make your work more efficient with improved equipment. In the latter part of the month, you are looking to escape the routine and have more fun. You may want to visit old friends and connect with people from your past. This energy remains strong through September, even though your career energies are more active by midmonth as you search for a better balance between work and home.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

Relationships are the main topic as the month begins. If you are in a personal or business relationship, this is a super time to put some energy into that part of your life. This can also be the time to create new relationships! If you are in a bad partnership, this energy will allow you to address the issues. If you don't, you will be forced to face it sooner or later as Venus, planet of relationships, goes retrograde. All Capricorns will be looking for stronger connections and a greater sense of intimacy. In the finances area, you are exploring ways to reduce debt and gain financial freedom. Toward the end of the month, you are ready to chill and do something that takes you away from your responsibilities.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Relationships are really the significant factor for you for the next two months. Your relationship energies are already very active, but they need some attention. There could be tension there, or a conflict that makes you pay more attention. Of course, this will be

strengthened as Venus, our planet of love and money, goes retrograde there until mid-September. For positive relationships, this can be a great time to reconnect and find that passion. For difficult relationships, it's a time when problems must be resolved, one way or the other. This will affect business partnerships, as well. At the beginning of the month, you are paying more attention to your health and daily routines. You may also feel a larger theme of potentially moving and downsizing. This will be more impactful through next year, but the seeds have been planted.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

You are continuing to improve yourself by making decisions to ensure your safety and be responsible to the people you love. This is a significant career time. You may be looking for a new career path or, if you are older, considering stepping back. This month, you are looking for a little more fun in your life. This is a very good time to enjoy a hobby or connect with your children. In your work environment, there could be conflict and changes that create fear and instability. Resolution on those issues may not come until mid-August. This is also a time to avoid negative people and optimize your "environmental" health. Those boundaries are improving as you get better at telling people No. Relationships are more active later in the month.

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FRED HAAS FAMILY PLAN

The Island Enchantress

Dessie Love Blake is a mesmerizing one-woman glam squad.

By **SAM BYRD** | Photo by **JENNA BARRETT**



Dessie Love Blake wears many hats—and as you can see, they're usually quite tall. She's a performer, pageant legend, clothing designer, fundraiser, drag mother...

and need we mention her long-running *Dessie's Drag Race* dynasty? Even more, this larger-than-life icon rules her empire from the teeny tiny island of Galveston. Find out more about this Island gal below.

Pronouns? In drag, she/her. Out of drag, he/him.

Home town? LaPorte, Texas

Drag birthday? June 2011

What got you interested in drag?

Drag was never on the radar for me. I was in a gay bowling league and there was a fundraiser for the league called Bowler BeeHive. They needed someone to perform in it, so I agreed—and things sort of snowballed from there. I do have a background in theater and music, so this is really a fit for me.

Describe your performing persona.

I'm a grand, larger than life, glam-rock showgirl.

Any titles or pageants?

Miss Gay Galveston America 2013, Miss Gay Texas America 2014, Miss Gay Northeast America 2017, Miss Texas Continental 2019, Miss Gay Southwest America 2022, Miss Gay Houston USofA 2021, two-time 1st Runner Up to Miss Gay America 2019 and 2023.

Bucket list item?

To travel the world.

Most memorable moment as a performer?

Winning Miss Texas and filming *AJ and the Queen*.

Ultimate goal as a performer?

To make someone feel something. Laugh, cry, let the anger out—whatever it is, I just want to leave a memorable impression.

Thoughts about the anti-drag show legislation?

I feel like there are much more important things to focus on than drag queens. We can't possibly be more scary than the guns killing kids. Focus on that first.



Your favorite thing about Island life?

I love the atmosphere and attitude of Galveston. It's very laid back, and the people are so nice.

Favorite Galveston hangout spot?

The beach, of course!

Any drag family?

My drag mom is Lana Blake. My drag children include Muffy Blake

Vanderbilt, Tamar Jazelle Paris, Lynn Adonis Blake, Lexus Chandelier, and Lexi Blake Lamour.

Guilty pleasure?

Reality television.

Describe your aesthetic.

My aesthetic is "pageant polish." I'm such a perfectionist that it often drives me crazy, but I definitely prefer everything to be as close to perfect as possible every time. It's maddening.

Must-have clothing accessory or prop?

A big hat!

Advice for up-and-coming performers?

If you want to do this full time, it takes a lot of work, money, and time. It rarely happens overnight. Be your very best every time, and find who you are. Don't try to be what someone else already is.

Favorite drag character on social media?

I love Bianca Del Rio and Asia O'Hara.

Where can fans see you perform?

Thursdays and Sundays at Hamburger Mary's, Fridays at KIKI, second Sundays of the month at Katy Vibes, third Sundays of the month at Electric Feelgood, last Thursdays of the month at Eureka Heights, plus other random gigs here and there.

Life's mantra?

Never quit until your good is better and your better is your best. I saw that St. Jerome quote written on a classroom wall in junior high, and it just stuck with me.

What else might be worth mentioning?

Life is short, so don't get caught up in the hustle and forget to live.

Follow Dessie Love Blake
@dessieloveblake.

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