

LATINX LEADERS: Spotlighting our LGBTQ advocates and champions Pg.30

OutSmart

SEPT. '23

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE



ARTS &
ENTERTAINMENT

POP DEMO

TONI LEAGO'S THEATRICAL
SPECTACLE CHALLENGES
THE CULTURE WARS

Pg.58

LOCAL
QUEER
CREATIVES

Pg.46

6 Degrees Dance members
Davis Stumberg (r) and
Travis Prokop in a scene
from *Pop Demo*

ALLYSHIP
IN ACTION

Pg.36



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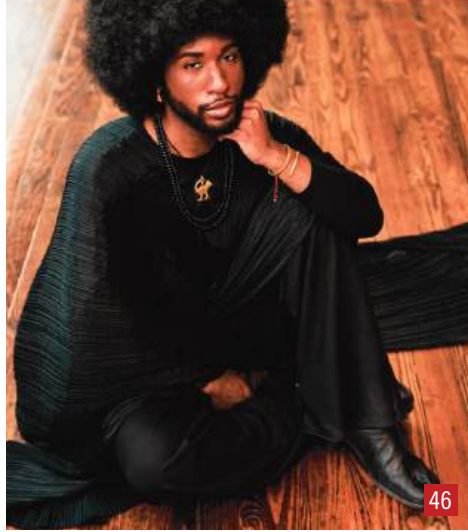
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POP DEMO

Toni Leago's theatrical spectacle challenges the culture wars.

Photography by Pin Lim



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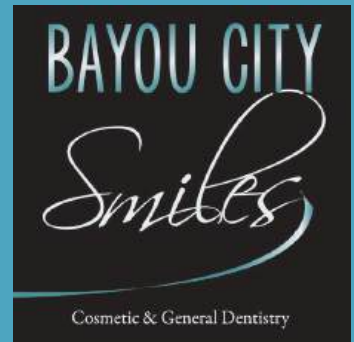


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OutSmart Media Company

Publishers of OutSmart Magazine
3406 Audubon Place • Houston, TX 77006
713.520.7237 • 713.522.3275 Fax

Subscriptions: \$42/12 Issues, \$78/24 Issues

E-mail: editor@outsmartmagazine.com
Website: OutSmartMagazine.com

OUTSMART is published monthly. Estimated readership in Houston and surrounding areas is 60,000. OutSmart Media Company is not responsible for claims and practices of advertisers. The opinions and views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the staff or management of OutSMART. Inclusion in OutSMART does not imply sexual orientation. ©2023 by OutSmart Media Company. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without permission of the publisher is strictly prohibited. Unsolicited material is accepted. No manuscript returned without SASE.

Financial support provided by
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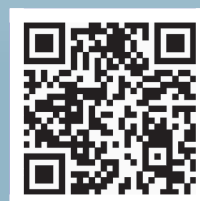


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QUEER THINGS to DO

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AARON ROBINSON

STAGE

September 8-17

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Houston Ballet launches its 45th season with an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The stunning three-act ballet is based on Shakespeare's romantic comedy of the same name, and brings the hilarity and hijinks of a love potion gone awry to the stage.

Choreographer John Neumeier's 1977 adaptation is one of his most popular creations, and Hous-

ton Ballet was the first American ballet company to perform the famous work.

OUTSMART magazine will partner with Houston Ballet for a September 15 OUT at the Ballet performance featuring 25 percent off orchestra-level seats, a complimentary drink voucher, and access to a reserved area before the show and during intermission. tinyurl.com/2n2bujmk



FACEBOOK

STAGE

September 8

SAM SMITH

Iconic nonbinary musician Sam Smith comes to the Toyota Center. Don't miss the artist behind hits such as "Unholy" and "Stay with Me." tinyurl.com/2sd8x835



MATTHEW MURPHY FOR MURPHYMADE

STAGE

September 7

JAGGED LITTLE PILL

Theatre Under the Stars presents *Jagged Little Pill*. This 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

September 6

LGBTQ+ POLITICAL CAUCUS

The Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus meets for a general meeting ahead of the 2023 election cycle.

tinyurl.com/mtseu9ce

COMMUNITY

September 7

RISING LEADERS

Rising Leaders, the Montrose Center's young professionals group, meets for arcade games and drink specials at FAO HTX. Free entry, with games covered.

tinyurl.com/ya777bb4



NIGHTLIFE

September 9

NUMBERS 45TH ANNIVERSARY

Celebrate Numbers' 45th anniversary by dancing the night away, with the opportunity to spin the wheel for big prizes.

tinyurl.com/3kz5vx23

STAGE

September 13

PJ PARTY

Join the slumber party at Pearl Bar Houston dressed in your comfiest PJs to see the H-Town Kings. A fun night complete with glow sticks.

tinyurl.com/4udt6ntk

COMMUNITY

September 16

TRANSGENDER UNITY BANQUET

The Transgender Unity Banquet celebrates Houston's trans community with featured speakers Dr. Cody Pyke, Dr. Lulu, Mister McKinney, and poet Kris Winters. Tickets available online.

tinyurl.com/p6kxv6bn

STAGE

September 22–October 22

AMERICAN MARIACHI

It's the 1970s, and girls can't be mariachis—or can they? Attend the Alley Theatre production on October 5 for a pre-performance LGBTQ mixer.

tinyurl.com/3b335ksw

NIGHTLIFE

September 22

HOUSTON "CHROME"

KIKI kicks off "Renaissance" weekend with Deviant Events' all-night party. This "intentionally sexy party" is curated for and by Black and brown queer people. Allies are also welcome.

tinyurl.com/kaum4tnu

STAGE

September 23–24

BEYONCÉ WORLD TOUR

Beyoncé's Renaissance World Tour is coming to her hometown. Celebrate the world-famous artist and her most recent album, *Renaissance*.

tinyurl.com/2s3hmnht



COMMUNITY

September 23

GAY 10K

Hit the streets and join the run at the Gay 10K, which partners with dozens of nonprofit organizations to raise funds.

tinyurl.com/y82du5se

COMMUNITY

September 23–24

HOUSTON TURKISH FESTIVAL

Houston's Turkish community celebrates with food, coffee, Tuana folk dancing, and more. Tickets online or at the door.

tinyurl.com/yjv7npgj



STAGE

September 16–October 15

WHAT THE CONSTITUTION MEANS TO ME

Main Street Theater presents this two-time Tony Award-winning and Pulitzer finalist play—a dramatic exploration of the Constitution's profound impact on women's bodies. There will be a special Pride Night at Main Street Theater pre-show reception on October 5 featuring light bites and signature cocktails.

tinyurl.com/4ntfej6u

QUEER THINGS to DO

SAVE the DATES

COMMUNITY

October 27-30

QUEER FEAR CAMP

Attend an 18+ Halloween-weekend camp at Lake Houston Wilderness Park, featuring midnight hikes and lots of games. Ticket price includes meals, snacks, and drinks throughout the weekend.

tinyurl.com/2s3kvhsr

COMMUNITY

October 14

KATY PRIDE

Join our neighbors in Katy for their Pride celebration featuring a mainstage full of performers, vendor and nonprofit booths, and more. tinyurl.com/setyrcke

COMMUNITY

October 6

OUT FOR GOOD GALA

The Montrose Center's annual fundraising event celebrates National Coming Out Day and the retirement of longtime Montrose Center director Ann J. Robison. An after-party follows the gala festivities. tinyurl.com/3br3vus2



NIGHTLIFE

October 20-22

GLUE WEEKEND

Misfits Houston's Gear, Leather, Uniform, Etc. (GLUE) Weekend is the group's premier fetish celebration. The weekend will include an opening party, vendor market, the Mr. Third Coast Leather contest, cigar socials, a Saturday night Misfits Ball, and a Sunday tea dance. Host venues are KIKI and BUDDY'S.

tinyurl.com/2s3cpj2y

STAGE

November 25

BARBIE DRAG-QUEEN PARTY

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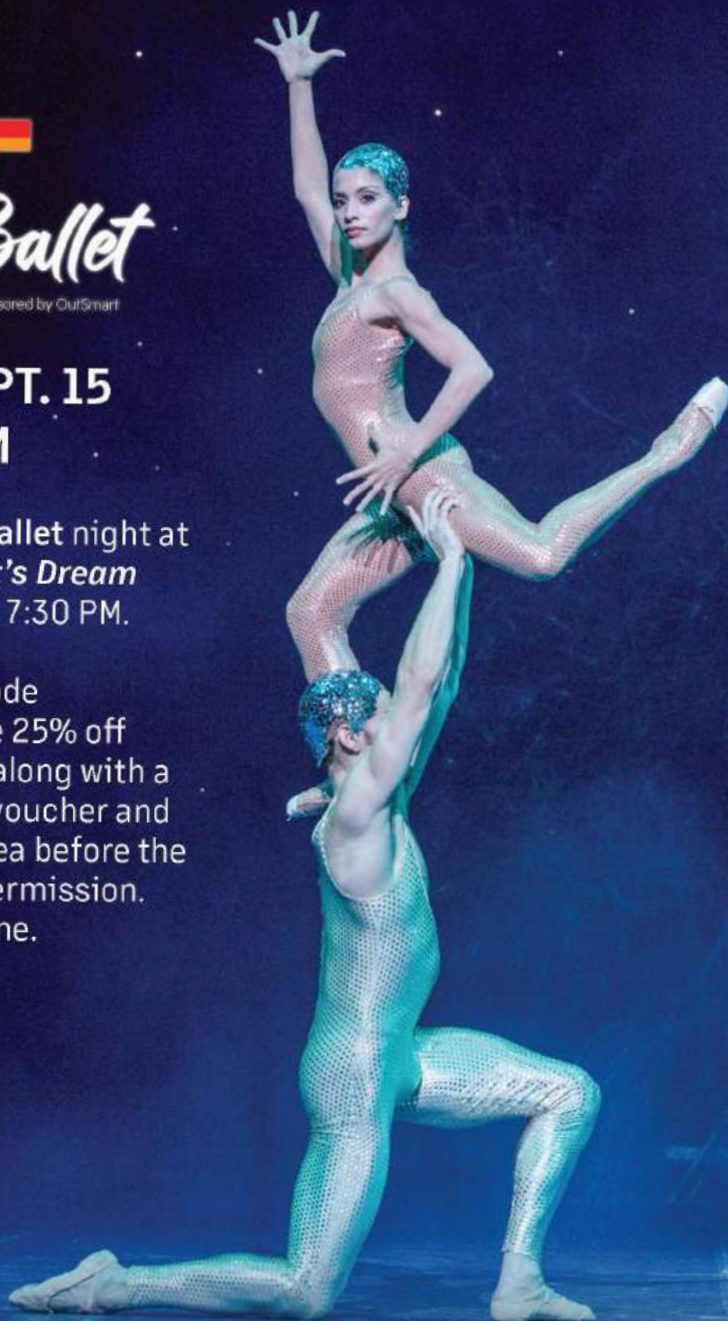


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SCENE OUT

Photos by
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On July 27, 2023, a Summer Spritz Party was held at Miss Carousel. Pictured are **Anthony Ferrell** and **Tracy Hults**.



The Mahogany Project had their re-grand opening and ribbon cutting on July 29, 2023. Pictured are representatives from The Mahogany Project and the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce.



Lululemon presented its Proud, Present & Future event on July 30, 2023 at Heights House Hotel. Pictured are **Brian Hull**, **Jay Ware**, **Asher Payne**, and **David McClintock**.



On August 3, 2023, Main Street Theatre hosted a Pride Night event. Pictured are **Roy Daniel Martinez**, **Brock Hutton**, **Andrew Ruthven**, **Lindsay Ehrhardt**, and **Joel Quinones**.



The T.R.U.T.H. Project celebrated the legacy of James Baldwin on August 6, 2023. Pictured are **Jae Gray**, **Stormie Holmes**, **PreechKid**, **The Wordmatician**, **Jonerik Wright**, **Jayda Winters**, **Noel Obi**, **Lauren Ware**, **Brent Smith**, **Josie Pickens**, **J. Albert Nicklos**, and **Kevin Anderson**.



On August 6, 2023, the Black Leaders Caucus of the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund held a reception at the home of Mayor Annise Parker and Kathy Hubbard. Pictured are **Jovon Tyler**, **Jolanda Jones**, **Elias Diaz**, **John Humphries**, **Annise Parker**, **Venton Jones**, **Marty Rouse**, **Jalen McKee-Rodriguez**, and **Kathy Hubbard**.



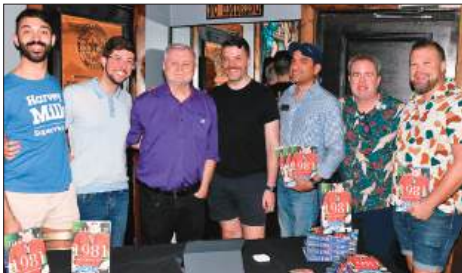
On August 16, 2023, The Diana Foundation held its August meeting and check presentations at China Garden restaurant. Pictured are **Michael Leibbert**, **Kennedy Loftin**, **Dr. Charlene Flash**, **David K. Johnson**, and **Howard Huffstutler**.



Essence International held its 2023 pageant at Crystal Nite Club on August 20, 2023. Pictured are **Deshawn Trulove**, Mr. Essence 23; **Jinesys Sinclair**, Miss Essence 23; **Hedi T. Iman**, Miss Essence 24; **Onyx**, Mr. Essence 24; **Tiffany Mcknight Capri**, Miss Essence Plus 24; **Beyonce Black**, Miss Essence Plus 23; and **P. Jassmyne Darnell**, Miss Essence Classic.



On August 24, 2023, the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce held a Power Happy Hour with the Alliant Group. Pictured are **Alexander Kirillov**, **Tammi Wallace**, and **Braden Ford**.



On August 24, 2023, JD Doyle held a book signing at Eagle Houston for his new memoir *1981-My Gay American Road Trip: A Slice of Our Pre-AIDS Culture*. Pictured are **Austin Davis Ruiz**, **Blake Mudd**, **JD Doyle**, **Judson Dunn**, **Mister McKinney**, **Bryan Hlavinka**, and **Ryan C Wilson**.



On August 25, 2023, Kindred Spirits held its annual dance at The Ballroom at Bayou Place. Pictured are **Meleah Jones**, **Alex Torres**, **Kennedy Loftin**, **Tara Converse**, and **Dan Cato**.



Pride Houston 365 held its Volunteer Appreciation Party at KIKI Houston on August 26, 2023. Pictured are Pride Houston volunteers and attendees.

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Adversity, Inequity & Exclusion

The Texas Legislature's assault on DEI programs claims the University of Houston's LGBTQ Resource Center as a victim.

By LANDON RICHIE

This year, we've witnessed an unprecedented attack on the rights of marginalized communities, especially the most vulnerable among us. From the ongoing attacks on the right and ability of trans people to exist authentically and participate fully in public life, to the threats on drag artists' freedom of expression and the ability of youth to access books in school libraries with LGBTQIA+ content and storylines, Texas consistently ranks as the leading harbinger of this national wave of assaults. During this year's Texas Legislative Session, 141 harmful anti-LGBTQIA+ pieces of legislation were introduced—more than any other state in the nation.

Despite this, Texas also saw an unprecedented number of *good* bills introduced. To be exact, 144 bills were filed to improve the lives of *all* Texans, especially LGBTQIA+ Texans and those living with or who are vulnerable to contracting HIV.

The community and our queer and ally legislators fought—as we always have and always will—tirelessly and relentlessly to defeat as many of these harmful bills as possible. As a result, 133 of the bills (95%) aimed at attacking our community died.

Yet, legislators succeeded in passing seven harmful bills, including criminalizing life-saving health care for trans adolescents, banning trans athletes from competing in collegiate sports, permitting the replacement of trained school counselors with chaplains, and attempting to abolish the Harris County elections office.

The University of Houston's LGBTQ Resource Center has been caught directly in these right-wing attacks on our fundamental freedoms, and in the efforts to rectify historical inequity and systemic injustices perpetuated against people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals in institutions of higher education. As a result of Senate Bill 17, which bans “diversity, equity and inclusion”



UH students from the school's LGBTQ Resource Center on their way to the 2023 Houston Pride parade

(DEI) programs and policies in Texas public universities, the LGBTQ Resource Center has ceased to formally exist after 13 years of service to the UH community.

In early August, queer and questioning UH students in need of resources and support, as well as our ally students and educators wanting to learn more about their responsibilities as collaborators in the fight for LGBTQIA+ acceptance and justice, were faced with haphazardly-mounted paper signs announcing the closure of the Center. Following a response from the University stating that these signs were posted “prematurely” and that an SB 17 compliance plan was still being finalized, an email sent to students during the first week of the semester confirmed what we feared: with just a week of notice, the LGBTQ Resource Center was closing.

The LGBTQ Resource Center provided the UH community with services and support in three crucial areas:

Education – Services included training for ally staff, faculty, and students to increase their awareness of issues that LGBTQIA+ people face. This included programs to increase students' knowledge and understanding of the lives of LGBTQIA+ people.

Involvement – The Center emphasized the cultivation of leaders through avenues such as storytelling and advocacy training, as well as giving LGBTQIA+ students the responsibility of representing the Center, planning outreach events, and creating a welcoming environment for all in the Center.

On-campus Support Systems – The

Center offered a space and opportunities for students in need of support to connect with peers who understand the difficulties that LGBTQIA+ students at UH experience. The Peer Mentoring Program and Rainbow Chats were critical in providing support, building friendships, and sustaining community connections.

For many students at UH, the Center was the first place they sought out to find others like them and to become familiar with University policies and attitudes affecting LGBTQIA+ students. The transition from high school to college is difficult enough without having to consider how a new school may embrace—or neglect and discard—its queer students. The mere existence of an office like the LGBTQ Resource Center can be an indication of the school's affirming environment. In the absence of any official support like the Center, students can feel abandoned as pawns in a political game of chess.

This gutting of DEI programs and offices like the Center is part of an alarming GOP trend to censor viewpoints and realities that subvert or threaten “traditional (white, cis-heteropatriarchal, ‘Christian’) values.” Earlier

this summer, a professor at Texas A&M was suspended for criticizing Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick in a lecture. Then another candidate for a tenured position at A&M had her job offer rescinded because of her support for DEI initiatives, racial equity, and diversity programs. A&M's Board of Regents explained in a text thread that such a hire—meaning a liberal Black woman—wouldn't have aided the university in their goal of injecting a “high-quality Aggie journalist with conservative values into the market.”

When students protest and call for the disinvitation of on-campus speakers (such as the self-proclaimed “theocratic fascist” Matt Walsh, who is a leading figure in the crusade to eradicate trans and queer people), we are accused of destroying and endangering free speech and blamed for enabling “cancel culture” and the “silencing” of conservative voices on college campuses. Yet, stripping professors of their livelihoods for expressing opinions about elected officials and the need for diversity training—opinions protected by the First Amendment—is considered by school officials to be acceptable. This state-sanctioned silenc-

ing goes hand in hand with the far-right attempts to revise school curricula to omit any reference to the horrors and present-day implications of slavery and erase the historical existence of queer people. Inextricably tied with these attempts are also moves to mandate the outing of queer and trans students to parents, ban books with trans and queer characters from libraries, disallow displays of support for trans and queer students in classrooms, bar the creation of LGBTQ+ clubs, prohibit the referral of students to crucial LGBTQ+ resources like the Trevor Project, and deny trans students the right to use their correct names, pronouns, and restrooms (see, most recently, Katy ISD).

Landon Richie (he/him), a senior at the University of Houston, has led local and state initiatives to expand trans rights. He serves on the board of the GenderCool Project, and is also involved in policy work with the Transgender Education Network of Texas (TENT).

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Brad Pritchett

Appointees Named to the Harris County's LGBTQIA+ Commission

Advocate Brad Pritchett will fill one of the Commission's 11 seats.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Brad Pritchett, the field director for Equality Texas, has been appointed to the new post by Harris County Precinct Commissioner Lesley Briones and was approved by the Commissioners Court on August 30. He is one of the first six appointees for the history-making LGBTQIA+ Commission.

"I am honored to be appointed to the Harris County LGBTQIA+ Commission and grateful for the leadership of Commissioner Briones," he said. "I look forward to working with the other members to advance equality for the community."

Commissioner Briones introduced the measure to create the LGBTQIA+ Commission on June 6—the same day that the Human Rights Campaign was making history for a different reason.

"The Human Rights Campaign has declared a national state of emergency for LGBTQIA+ people for the first time in its history following a slate of harmful and

discriminatory legislation across the nation," said Commissioner Briones at the time. "Representation matters. This Commission will ensure voices of the LGBTQIA+ community are front and center in the County's decision-making processes."

The report released by HRC, *LGBTQ+ Americans Under Attack*, details more than 75 anti-LGBTQ bills that have been signed into law this year alone, more than doubling last year's number, which was previously the worst year on record.

Regarding the August 30 appointments, she added: "Now, more than ever, we must ensure LGBTQIA+ voices are represented in Harris County's decision-making processes."

Commissioner Briones named Pritchett and Dr. María C. González as her appointees. In total, the LGBTQIA+ Commission is comprised of 11 seats, nine of which are appointed by the Court. Members of the new Commission will then appoint the remaining two seats.

Dr. González will fill the at-large 9 position. She is an associate professor of English at the

University of Houston and is a leading authority on Mexican American literature, Chicana writers, feminist and queer theory, sexuality, and pedagogy. González was among the core group of faculty, staff, and students who helped establish the LGBTQ Resource Center at UH which, unfortunately, was closed on August 31 due to the Texas Legislature's Senate Bill 17, which prohibits public institutions of higher education from maintaining Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) offices and conducting DEI-related trainings, programs, and activities.

"I thank Commissioner Briones for this opportunity to serve, and for the honor to be part of the inaugural Harris County LGBTQIA+ Commission," González said. "Because the LGBTQ+ community can still be discriminated against at the local and state level, I applaud Commissioner Briones for creating this commission to begin to address that issue, and look forward to working with the group."

In addition to Pritchett and the González, Commissioners Court approved the following members of the LGBTQIA+ Commission:

Brandon Mack (Position 1) and Kylie McNaught (at-large Position 6), appointed by Precinct 1 Commissioner Rodney Ellis.

Victoria Cordova (Position 2) and Ramiro Fonseca (at-large Position 7), appointed by Precinct 2 Commissioner Adrian Garcia.

This fall, the County Judge's Office will nominate appointees for Position 5 and the at-large Position 8. Precinct 3 Commissioner Tom Ramsey, the only Republican on the court, has not yet submitted his nominees. He was the lone vote against creation of the LGBTQIA+ Commission, and his office did not return a phone call as of press time.

It is unclear what will happen if Ramsey does not appoint anyone, although it is possible those two seats would be appointed by the other commissioners.

Federal Judge Halts Ban on Drag Performances

Federal judge issues temporary restraining order, says Texas law banning drag shows is "likely" unconstitutional.

By WILLIAM MELHADO, TEXAS TRIBUNE

US. District Judge David Hittner temporarily blocked a new state law Thursday from going into effect that would have criminalized sexually-oriented performances in front of children or effectively banned some public drag shows.

LGBTQ+ groups sued the Texas attorney general's office, hoping to stop authorities from enforcing Senate Bill 12, which was signed by Gov. Greg Abbott in June and was scheduled like most new laws to go into effect Friday.

In a two-day hearing earlier this week in Houston, a drag performer and entertainment businesses said Texas lawmakers' effort to regulate these shows was an unconstitutional attempt to stifle their freedom of expression. Though Hittner did not issue a final order on Thursday, he found the plaintiffs' argument compelling.

"Based on evidence and testimony presented at the hearing, the court finds there is substantial likelihood that SB 12 as drafted violated the First Amendment of the United States Constitution under one or more of the legal theories put forward by the plaintiffs," Hittner wrote in the temporary restraining order.

Hittner said allowing the law to take effect would likely cause "irreparable harm" to the plaintiffs. He issued the restraining order to maintain the status quo of the legal landscape while preparing a final decision — the restraining order does not guarantee a permanent injunction. He said his order could come two to four weeks after the hearing.



Photographer Sarah Bork takes a picture of Brigitte Bandit during a local literacy event/
Photo credit Montinique Monroe for *The Texas Tribune*

Hittner heard testimony earlier this week from LGBTQ+ groups, businesses and a performer, which were plaintiffs in one of two lawsuits against SB 12. They argued the law trampled on their First Amendment rights to perform and organize drag shows. They described drag as a healing, expressive and political form of performance art with historical connections to LGBTQ+ people.

"If allowed to take effect, SB 12 will make our state less free, less fair, and less welcoming for every artist and performer," said American Civil Liberties Union of Texas Attorney Brian Klosterboer in a statement following the judge's decision. "This temporary order is a much-needed reprieve for all Texans, especially our LGBTQIA+ and transgender community, who have been relentlessly targeted by our state legislature."

Defending the law, attorneys with the Texas attorney general's office said SB 12 was narrowly tailored to protect children from sexually-explicit performances. The new law did not explicitly ban drag shows, lawyers for the state said, and these performances should not be considered expressive or receive First Amendment protections.

However, shortly after signing the law, Abbott shared a story on social media about SB 12's passage and declared he had banned drag performances in public.

"The people of Texas were appalled to learn of an increasing trend of obscene, sexually explicit so-called 'drag' performances being marketed to families with children," said Paige Willey, the director of communications for the attorney general's office. "The Office of the Attorney General will pursue all legal →



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remedies possible to aggressively defend SB 12, the state law that regulates such performances to protect children and uphold public decency.”

Under the new law, business owners would have had to face a \$10,000 fine for hosting sexually explicit performances in which someone is nude or appeals to the “prurient interest in sex.” Performers caught violating the proposed restriction could be slapped with a Class A misdemeanor, which carries a maximum penalty of a year in jail and a \$4,000 fine.

Texas is one of six states that have passed a bill restricting “adult” or drag performances, according to the Movement Advancement Project, a nonprofit that tracks legislation related to LGBTQ+ issues.

Legal challenges to similar legislation in Florida, Montana and Tennessee have successfully blocked these laws from going into effect. In June, a federal judge in Tennessee, appointed by former President Donald Trump, ruled the law is unconstitutional in its effort to suppress First Amendment-protected speech.

This article originally appeared in the Texas Tribune.

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Little Green Men

The space aliens headed for Texas should think twice.



conspirators facing prison time if they are convicted.

I've done a lot of stupid things in my life, like eating tamales anywhere north of Dallas, signing a contract under the warm glow of neon light, or sharing my deepest secrets with a Nigerian prince who emailed me to say he was going to die next week and leave me his fortune. But even I know that when you're an elections official in Georgia, you shouldn't send a damn *written* invitation to Trump's attorneys to come on down and ransack the voting machines.

I would say "How dumb can you be?" but those conspiracy nuts would see that as a challenge.

However, what I've *really* been fretting over is something that everybody else is overlooking: those space aliens are just begging Governor Abbott to do something damn awful.

If you do your own research (like all the good MAGA Republicans do), you'll discover that the United States government now refers to a UFO as an "Unidentified

Aerial Phenomena." Yep, now we have "UAP" sightings. Our top officials know that changing the name of something is a real effective strategy when you don't know what the hell else to do. They picked "UAP" (which nobody can remember) to throw off reporters trying to snoop around for the UFOs. The government should just take a hint from the hurricane people and pick friendly names for each UFO—like Hazel, or Polly Sue. That would make their sighting announcements more memorable.

Anyway, let me tell you that I am certainly not afraid of UFOs. They've been around since before I was born, and they haven't shot up any elementary schools, told lies to get us into a war in Iraq, tried to steal an election (or even my-my-my-my boogie shoes), perpetuated the patriarchy, or canceled Nickel Beer Night at the ball games.

But while I have no fear of UFOs, I *am* terrified of how Governor Greg Abbott will react to UFOs and the aliens that are probably onboard. Governor Abbott doesn't think highly of aliens, as he has demonstrated at the Mexican border. If he believes he's doing the Lord's work by pushing tiny children back into the waters of the Rio Grande if they make it across (or stringing up razor wire that has trapped both children and pregnant women in the water), can you imagine his plans for those space aliens?

The Governor is very fond of billboards, so I

imagine he'll use taxpayer dollars for billboard messages like "Space Aliens: Too Green for Seguin!" or maybe "Space Aliens: Peeing in Your Swimming Pool from the Sky!"

After the billboard campaign, Abbott will want to build on his success (!) at finishing Trump's border wall by announcing plans for adding a ceiling across Texas to keep out the UFOs.

And third, since it's obvious the feds care even less about space aliens than the ones at the border, it'll be up to the State of Texas to again pick up the slack. NORAD will be replaced by NIMRAD—the Not In My Republic Air Defense system. Recruiting volunteer sharpshooters to bring down the UFOs over Texas will be a breeze once NIMRAD starts giving out free gun scopes and baseball caps. I just hope the volunteers don't shoot down some poor Jet Blue plane and tell us they were trying to take out the "woke" Air Force's fighter jets.

And that's where we are.

Until next month, I know there are people about my age who are mountain climbing, but I get *my* thrills just getting one leg at a time through my underwear without losing my balance.

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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By GRACE YUNG, CFP



Is Your Business Properly Structured?

Don't lose out on the key benefits of small-business ownership.



To date, according to the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC), the LGBTQ business community includes 1.4 million business owners. By the NGLCC's projections, it estimates that LGBTQ-owned businesses contribute over a trillion dollars to the US economy.

Starting and operating a successful business requires careful planning and strategic decision making. By understanding areas like entity structuring, financial management, business succession planning, and retirement plan options, you will be better equipped to maximize your company's potential.

Choosing the Right Business Structure

One of the first steps in building a solid foundation for your business is selecting

the appropriate entity structure. There are several possible options for structuring your business. Each structure has its own set of advantages and disadvantages, so it is important to understand factors like tax implications, liability protection, and flexibility before making a decision. Working with an experienced tax professional or CPA can help.

The most popular business structures are the Sole Proprietorship, the Partnership, the Corporation, and the Limited Liability Company (LLC).

Sole Proprietorship – A sole proprietorship is the simplest and most common form of business structure. This type of business is owned and operated by a single individual. The main advantage of a sole proprietorship is the simplicity—there are no separate legal formalities or paperwork required.

However, the business owner who operates as a sole proprietor will also be personally

responsible for all of the company's debts and liabilities—including legal action that may be taken against the business.

Partnership – The partnership is a type of business structure that is formed by two or more individuals who agree to share profits and liabilities. Decision making and workload can also be shared.

In addition, partnerships can offer more flexibility in terms of distributing the company's profits. It is important to note, though, that general partners can be personally liable for the company's actions and debts. Limited partners could also be at some risk with regard to any capital that they contribute to the business.

Corporation – Corporations are separate legal entities that are owned by their shareholders. One of the primary advantages of a corporation is the protection from liability

that it offers to its shareholder owners. In this case, shareholders are not personally responsible.

Also, corporations have a “perpetual” existence, meaning that they can continue even after the death of owners/shareholders. While corporations can raise money by issuing stock, they can also be subject to more complex legal requirements and formalities.

An S-Corporation, or S-Corp, is a special type of corporation that allows the company’s profits and losses to be “passed through” to the shareholders’ individual tax returns. One of the big advantages of an S-Corp is the mitigation of double taxation on the company’s income.

On the other hand, S-Corporations can also have certain eligibility requirements and limitations on the number and the type of shareholders that it can have, so it would be important to have a good understanding of what these are.

C-Corporations are yet another alternative. A C-Corp is a legal structure for a corporation in which the owners, or shareholders, are taxed separately from the entity. It is a legal structure for a corporation where the company’s assets are separate from the owners’ assets.

Limited Liability Company (LLC) – An LLC, or Limited Liability Company, is a type of “hybrid” entity that combines the advantages of both a corporation and a partnership. The main advantage of an LLC is its owners, who are referred to as members.

Limited Liability Company members are not personally responsible for the liabilities or debts of the LLC. Also, Limited Liability Companies offer flexibility in terms of both management and taxation options.

Managing Your Business Finances

Proper financial management is crucial for the long-term success of any business. Creating a budget, tracking cash flow, and evaluating expenses are essential steps in maintaining your company’s financial stability.

In addition, using financial tools and software could help you streamline the bookkeeping process and provide you with valuable insights for short- and long-term decision making.

Another key area of your business strategy is tax efficiency. Understanding the tax deductions and credits that are available to businesses can assist you with minimizing tax liability and increase profitability. →

CONTINUED ON PAGE 68

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Becoming an Ally in Word and Action

Confronting bigotry is a necessary part of the equation.



On August 18, 2023, 66-year-old Laura Ann “Lauri” Carleton, identified in the media as a clothing store owner, was killed because she displayed an

LGBTQ Pride flag in her clothing shop located in Cedar Glen, California. During her altercation with the murderer, 26-year-old Travis Ikeguchi, she refused to remove the flag after he unleashed a barrage of threatening homophobic remarks. Ikeguchi then shot Carleton, who died on the scene. He was later found by police, opened fire on the officers, and was killed when they returned fire.

Lauri Carleton was a wife and mother of nine children, a businesswoman, and a friend to countless people. She was also a staunch advocate and ally of the LGBTQ community, and she lost her life not only in defense of her commitment to displaying the Pride flag, but in support of the ideal that people should be able to live and love without fear or compromise.

Lauri Carleton's tragic death represents a

call to action—both for those who identify as LGBTQ and for allies of the community. Her murder highlights how the continued spread and promotion of anti-LGBTQ sentiment and rhetoric on social media, in our schools, and through our state legislatures directly impacts the lives of all people. It's not just sad, it's scary. It raises questions about our safety, and challenges us to think: How far am I really willing to go in defense of my beliefs?

Allyship Is an Action

Anyone and everyone can be an ally to someone. Being an ally to a particular community is something we all have the opportunity to do. There are so many different kinds of people we can align with and work alongside in a common pursuit of progress and change. But is it enough to simply call ourselves an ally? What is required to actually be considered an ally?

It's not enough to simply claim that we are an ally to a particular group. Many would argue that the group itself should decide if an

individual is actually an ally. For instance, there are examples throughout history of legislators who claim to be allies to LGBTQ folks, but then vote against measures that support the community. Ultimately, their actions did not line up with their words, so the community, in turn, called them out on their hypocrisy.

Allyship Means Confronting Bigotry

Calling people out for their bigoted views is a form of allyship. This can occur when someone assumes they are free to make racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or ableist remarks or jokes. Confronting them communicates that you do not agree with their beliefs or statements. This is particularly important because silence is often mistaken for tacit approval. It also counters the pervasive anti-LGBTQ narrative currently being pushed by the far-right haters.

Naturally, it can be uncomfortable to tell another person—either at work or in our →



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social circles—that their statements are not OK. It is common to “freeze up” and struggle with what to say in response to bigotry. Typically, a hundred different responses come to mind after the moment has passed. There can also be feelings of guilt and regret over the failure to stand up for others.

One helpful strategy is to prepare in advance for the unfortunate, but inevitable, likelihood that you will hear someone say something offensive. Usually, people will back down after being challenged. Perhaps you can memorize a series of statements that feel natural and can be kept at the ready. Using “I language” and focusing on how offensive beliefs make you *feel* is a good way to challenge divisive beliefs, since it is not directly accusatory. It’s hard for people to argue with how you feel about something, because your feelings are your feelings.

“CALLING PEOPLE OUT FOR THEIR BIGOTED VIEWS IS A FORM OF ALLYSHIP.”

“That type of language makes me uncomfortable.”

“I don’t agree with that perspective.”

“I am an ally to the _____ community, and I support their right to live and love as they see fit.”

Memorizing statements like these can be helpful in demonstrating allyship with other communities.

Each year, LGBTQ+ Ally Week is observed during the last week of September. Although originally created as a national effort to promote allyship among youth, we now recognize its importance and meaning for the broader community. It serves as a reminder that we can all take greater strides toward promoting equality for all people.

How will *you* demonstrate your allyship this month?

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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Empowered Aging

Positive Living Houston provides both community and wellness advocacy for HIV-positive seniors.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



In 2020, the pandemic offered the world a glimpse of what a life of isolation looks like. For people transitioning into old age, oftentimes those feelings of loneliness are inevitable, and detrimental to their well-being. Throw an HIV diagnosis into the mix, and long-term survivors risk feeling particularly alone.

One local organization, Positive Living Houston, is working to help older HIV-positive men combat those feelings of isolation by creating a space where they can find dignity and community, as well as help in navigating the evolving healthcare system.

“At the moment, we are offering services for HIV-positive men over the age of 50,” explains board president Jereme Scott. “We offer socialization programs, educational programs, and a referral service for any issues that should be handled by social workers or a different nonprofit.

“Although our mission states that we serve those 50 years and older, we will not turn any HIV-positive person away,” Scott adds. “Whether that person is female, male, or an adolescent, we will always be a resource for them as best we can.”

The group occasionally meets in person, but a majority of their gatherings take place via Zoom.

“Our organization was initially called The HIV and Aging Coalition Houston. We came up against a lot of roadblocks because of the words ‘HIV’ and ‘Aging.’ People who are aging with HIV don’t really want to talk about it,” Scott, who received his HIV diagnosis 39 years ago, says. “What our board decided to do was to create an organization that had a more positive approach than using those specific words.”

Scott and the Positive Living board are now doing extensive work to engage with those who aren’t as connected to their community (or who have no family members to care for them as they age). “What we concentrate on is trying to reach those individuals who are at a turning point in their life, where they don’t know which way to go,” the leader explains. “It has been very difficult to reach those individuals. It’s



Positive Living Houston's new board members (l-r) Don Jones, Curtis Love, Jereme Scott, Steven Vargas, and Rob Weaver

much easier to reach those who are well socialized within the community.”

Board member Steven Vargas explains that he and his cohort know firsthand what it means to be a longtime survivor. “As we age, friends start passing away. We address the isolation piece, as well as other stuff that comes up whenever we meet with folks in a group—transportation, food security, medical appointments,” he says. “Most of us around that table have an awareness of where to direct them for assistance.”

Although health care has advanced since Vargas was diagnosed 20 years ago, he explains that the data is lacking when it comes to how HIV impacts those 50 years of age and older. “We’ve done a great job of providing medications that can help us live long, healthy lives, but it doesn’t end there like we thought it did back in 1996. As HIV-positive people age, we can start to feel some co-morbidities in our 40s

and 50s that folks [normally don’t] get until their 60s and 70s. The chronic inflammation that occurs in our bodies due to the HIV in our system exacerbates some of those aging conditions.”

In regard to health care, Scott agrees that HIV care is no longer about mere survival, and that we should now be focusing on how the medical field can help HIV survivors thrive as they transition into their golden years. “I believe that in order to create an environment of good health for those of us who are aging with HIV, the comprehensive health care that is provided to aging individuals is no longer about just a patient-doctor relationship. It requires a holistic approach that addresses both the virus and the aging process. We’re losing our healthcare providers that [have decades of experience in] treating HIV. It’s getting difficult to find doctors who are specifi-

cally HIV-related doctors. Sure, you can go to Methodist Hospital, or you can go to UTHealth and find doctors who work in HIV, but it's not like it was 15 years ago, where you had your primary-care physician who was an HIV specialist."

The group's healthcare advocacy work is done in tandem with addressing social issues, such as the widespread stigma that still surrounds HIV. "When we think about residential homes or assisted living, we hear about people having to go back into the closet," Vargas explains. "That's another place where they're not really ready for us just yet. We're trying to raise awareness on those fronts, and help people who might be experiencing some of the effects of those conditions, and to get them to places that they really want to be."

Scott envisions a future where the organization becomes a stand-alone nonprofit supported by grant funding, with an executive director and trained professionals on staff. Until then, Scott looks to the next generation of leaders who will carry the

**"WE TRY TO REACH
INDIVIDUALS WHO
ARE AT A TURNING
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WHICH WAY TO GO."**

—Jereme Scott

torch. "HIV and aging is becoming a very important segment of the HIV community, because of all of the medical advancements that continue to extend the lifespan of individuals living with HIV. I personally have had HIV for 39 years. I never thought I'd live this long."

"I was drawn to Positive Living Houston because I wanted to empower long-term survivors and surround them with people who can address whatever concerns they might have," Vargas explains. "My ultimate goal would be that folks aging with HIV should still be able to age with dignity, just as they were planning to do before they received their HIV diagnosis. They may feel alone and not exactly sure what they're going to do about certain situations that come up, but we want to support them—and also just have a good time with some folks."



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COURTESY

Coalition Builder

The Montrose Center's Ann Robison reflects on concluding her 35 years of service.

By RYAN M. LEACH



In December of 1988, Ann J. Robison, PhD, became the chief executive officer of the Montrose Center. Over her 35-year career at the helm of the largest LGBTQ community-focused organization in Houston, she has played every role, and soon she will be playing a new role: retiree. On October 6, Robison will be honored for her work during the Montrose Center's Out for Good Gala, which is their annual fundraising benefit.

"I have always been the CEO, but over the years that has meant also answering the hotline, managing data security, being the ethics watchdog, grant writer, grants manager, doing building maintenance (including unstopping

toilets and swamping out after hurricanes and floods), and all the other things that go along with being CEO," she jokes.

Robison's career has taken her through three and a half decades of Houston LGBTQ history. When she began, AIDS was ravaging the community and that was the focus of the Montrose Center. During her time, treating the virus has evolved into taking one pill a day, and preventive PrEP medication has given the community new hope for eradicating HIV transmission. The Center has also created programs that support the lives of the LGBTQ youth and seniors, and Robison notes that she counts the Law Harrington Senior Living Center as one of her biggest accomplishments.

"It took 10 years of research, planning,

and educating ourselves on this complex project," she notes. "The need for an affordable, LGBTQ affirming, low-income senior housing campus with services attached was apparent from the stories of volunteers, donors, and aging clients who were fearful of moving farther outside the core of Houston where services and neighbors might not be as supportive [of openly LGBTQ+ seniors]."

The Law Harrington Center was just one of many programs developed under Robison. In the mid-'90s, she started the Anti-Violence program—in part because she began her social-work career dealing with sexual assault and domestic violence work. (Many mainstream hate-crime and domestic-violence programs are still unable to adequately deliver services to the LGBTQ community, according to Robison.)

She also led the Montrose Center in taking various existing and vitally important local programs under its wings—programs like Hatch Youth, the Gay & Lesbian Switchboard, AssistHers, Lesbian Health Initiative, and Kindred Spirits were able to survive and thrive thanks to the Montrose Center and Robison. After the Center expanded into its current space on Branard Street, the Center provided those groups with office and meeting space. The entire building is now vibrantly painted to reflect its role as a gathering place for the community it serves.

"We are one of the oldest LGBTQ+ organizations in Houston, and we are certainly the largest. We have been able to be a fiscal agent to many small groups that just needed administrative support and a 501(c)(3) to work under [so they could] continue their good work and grow their ideas," she explains. "We have absorbed several organizations that are very important to the community and enabled those programs to survive and thrive. And we are honored that their founders trusted us to honor their brand and their history."

Over her 35 years, Robison has gained a significant amount of knowledge about how best to serve the needs of Houston's queer community, which is constantly evolving. "Working closely together with the clinicians here to get the policies and practices right is essential," she says. "Management and program staff have different perspectives, but they are both important to get the right approach. The more diverse our staff has become, the better our services and outreach has become. And listen to the program participants—they can have the best ideas for what the community needs. Working with

other agencies in coalition is very important—in HIV, substance use disorder, mental health, anti-violence, homelessness, youth and senior-services issues. Being above reproach in managing the community's money—both tax dollars and donations—and the ethical implementation of services are paramount.”

As Robison departs the organization, she understands that there are still things left to be accomplished—in particular things relating to LGBTQ youth. “I wanted to do more for youth and young adults who are unstably housed. The system is broken, and until the child-protection and foster-care systems are overhauled in Texas, there isn't a good way to fund and protect the mission of a dedicated shelter or group-living project.”

**“WE HAVE ABSORBED
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—Ann Robison

While there will always be plenty of work for organizations that support marginalized communities, Robison has earned her retirement. She plans to travel more with her partner, Greg Gladden, and she wants to spend more time with her 94-year-old father in Pennsylvania and even watch more Korean dramas.

But first, the community will have an opportunity to thank her for 35 years of service at the gala on October 6. “I have never been one to stand out front, unless it's protesting an injustice,” she admits. “I prefer to do all the behind-the-scenes strategizing and implementation, and let others be the face of the Center. So [even though this gala] will be a bit embarrassing and humbling, I am very happy to be a vehicle to showcase the Center's programs and services. We can get more done together than alone, and we can be the voice of conscience to these mainstream coalitions about LGBTQ+ inclusion.”



For Gala tickets, or to send a note of thanks to Ann Robison, visit montrosecenter.org/event/2023-out-for-good-gala.

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An Ideal Ally

Chris Hollins hopes to advocate for marginalized communities as Houston City Controller.

By IAN L. HADDOCK

Chris Hollins is probably a name you've heard about in the last three years, but he has been invested in marginalized communities for his entire life. Being reared in public service by his parents (who fostered more than 20 children), he was impacted by their unselfish generosity from a very early age. It was a mindset that animates his career as a rising Houston politician: Regular folks trying to help their neighbors.

Now in his mid-30s, Hollins rose to national prominence in 2020 as the Harris County Clerk who spearheaded innovative approaches to increasing voter engagement during the pandemic. Initiatives like 24-hour drive-through voting locations were successful in boosting early-voter turnout citywide. He is currently a candidate for City Controller in Houston's upcoming municipal elections. Hollins is a graduate of Morehouse College, Yale Law School, and Harvard Business School.

Since I met Chris two years ago, he has been a consistent example of what it means to be an LGBTQ ally. Even with all of his political and professional acclaim, he still has a progressive heart for people at the margins. You'll find him connecting people to resources, creating economic opportunity, and advocating on behalf of the LGBTQIA+ community in a way that is unheard of among heterosexual Black males. When he shows up to our spaces, he is willing to listen and learn from the communities he serves.

Oftentimes, allyship is hard to define because it is so nuanced, but Chris defines it as "a friend that has your back and is willing to go to battle on your behalf, even if they don't share your background." It is that commitment that shines brightly in his work as he continues to move people forward.

Allyship is necessary in the current political and social climate as anti-LGBTQ legislation injects stigma, fear, and even violence into everyday conversations. With estimates of the queer community comprising just over 7 percent of the American population, it will be nearly impossible to move the needle toward



Houston City Controller candidate Chris Hollins

ALEX ROSA

an equitable future without the help of politicians like Hollins joining our fight for justice and equal rights.

“For anybody considered ‘other,’ the government is trying to limit equal opportunity and attack them,” Hollins notes. “I hope for a future where everyone knows that being themselves won’t limit the scope of what they are capable of achieving.”

This helps to put allyship into a perspective tangible to everyone. In whatever ways you hold privilege or power, you can use that power to be a better ally to marginalized people—starting with envisioning a better outcome than the world currently envisions for them.

Allyship is important because it focuses us on the people who need the most help and increases their opportunities for success. Further, that type of focus allows us to see that allyship is not just for one community; *all* marginalized people need to come together in solidarity and support of a more equitable society. From whatever position you hold, you can find ways to pursue allyship in meaningful and impactful ways.

“When I look back on my life, I want to focus on the difference that allyship made

“WHEN I LOOK BACK ON MY LIFE, I WANT TO FOCUS ON THE DIFFERENCE THAT ALLYSHIP MADE IN PEOPLE’S LIVES.”

—Chris Hollins

in people’s lives as I see neighborhoods rebuilt, better access to transportation, and revitalized parks for all Houstonians. I also want to lay a foundation where small-business owners with diverse backgrounds can grow, and I want to get people set up for success with bank accounts, better credit, and necessities like internet access.”

The core of allyship is about the uplifting of voices that are silenced. bell hooks, an acclaimed writer and thought leader who passed away in 2021, introduced a framework widely known to movement work called the “margin-to-center theory.” Though the theory was initially focused on feminism, it applies to all marginalized identities including queer

people and people of transgender experience. It asserts that by centering those at the margins when considering solutions, you can create more expansive solutions that can impact more people. Allies should strive to use this concept in our varying roles as we promote solutions to the problems we’re all experiencing.

Chris Hollins has found the balance in centering this approach to allyship. “I don’t want anyone to have to be lucky just to get a fair shot. Everyone should experience a Houston that is safe and that appreciates us as we grow, thrive, and excel.”

Allyship is about more than saying nice things about those who are at the margins. Ideally, it’s a commitment that can propel them to greater visibility, opportunity, and sustainability. That commitment takes courage, but the payoff is a better society, stronger communities, and a brighter future for all. “We’re in a critical time,” Hollins concludes. “Our job as neighbors is to connect people to real solutions.”

I can’t think of anything more ideal than that.

➔ Follow Hollins’ campaign for City Controller at chrishollins.com.

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Raising Funds and Raising the Bar

Margarita Pérez Frinsco excels at building bridges among diverse communities.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Margarita Pérez Frinsco lives on Houston's Near Northside with her wife, Jessica Lindsey Frinsco, their son, Gedeón, and their two pets. Margarita is a lifetime inner-looper and is now leading the philanthropic efforts for the Cullen College of Engineering at the University of Houston, where she is the senior director of advancement. Although she was both born and educated in Houston, her roots extend even deeper into the LGBTQ community and her Mexican heritage. She is a dynamic Houston leader who is able to leverage her intersectionality and talent to build bridges within the community—and also within her family.

Margarita points to a meaningful bridge-building opportunity she had during this year's Pride Month celebrations. "As Pride Houston's Female Identifying Grand Marshal, and the only Spanish-speaking parade marshal, I had the exclusive opportunity to speak to the Spanish media, share my story, and talk about the importance of Pride. It was such a special moment because I was able to include two huge parts of my identity. I am the proud daughter of Mexican immigrants from small towns and traditional upbringings. I am so proud of our [family's] journey together, and their loving, supportive stance that allowed us to have difficult (and sometimes hurtful) conversations to get to the place we are today. My parents now call Jessica my wife (we started with "amiga"), and they absolutely love our son."

Margarita and her family enjoy spending time in Galveston, a place that holds special meaning for them. "We were married there in this beautiful historic church building, The Lyceum. As a young girl, my family would spend many summer days playing on the beaches, fishing, and even camping a few times," she recalls. "We also have a tradition of spending a long Halloween weekend with a group of longtime friends, visiting some of our favorite shops along The Strand and attending what used to be called the Witches Ball, now

the Misfits Ball."

In Houston, Margarita typically goes for some famous Houston staples like Miller Outdoor Theatre or watching the Houston Dash team play at Shell Energy Stadium.

Before coming to UH, Margarita began her career organizing volunteer-led fundraisers, which allowed her to practice the fundamentals of fundraising. She earned her undergraduate degree in communication from the University of St. Thomas, and her MBA from UH's Bauer College of Business. Margarita is also an alumni of the Excellence for Nonprofit Leadership program sponsored by the Fort Bend Chamber of Commerce and funded by The George Foundation.

"I went to a Catholic university where, for four years, a group of students and I led efforts to ask that the institution add sexual orientation and gender expression to their nondiscrimination policy. We were never successful, but it helped us connect and develop friendships. I have always felt grateful to live in such a large city with so many LGBTQ+ organizations that cater to the various interests of our community members," she says.

When Margarita began her career at UH,

she initiated a coming-out-at-work conversation that many queer-identifying people feel obligated to have, especially in the current Texas political climate. She felt great relief over the support she received. "Before I accepted the position, I had coffee with the person who would be my supervisor and very seriously told him that I needed to share something. I heard myself say 'I am a lesbian,' and saw the concern on his face turn into relief and mild amusement. I had been out for a few years, and I wanted to be in an environment where I could continue to be out. His response provided assurance that the team, the institution, and he personally valued the experience and perspective I could provide. To put it simply, UH has provided an environment where I can be myself, engage fully in community, and excel professionally."

Last month, UH officials announced that the Texas Legislature's recently passed Senate Bill 17 requires them to reconfigure their campus Diversity, Equity & Inclusion programs, including the resource center that supports LGBTQ students. Although it is yet to be determined what the future has in store, people like Margarita can continue to serve as proof that the University is still a welcoming place for queer students.

"I am so disappointed and saddened by how the new laws are impacting UH students," she says. "I hope students harness their emotions into motivation to register to vote, and turn out on November 8 and let their voices be heard."

Margarita now has her sights set on future leadership opportunities like the prestigious Leadership Houston program, as well as the League of Women Voters' Rising Stars program. Both organizations would be lucky to count Margarita among their ranks.



2023 Pride parade grand marshal Margarita Pérez Frinsco waving to onlookers.



Follow Margarita Pérez Frinsco at [linkedin.com/in/margaritafpinsco](https://www.linkedin.com/in/margaritafpinsco)

A full-page photograph of a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a vibrant red, sleeveless, form-fitting dress. Her arms are crossed over her chest. She is wearing a silver watch on her left wrist and a ring on her left hand. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green trees and a light-colored building in the distance. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting daytime.

**"AS THE ONLY SPANISH-
SPEAKING 2023 PRIDE
PARADE MARSHAL, I HAD
THE OPPORTUNITY TO
SPEAK TO THE SPANISH
MEDIA AND SHARE
MY STORY."**

—Margarita Pérez Frinsco



A Writer's Revolution

César Ramos uses his publishing venture to create spaces for Latinx creatives.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

When César Ramos embraced his queer identity, he turned to the familiar world of literature for content regarding his lived experience. What he discovered was that the only relatable stories he found were those penned by white female writers. His hunger for queer Latinx media representation led Ramos to found *Raspa* magazine, a print publication that focuses on the marginalized voices of self-identifying queer Latinx creatives in the US and abroad.

Today, the trailblazer works tirelessly to amplify the queer Latinx experience, both in print and through public events that provide a platform for new literary voices.

The Mexican-born wordsmith explains that coming out to his family was not a negative experience. “If anything, going into the creative arts was more of an issue [for them] than me being gay,” he says with a laugh. “There is a lot of stigma that Latinos have to navigate—from hyper-sexualized perceptions, to having our integrity questioned due to our documentation status and/or financial stability. I had to navigate those when I was engaging with people, in a way I feel many don’t have to even consider.”

Ramos goes on to explain that queer colloquialisms create a language barrier for dual-language speakers. “I have queer language that I can access in English, but it is really difficult to translate into Spanish because those words don’t exist in the Spanish language quite yet.

I’ve had to learn how to navigate this duality of language when it comes to queer language and queer writing.”

Early in his career as an editor, Ramos began to explore his identity and ultimately came out as gay. His search for published stories that reflected his own experience led him to find a host of works written by women who were, as Ramos puts it, “writing about sexuality and oppression they faced because of their sex.” Although he could relate, somewhat, to these stories, he was frustrated by the lack of queer Latinx literature. “Why can’t I have greater access to some poetry, essays, and nonfiction works that more closely mirror my own existence—my own experience?” he asked, before taking matters into his own hands

in 2012. “That was the inspiration for the magazine. My goal was to make queer stories that closely mirror people’s existence more accessible for people to view, understand, and experience.”

Ramos takes pride in *Raspa*’s aesthetic as well as its content. “For a long time, creative communities of color have been relegated to other spaces that are not formally recognized. They weren’t welcomed into museums, galleries, or national publications,” he notes. “*Raspa* started as a zine, and after receiving some funding and community support, we were able to raise the level of quality really quickly. It was important to me that people of color were able to experience the joy and acceptance from a magazine that showcases the importance of their work through a quality publication.”

Ramos was determined to create a print publication that didn’t exist solely in the digital space. “These creators know that someone has enough faith and trust in their ability as writers to invest time, money, and energy to create something that is tangible—something that they can hold on to permanently. I think that’s beautiful.”

In addition to publishing *Raspa*, Ramos hosts literary events entitled Rough Nights:



Raspa magazine

A Reading Series that feature queer Latinx writers across the US. “For me, reading poetry, fiction—reading anything—is very intimate. It’s between you and whatever book, page, or online blog you’re looking at,” the community advocate says. “Rough Nights brings a connection between the reader and the writer in a way that is more community oriented.”

With events taking place in Houston, New

York City, Washington DC, and beyond, Ramos purposefully selects venues that communities of color may not always occupy. “It is important to be able to inhabit these spaces, and show people that even though these people oftentimes cannot financially afford to visit these venues, it won’t stop us from getting the community connected and recognize them for the work that they’re doing.”

Speaking about the impact of the Rough Nights literary events that he’s hosted, Ramos says, “You can build community by reading someone’s work, but it’s a stronger, deeper, more meaningful bond when you can connect a face and a conversation to whatever you’re reading. By doing so, you create a stronger community.”

Ramos humbly shies away from the term “leader” when considering his position in this movement. “I think the term *leader* relegates everyone else in your community to followers. I like to consider myself more of a *facilitator*. I make things happen. I have the access and the means to make things happen,” he says. “The success of my community is *my* success. If I can uplift my community, I am inherently uplifting myself. That’s how I view my role in any project that I choose to do.”

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Public-relations guru Stuart Rosenberg is known for representing elite clients such as Hotel ICON and CityCentre in Houston, and the Victory Park entertainment district in Dallas.

But the 51-year-old prince of PR almost didn't go into the marketing business.

"It was somewhat of a fluke," he says. "I went to UT with the goal of becoming an architect, but I ended up graduating with a degree in advertising, which I was drawn to given its mix of creative and business aspects. My first job in Houston after graduation was with Beth Wolff Realtors, where my responsibilities included copywriting, brochure development, and ad design. Simultaneously, Beth allowed me to pursue an internship at the then-fledgling PR firm Pierpoint Communications.

"While I really enjoyed living in Houston post-college, I was ready to experience new things, and a childhood friend in New York who was newly working in PR invited me to use her apartment for the summer. She thought I would also love working in New York City. I was very fortunate that a family friend—Houston-based home builder (and former lifestyle journalist) Carol Isaak Barden—made an agency recommendation. It was my first and best interview, and I officially started my career in public relations about two weeks later with Middleton & Gendron, a top boutique firm focusing in the travel, hospitality, and luxury-goods space."

For the Johannesburg, South Africa, native whose family moved to Houston when he was five, Manhattan became his home for close to a decade. Then in 2002, he headed back home to start Studio Communications with his friend Gail Rubin. One of their first hires was Rosenberg's friend Mark Sullivan, whom he had met in New York. After four years, Sullivan, with Rosenberg's blessing, started his own firm, On the Mark Communications.

"With a similar portfolio of clients and an increasing frequency of both of us being finalists for the same pieces of business," Rosenberg explains, "we ultimately decided that we would better serve our clients and lay the groundwork for more substantial growth by merging the two firms. Public Content, an integrated agency encompassing facets including media relations, community engagement, social media, and creative services, was born in late 2018."

Since then, Public Content has become a dominant player in Texas. "Having Hotel ICON as one of our first clients was really pivotal in our growth," he says. "It was an opportunity for us to bring our national media contacts to Houston, many of them visiting the city for the first time."

But Rosenberg's life isn't all about public



PUBLIC CONTENT

A Serendipitous Shift

Stuart Rosenberg's creative passion led him to public-relations success.

By MARENE GUSTIN

relations. In July of 2022, he married Jose Ocque in a Harris County courthouse ceremony officiated by Judge Beau Miller.

"I met Jose, who was born in Venezuela and is a Realtor and home builder, through friends at a group dinner," Rosenberg recalls. "Before we even spoke, there was an immediate spark. We packed a lot into that evening, including hours and hours of talking and a very fun time dancing at Barbarella. I knew almost immediately that something really special had happened. And it didn't take much more than a week for us to become pretty much inseparable.

"After we were stranded in Peru during my 49th-birthday trip, unable to leave our hotel for weeks, we knew we could get through anything together. I proposed just before my 50th birth-

day, and we were married on July 7, 2022, exactly four years after first meeting. He's changed my life, and I can't imagine being without him."

The couple reside in River Oaks with their goldendoodle, Lucas, in a home that Ocque designed and built.

"We moved in this past winter and love the area, given the easy access we have by bike or car to some of our favorite neighborhoods like Montrose and the Heights," says Rosenberg. "We enjoy playing tennis, and have recently picked up pickleball. We rarely say no to a game night. Travel is important for both of us, not only to get away and recharge, but also to reconnect with friends, explore, and discover."



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EXTRATERRESTRIAL EXPLORATIONS

Performance artist **Christopher Paul** recasts the queer Black experience.

By **DAVID BRASHER**
Photo by **FRANK XAVIER**

Christopher Paul is an up-and-coming performance artist based in Houston. At only 27, his work has been featured in numerous publications, and he's worked with leading performance artists nationwide. His art, be it wearable or performative, has been described as "meditative," "Afro-futurist," and even "extraterrestrial." He will be featured in a September 19 event at the Eldorado Ballroom that will showcase his unique vision informed by his Black queer perspective.

Paul always knew he wanted to create art, but he wasn't sure what form that should take. He was initially accepted as a fashion-design student at Central Saint Martins in London, one of the most prestigious art schools worldwide. (Famous alumni include John Galliano, Stella McCartney, Alexander McQueen, and Zac Posen.) But Paul quickly found out the tuition was unaffordable, so he went with his next choice—the University of Houston, which also allowed him to be closer to home.

While at UH, Paul found his calling. First, he began studying studio art and sculpture, something he hadn't considered before. "I love sculpture more than fashion," he says. "With fashion, you have to water down ideas in order to make them sellable. With sculpture, you can put everything you want to say into [your creations]. I learned how to express myself through sculpture."

Paul then began to focus on Black speculative theory to explore the different ways that Black people exist outside of the terrestrial framework. "How do we in the Black community view ourselves—outside of the way the

world views us? Black people have been left out. They haven't been looked at as human beings. So if we have been left out of humanity, what exists outside of that? What have we done that transcends the human body?"

These ideas motivated Paul to accept a residency at Rice University under the mentorship of performance artist Viktor le. Givens. He's also worked alongside Jacoby Satterwhite, a contemporary queer artist known for his immersive installations and his work in pop culture and in music videos, such as with Solange Knowles on her album *When I Get Home*. At the UH Blaffer Art Museum, Paul teamed up with sound artist Mo Nikole to produce *Transmigration Through the Void to No Place*, which was unlike anything he had performed before. Because he wanted to show how Black people have been ignored, he avoided looking at the audience. "Black people perform for lots of reasons—to be entertainers, to make money. But more often than not, it is in white spaces that we haven't had the right to be in. So I performed away from the audience," he explains. "There was nothing in front of me when I performed. Everyone was looking at my back. It's freeing."

Now Paul has been invited to participate in the first annual Summer Studio Stages Residency at Project Row Houses (PRH). An integral part of the Houston arts landscape for 30 years, PRH encompasses five city blocks in Houston's historic Third Ward, one of the city's oldest African-American neighborhoods. The site's 39 small houses and other structures (including the historic Eldorado Ballroom) serve as a home base to a variety of community-enriching art programs and neighborhood development activities, according to the PRH website. →



**"I EXPLORE WHAT EXISTS
BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES
AND TRAUMA OF
MY CULTURE. WE'VE FOUND
JOY AS BLACK PEOPLE
COMING TOGETHER. THAT'S
THE MESSAGE I WANT
MY ART TO CONVEY."**

—Christopher Paul

While visual art is nothing new to PRH, this staged event at the newly restored Eldorado Ballroom will be. Paul and a few other local artists will showcase their work over three days in September. Each artist will perform for 30 minutes before speaking with the audience for another 30 minutes. There will be music, a reception, and lots of community engagement. The event is free and open to the public.

Unlike his disengaged performance at the Blaffer event, Paul plans to actively engage with his Eldorado Ballroom audience. "There is a camaraderie that is unspoken within the Black queer culture," he notes.

"Every Black artist comes into a sense of who they are through their work. How do I, as a queer Black man, fit within the framework of society? A lot of my work initially dealt with the stereotypes of my culture. It got to a point where I felt as though my work was "trauma porn" for other people. I wanted to know what exists beyond this. There has been so much joy that we, as Black people, have created by coming together within the terror of our dystopian realities. That is what I want my art to convey."



Follow Paul's work at [instagram.com/christopherpaulstudio/](https://www.instagram.com/christopherpaulstudio/). For more on Project Row Houses, visit [projectrowhouses.org](https://www.projectrowhouses.org).



COURTESY

Christopher Paul performing in his art installation *Earth Seed* at the Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans.

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Bilal Rehman Studio designed the exclusive salon room for Tootsies.

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Designing in the Digital Age

Bilal Rehman leveraged his social-media fame to open an eclectic interior-design studio.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



In a world of talented interior designers, it's hard to stand out from the pack. One local designer used TikTok, and his hilarious and engaging personality, to do just that. Bilal Rehman is capitalizing on a recent viral social-media moment and realizing the dreams he's had for years.

Rehman recently opened his Bilal Rehman Studio in Montrose, and he invites Houstonians to visit and shop for pieces that give

their homes a touch of character at an affordable price.

"My background is Lebanese and Pakistani," the bi designer says. "Coming from an immigrant family, the expectation of what a successful job looks like for their kid is a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer—that's it. There's nothing else to it, especially not something creative." Rehman followed suit and set out to pursue a degree in computer engineering. "I realized very quickly that I hated it, and ended up switching to interior design."

Rehman soon learned that a learn-by-doing approach served him best. "I realized that I hated learning interior design from a book, so I made the decision to try to find an internship in the world of interior design," he recalls. "That was incredibly difficult, not having a portfolio, any experience, or a college degree at that time. Luckily, I landed one after months and months of hunting. I fell in love with the world of design through that internship. I decided to pursue it as a full-on career and climbed the ropes in that company until I became a senior designer."

After leaving his previous company to set out on a solo venture, the personable creative began marketing his image in a more relatable way. "I was making content on all of my platforms, mirroring what you would expect of an interior designer. It was super-polished, very bougie and very uppity—not relatable to people," he admits. "In real life, I'm crazy, I cuss, I joke around, I'm not as serious and uptight as I was appearing on social media. My sister, Mya, is the one who came up with the idea to make a video where I spoke to the audience in the way that I actually speak in real life. I think doing that

is what really created this relatability to me that now allows people to not only see me as an interior designer, but as a person.”

Rehman’s new approach worked better, and faster, than he expected. “When I first started on January 1, I expected that business would slowly creep up over the next five or six years. On January 17, I posted my first viral TikTok that my sister helped me create,” he recalls. “I think within five days of that video, we had a handful of new clients. We had huge projects and people from all around the country contacting us trying to work with us—all from that one video.”

With a booming client roster, Rehman has brought new life to spaces in Houston, New York, and Los Angeles by giving each space its own unique touch. “My personal aesthetic is this hybrid of the sophistication of New York, the casual luxury of Los Angeles, and the oversized comforts that we get in Houston,” the charismatic designer explains. “Combining all three of those into this new aesthetic didn’t exist in the Houston market prior to us. All of our projects are experience-based. We focus on the way the room looks, the way the room feels, the way the room smells, the way that the fabrics feel on your skin.”

Rehman even takes a sex-positive ap-



proach to client meetings. “We get really in depth with our clients. I ask them the craziest questions like, ‘When you’re at home on your day off, how do you lay around? Are you naked? Are you in underwear? What is the vibe?’ Because that determines the kind of fabric that we’re going to use on the sofa. I ask them questions about their sex life, and how they want their bedroom to feel and if they are into some crazy shit that I need to know about so that we can have maybe a fabric that’s easier to clean. I think putting all of those little details into our projects is kind of what sets us apart. When our clients enter [their completed spaces, it’s] truly

tailored to who they are and their lifestyle.”

Rehman’s Montrose gallery space also provides a venue for independent artists to display their one-of-a-kind creations. “I had always seen this hole in the market, where a lot of amazing untapped talent didn’t have a platform of their own to showcase their work or their pieces. When I got my social-media following, I decided that I was going to create a store that showcased local and small artists, and artists and pieces from around the world that you really can’t find anywhere else.”

The studio features eclectic lounge chairs, stunning home decor, luxurious pillows, and much more. “I wanted to create a store that had really unique pieces for the home—anything and everything, from kitchenware to furniture, art, and accessories. Everything is carried in the gallery, and it’s all at an obtainable price point,” he says. “Nothing is \$10,000. No gold statues. It’s not that kind of gallery. This is the kind of gallery where if you just got your first apartment, you can come in here and shop. And if you just bought your first house, you can come in here and shop. If you live in a mansion in River Oaks, you’ll find something here that fits into your house, as well.”

➡ Keep up with Bilal Rehman on Instagram @bilalrehman.

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Fashion in Bloom

Designer Alvin Alan Ramírez Riojas premieres his first collection in October.

By **JENNY BLOCK**
Photo by **CHRIS PIÑON**



Alvin Alan Ramírez Riojas (center) and his models wearing pieces from his collection inspired by traditional Mexican culture.



For fashion designer Alvin Alan Ramírez Riojas, developing a love of art and design came quite naturally as he was growing up in a family of creatives. “I

have memories of my grandfather playing the guitar at family gatherings. I remember the joy of those gatherings full of music and many activities,” he recalls.

And his mother was a fashion designer in her own right. “My mother was very creative; in a self-taught way, she created costumes and outfits and dressed me in them for the festivals that we celebrated when I was little. She also made costumes for Christmas and decorated the house. She was my first teacher, who taught me to combine colors, discover different fabrics, and develop a concern for aesthetics.”

Motivated, perhaps, by his mother’s enthusiasm for the work, Riojas developed a strong preoccupation with fashion. “I remember from a very young age worrying about being well presented—attentive to every detail of my clothing, including body expression, accessories, and hair.”

Even when he was quite young, he participated in as many folkloric events as he could, just so he could wear a suit. “Back then, I dreamed of [fashion-show runways] where my creations were displayed. I think all of this motivated my interest in fashion and design,” says Riojas.

A native of Monclova, Coahuila, the northern Mexican town where he lived for many years, the 41-year-old has been in Houston since 2003. He is now a full-time

fashion designer with a studio in the Sawyer Yards artists complex. “There, I have my production space and my shop. I sell all my creations: clothing, costumes, pet clothes, and accessories—mainly millinery hats.”

But on occasion, he also works as a costume designer—something he’s done for more than twenty years now. “My creative work oscillates between the playful and the sophisticated. My thing is to express myself and be creatively free,” Riojas adds.

Despite his success, his path was not always an easy one. “In my hometown, the cultural, social, and economic limitations postponed my career as a designer,” he says. Now, though, he is about to earn his degree in fashion design from Houston Community College, where he is a member of the Honor Society.

The inspiration for his work, he explains, is “the folklore of my city and my native country, its costumes, and that floral spirit.” But what inspires him the most is the satisfaction he gets from creating. “It is that desire to express myself through couture design, to pour something that is very personal and complex into my clothing creations.”

The bilingual designer is a big fan of Karl Lagerfeld’s style, as well as his views on fashion. “I also adore Frida Kahlo and Marilyn Monroe. My dog is a Mi-Ki named Frida, and is part of my family here in Houston,” he adds.

Riojas was recently honored in Dallas at this year’s Fashion Group International Rising Star Awards. “They awarded my work. I feel like I’m on track in my career,” Riojas says.

Now, he is working more than eight hours a day on the details of premiering his first collection as a designer. “The fashion show is entitled *Ethereal Blooms*, and is an evocation of the natural and cultural beauty of the city of San Miguel de Allende. This collection expresses the most characteristic elements of my work: flowers, elegance, and colonial style,” Riojas says. The October show pays tribute to Riojas’ Hispanic-Mexican cultural heritage by showcasing hand-sewn embroidery and appliques. “I am 100 percent focused on this, and I hope it will be a great celebration of new opportunities in the world of fashion,” he adds.

And just what advice does he give up-and-coming designers? “Even if something seems far away, it is necessary to continue with your work day by day and move forward with your creations. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, your

dream materializes. [Seek out and get help from] positive people who also believe in that dream. That is a good guide to success.”

As for his personal life, Riojas calls his partner “my love and my greatest collaboration. He is the one who has supported and strengthened me on this path of self-realization. Designing and sewing is my passion, and all my achievements are with his help.”

Riojas also enjoys exploring Houston’s thriving cultural scene. “I enjoy the fine arts and music concerts. I am also attracted to pop culture, and of course I am always up-to-date with looking at fashion trends. All of these elements inspire me.”

At every social event he attends, Riojas admits that his fashion choices make him stand out. “I feel like it’s one of the things I love about clothing design. I believe that what we wear and how we look makes an external statement about who we are. Designing and creating that statement for people is my goal.”

WHAT: Alvin Alan Ramírez Riojas
fall fashion show

WHEN: October 14 at 8:00 p.m.

WHERE: Sabine Street Studios, 1907 Sabine
INFO: alvinalanfashion.com

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Flying High with Digital Art

Artists Alex Ramos and Billy Baccam's immersive airport installation pushes the boundaries.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Artists Alex Ramos (l) and Billy Baccam with their installation in Houston's Seismique digital-art museum

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA FOR OUTSMART



If you are one of the thousands of people who have traveled through Bush Intercontinental Airport recently, you've likely come across a transformative digital light experience in the Terminal B Skyway station entitled *Data Stream*. Its creators are Alex Ramos, a queer and nonbinary local artist, and ally and artist Billy Baccam of Input Output, a creative media lab that researches, designs, and develops interactive and immersive experiences that blur the lines between the digital and physical worlds.

Data Stream, an installation that uses 66 LED strips, offers a constantly changing light show spanning three spaces within the Skyway. The lights mimic air waves as they travel over the wings of an airplane, visually guiding travelers through the space. It is Input Output's most visible art installation in Houston, but it certainly isn't the only one created by this artistic duo.

"Each project is unique and possesses its own challenges to navigate," says Baccam. "Over the last five years, we have made a name for ourselves as a company that innovates and pushes the boundaries of what is possible with technology. Most of our

clients are surprised by what we are capable of and willing to take on."

Connecting with the audience is a primary focus for these artists. "The technology, for us, is secondary to the user experience," Ramos adds. "No amount of fancy tech or high-end gizmos will make up for a lack of connection from the audience. We always design from the perspective of the user, and work from there. We consider the flow of traffic and the amount of time we have to capture their attention. Once this is all accounted for, we can start with the fun stuff. Our designs range from passive to fully interactive and immersive, with each type posing its own unique engineering design challenges."

Input Output has other artistic irons in the fire. They are one of the founding members of Seismique, an immersive digital art museum located in West Houston. Seismique describes itself as a technology-fueled experiential art museum spanning 40,000 square feet.

During June Pride Month, Input Output created an amazing and immersive light experience at the Denver Max Pride event at Post HTX that enhanced the look of the vast downtown space and the feel of the event.

"One of our recent clients was the James Beard Foundation, and we were tasked with

the entire concept of their event. And one of our long-term clients, Rock the Bells, puts on some incredible projects and has taken us on some wild rides. They recently commissioned us to activate the second story of a four-story yacht for one of Art Basel Miami Beach's star-studded events," says Baccam.

"The implementation phase of our process is where the rubber meets the road," Ramos explains. "Here, we are constantly butting up against what might seem impossible. Our ability to iterate and learn during each part of our process has made us a great team and a valuable asset to our clients."

Both Ramos and Baccam completed some undergraduate courses that have informed their work, but the majority of their knowledge is acquired through their research and development for each project.

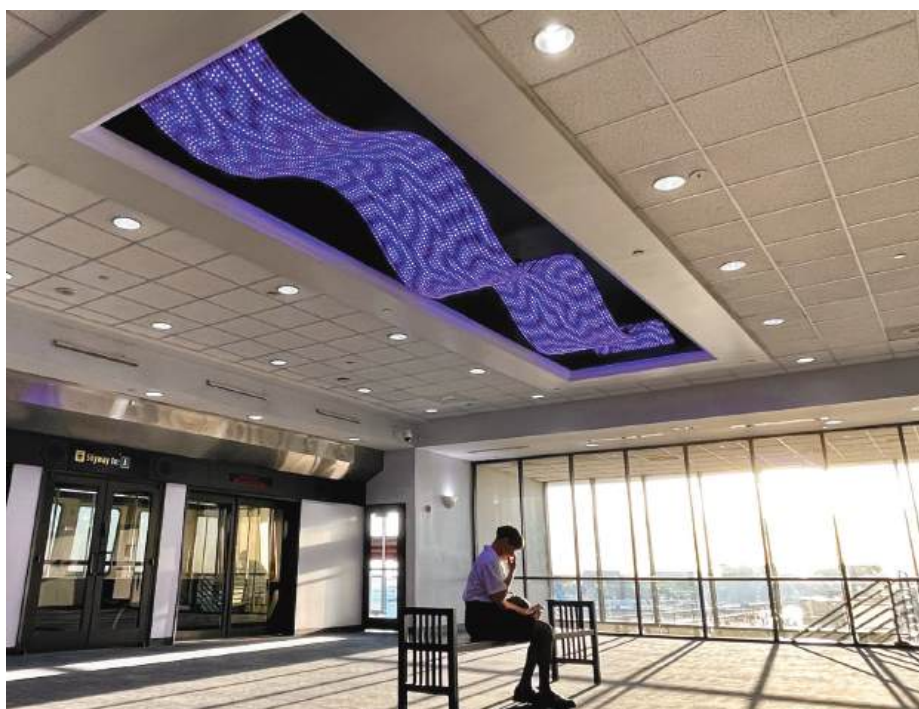
The journey that led each of them to Houston also informs their artistic perspectives. Baccam came here from Dallas to study electrical engineering, while Ramos was born in Mexico City and immigrated at a young age with their parents, who were in search of work and a more stable situation. Being a gender-nonconforming person is not just an identity for Ramos, but an approach to life. "We are born into this reality with the game already in play. This game has its own norms and customs; we either choose to get in line, or we question everything. These norms and customs are at times rooted in structures of control and dominance, and when we challenge the narratives, we have the ability to rewrite our story. This mindset opens us up to new experiences and ways of living where anything is possible."

With installations in major spaces—and giant event sponsors inviting them to participate—Input Output is picking up momentum as they uplift the Houston arts and entertainment scene.

"Houston is slowly but surely becoming a hub of innovation and art," Baccam says. "The underground art scene in Houston is exploding with events, musical performances, art happenings, and everything art-related."

"We have always been thankful to our clients [who have given us] gigs that really validate this thing we are doing," he concludes. Having [our *Data Stream*] public art piece at an airport is a wonderful addition to our portfolio of work."

 Follow the work of Input Output at inputoutput.space and on Instagram @InputOutput.



BILLY BACCAM

Ramos and Baccam's art installation *Data Stream* floats above travelers at Bush Intercontinental Airport

A Queer Climate Activist

Author **Sim Kern** releases a new 'anarchist climate fiction' novel.

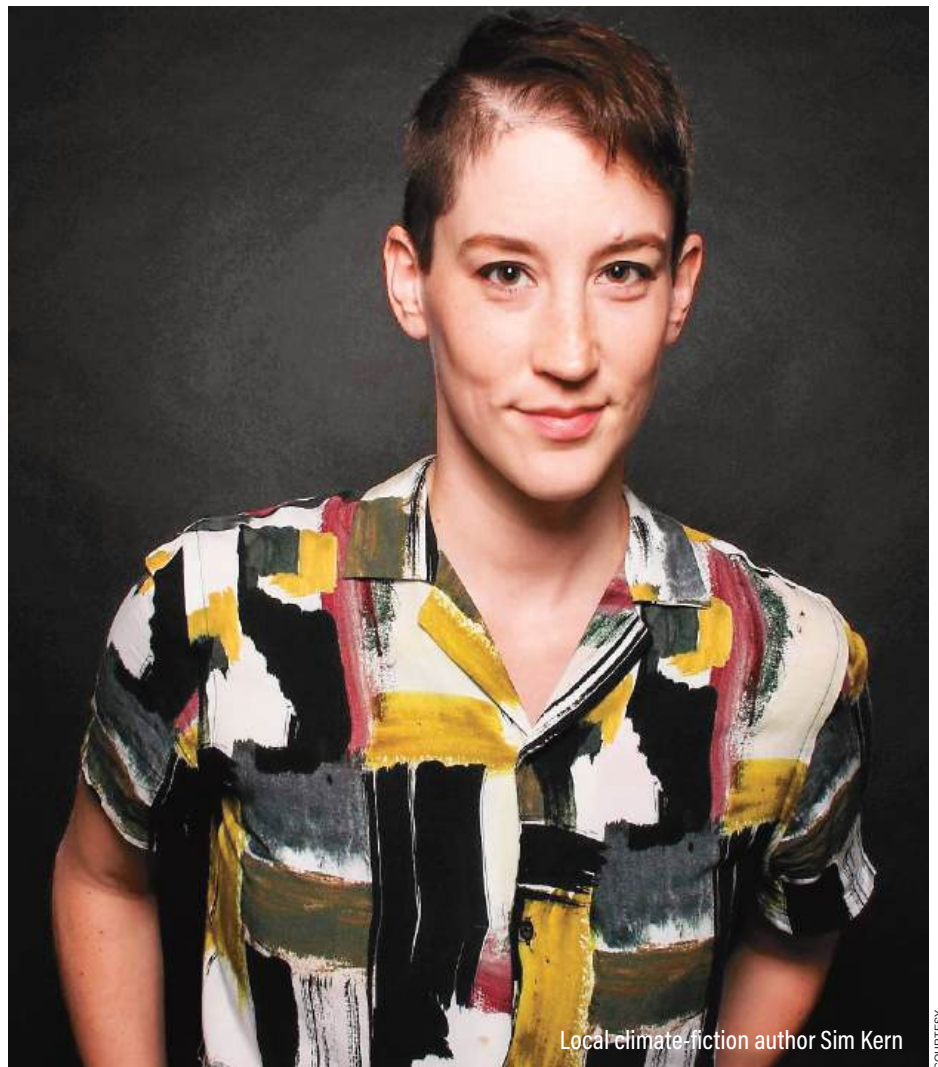
By **DAVID BRASHER**

What if Al Gore had been elected in 2000 and was able to focus his agenda on climate change? What if all of the climate policies that Democrats had proposed had been put in place? What if those policies had only benefited wealthy white neighborhoods? Where would we be? These are some of the questions author and journalist Sim Kern explores in their latest novel *The Free People's Village*. Kern will launch the book in Houston on September 12 at Brazos Bookstore, and the event will include a conversation with writer Ehigbor Okosun.

Kern has lived in Houston since 2007, and in that time has taught both middle- and high-school English, started a family, written articles for national publications such as *Salon* and *Out*, and completed four novels. To say that Kern stays busy is an understatement. But Kern understands the importance of their voice, and uses it to encourage climate activism.

Kern describes their novels as “queer, Jewish, anarchist climate fiction.” That may sound convoluted to some, but it actually comes from a place of thoughtful concern for both the planet and for minority communities. “I have been dealing with climate anxiety since I was a teenager in 1999 when there weren’t a lot of people preoccupied with climate change,” Kern explains. “I’ve spent a lot of time processing feelings and figuring out how to move from despair and nihilism toward action and revolution, which is what my books are all about—how to find ways to be useful.”

That activist’s passion inspires all of Kern’s novels. Other influences include writ-



Local climate-fiction author Sim Kern

COURTESY

ers like Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin, as well as Kern’s involvement in the local music scene as a band member and an explorer of Houston’s unique ecosystem and vibrant culture. “You can see how all of these things come together. All of the books I have written so far tend to get lumped into a genre known as climate fiction—books that deal with the way our world is changing due to the climate,

and how that intersects with social-justice issues and queer identity.”

In *The Free People’s Village*, which is set in a futuristic Houston, Kern gets to explore that intersection of climate change and social justice in a rapidly gentrifying city. The novel’s protagonist, Maddie Ryan, spends her free time as the rhythm guitarist for a queer punk band living

in a warehouse space called The Lab in Houston's historically Black Eighth Ward. When Maddie learns that their warehouse and neighborhood is to be destroyed for a new green hyperway out to the suburbs, she joins a Black-led movement fighting for their community.

But *The Free People's Village* isn't just a dystopian story about racial justice and climate action. It's also a love story and a tale of queer awakening through the eyes of Maddie, who is leaving behind a strict Catholic upbringing and embracing her queerness, all while getting closer to the band's lead guitarist. It is also about becoming resilient when your dreams of making the world a better place are crushed and you can only pick yourself up and try again.

Kern hopes that writing about climate change and social justice will help people confront those vital issues. "I don't want to leave people in a place of despair, even though this book deals a lot with grief. But it's about coming out of grief and moving forward. I hope people are inspired to take action—or even just [find ways] to cope better."

And take action they do. After reading Kern's first novel *Depart, Depart!*, a story

about a trans man dealing with the difficulty he had faced when sheltering with neighbors after a devastating hurricane, someone from the Red Cross in Wyoming contacted Kern to say they had been inspired to rewrite their disaster-response policies to be more trans-inclusive—proof that Kern's voice is making a difference.

Kern hopes to inspire further activism among readers of *The Free People's Village*. The book's cover art—a red background with graphic characters suggesting war propaganda—should inspire readers with its revolution-



ary tone. The cover was designed by Egyptian artist Ganzeer, who Kern met at a local festival and recognized him as the activist and street artist who gained notoriety during the Egyptian revolution in 2011 before being forced into exile. Now based in Houston, Ganzeer was able to produce a cover design—including a dust jacket that unfolds into a protest poster—recalling the street art he produced during the Egyptian revolution.

Looking ahead, Kern is already working on their next book, and it's a departure from previous climate-fiction novels. This new story takes place in Eastern Europe in 1647 and is a historical-fiction plot that follows a group of traveling queer Jews as they navigate religion, racism, and capitalism. But Kern's signature style—including elements of climate change and social justice—will still be evident throughout the book.

WHAT: Sim Kern book launch event and discussion

WHEN: September 12 at 6:30 pm

WHERE: Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet

INFO: www.brazosbookstore.com

Keep up with Kim Kern on Instagram @sim_bookstagramsbadly

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Chaos and Color

Left to right: Haley Lee, Mia Pham, Michelle Reyes, Travis Prokop, Carlos Perez, and Davis Stumberg

Bam! Pow! Save Democracy Now!

6 Degrees Dance fights back with *Pop Demo*.

By NEIL ELLIS ORTS

Photo by PIN LIM



"I will fight you with glitter, I will fight you with color, I will fight you with humor, and you cannot win. That is the heart of this show."

The show in question is *Pop Demo*, the latest evening-length dance theater piece from 6 Degrees Dance. Toni Leago Valle, the show's artistic director who recently spoke with OUT-SMART, is referring to the theatrical firepower she has marshaled to combat the legislative forces currently targeting women and queer communities.

Other than last year's 20-year retrospective of her work entitled *Score*, *Pop Demo* is Valle's first full-length production since her circus-themed *Never Again* in 2018. "I think of *Pop Demo* as a sister project, but it is different in that it's national," she says. "*Never Again* was about activism and the Texas Legislature. This is more about how propaganda is used to deceive the public."

For this new work, Valle left behind the

colorful world of the circus for the colorfully absurd world of comics and editorial cartoons. Using characters as big as 1980s hair who are dressed in primary colors, Valle uses theater, modern dance, and aerial silks to present a world that has tilted off its center. It's a show with a point of view, which should have audience members laughing at wild antics one minute and then losing themselves in thought about the precarious political moment we're living in.

Like most of the show's cast, Mia Pham first got to know Valle at the University of Houston, where Valle teaches. Pham, who is more at home with subtle and abstract modern dance, enjoys rehearsing Valle's edgy choreography. "It's pretty fun to do something so bold," Pham says. "[How often] can I unabashedly say, 'This is who we are, this is what we support'?"

A Queer Aesthetic

Valle grew up in the southeast suburbs of

Houston, an artistic kid in a conservative environment. She turned to theater in school, but even there she didn't feel like she fit in.

Then she discovered *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. More than the movie itself, she found the camp classic's outrageous fans to be her people. "Here I am, this little 14-year-old white girl from the suburbs," she recalls, "and they just took me under their wing."

Becoming immersed in the Montrose of the 1980s as a teenager shaped her outlook on life as well as her artistic aesthetic. The married mom thinks of herself as straight, but those years roaming up and down Westheimer nevertheless solidified her love for the community. "It gave me a lifelong love of queer people," she says. "They have always been my family. They were the first people who stood up for me. They were the first people who would fight for me."

At least half of her *Pop Demo* cast is queer, and part of the rehearsal process is allowing time for open conversation around the issues in the show. She brings her views of women's issues and feminism to the stage, but when it comes to LGBTQ issues, she allows her queer cast members to shape the production's message. "I can't speak in that voice, so I have them guiding me," she notes.

Several of her cast members speak with appreciation about this aspect of the show's development. "I find myself really supported by her and the environment she creates," says Tempest McClendon. "I'm a Black lesbian artist who has tattoos and piercings. I feel like she [creates] spaces for me to put my own experiences into the work."

Travis Prokop, who is working with Valle for the first time, puts it this way: "As a gay male in the arts—and there are lots of gay men in the arts—we rarely get to be ourselves onstage. In rehearsal and in class, I think our queerness is definitely celebrated, but that's not the case onstage very much."

Valle cites Prokop's observation as the catalyst for a love duet between two men, a quiet moment in the show. "While these are cartoons, there are also these behind-the-scenes reality people," Valle explains. "So I have a lovely duet that just shows two people who care about each other."

Valle also pushes for gender-nonconfor-

mity in this show, something that cast member Haley Lee mentions: "Even though I don't identify as a queer person, what I love about dancing in Toni's work is that I do feel like I'm able to exercise my masculine as well as my feminine qualities. I'm not a very girly girl, and I feel like I'm very fluid in Toni's dances. It's really nice to get to do that."

Cartoon World

Popular culture, politics, and democracy are central themes in *Pop Demo*. Valle began researching editorial cartoons as a way of fighting the propaganda that's currently eroding government. From there, she expanded to harness the power of comic books and animation to build her off-kilter environment. Aerial dance is another technique she uses to create this unique "cartoon world."

Aerial dance incorporates trapeze, aerial silks, and other equipment to allow the performers to leave the ground, taking movement into another dimension. Valle has been training in aerial dance for a number of years, and used it extensively to create the circus atmosphere seen in *Never Again*. For that show, she trained her dancers as she developed the aerial choreography they could perform. For *Pop Demo*, she is teaching less. "This is the first time I have five people out of seven that train in aerial," she says enthusiastically.

Aerial is also a way Valle found herself in Cartoon World. She doesn't just wedge aerial

into a show. She explains, "What I do is instead of saying 'is it needed?' I say, 'what world can I create in which it's absolutely necessary?'"

Hence her creation of a 1920s speakeasy in a world that defies the laws of nature. "Not every [section] has aerial in it, but it definitely adds to the [cartoonish] spectacle. Without aerial, it would be incredibly grounded. I want the idea that the world is tilting. When I have silks hanging, it allows me to make walls move. It allows me to redefine spaces. It's integral to the piece."

To create an engaging speakeasy environment, audience members can actually sit around tables on the stage by purchasing premium-price tickets. "We're involving the audience into the piece a lot more," says veteran 6 Degree dancer Michelle Reyes. "Instead of just watching what she's trying to show and share, the audience is actually in the middle of it all."

More than Dancing

Valle isn't just protesting the current political turmoil through her art. "She is an activist," says Davis Stumberg, a dancer who Valle first put in the air for *Never Again*. "You see her out and protesting. She's not putting on a show to put on a show—it's what she actually believes in. I enjoy that she lives her life that way."

Cast member Carlos Perez sees Valle's activism lending layers of added meaning to *Pop Demo*. "I think it's going to be a show that people find very funny and entertaining, but at the same time it makes you think," he says. "You're there for the humor and entertainment, but it's [also] putting these subconscious thoughts in the back of your head: 'You need to be aware of this. You need to be thinking about this.'"

Valle expects to take some time off from dance-making in order to focus her activism on the 2024 elections. She's anxious to put more time into the causes and candidates that have influenced *Pop Demo*. Clearly, the artistry she employs onstage to fight for democracy is not her only tactic.

"At the heart of all the fun and games, and all the bright colors, is that deeper message of how much we're being deceived," she concludes with an artist's optimism. "I believe people are fatigued and tired of politics, and that's one of the weapons—to constantly be throwing propaganda at you until you're too tired to react. We need to be able to shut the noise out. The culture wars—that's all noise! It's meant to make us tired and despairing. I refuse to see the world that way."

WHAT: *Pop Demo*

WHEN: Seven performances,
September 15–17 and 21–23

WHERE: MATCH

INFO: matchhouston.org/events/2023/pop-demo



Love Duet
Davis Stumberg (r) and
Travis Prokop



COURTESY

Hitting All the Right Notes

Wayne Ashley's love of music is contagious.

By SAM BYRD



If Wayne Ashley had a nickname, it would have to be The Music Man. With his lifelong involvement in music and his appreciation for many genres, his résumé

includes being a founding member of the Cloudburst Vocal Jazz Quartet, a collaborator with celebrated organizations like the Apollo Chamber Players and Houston Ebony Opera Guild, and a lead tenor in the choir at St. Paul's United Methodist Church.

"I think the heart of it is that I just love to sing. I love opportunities to make music in any way and any capacity that I can. And being in a diverse community like Houston, I have the opportunity to get into lots of really cool and fascinating projects," he says.

Originally from Arkansas, Ashley was surrounded by music his entire life. "I am thankful to have grown up in a family of incredible musicians," he notes. "Music has always been something that I remember at the heart of the

positive experiences of my childhood."

His family introduced him to blues and gospel musicians, and his grandfather and great-grandmother were both pianists. He feels much of his musical DNA was passed down through the generations.

Ashley started playing trumpet in his youth, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree as a euphonium performance major from Henderson State University. After earning a master's degree in vocal performance at the University of Houston, he served on the faculty of Texas Southern University. He now maintains a private voice studio to coach some of Houston's brightest up-and-coming young artists.

He also runs Nilhoak Media, where he helps artists promote their work and learn how to navigate the music industry. "Something I absolutely love, in addition to making music, is supporting other musicians. That's really the root of my [current work]—to help people."

One of his longest-running associations

in the Houston arts scene has been with the Houston Chamber Choir, where he has performed every season since 2008.

"Houston Chamber Choir has presented such incredible programs over the years that I hold close to my heart," he says enthusiastically. "Each season, we've gotten better and better, and it's been more fun each time."

He is looking forward to the Chamber Choir's current season, themed Prime Time, which launches on October 7 with the first of eight concerts throughout the year.

Ashley's connection with the Chamber Choir is especially notable because he was among the singers who recorded an album of Maurice Duruflé's complete choral works on the Signum label, which earned the Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance in 2020.

He recalls that recording Duruflé's sublime choral music was an accident of sorts. "Our conductor, Robert Simpson, didn't



Ashley sings a heartfelt solo during a piece performed by the Houston Chamber Choir.

originally plan to record it. It was just going to be our opening concert for the season. When we got together to rehearse that music, we recognized it would be something special. After the concert concluded, we knew we couldn't be done with Duruflé."

Aside from the Grammy Award, the album stands out in Ashley's mind for additional reasons. "The concert was held at Rice University, which is where we also recorded the album. It's something that was done entirely by local musicians. Every

single one of us who performed on that album are local musicians. That's a rare thing in the recording industry."

Ashley's enthusiasm for music stems from its ability to create conversation, emotion, and connection. "Music is a language, a bond, a community experience that is unique, and unlike anything else that we can do as humans. We can share a moment in time together, but we all experience it differently. What music allows us to do is to take someone's voice, someone's hopes, their dreams and their de-

sires, and project them in a way that resonates with people.

"Unlike other types of media, we can say things through the emotional content of music that sometimes we may not have the courage to say out loud," he adds. "Music provokes our emotions, and when we combine that with the power of words—the incredible power of poetry and prose—it becomes an even deeper art form. Music bonds us in a way that other experiences just can't."

Ashley is also a member of the Recording Academy, which presents the annual Grammy Awards. As such, he uses his influence to advocate for keeping music recordings affordable to produce, and for enabling recording artists to earn equitable paychecks. He also leads conversations about how best to preserve arts communities and concert presenters.

"I want to sing as much as I possibly can," he says, "but I also want to use my voice to uplift others, and that's what I really want to see for my future."

▶ Follow Wayne Ashley at [wayneashleymusic](https://www.instagram.com/wayneashleymusic) on Instagram, at twitter.com/wayneashleymusi, or at [linkedin.com/in/lwayne-ashley-68634252](https://www.linkedin.com/in/lwayne-ashley-68634252). Follow the Houston Chamber Choir at HoustonChamberChoir.org.

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FRED HAAS FAMILY PLAN

The Queen Returns

Local fans speak about Beyoncé's legacy ahead of her Houston concert.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

When Beyoncé released her *Renaissance* album last summer, the girls, gays, and theys rejoiced! Queen Bey brought ballroom culture, a disco vibe, and old-school glamour front and center with her latest chart-topping feat.

The superstar's Renaissance World Tour hits Houston on September 23 and 24—complete with sickening outfits, stunning visuals, a levitating disco ball horse, voguing, and mind-blowing choreography and vocals.

Beyoncé has always rooted her art in Black joy and heritage, and her most recent projects have focused heavily on Black cultural influences and African American history. With *Renaissance*, the Queen pays homage to queer communities of color, and specifically those from the Harlem ballroom scene, whose essence, choreography, vocabulary, and fabulosity have influenced generations of performers, including herself.

The album is rich with queer references, as well as features and samples of Black LGBTQ artists and culture makers. Ts Madison, a trans advocate and social-media star who has been a rotating judge on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, is featured on the song "Cozy" with the spoken phrase "I'm dark brown, dark skin, light skin, beige, fluorescent beige. Bitch, I'm Black!" Big Freedia's song "Explode" is sampled at the beginning of "Break My Soul," gay R&B artist Syd co-wrote "Plastic Off the Sofa," and samples from underground drag legends Kevin Aviance and Moi

Renee are included. A host of other Black queer artists also had a hand in influencing the album.

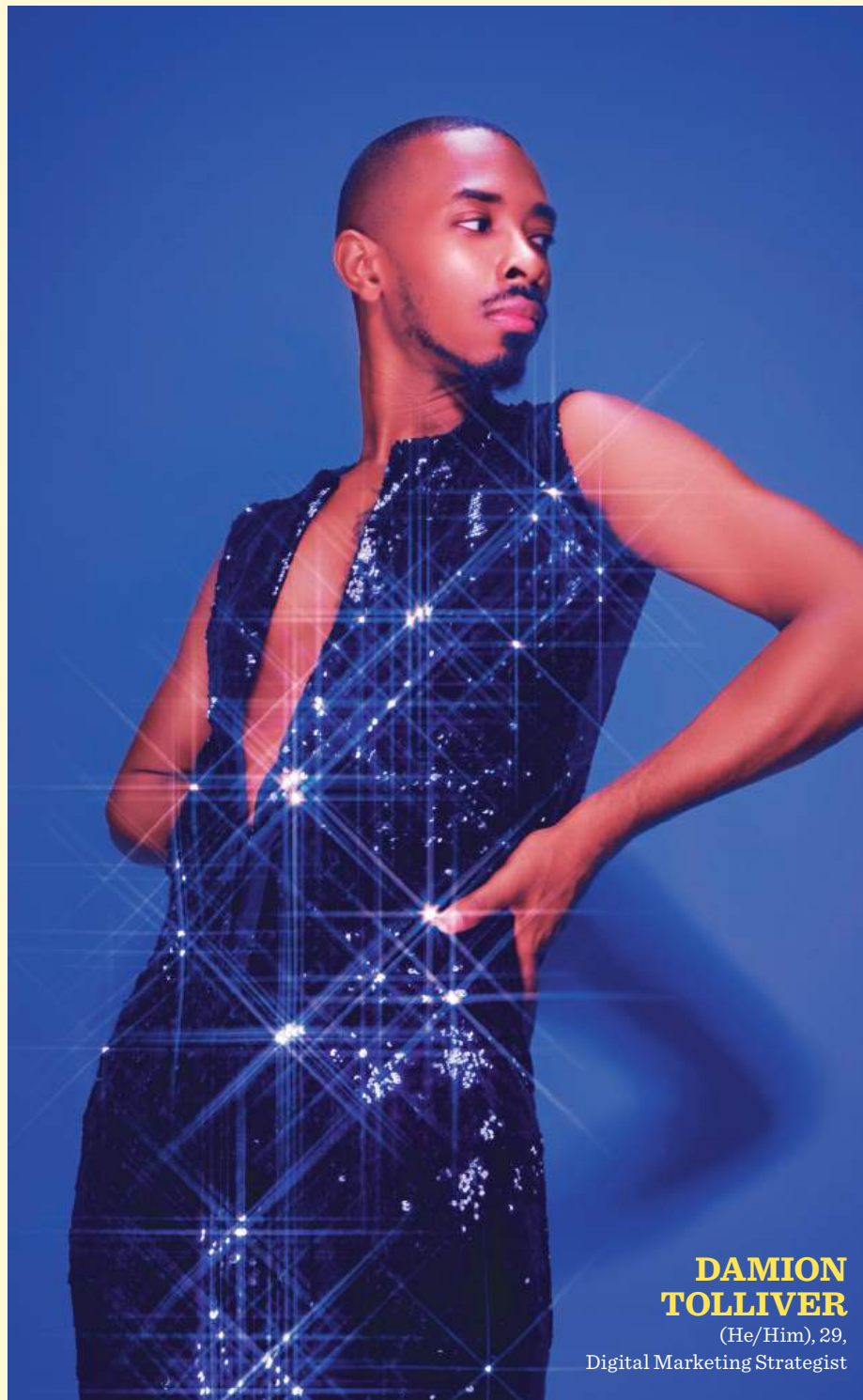
One name that is checked in the track "Heated" is that of Beyoncé's gay cousin, who she affectionately refers to as "Uncle Johnny" as she sings, "Uncle Johnny made my dress, that cheap Spandex, she looks a mess." In an Instagram post, Beyoncé's mother, Tina Knowles, explains that her nephew Johnny loved house music and introduced it to Beyoncé and sister Solange at a young age. He is also credited for inspiring their "sense of style and uniqueness."

Beyoncé paid tribute to Johnny at a 2019 GLAAD awards presentation, saying "I want to dedicate this award to my Uncle Johnny, the most fabulous gay man I have ever met, who helped raise me and my sister. Witnessing his battle with HIV was one of the most painful experiences I've ever lived. I'm hopeful that his struggle served to open pathways for other young people to live more freely."

Johnny's legacy and impact will be felt throughout NRG Stadium when Beyoncé comes home to perform this month, bringing his story to fans of every gender and sexual identity.

A few members of Houston's LGBTQ community spoke with OUTSMART about Beyoncé's impact on their lives, and what they're anticipating most about the concert event of the year.

WHAT: Renaissance World Tour
WHEN: September 23 and 24
WHERE: NRG Stadium
Info: www.livenation.com



CAMERON PERRY

What is your earliest memory of hearing Beyoncé, and how did it impact you?

My earliest memory of Beyoncé is so vivid. I was at my grandparents' house in a country town in Louisiana called Clarence. My aunt, who is ten years older than me, was a big music lover, and we bonded over watching videos on BET. I'll always remember seeing the Destiny's Child "Bills, Bills, Bills" video for the first time. Although I heard the song on the radio many times, I was blown away by her voice and beauty. I'll never forget I

was singing word for word, and trying to do the run at the end of the song. In that moment, I was a fan, and over time my love for her grew stronger.

Which song are you most looking forward to hearing her sing at the concert?

Since the *Renaissance* album dropped, I've been connected to "Virgo's Groove" from the moment I heard the funkadelic beat. No matter the tempo, I'm a sucker for a good love song. I'm a Scorpio through and through, but this song

makes me wanna be a Virgo for the six minutes she's blessing us with her vocals. The way she describes her love for her partner, and how she wants to experience this sexual bliss with him and to be high on his love, is a place I always want to be. Plus, her vocals were top-freakin'-tier. You can hear the passion in her voice in this song. You can tell that she had fun creating this record. I wish I had been in the studio when she recorded it!

Are you planning to wear anything special for the concert?

I've been thinking about my outfit since *Renaissance* dropped last year. I've had many ideas, but I finally settled on this Grace Jones-inspired outfit. I've always been inspired by her androgynous spirit and wanted to channel that in my outfit with sequins and sparkles.

"BEYONCÉ HAS TAUGHT US TO NOT LIMIT OURSELVES, AND TO SHOOT FOR THE STARS."

—Damion Tolliver

As an LGBTQ Houstonian, what kind of influence do you think Beyoncé has had in the community?

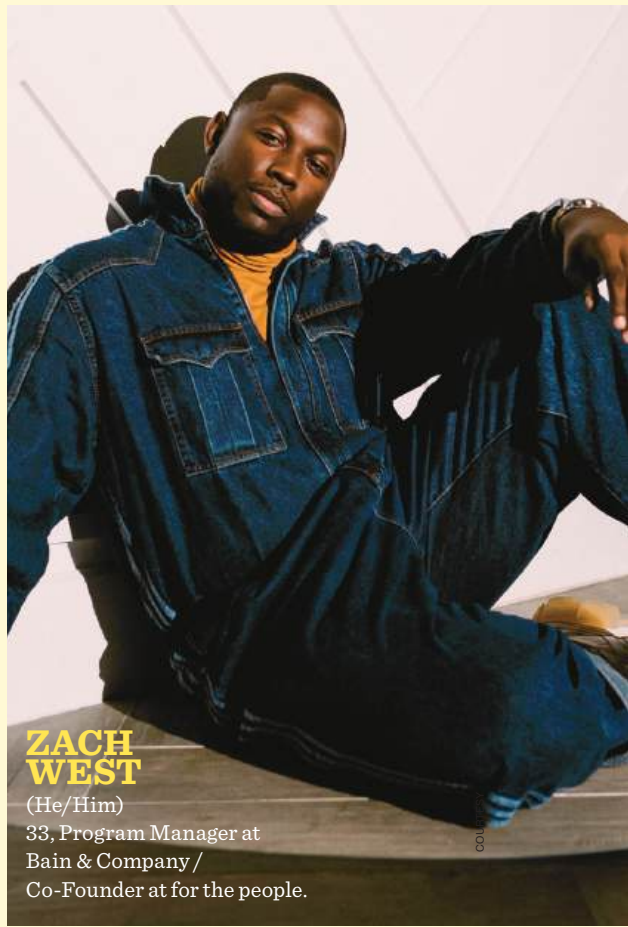
Beyoncé means so much to me as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Watching her grow into her career has been a beautiful journey. She has taught me to embrace everything that makes me unique. She has taught me to embrace the highs and lows of life. She represents empowerment, self-acceptance, and fierceness—the archetype of someone in this beautiful community. Her music has been a message of self-acceptance and love, and has taught us to not limit ourselves and to shoot for the stars, and to push through all of life's troubles while promoting love, understanding, and equality.

Do you have a favorite *Renaissance* lyric or song?

There are so many lyrics that speak to my soul. But I would say my favorite lyric is when she's belting out "You're the love of my life" on "Virgo's Groove." It sends me into this trance of love that I never want to leave. I want this song to be played at my reception whenever I get married so I can look my man in his eyes and sing, "You're the love of my life."

Any special plans to celebrate Beyoncé's homecoming this month?

My friends and I will be having a *Renaissance* pre-game to make sure everyone is prepared to be on Mute and have the "Heated" lyrics and fan-clicking correct.



ZACH WEST

(He/Him)
33, Program Manager at
Bain & Company /
Co-Founder at for the people.

Have you seen Beyoncé perform live before?

Have I? Yes, I went to The Mrs. Carter World Tour, the Formation Tour twice, On the Run I & II, and the Renaissance World Tour twice (as soon as Houston hits).

What is your earliest memory of hearing Beyoncé, and how did it impact you?

My earliest memory of Beyoncé is going to see Destiny's Child at the Houston Rodeo. Something about that performance was so electrifying for me, and really started my love of Beyoncé.

Are you planning to wear anything special for the concert?

I wanted to find a way to highlight the *Renaissance* album and showcase my hometown. I partnered up with local Houston artist Layne Stitch to create a one-of-a-kind *Renaissance*-inspired jacket that will be the focal point of my outfit.

As an LGBTQ Houstonian, what kind of influence do you think Beyoncé has had in the community?

Beyoncé is known for using her platform to advocate for inclusivity, equality, and acceptance. Take the songs "Formation"

or "Cozy"—they both resonate with me as a Black queer man because the lyrics promote empowerment and pride. She is an artist that understands how to effectively show allyship by including people in her music videos and performances who identify similar to me. I appreciate that she is not afraid to send a message of acceptance and celebration.

Do you have a favorite *Renaissance* lyric or song?

Favorite song on the album has to be "Heated"! I mean, that outro? My other favorite would be "Church Girl." I've had the personal experience of struggling with the expectations and norms within a Baptist church, particularly in the context of how the "Black church" identity is perceived and imposed on others. It can feel challenging and isolating at times. It took me a while to understand that spirituality and religious beliefs are deeply personal, and every individual's relationship with their faith should be respected and valued. "Church Girl" is a reminder to me as a preacher's kid that I can maintain a strong spiritual connection while also embracing my authentic self, without fear of judgment from others. Then to top things off, the Clark Sisters sample—chef's kiss to Beyoncé!



ISRAEL CRUZ

(He/Him), 32,
Entrepreneur

Have you seen Beyoncé perform live before?

I've seen Beyoncé three times. My all-time favorite concert would be the Formation World Tour in 2016.

What is your earliest memory of hearing Beyoncé, and how did it impact you?

My earliest memory would be around 1999 when *The Writing's on the Wall* album was released. "Say My Name" is one of my favorite songs. I used to have a Hit Clips that played the song "Independent Women" when I was younger. I also hope nobody forgot that Beyoncé sang the theme song for *The Proud Family* on the Disney Channel.

Which song are you most looking forward to hearing her sing at the concert?

I'm most excited to hear the song "My Power." I think the song does an amazing job of embodying African culture and being proud of that African heritage. I'm also hoping that Blue Ivy joins her onstage and leaves zero crumbs with that viral dance.

As an LGBTQ Houstonian, what kind of influence do you think Beyoncé has had

in the community?

Renaissance is essentially a love letter to the queer community. Not many artists would take a risk like this, considering it comes with major potential backlash. It's important to have public figures like her to celebrate our community.

Do you have a favorite *Renaissance* lyric or song?

My favorite song from *Renaissance* would be "Cozy." I interpret the song as [a call to] be confident as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, even after most of us receive daily hate over our sexual preference. I love verse 2 specifically, where she pays homage to the Progress Pride Flag by naming all of the colors shown on the flag [that represent] everyone from our community.

Any special plans to celebrate Beyoncé's homecoming this month?

I share the same birthday, September 4, and the same hometown, Houston, as Beyoncé, so I am treating this as a delayed B-Day Twins celebration. My go-to pre-concert activities include brunch with friends and then a Happy Hour prior to arriving at the venue.

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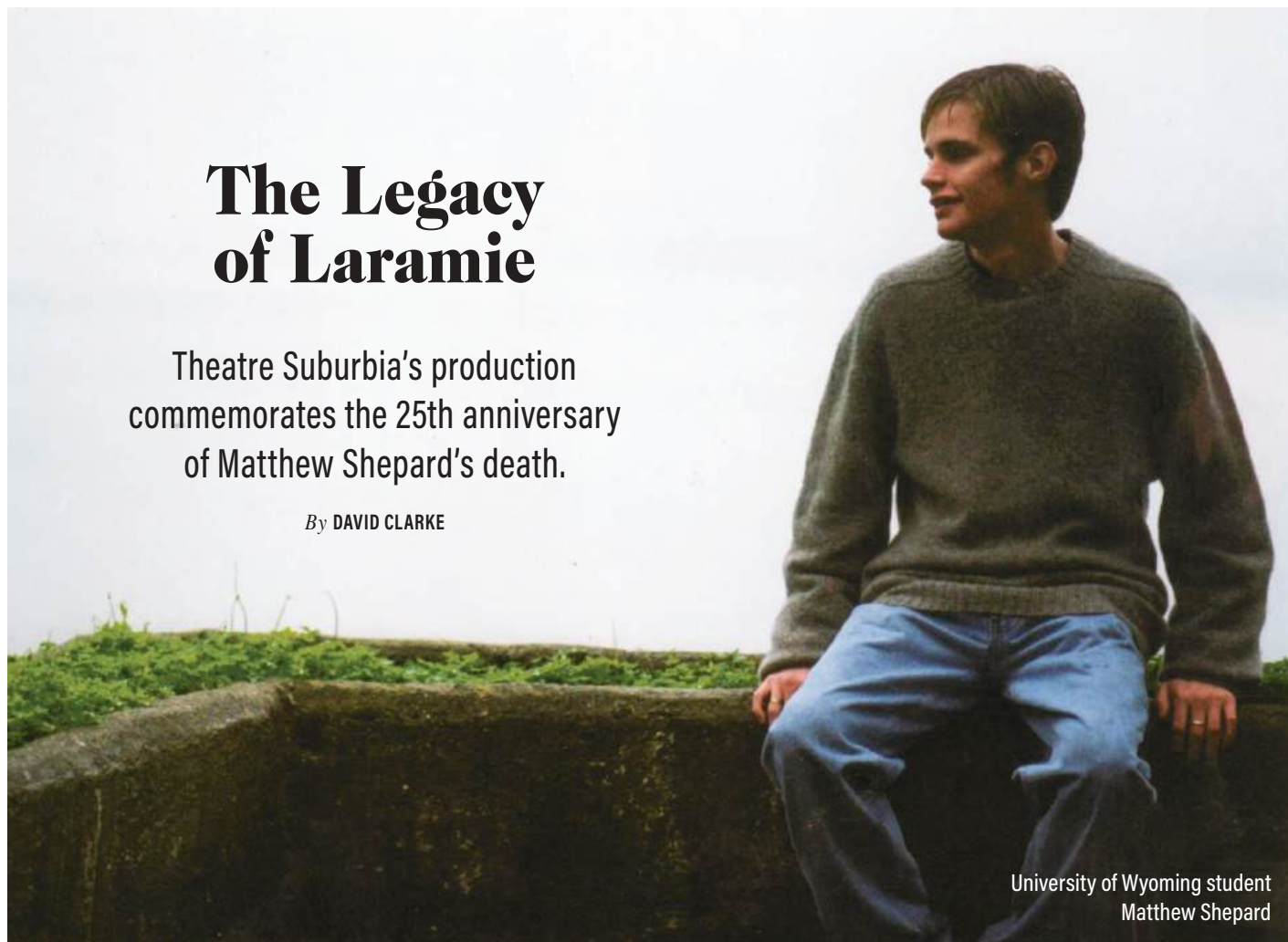
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The Legacy of Laramie

Theatre Suburbia's production commemorates the 25th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death.

By DAVID CLARKE



University of Wyoming student
Matthew Shepard

GINA VANHOOF/MATTHEWSHEPARD.ORG



On October 8, 1998, a bicyclist came across what appeared to be a scarecrow tied to a split-rail fence in a remote area east of Laramie, Wyoming. Roughly 18 hours

earlier, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson had tied Matthew Shepard to that fence and left him for dead. They had abducted him from a local bar before viciously assaulting him. Shepard died from his injuries a few days later, and the violence he suffered shocked the world and left a lasting impact that is felt to this day.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of Shepard's death, local radio host Judy Reeve approached Theatre Suburbia about directing a production of *The Laramie Project*, which Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theater Project created a few years after the murder. "I do a radio show at KPFT, and I run a show every October commemorating Shepard's death," Reeve explains. "With all that's happened since then with the Hate Crimes Prevention Act, I thought, 'Somebody's

going to wake up in September and realize that this is the 25th anniversary, and they're going to be clamoring to do this play.' But I thought of it first, and that's very important to me."

The Laramie Project has an unusual structure in that the actors have no real dialogue to learn. The entire script is lifted from over 200 interviews that Kaufman and Tectonic Theater members conducted with 60 people in Laramie over several months. "There are no conversations—somebody sticks a microphone in [an actor's] face, they answer a question or two, and then they're gone."

**"FOR A COMMUNITY
THEATER, THIS
PRODUCTION IS A
REALLY BIG THING."**

—Judy Reeve

The result is a compelling piece of stagecraft that requires eight actors to breathe life into the actual words spoken by those Laramie citizens regarding the aftermath of the murder and the trial of the two young men accused of killing Shepard. "I am exactly following Tectonic's idea and thoughts," Reeve says, "but I added two people out of necessity, [to cover the 82 characters]. We got it all situated, and everybody's happy, but the line loads are pretty heavy. And for a community theater, it's a really big thing."

In 2009, a little over a decade after Shepard died, President Obama signed the country's first federal hate-crimes legislation—the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Although the new law ushered in a brief period of optimism that hate crimes would decrease, the Trump era changed all of that. "I want people out there to see this play because of its historical value, [but also] to find out that we're not as far ahead as we think we are, and we're losing ground



THEATRE SUBURBIA

Director Judy Reeves (l) and the cast members of Theatre Suburbia's production of *The Laramie Project*.

"The other thing that's important is that [although] the play is basically focused on what happened to Matt, if you take 'LGBTQ' out of it and you put in a race or a religion, [it could be another] identical play," Shepard adds. "It's all about hate, discrimination, and pushing down and pushing away those who aren't considered equal."

Reeve praises the enduring power of *The Laramie Project* to teach audiences about love and acceptance. "Twenty-five years after the death of Matthew Shepherd and James Byrd Jr., we still need to learn to cohabitate. The people of Laramie, Wyoming, are to be congratulated because I [can still] hear them, in the script, say that we have a lot to learn about tolerance and love."

The Laramie Project runs September 15 through October 14, with a special Friday, September 22, performance sponsored by the National Leather Association, which will be selling September 22 tickets to members of the LGBTQ community to ensure that they have a safe space to see this production.

WHAT: 25th anniversary production of *The Laramie Project*

WHEN: September 15–October 14

WHERE: Theatre Suburbia, 5201 Mitchelldale St.

Info: TheatreSuburbia.org or (713) 682-3525

rapidly," Reeve emphasizes. "It's almost too late to open your eyes to that. I'm 73 years old, and I don't have time to open my eyes too many more times. The young people need to step up and start protecting their own rights. This play might wake them up to that."

Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father and the co-founder of the Matthew Shepard

Foundation, believes *The Laramie Project* highlights a truth that LGBTQ Americans confront daily. "We still have a two-tier system of citizenship. You have access to all rights in this country if you're straight, and only part of the rights of an American citizen if you're LGBTQ. I just don't understand that as a father—why they're not equal. It really pisses me off that these kids have no equal chance to succeed.



Matthew Shepard's mother, Judy

The Matthew Shepard Foundation

The nonprofit is expanding their outreach to the transgender community.



For almost 25 years, the Matthew Shepard Foundation's mission has been "to amplify the story of Matthew Shepard

to inspire individuals, organizations and communities to embrace the dignity and equality of all people." Following in the footsteps of Shepard, the foundation has consistently sought to make the world a more caring and just place through civil-rights advocacy and efforts to change hearts and minds.

"Everybody can see something of Matt in themselves, or in somebody they're close to," says Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father and the Foundation's co-founder. "He wanted to work overseas for the State

Department and bring to other countries what he thought he had in the way of equal rights, responsibilities, and privileges in this country."

Shepard is dismayed by the wave of state legislation taking aim at the trans community. "The reason we're now focusing on the trans community is because that's where most of the hate and the evil laws exist," notes Shepard. "Because they want to start telling a parent how to raise their kid, what I'd like to do is sue them for child support. If you're going to tell me how to raise my child, you must be one of the parents, so you should be paying child support because you're such an expert. I also want to see their medical and psychology degrees to show me why they're such experts."

Shepard sees these attacks against the

trans community as nothing more than fear-mongering. "They're just doing this because they have no other issues. Gun violence, climate change, the war in Ukraine with Russia—they have nothing to say about that. The same thing with the book banning—it's a sad situation when you can't read the book that you want."

He's also had it with evangelical Christians and groups like Moms for Liberty, who describe the LGBTQ community as "groomers." "Aren't they trying to 'groom' everybody to [interpret the Bible] their way? They're grooming people to be hateful and to exclude me and my community."



For more info, visit matthewshepard.org.

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Selecting a Retirement Savings Plan

As a business owner, you may also have access to enhanced retirement plan options. Depending on whether or not you have employees, you could offer a retirement savings plan to also help these individuals save for the future, as well as to attract quality talent to your company. In addition, implementing a retirement plan for your company can also provide tax advantages for the business itself.

There are various retirement plan options available. These can include a 401(k), an SEP IRA, and a SIMPLE IRA.

By exploring these options—and understanding the eligibility requirements and contribution limits—you can choose a company retirement plan that aligns with your business and personal goals. Working with a financial planning professional can help you narrow down which business retirement plan may be best for you, based on your specific needs and objectives.

Protecting Your Company from Accidents

Regardless of what type of business you own, it is possible that accidents or incidents may occur. Therefore, if your company offers physical products and/or operates out of a physical location, it is critical that you have the right type of insurance to recoup losses from damage, theft, or natural disasters. It is also recommended that you carry liability insurance to handle any legal action taken against your company for injuries, errors, and other situations.

Some business owners obtain umbrella insurance. This coverage can offer an extra layer of liability protection by covering costs that go beyond other liability coverage limits. In this case, a commercial umbrella policy can take over when your company's other liability coverage limits have been reached.

Business Succession Strategies

Depending on your goals for the company, you may wish to pass it on to a loved one or other successor when you retire, or possibly sell it to an interested buyer. In any case, it is important that you have a business succession plan in place. Otherwise, the company could be forced to close in the event of an unexpected incident such as the death or disability of an

owner, partner, or even a key employee.

Business-succession planning involves creating a strategy for transferring the ownership and leadership of a company. Doing so can help to safeguard the business itself, as well as its employees and customers.

A well-executed business succession plan should ideally maximize the value of the company and protect the interests of its stakeholders. One of the most critical aspects of business succession planning is funding the transfer.

In the case of an unexpected passing or disability of a partner, owner, or key employee, "key person" insurance can play a big role. This is a type of life or disability insurance that provides funds for covering various financial obligations.

For instance, the funds from a key-person insurance policy can be used to buy out the shares or interests of the disabled or deceased individual. So in essence, it could allow the business to continue operating smoothly. With ample funds available, key-person insurance can also help to facilitate stability during the company's transition period.

Your Team of Advisors

Running a business can take a great deal of time and effort—whether it is a large corporation or a one-person company—so it's critical that you have it properly structured.

Seek the guidance of qualified professionals—including a financial planner, a CPA, and a legal advisor—who can work with you and provide valuable insights and knowledge in navigating the complexities of business structuring, retirement planning, and financial and tax management.

Additionally, an advisor who is knowledgeable about issues that affect the LGBTQ community can be beneficial, as they may be able to better understand your situation.

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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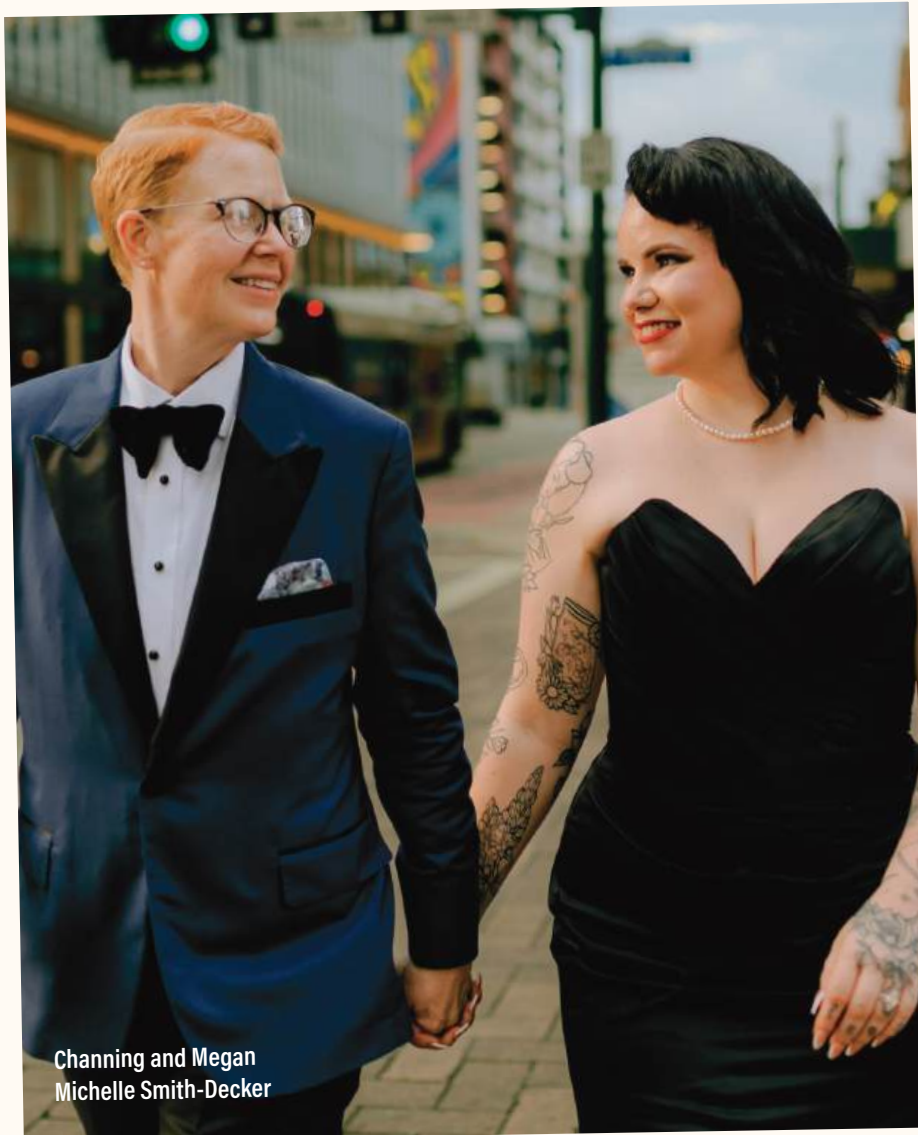
Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



LGBTQ+ VICTORY FUND BLACK LEADERS CAUCUS RECEPTION August 6, 2023

Dozens of politically-minded guests joined LGBTQ+ Victory Fund president Annise Parker and Jovon Tyler for a reception honoring the Victory Fund's Black Leaders Caucus. The event, which was held at the home of Mayor Parker and her wife, also featured special guest San Antonio City Council member Jalen McKee-Rodriguez.

WEDDING GUIDE



Channing and Megan
Michelle Smith-Decker

A Surprise Ceremony

Channing and Megan Michelle Smith-Decker's wedding was a mystery to their guests.

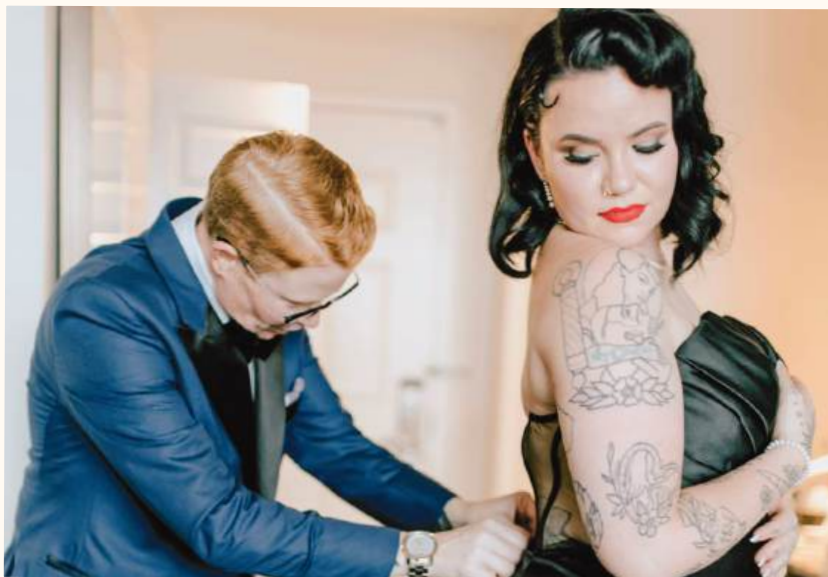
By JENNY BLOCK
Photos by KAITS IMAGES



Channing and Megan Smith-Decker first met in 2016 when Channing reached out to Megan and asked her if she could cut her hair. "She's been my barber ever since," Chan-

ning says. Luckily, Channing had a sweet pickup line ready for Megan: "Do you cut short women's hair? I mean, *I'm* not short, but my hair is!" From then on, Channing adds, "I'm convinced she's been hooked."

Channing, 44, is from Cleburne, Texas, and is a contract administrator at Olin Corporation in Freeport. Megan Michelle, 33, a native of Columbus, Texas, graduated from Texas Barber College in Columbus and now owns and operates The County Seat Barbers in Angleton.



The couple say they can't recall one specific time when they knew they had found their forever mate. "We remember feeling safe for the first time in a relationship. We loved how effective and healthy the communication was between us," Channing recalls. "Also, what it looked like to have your partner show up for you. When we experienced these things with one another, we knew we wanted it to last forever."

When it came to proposing, Channing was the one who decided to pop the question. They had planned a date day, and Channing sensed that it was going to be the big day.

"I had the ring in the door pocket of the car, hiding it from her," Channing says. "On the way to the car, we decided I would drive, which meant Megan would be right next to her ring." As Megan was getting in the car, Channing had to grab the ring so Megan wouldn't see it.

When they arrived at the local Goodwill store, Channing made her move. "I dropped to one knee in the parking lot and asked her to spend the rest of her life with me. Megan said yes, and when I asked her if she wanted to see the ring, she said, 'Not yet. All I've ever needed was you, and I just want to take in this last moment before we go to the next chapter.'"

They sat in that parking lot for a long time. "We even had spectators cheering us on as we made the choice to choose each other for the rest of our lives," Channing recalls.

The two were wed on July 2, 2023, at Lawless Spirits & Kitchen in downtown Houston's Rice Hotel, with Judge Jeff Gilbert officiating. "We chose Jeff because he has been a client and friend of Megan's for years. He's witnessed the highs and lows of Megan's life, and encouraged [her to begin] this new chapter—all [while sitting in] the barber's chair during his haircuts," Channing says.

The couple knew right from the start that

a traditional ceremony was not their style. "We decided, with the help of our wedding coordinator and great friend, Alisha Shuck (owner of Ambition Events & Services), to [invite our guests to] a 'Murder Mystery Birthday Party,' written and narrated by Davis Gordon Gilbert—which was actually our surprise wedding ceremony," Channing explains.

Guests were completely shocked that there was a surprise wedding ceremony at the end of the murder mystery. "We also surprised our guests with entertainment provided by the one and only Cyn Queen," Channing adds. "Our only challenge was keeping this big secret!"

All of their vendors were LGBTQ-friendly, of course. "Everyone we encountered was incredibly friendly, welcoming, and respectful

of our love—and our wants for our special day," Channing notes.

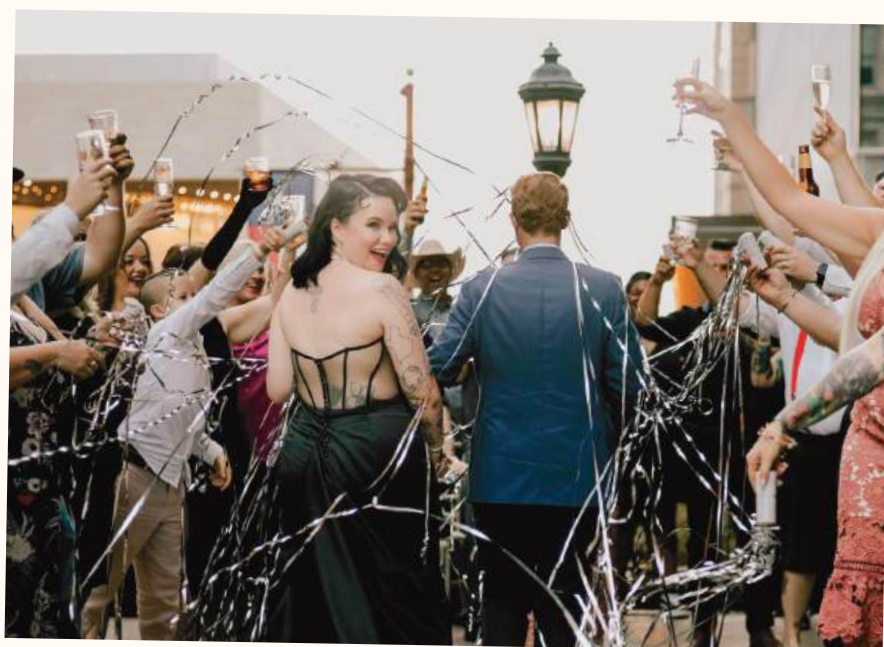
The couple chose to get ready for the day together instead of in separate locations, as is traditional. "For us, being able to share every moment together, including getting ready, was special. It relieved a lot of stressors that some couples generally feel," Channing adds.

Immediately following their ceremony, the two drove to Austin for a mini-moon. "We chose Austin because it is our happy place and somewhere we love to visit. We plan to go to Costa Rica for our actual honeymoon. Neither of us have ever been there, but we are drawn to the happiness and the culture."

The two could not be happier in their home in Rosharon, a short drive from Angleton. "Channing consistently strives to do everything to the best of her ability, not only through her actions, but also in how she shows up for others," Megan concludes. "The way she lights up when she speaks of those she loves is contagious, and inspires [us to realize] that we all have the capability to love deeper."

"Megan is the kindest and most gentle soul I have ever encountered," Channing adds. "She strives to always encourage others to be their best self. She is an impactful leader and is truly inspiring. I'm lucky to call her my wife."

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[2320 Crocker St, Houston TX 77006](#)

Barcode

With the longest daily Happy Hours in Montrose from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., this neighborhood watering hole is a popular spot. Drag shows occur Wednesday through Sunday, and the bar hosts karaoke on Mondays and Wednesdays.
[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](#)

BUDDY'S

"EveryBUDDY'S welcome" at this modern LGBTQ bar with "events as diverse as Houston." The bar features cocktails, beer, karaoke, pool, DJ's, and more.
[2409 Grant St STE A, Houston TX 77006](#)

Club Crystal

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

The newest LGBTQ club in Southeast Houston, where couples are welcome. Friday-night super show with Rosselyn D Montiel. \$3 shots. No cover, free parking.
[10705 Gulf Freeway, Houston, TX 77034](#)

Crocker Bar

This comfortably remodeled Montrose nightspot offers karaoke on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and extended Happy Hour prices throughout the week.
[2312 Crocker, Houston TX 77006](#)

Eagle Houston

As part of the worldwide Eagle family, Eagle Houston is the definitive home of the man's man. Leather, bear, or jock, you'll find them all here. This neighbor-

hood bar has multiple levels and outdoor decks, and regularly features DJs and male dancers.

[611 Hyde Blvd., Houston TX 77006](#)

George Country Sports Bar

Regulars rule at this comfortable neighborhood sports bar with dart boards and pool tables. Sports fans can watch games on televisions, and Steak Night with chef Michele Free is on Thursday nights.

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

Hamburger Mary's Houston

This drag-queen themed downtown restaurant serves up the best in entertainment, delicious food, and gloriously yummy drinks.

[1008 Prairie St., Houston TX 77006](#)

JR's Bar & Grill

Proudly serving Montrose for 40 years, JR's Bar & Grill offers drag Sunday through Thursday, karaoke Wednesday through Sunday, and daily Happy Hour specials on a spacious courtyard patio.
[808 Pacific St, Houston TX 77006](#)

KIKI

Montrose's newest experience! Award winning DJs, spectacular cocktails, amazing lighting and huge screens make for the best club vibe in town. Doors open at 9p. Thursday - Sunday.
[2409 Grant St., STE D., Houston, TX 77006](#)

La Granja Disco y Cantina

One of Houston's favorite Latin LGBTQ bars, La Granja Disco y Cantina is open Wednesday through Sunday and features daily Happy Hour prices, DJs, drag shows, and karaoke nights.
[5505 Pinemont Dr, Houston TX 77092](#)

Michael's Outpost

The only piano bar in Montrose offers great drinks, award-winning drag shows, and a roundup of talented musicians taking turns on the keys seven nights a week.

[1419 Richmond Ave, Houston TX 77006](#)

Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon

Houston's only LGBTQ country dance hall is open Wednesdays through Sundays and hosts dance classes, steak nights, bingo, and karaoke.

[11410 Hempstead Hwy, Houston TX 77092](#) →

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BAR GUIDE

Papi's

Houston's newest Latin LGBTQ club offers dancing, drag, and game shows all week long. Visit Papi's and experience the spicy side of Montrose!

570 Waugh Dr, Houston TX 77019

Pearl Bar

Houston's only lesbian bar—one of just 21 left in the nation—is home to a wide variety of events including weekly drag-king shows, nationally known LGBTQ DJs, and a queer farmers market on the patio.

4216 Washington, Houston TX 77007

ReBar

This full-service venue offers distinctive food with Southern flair, a popular patio, multiple bars, VIP bottle-service areas, a large dance floor, and some of Houston's most acclaimed resident DJs.

202 Tuam St, Houston TX 77006

Sabroso Patio Bar and Restaurant

Northwest Houston's newest LGBTQ destination, serving delicious food and cocktails in a beautiful patio setting.

5503 Pinemont Dr, Houston TX 77092

South Beach

Montrose's favorite dance club has re-opened to rave reviews. South Beach's state-of-the-art sound, laser light show, and world-class DJs make the club a must-visit destination.

810 Pacific Street, Houston TX 77006

RIPCORD

Since 1982, this leather bar has been a fixture in Houston's LGBTQ community. It's where the wild, the weird, and the kinky gather on a nightly basis—no pretense, no gatekeeping, just pure camaraderie and debauchery.

715 Fairview, Houston TX 77006

Tony's Corner Pocket

If you love a friendly bar staff, sexy male dancers, and entertaining showgirls, Tony's Corner Pocket is the perfect spot. The bar is open seven days a week and hosts shows like Tornado Tuesdays, Wepa Wednesdays, and Sassy Saturdays.

817 W. Dallas, Houston TX 77019

Viviana's Nite Club

This weekend-only LGBTQ Latin dance club is home to a variety of DJs, singers, talent shows, and Sunday strippers.

4624 Dacoma St, Houston TX 77092

GALVESTON

23rd St. Station Piano Bar

This upscale piano bar with an extensive martini menu offers daily drink specials. Happy Hour prices from 4 to 7pm and live entertainment every evening. Closed Monday and Tuesday. Weekends include a full-service outside garden patio bar.

1706 23rd Street

Galveston 77550

Robert's Lafitte

Texas' oldest bar has been open for over half a century, and is home to Galveston's original drag show.

2501 Avenue Q, Galveston TX 77550

Island Time Bar and Grill

Located at the historic Seawall Boulevard on 31st Street, this Galveston spot offers dancing, food, drinks, drag, and a wide variety of themed nights.

3102 Seawall Blvd, Galveston TX 77550

HUNTSVILLE

Ranch Hill Saloon

The first (and only) LGBTQ bar in Walker County offers DJs, dancing, drink specials, and drag shows.

1000 12th St, Huntsville TX 77340

SPRING

The Room

This bar and video lounge has a laid-back atmosphere and features daily drink specials, karaoke, free pool, drag shows, and live DJs several nights a week.

4915 FM 2920 #148,

Spring TX 77388

COLLEGE STATION

Halo

The only LGBTQ dance club in Bryan/College Station is this sleek spot located smack in the middle of Aggieland.

121 North Main Street,

Bryan TX 77803

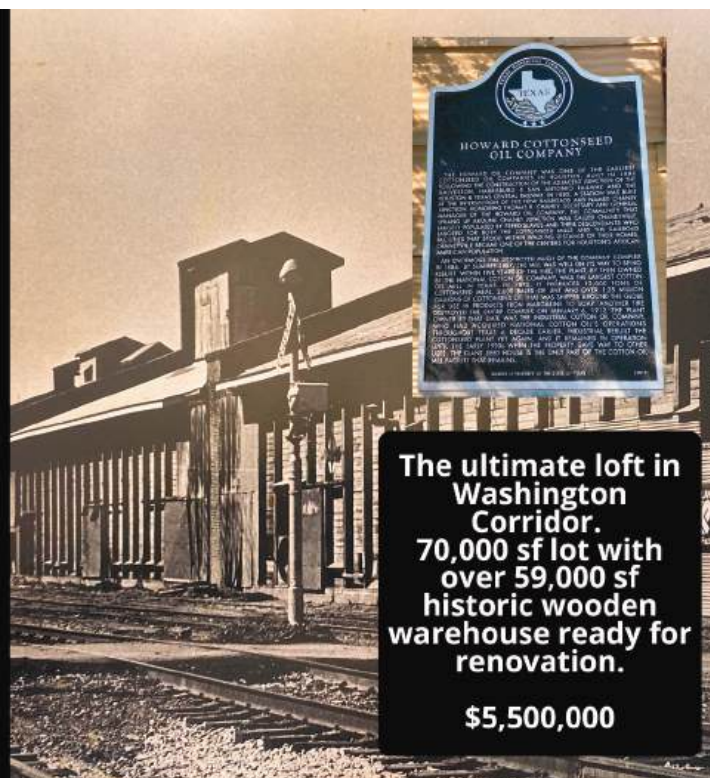
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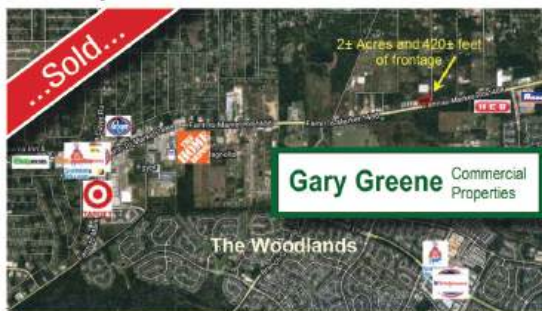


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Prepare to Move Forward

Virgo season is all about advancing our goals after the 19th.



We are still in the Mercury and Venus retrograde until the 19th, so we'll begin to improve by midmonth. But we aren't out of the weeds

until closer to the end of the month, when Mercury and Venus are moving at their normal speeds.

The sun enters Libra, the Autumnal Equinox, on the 23rd. Mercury remains in Virgo, Venus in Leo, Mars in Libra, Jupiter and Uranus in Taurus, Saturn in Pisces, and Pluto in Capricorn. Our New Moon is on the 14th in Virgo. The Full Moon is on the 29th in Aries, when we are ready to tackle some new and exciting projects.

Good days this month are September 4, 8, 21, 25, and 30. Difficult days are September 1, 3, 15, 19, 24, and 29.

ADRIAN HERNANDEZ

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

You begin the month by working on getting your routines and life back into some sort of order. The first half of the month is best for cleaning out and getting everything back in place. You are also more motivated to improve diet or exercise patterns. Later in the month, your relationship energies are very active. Mars, your ruler, is in Libra, your opposite sign. This should be a time to put some positive energy into your partnerships. If you aren't getting enough attention, you may generate some problems to bring both of you closer together. Some of you are still wondering if you are on the right career path or not. That should be resolved later this year.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

The cows and bulls are in a more creative time as the month begins. You are working on making your life more fun and enjoyable. As soon as your ruler, Venus, goes direct on the 19th, it is time to move forward. This is an excellent time to consider a new position at work or start something on your own. You continue to look for things that excite your passion and reduce the daily drudgery. Later in the month, you are more aware of your work and health conditions. This can be an excellent time to visit the doctor and improve your diet. At work, you are more short-tempered and may have a more difficult time dealing with others. Home is a great place for escape this month. You are making your nest much more comfortable.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Home, family, career, and security are the main topics for you this month. You have been working to make

your home a more comfortable place with your ruler, Mercury, in Virgo retrograde. You will also be spending more time with family and close friends. And if the heat doesn't kill you, this is a good time to have a party at your house! Later in the month, you are exploring hobbies and spending more time with your children. You are definitely looking for some creative outlets. Children could be more independent and unruly over the next month and a half. Career continues to be very strong as you explore ways to move forward, take on a new position, start something on your own or, if you are older, cutting back on work and having more fun.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Your daily activities are keeping you busy, so you may have a hard time keeping up. This is a good time to improve old habit patterns. You are more talkative than usual, so this can be a better time for writing, podcasting, taking or teaching a class, and reviewing your social-media content for needed revisions. By the middle of the month, you are more focused on home and family. After the 19th is a very good time for home improvement, moving, or spending more time with your family. You have also been focused on finances with Venus retrograde, perhaps taking care of old debts or incorrect billings. After the 19th is the time to put your new ideas about improved finances into action. You are not very patient this month, so find some positive ways to direct this energy!

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

The focus this month continues to be on you, your relationships, and what you value the most. With primary relationships, you have been reviewing what works and

what doesn't. You have been working on improving communications and renewing your connections. If that hasn't been working, you may be ready to move on. You are also exploring new ways to expand your resources, get rid of services you no longer need, and work on a budget. As the month opens, you are more vocal about your needs and you are better at communicating. This continues to be an improved time for career. You are looking for more freedom, more choices, and less connection to the grid.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

This is your yearly cycle when the sun returns to Virgo—normally a time of reassessment and setting new goals. This has been even stronger with Mercury retrograde in your sign until the 19th. You have been more than ready to move forward. Long-term planning and relationship goals are now more important. With partnerships, this is a time to make sure you're on the same page. This is a better time for negotiations, which can help positive relationships to move forward. In difficult partnerships, you won't move forward without resolving the issues. You are exploring ways to be more efficient at work. Money and resources are on the menu after midmonth. You can be more impulsive with your spending!

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

September offers you periods for rest and retreat from your obligations and responsibilities. You are more interested in the bigger questions of why we are here and what is our purpose. You will be more focused on yourself and your relationships. Mars,

planet of self-protection and anger, is visiting your sign for the next 40 days or so. Mars makes you take life more personally, and become less patient. This can be a great time to start a health program. By the middle of the month, you are ready to step forward as you continue to work on getting rid of debt and giving yourself more freedom.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

You have been reconnecting with friends and family, and that trend continues this month and through the end of the year. This is also a more creative time for you. You have been reviewing career choices and getting ready to put your new ideas into action after the 19th. Some of you have been trying to figure out how to make your hobby a side gig. Relationships continue to be positive. If you are single, this is a great time to meet new potentials. In existing partnerships, you are looking to bring new fun and energy into your relationships. Travel continues to look good for your sign. Later in the month, you are ready to take a break for some alone time as your psychic sensitivities increase. Self-care becomes more important.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

Career and work responsibilities continue to be very strong as you reorganize and take a step back to evaluate. By the middle of the month, you will be ready to move forward and put new ideas into play. Your social

calendar improves. This is also a better time to market your services or products. People are more receptive to your advice. Home and family are requiring some of your time. You may be considering relocating, moving, downsizing, and becoming more involved with the family. For you older folks, this can be a time of retirement and cutting back. You are definitely making changes in your work and health routines. You are ready to be free of things that hold you back. You expect your partner to be more responsible, but it would help if you let them know that!

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

This is going to be a busy month as you enter a time of expanding your knowledge base. You may be sharing your insights more on social media in order to get your name out there. Late September is an excellent time for starting a podcast, teaching a class, and connecting more with the global community. Your career energies are very strong, so you might want to take on a leadership role, look for a promotion, or start something on your own. You won't be very patient this month, so try to distance yourself from people who get in your way. Connecting with friends and colleagues can be very fruitful this month!

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

The waves of change continue to shift your home and your family connections. If you are younger, you are looking for ways to establish a home as your personal

foundation. If you are older, you may want to step away from past obligations and downsize, remodel, or possibly move. This can also be a time when family roles are changing, and you may need to step up. Partnerships slowly become easier after the 19th. You are more comfortable moving forward as you work to free yourself from debt and the fears that have held you back. By the end of the month, you are in a more creative and free time when you could further your education, market yourself on social media, or work with international businesses.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

You continue to feel a need to take more responsibility for your choices. You are watching your boundaries and avoiding people you have no use for. Personal relationships have been unsettled, and will continue that way until after the 19th. You are trying to determine if some relationships are worth the effort. Renew the ones you find beneficial, and move on from the others. Your desire to be more secure remains strong. For you older folks, this can be a time of retirement. Younger ones will consider becoming more of a leader at work or in the community. You may even want to start something on your own. You want to have more freedom to do just the things that matter.

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Living Out Loud

Viva Vidalia is sweet like the onion, but she can still bring out the tears.

By SAM BYRD | Photo by ALEX ROSA



With a self-deprecating sense of humor and the fashion sense of a supermodel, Viva Vidalia brings a quirky yet relatable persona to her shows. The maven grew up near the Big Apple, and now she's

conquering the Lone Star State with her unique brand of fun and flair. But don't be fooled—she can deliver a ballad live that will create a flood of emotions. Read on for more about this dazzling diva.

Pronouns?

She/Her while in drag,
They/Them when out of drag

Hometown?

Hempstead, New York

What got you interested in drag?

I was 18 and went by myself to a Gay Night at a bar in my hometown. There was a drag show, and as soon as the first performer finished I was completely hooked. After the show, I saw the drag queens getting free alcohol at the bar and decided this was something I needed to do. I put on Payless wedges and one of my mom's dresses and went in drag the next week. Someone bought me a drink, and the rest is history.

Describe your performing persona.

Versatile. If you need a dancing girl, I'll buck the house down. If you need a glamour girl, I'll throw on a gown. My drag persona is everything and anything my audience needs it to be.

How did you pick your name?

Viva is the Spanish word for "to live," so I like that my name is a verb. Vidalia is a sweet onion, and I really like onions.

What got you into fashion design, and what keeps you going?

I started making my own costumes out of necessity. I used to be about 150 pounds heavier than I am now, and finding designers who would make me costumes for reasonable prices was very difficult. So I learned how to make my own stuff.

Where might we have seen your fashions?

I have had things I've made on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Dragula*, and *Camp Wannakiki*. I've even had some pieces I've worked on walk down the Met Gala red carpet. As braggadocious as it sounds, I've been doing this so long that I've kind of lost track of

who's wearing what, and where my things go. I think out of all the places my designs have ended up, I still love seeing local performers wearing my stuff around town.

What is your secret talent?

I don't know if I have a talent that I haven't already exploited for cash, but I think most people don't know that I started my music career as an instrumentalist. I originally went to college as a violin major before transitioning into a vocal major.

What's your guilty pleasure?

I love a naughty romance novel. I have large Audible library of queer romance novels. There isn't a lot of romance in my life right now, so I get my lovey-dovey fix from novels.

Drag performers are under attack in many states right now. What are your thoughts?

It's definitely hard being a performer in a state that is actively trying to criminalize you for it. I think that the GOP needed a boogeyman, and drag was an easy target for them. All we can do is to continue what most of us have been doing since coming out: fight. Go to the rallies, get your friends and families to vote out the conservative zealots, keep educating, keep being visible. It's more important than ever to be as queer as you possibly can.

Marry, Shag, Kill: Ryan Seacrest, Ryan Gosling, Ryan Reynolds?

I think I'd marry, shag, *and* kill all three, amass the fortune as their widow (after solidifying my name in their wills, of course) and then live out my life as an eccentric billionaire who throws days-long orgies at a private estate somewhere just outside of New York City.

What have you learned from drag that you use in your everyday life?

Find the humor in everything. No matter what's going on in your life, if you can find the comedy in it, then it makes it easier to feel like everything will be OK.



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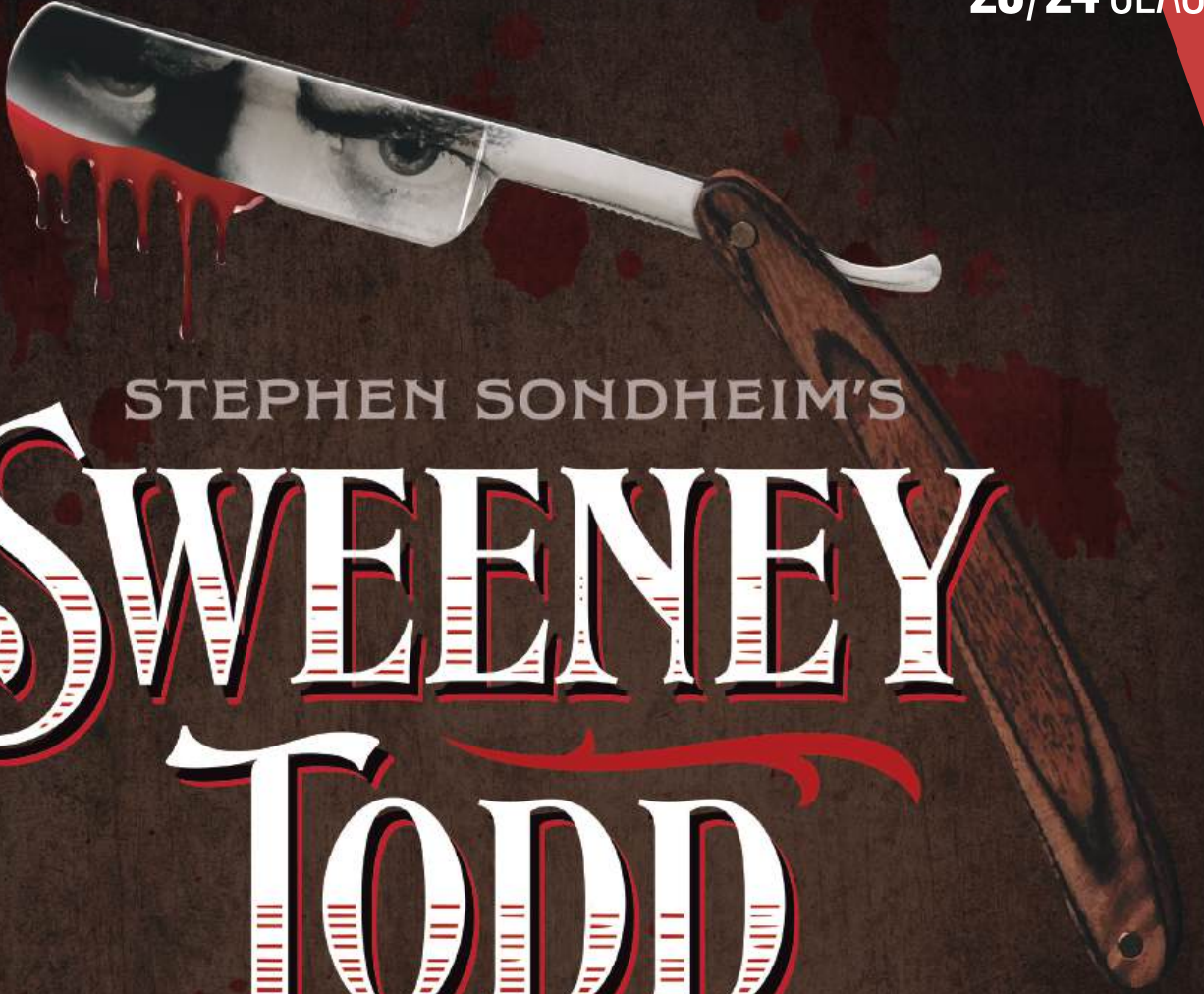
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