

➡ **QUEER VOICES: BEN CHAVEZ'S LAST DAY, COUNTY FAIR PREMIERES IN HOUSTON** Pg.52

OutSmart

MARCH 2025

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

REPRESENTATION & RESILIENCE

Diamond Stylz on her
GLAAD-nominated
graphic novel
Pg.42

A SAFE SPACE FOR YOUTH

Carrie Rai and
her colleagues
at Tony's Place
Pg.35

WOMEN in POWER

Game CHANGER

Angela Hucles Mangano
is shaping the future
of women's soccer
at the Houston Dash Pg.30

PLUS

CIVIL-RIGHTS CHAMPION

Trey Yates'
lifelong fight
for equality
Pg.24

A photograph of two men, one white and one Black, smiling and hugging. The image is overlaid with a blue tint.

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A small logo featuring a stylized flame or heart shape in blue, orange, and yellow colors.

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OutSmart
HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE



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GAME CHANGER

Women in Power: Angela Hucles Mangano is shaping the future of women's soccer at the Houston Dash.

Photography courtesy of Houston Dash

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Our March issue is highlighting both Women's History Month and the annual Transgender Day of Visibility on March 31. Writer Lou Weaver details plans for this year's Trot for

Trans Visibility 5K Fun Run, which builds on the success of the 2024 event organized by Lou in collaboration with endurance athlete Cal Dobbs. Organizers encourage trans individuals and allies to show up on March 29 to stand together and affirm that trans people will not be erased.

Our cover star Angela Hucles Mangano has spent her life breaking barriers in soccer—from playing on all-boys teams as a child to recently becoming president of women's soccer for the Houston Dash. Writer David Clarke spoke with her about the culture of community involvement she is fostering in her new role as an advocate for greater visibility and investment in women's sports.

Then we meet the women leading Tony's Place, a local drop-in center for LGBTQ youth that provides essential services and a safe space for those facing homelessness and instability. Carrie Rai, Alyssa Kelly, and Giana Ramirez all see the organization as more than

just a shelter—it's a place of belonging and empowerment. Writer David Clarke details how it has become a beacon of resilience as political attacks on queer youth escalate.

Also in our Women in Power feature this month is longtime City Hall visionary Susan Christian, the events planner responsible for decades of major city-wide events. Susan has begun a new chapter in her career as Rice University's events planner. And don't miss our story on Paris Kissel, another public-relations leader who empowers her clients to build community and advocate for making the world a kinder place.

Writer Brett Cullum spoke with trans activist Diamond Stylz, whose children's book *Becoming Who We Are* is in the running for a GLAAD award this month in Los Angeles. Stylz' graphic novel is centered around her fight to wear a gown to the high school prom, but it especially highlights trans joy and the power of community.

Writer Connor Behrens brings us Ashley and Jacquie Creath's love story that began in a Montrose bar and has continued through almost two decades of community service. As faithful volunteers at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, they're helping to make the

annual Out at the Rodeo day a big success.

Our Arts & Entertainment news covers Houston-based artist and advocate Ben Chavez, who is having a busy month onstage as he premieres his *Last Day, County Fair* (part of Performing Arts Houston's New/Now series) and then teams up with singer Courtney Markowitz for the 72nd annual Diana Awards gala. Writer David Clarke interviews Chavez, who tells us about his commitment to empowering LGBTQ youth through storytelling and music.

Like many independent media outlets, *OutSmart* faces financial challenges as we remain committed to telling LGBTQ stories that might otherwise go unheard. If you believe in the power of independent local LGBTQ journalism, please consider becoming a charter member of the OutSmart Foundation. Even a small monthly donation can help sustain our mission.



Greg Jeu
Publisher



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for LGBTQ News and Media

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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



The Mahogany Project held its Coalition for Trans Liberation Breakfast designed to drive systemic change on February 1, 2025, at the Montrose Center. Pictured are participants.



On Feb. 2, 2025, Mr. and Miss Silver Spurs held a benefit for TGRA at Los Robles. Pictured are **Kirk Wyllie**, 2nd Runner-Up Mr. IGRA 2025; **Iowna Sweetpea Standards**, Miss Silver Spurs; **Justan Standards**, Mr. Silver Spurs; **Kevan O'Neil**, Mister IGRA 2025.



Pride Houston 365 held its 2025 Logo Unveiling and Announcement of the Pride Grand Marshal Nominees at Lustre Pearl on February 5, 2025. Pictured are Pride Houston 365 members, supporters, and Pride Grand Marshal Nominees.



On February 6, 2025, a re-election fundraiser for Jonathan Estrada for Pasadena City Council was held at the home of Mayor Annise Parker. Pictured are **Mayor John Whitmire**, former **Mayor Annise Parker**, **Kathy Hubbard**, and **Eric Blackwell**.



Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston Luncheon "Wag & Whiskers" was held at Hotel ZaZa on February 8, 2025. Pictured are **Kim Padgett**, **Frank Billingsley**, and **Ernie Manouse**.



On February 12, 2025, the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber hosted the chapter meeting for The Houston Business Action to End HIV Initiative at Amegy Bank. Pictured are participants.



On February 13, 2025, the Harris County Democratic Lawyers Association held its February 2025 CLE with Harris County District Attorney Sean Teare at Pinstripes. Pictured are **Kimberly Dang**, HCDLA President; Harris County District Attorney **Sean Teare**; and **Ross Miller**.



OUT in Tech hosted "Here for You—A February Pick Me Up" at Second Draught Craft Beer Pub on February 13, 2025. Pictured are those in attendance.



The Krewe of Olympus Texas Ball "New Orleans French Quarter" was held at The Wyndham Hotel Heritage Center on February 15, 2025. Pictured are **King Olympus LIII Bill Henry** and **Queen Olympus LII David Wallace**.



On February 18, 2025, a reception for Judge Fran Watson, Probate Court 5, was held at Carrabba's. Pictured are **Judge Jerry Simoneaux**, **Judge Fran Watson**, and **Judge Pamela Medina**.



The Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber held its 3rd Thursday Breakfast Community with guest Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee on February 20, 2025. Pictured are **County Attorney Christian Menefee** and **Tammi Wallace**.



The Mystery and Fantasy Mardi Gras Party 2025 "Broadway" was held at Numbers on February 22, 2025. Pictured are costume contest winner Max as Lydia from *Beetlejuice*, emcee **Robert Harwood**, and judge **Clifford Dotson**.

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QUEER THINGS to DO

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March 7**Out at the Ballet for *In the Night***

Houston Ballet and *OutSmart* magazine host a special reception for LGBTQ ballet lovers and friends. Get 25% off select seats, a complimentary drink voucher, and access to the reception area before the show and during intermission. tinyurl.com/yeywzbw4



COMMUNITY

March 22**Out at the Rodeo 2025**

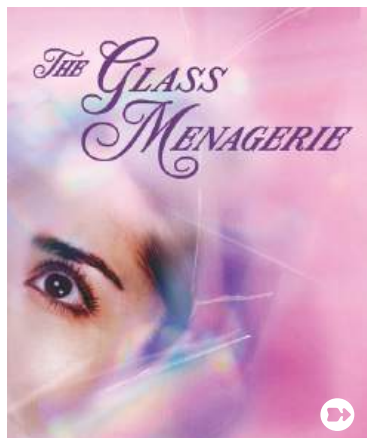
Join LGBTQ rodeo lovers in celebrating community while enjoying Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo events, live music, and heart-pounding carnival rides. tinyurl.com/2nhz9ez6



COMMUNITY

March 29**Trot for Trans Visibility 2025**

Triple A Alliance is celebrating the annual Trans Day of Visibility. Proceeds from the 5K run will support the alliance and the Trans Legal Aid Clinic Texas. tinyurl.com/5n7kfzt4



STAGE

March 6

ActOut for The Glass Menagerie

Ticket holders for the Alley Theatre's production of Tennessee Williams' classic *The Glass Menagerie* can enjoy a pre-performance mixer with music, socializing, light bites, and drinks. tinyurl.com/mv2ht7z2



STAGE

March 6-7

New/Now Project Premiere: Last Day, County Fair

Houston favorite Ben Chavez premieres his *Last Day, County Fair*, one of the 2024-25 winners of the Houston Artist Commissioning Project. tinyurl.com/22nznfdt

STAGE

March 8

HERstory: A Celebration of Women's Voices

In honor of International Women's Day, Pride Chorus Houston presents a special concert paying tribute to trailblazing women. tinyurl.com/bdcm3jhx



COMMUNITY

March 9

36th Annual Walk to End HIV

Lace up your sneakers and join Allies in Hope to work toward an end to the HIV epidemic in Houston and beyond. tinyurl.com/3kepf5uz



STAGE

March 10

2025 ExxonMobil Theater District Open House

Explore downtown Houston's world-class theaters during a day of fun and learning for all ages, with interactive activities and theater tours. tinyurl.com/wchn5pas

COMMUNITY

March 13

Bringin' in the Green

LGBTQ Houston's favorite St. Patrick's Day celebration is back! This evening of fun benefits the Montrose Center and features an open bar, hors d'oeuvres, and a luxury silent auction. tinyurl.com/4n7radja



COMMUNITY

March 20

Houston Champagne Brunch

Join the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund in supporting LGBTQ candidates while toasting out elected officials in Texas and beyond. tinyurl.com/ywbnn4n5

ART

March 4-29

International Watermedia Exhibition

The Watercolor Art Society of Houston is hosting the exhibition this year, featuring the finest contemporary watermedia art from around the world. tinyurl.com/mw5rweut



COMMUNITY

March 28

72nd Annual Diana Awards

Get ready for a night of glamour, hilarity, and heartfelt giving as The Diana Foundation—America's oldest LGBTQ organization—presents their festive Diana Awards. tinyurl.com/5cu7csu8



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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

QUEERTHINGS to DO SAVE the DATES



STAGE

April 5

Houston Pride Band presents Lotería

Experience a concert inspired by the imagery and stories of the Latin American game of chance. tinyurl.com/54n6pvns



STAGE

April 9

Cynthia Erivo with the Houston Symphony

Cynthia Erivo brings her gravity-defying voice to Jones Hall for a one-night-only performance backed by the full Houston Symphony. tinyurl.com/b9v7b4yt



COMMUNITY

April 20

Bunnies on the Bayou 46

Bunnies on the Bayou returns to Sesquicentennial Park in downtown Houston. The outdoor party features live outdoor DJs, entertainment, drinks, food for purchase, dancing, and sponsor booths. tinyurl.com/yc2yms9r

STAGE

June 28, 29

Beyoncé's Cowboy Carter Tour

Beyoncé brings her national tour to Houston's NRG Stadium for two shows. tinyurl.com/9mf54n7p



Submit your events at calendar@outsmartmagazine.com

ENTERTAINER LINEUP MARCH 4 - 23 2025



A calendar grid for the Entertainment Lineup 2025, featuring various artists and their performance dates from March 4 to March 23. The grid is organized by day of the week (Tuesday through Sunday) and includes artist portraits, names, and the specific day of the week they are performing. Some entries include special event titles and sponsors.

Day	Artist	Special Event / Sponsor
Tuesday, March 4	Reba McEntire	Opening Day Presented by Shell Federal Credit Union
Wednesday, March 5	Riley Green	Armed Forces Appreciation Day Presented by Crown Royal
Thursday, March 6	AJR	
Friday, March 7	Bun B's Birthday Bonanza	Black Heritage Day Presented by Kroger
Saturday, March 8	Bailey Zimmerman	
Sunday, March 9	Carin Leon	
Monday, March 10	Brad Paisley	First Responders Day Presented by BP America
Tuesday, March 11	Zach Top	
Wednesday, March 12	Lauren Daigle	Community Day Presented by TC Energy
Thursday, March 13	Jon Pardi	Volunteer Appreciation Day Presented by Phillips 66
Friday, March 14	Journey	
Saturday, March 15	Warren Zeviers	
Sunday, March 16	Grupo Frontera	Go Tejano Day Presented by Fiesta Mart
Monday, March 17	Charley Crockett	
Tuesday, March 18	Post Malone	
Wednesday, March 19	Old Dominion	
Thursday, March 20	Cody Jinks	
Friday, March 21	Parker McCollum	
Saturday, March 22	Brooks & Dunn	
Sunday, March 23	Luke Bryan	



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Choosing the Right Power of Attorney

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Choosing a power of attorney (POA) is one of the most significant decisions you can make when planning for the future. A power of attorney is a

trusted individual (or individuals) who can make important decisions on your behalf should you become incapacitated or otherwise unable to handle your affairs. The right choice requires careful consideration, as it entails significant responsibility and legal authority over your financial and health matters.

The Power of Attorney's Role

A POA can be appointed for different aspects of your life. The two primary types of POAs are:

- *Health Care Power of Attorney* – This person makes medical decisions on your behalf, ensuring that your health-care preferences and treatment plans are followed.
- *Financial Power of Attorney* – This person manages financial affairs such as paying bills, handling investments, and overseeing real estate transactions.

You may choose to designate one person for both roles or appoint two separate individuals, depending on their strengths and expertise. Regardless, the role comes with great responsibility, and it is not a decision to be taken lightly.

Key Considerations

When selecting a POA, several crucial factors should be taken into account:

- *Proximity and Accessibility*
Having a local POA can be highly beneficial. The closer they are, the easier it will be for them to handle legal matters, attend meetings, or respond quickly to emergencies. A POA who lives far away might face logistical challenges in managing affairs promptly.
- *Age and Longevity*
Choosing someone younger or at least in good health is a practical consid-

eration. Your POA should be someone who is likely to be available and capable of serving in the role for the foreseeable future. While age alone is not a determinant, an older POA might eventually face their own health challenges, which could impact their ability to act on your behalf.

- *Time and Availability*
Serving as a POA is a demanding role that requires time and commitment. Some people, due to career demands, family responsibilities, or personal constraints, may not have the bandwidth to take on this responsibility effectively. It is essential to choose someone who has the time and willingness to fulfill the role.
- *The POA's Decision-Making Skills*
Your POA should be someone who remains calm under pressure and can make sound decisions, especially in

stressful situations. If they will be your Health Care POA, they must be able to advocate for your wishes in medical settings, even when faced with emotional challenges. Similarly, a Financial POA should be level-headed, responsible, and capable of managing money prudently.

- *Financial and Legal Acumen*
A Financial POA should be comfortable handling money, managing investments, and making financial decisions in line with your best interests. If they lack expertise in these areas, they should at least have the wisdom to seek professional guidance when necessary.

Introducing Your POA to Your Financial Advisor

Once you have chosen your POA, it is a wise step to introduce them to your financial advisor. This ensures that your POA is not stepping into the role blindly should they need



to take action. A financial advisor can provide insight into your accounts, financial plan, and investment strategy, helping the POA make informed decisions. Additionally, establishing a relationship with your financial advisor beforehand can make the transition smoother if the POA ever needs to step in.

Discussing and Documenting Your Wishes

It is crucial to have open and honest discussions with your chosen POA about your expectations and wishes. Whether it's your preferences for medical treatment, financial priorities, or specific directives regarding asset management, providing clear instructions ensures that your wishes are honored. Legal documentation, such as a living will or advance directive, can provide additional clarity and support.

Consider Naming a Backup POA

Life is unpredictable, and circumstances may change. Your chosen POA may no longer be available or willing to serve when the time comes. Naming a contingent or backup POA is a smart move to ensure continuity in decision-making if your primary choice cannot fulfill the role.

Selecting the right power of attorney is a critical decision that requires thoughtful consideration. The individual(s) you choose should be trustworthy, responsible, and capable of handling the duties required. Whether you appoint one person or divide responsibilities between a Health Care POA and a Financial POA, your choice should be well-informed and discussed openly. Furthermore, introducing your POA to your financial advisor can help ensure a seamless transition when the time comes.

By taking these steps, you can have peace of mind knowing that your affairs will be managed according to your wishes, even if you are unable to make decisions yourself.

This information is not intended to be a substitute for individualized legal advice. Please consult your legal advisor regarding your specific 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. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com. Visit letsmakeaplan.org or midtownfyg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.



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Standing Tall, Running Proud

The Trot for Trans Visibility 5K is a powerful stand against erasure.

by LOU WEAVER | photos by NORA DAYTON

When I came out as trans back in 2007, no one really seemed to care about trans people. We were slightly invisible, or at least not the focus of the country's obsession.

But then in 2014, the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance was proposed. While the City Council was deliberating the issue, outside City Hall people were chanting, "No men in women's restrooms!" This was to be the rallying cry, beginning in Houston, traveling to North Carolina, and back to Texas with a vengeance in 2017. This attempt by some to erase people who do not conform to what they expect men and women to look like has swept the nation. During this time, more and more folks—including non-binary and gender-expansive folks—have come out. One would think this would make life different and it would make life easier.

Here we are. We are your friends, your family, your loved ones, and your co-workers. Yet, the more visible we become, the more we've had a target placed on our backs. In 2015, when same-sex marriage became legal, things really started changing. The rallying cry of "No men in women's restrooms" was all people could talk about, as far as the LGBTQ community went. It has become even harder to be who we are and to be out, to be visible.

In some ways, it feels as if it is a Catch-22. It's so important for people to see us—for kids to see trans grownups, and for parents to see that their kids have a future. Trans folks deserve to see other trans folks and be in community with them. Yet coming out and being loud and proud has led to so much hate and bigotry.

The word *transgender* is literally being erased from so much across the country. It was just announced that the National Park Service has removed the word *transgender* from the Stonewall Memorial website. The first bricks that launched our revolution were thrown by black and brown trans women, those that were the most marginalized even then. And now their identities are gone.

But they aren't forgotten, and we won't be forgotten either. That is why this year the Trot for Trans Visibility is more important than



ever. It is so important that trans people see allies, that trans people feel love, and that we can feel joy and happiness in our own bodies with our friends and our families in a place where it is okay to *be who we are*.

I invite you, your friends, and your families to come out and join us for the 5K on March 29 to be in solidarity with one another, to show your love, to show your appreciation, and to show you understand how important it is to be a community right now.

It gets harder and harder listening to the rhetoric that says trans people don't exist. *But nobody's words are going to take our visibility away from us.*

About the Trot for Trans Visibility

In 2023, endurance athlete runner Cal Dobbs (he/they) was planning a Trot for Trans Lives 5K in Austin to support trans and intersex people. Knowing that a lot of folks can't get to

Austin, Lou Weaver reached out about coordinating something in Houston. Cal and his team responded, "Yes, let's do a Houston 5K."

Without knowing anything about 5Ks, or even running, Weaver jumped at the opportunity.

The Inaugural Houston Trot for Trans Visibility 5K in 2024 was more successful than he could have imagined. Thanks to help from the local queer running community the Trot became a much smoother operation, and the start of something powerful for the local trans community.

WHAT: Trot for Trans Visibility 2025
Houston 5K Fun Run

WHEN: Saturday, March 29, 2025
Gather at 8:30 a.m., run starts at 9

WHERE: Frost Town Brewing,
100 N. Jackson St,

INFO: tinyurl.com/5n7kfzt4

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The Life and Impact of Trey Yates

The Houston attorney overcame personal struggles to become an LGBTQ-rights pioneer.

by BRANDON WOLF



"I had a happy childhood, for the most part," says Houston attorney Trey Yates. "It just came with difficulty and struggles that were unneces-

sary. And I wanted to be accepted, as we all do at that age. I think my parents knew I was gay long before I knew it."

The youngest of three children, Yates was born on March 6, 1956, in New Orleans where his father was in medical school and his mother was a nurse. After his father graduated, the family moved to Atlanta where he took up his medical residency. Eventually, the family moved to La Marque, Texas, near where his father worked at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. His father later gave up his medical practice and became an attorney, practicing in Austin and then Houston.

Yates describes his mother as "very driven," and the person he credits for his own sense of drive and determination. She loved being a nurse and worked her way up to head Austin's Brackenridge Hospital School of Nursing. As an OB-GYN nurse, she loved delivering babies, though she also believed in a woman's right to choose whether or not to continue an unwanted pregnancy. Collaborating with attorney Sarah Weddington and another attorney brought in by Weddington, Yates' mother helped write the medical aspects of *Roe v. Wade*, the 1972 Supreme Court case that made legal abortion available to all women in the United States (until the Court reversed its decision in 2022). "We got death threats," Yates says. "It was interesting."

An Eagle Scout at 13

Yates attended elementary school in La Marque and spent his junior high and senior high years in Austin. He loved scouting, joining the Cub Scouts and finally the Boy Scouts. By the age of 13, he had achieved the rank of Eagle Scout and remembers going to Austin and meeting the governor.

"I liked camping, and I liked rope tying," Yates says. "And there was a lot of male testosterone." One weekend when Yates was at a campout, a friend suggested they walk into



COURTESY

town and buy some wine. “That sounded exotic and dangerous,” he says. “We waited outside of a 7-Eleven store and got a hippie to buy each of us a bottle of Boones Farm apple wine. I had never tasted alcohol, and didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to drink the whole bottle. After that I didn’t remember anything, but was told I threw up in the campfire. My parents were summoned, and I was asked not to return to the troop.”

High School Musical

In high school, Yates was drawn to classes in English and literature. He became active in the Drama Club, pursuing a goal to become an actor. Though his father’s life passion was sports, Yates says his father “was very accepting” of the fact that his son’s gifts and inclination were not in that direction.

“I grew up in the South, and we had a domestic that lived with us and cooked,” Yates recalls. “She could only cook vegetables if they were fried. She could bake peach cobbles, but they were dripping in lard.” It was no mystery, he says, why he carried so much extra weight or that school bullies taunted him as “a fat faggot.”

Involved in the school’s student government and a member of the debate team, “I was as popular as I could be, not playing football,” he remembers. But the ever-present bullying still made life challenging. “You just somehow get through it,” he says, “but it wasn’t pleasant at the time. I think my experience was quite typical of gays and lesbians at that age.”

Yates often played the lead roles in the school’s student productions and showed he could handle any role. He appeared in Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, and sang and tap danced in a musical version of *Winnie the Pooh*.

For a regional acting contest, he was cast as George in vignettes from *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “I remember that they smoked a lot of cigarettes in the play, and our drama teacher allowed us to smoke in the scenes.” Yates especially enjoyed playing the part of the emcee in a production of *Cabaret*. “I wore fingernail polish, lipstick, and fake eyelashes. It was all pretty exotic.”

Yates dated female classmates and had girlfriends. His desirability was no doubt enhanced by his father’s gift of an Oldsmobile Delta 88, one of the most coveted sports cars of its day.

“This was before iPhones and the internet, and I was left to explore on my own and try to figure it all out,” he says about discovering his true sexuality. “I had a crush on my drama teacher. One night I snuck into a gay bar with friends. And there my drama teacher was, with his boyfriend.”

Yates was aware of the Stonewall Inn riots

because of published reports in major magazines, but his awareness of a growing national gay community came from two magazines that he read at a local newsstand. One was *After Dark*, a slick, glossy magazine that often featured black-and-white portraits of male ballet stars in their tights, as well as reports on the scene at the legendary New York City disco Studio 54.

The other was Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine. “It was oversized and had that sort of newspaper feel to it. But I couldn’t buy them and bring them home. That would have been way too bold a move for me at that point. I did think the most exotic place to be at that time was either New York or San Francisco.”

Yates has always loved music of all kinds. One day, a friend of his bought a copy of the *Jesus Christ, Superstar* album. “We went to his home and played it on a little turntable,” he says, “and I thought it was just amazing! Every year the best of Broadway was published in book form, complete with pictures. I remember spending hours at the school library reading that, and wanting to be that.”

Finding His Own Tribe

“I didn’t really have any mentors,” Yates confides. “The only obvious gay men were usually flamboyant and over the top. I see some pictures of me in those days, and I think ‘Who is this person?’ At one point I had a Peter Frampton-style Afro. The country was firmly into the disco age, and I wore platform shoes and high-waisted bell-bottom pants. Things were androgynous. It was the age of David Bowie and Mick Jagger.” Yates says he came to feel safe in gay discos because there were so many other people that looked like him. “I could openly express myself without condemnation,” he recalls.

The family of his childhood attended a conservative Christian church. “I sang in the choir and did little musicals for the church,” he says, “but being gay was also the worst thing that you could be from a Christian standpoint. So I was in great conflict, because I really enjoyed the church environment, and I had made friends there. But from the pulpit, being gay was an abomination. I was very spiritual, but I rejected all of that formal dogma.”

College and Beyond

After high school, Yates attended the University of Texas. By this time, he was out of the closet and frequenting Austin’s gay bars. “I spent more time having a good time than studying,” he confides. After a year, his parents, now living in Houston, summoned him home.

He took a job working in retail sales in a department store in Houston’s Town and Country Mall. First, he worked in the fine china and glassware department, then moved

to women’s sportswear. Some of the older gay men who worked in the store soon enlisted him to work in display, dressing mannequins and creating vignettes.

After a year and a half at the department store, Yates enrolled at the University of Houston and subsequently began working as a waiter. “You could go to school, have fun, make some money, and go to bars,” he says about this change of pace. “You could get away with two hours of sleep. But I wanted to be an actor, so I told my parents I wanted to go to Dallas. They were bewildered, but supportive.”

Once in Dallas, Yates found a job as box office manager for Theater Three, where he was also able to appear in small roles. He lived in the Oak Lawn area, which had Dallas’ highest concentration of gays at that time.

Do You Know the Way to San Jose?

Yates finally auditioned for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles and was accepted. He jumped into his little Chevette and drove to California to fulfill his longtime dream. “I was poor as a church mouse, but thought that if I’m going to be poor, then I’ll be poor in a warm climate.”

His once-again baffled parents paid for the tuition. “Those were some of the happiest days of my life because I was with other oddballs—people that were creative, had energy, and explored.”

In Los Angeles, Yates studied kabuki theater, traditional stage, fencing, and even ballet. Many of the classes were taught by people in the film industry. But after a year and a half, he noticed that “every waiter in Los Angeles looked like they were 50 and still waiting for their agent to call with that big role. Acting is extremely competitive, and it’s a profession in which you must get used to rejection. I realized I just wasn’t good enough, and that was a sobering thought. I called my father and asked if I could return home to try to figure out my life.”

A Calling in Law

Yates’ father had changed his own career from medicine to law, so he suggested that his son might also be interested in a legal career. Now in his mid-20s, Yates returned to school and earned an undergraduate degree in political science, then enrolled in St. Mary’s University School of Law in San Antonio.

The choice proved to be a good one, and Yates says it gave him an opportunity to really shine as the new person he was becoming. He joined the debate team, was elected to the student council, and made many good friends. It was through one of these friends that Yates became a willing escort to Dallas debutantes seeking a date for the many parties and other events that their positions demanded. “I had a tuxedo, two formal shirts, and a blue blazer,” →

he recalls, and that got him into some wonderful parties where he didn't have to pay for a thing.

Law school was a kind of finishing school for Yates. "I was already pretty articulate and well read, but I hadn't known how to do deductive thinking or how to argue," he explains. He sat for the Texas State Bar exam and passed it. Soon he was offered a job at a major law firm in Dallas.

Assigned to negotiate personal injury settlements, Yates remembers it was an amazing time for him. "Money was falling from the sky, and suddenly I was making more money than my father was in Houston," he says. After only three years of the good life, however, the partners of the firm began in-fighting and he decided the time had come to exit. He took up his father's offer to introduce him to the Houston legal community.

Building a Life in Houston

In 1987, Yates opened a small practice in Houston and began learning about the business end of running a law firm, as well as the art of arguing cases in court—something the lucrative field of personal injury settlements had never demanded.

He soon joined the Houston Volunteer Lawyers, where he worked with pro-bono family-law cases such as divorce and probate. "I liked knowing that I was making a difference in people's lives," he confides. He also began taking on various leadership roles in the Houston Family Bar and sat on the board of the Houston Volunteer Lawyers as he was building his practice.

By now, AIDS was rampant within Houston's LGBTQ community. "Those were dark times," Yates says. In response, he helped form the first AIDS Outreach Committee of the Houston Bar Association. Volunteer lawyers came to the Houston GLBT Community Center and helped draft wills for people who were dying from the disease. "We helped restore a sense of dignity for them," he confides in a somber tone.

As Yates' circle of friends broadened, he helped create The Assistance Fund, whose mission was to raise funds to help people pay for their COBRA insurance premiums after they had been laid off from their jobs. He formed a friendship with society caterer Jackson Hicks, whom he describes as "such a tireless advocate for those with HIV and AIDS." Yates also remembers other friends who volunteered at the Omega House hospice, sitting with people as they made their transitions. Corporate sponsors were sought, and Continental Airlines was one of the first to sponsor major galas.

As head of The Assistance Fund board, Yates helped hire Ken Malone as the first executive director. Yates also began helping the AIDS Foundation Houston and the Houston



Yates in front of the Wortham Center in the early 1990s, where The Assistance Fund held its AIDS fundraiser Le Cirque Fantastique featuring The Pickle Family Circus.

Names Project, which was part of the national AIDS Memorial Quilt. "We used to meet each other at the discos, but now we were meeting each other at funerals," Yates recalls.

"My involvement with Trey began in 1988 during the formative years of The Assistance Fund," Malone remembers. "Trey was a true visionary, taking what was a struggling group of volunteers and then molding them into a board and ultimately setting up the organization with a professional staff to guide its growth. Trey used his contacts to produce Le Cirque Fantastique, a very successful fundraiser which featured The Pickle Family Circus. We launched The Assistance Fund into the world of grants and grant writing. He truly made a difference in the way we did business and charted our growth, so that we would be able to serve many more clients while reducing our reliance on fundraising."

Finding and Losing Love

Yates lost his partner, Victor Borgeson, in the early 1990s. "He was such a sweet guy, and very interested in the theater," Yates remembers. What struck him most was the drastic change in Borgeson's appearance. "He was a tall, cute, muscular guy. And in a very short period, he basically wasted away. He always had such a great spirit. We had two dogs, and even at his worst he insisted on walking them. He went in for a procedure for his heart and had a stroke on the operating table. It was the first time I'd really committed to someone, and then he was gone. It was tough. It certainly brought all the activism directly home."

Yates found love again with Donald Browning while serving on the board of The Assistance Fund. Browning was taken away by cancer after 13 years of companionship. "He was a beautiful man—kind, generous, and quite mischievous. I still miss him."

Sara Selber was the executive director

of AIDS Foundation Houston (now Allies in Hope) from 1994 to 1999. She looks back on those years: "It is hard to describe Trey Yates' work and dedication to AIDS Foundation Houston without also thinking of Don Browning. It was as if we always had two individuals for the price of one. They worked tirelessly to bring programs that ensured clients were able to die with dignity. And then as medical advancements occurred, they helped create incredible opportunities that helped clients live with hope and optimism."

A Tireless Activist

Yates also worked with his attorney colleagues Mitchell Katine and Connie Moore. "We fought for dignity for our relationships and the right to adopt. I didn't win a lot of cases because the cards were stacked against us, but by bringing those cases before the judges, we created awareness. With each experience, I became a bit more politically savvy. I still had an idealism of justice and equality. I felt it was important to live my life with integrity."

Attorney Veronica Jacobs met Yates in 1995 through Houston Volunteer Lawyers. "At that time, there were attorneys who didn't even want persons living with HIV or AIDS in their offices," says Jacobs, "but I always knew that Trey would respond without reservation. He helped make clients feel that they were worthy of having an attorney. We were working in a climate that was very hostile. Some of the hardest cases were divorce proceedings that included custody of children. There were people who thought if someone was HIV-positive or had AIDS, they should not be allowed to take care of children or even visit them. There was one woman whose family made her drink out of only one glass, and she had a designated plate, glass, and silverware.

"At Christmas time, we would help some of our clients who had few resources to have

money for Christmas. We expanded it to include single men and women whose families had abandoned them due to the disease. Trey said, 'Yeah, I'm gonna help these people.' He was just magnificent, even though he didn't know whether or not he was putting his career on the line."

Funded by the Houston Bar Association, the Houston Volunteer Lawyers "also learned how to write grants for federal, state, and Ryan White Care Act funding," says Jacobs.

Attorney Michelle Goldberg met Yates on the Houston Bar Association's AIDS Outreach Committee in 1995. She remembers "will-athons" that Yates organized. He pulled together volunteer attorneys, notaries, witnesses, and paralegals to give pro bono legal assistance to people with AIDS who were sick and had little or no money.

"He was so dynamic! I showed up one day to volunteer and was blown away," says Goldberg. "In room after room, people were being helped in drafting up wills and powers of attorney. Paralegals were typing up the documents, really cranking them out. People were also being given advice about life insurance policies that were either being left to a partner or being sold."

Goldberg has also worked with Yates over the years to provide legal help for clients who had dependents with special needs. "He is a leader in this field, and he's got a whole niche on this. He's like a unicorn with family-law cases because he is so good," she says.

If Yates was working on a divorce case where there was a special-needs dependent involved, Goldberg says, "He knew how to ask the right questions and get a whole team involved." She says that Yates helps make clients make plans for the entire course of life of a special-needs dependent. "Opposing counsel didn't always want to do this, but Trey would

not back down. He gave people answers and hope," she adds.

Shelley Kennedy served with Yates on the board of the annual Black Tie Dinner fundraiser, and together they helped create a Houston chapter of the Human Rights Campaign. Kennedy notes that Yates is "a quintessential gentleman, wonderful friend, community activist, and advocate. We've known each other for decades and were in the trenches together during the AIDS crisis. Time spent in Provincetown with Trey and Don is among my fondest memories, and our friendship is one of my greatest treasures.

"His knowledge of the law, coupled with his willingness to help so many people and organizations, is priceless. When someone in our community is faced with divorce, child custody fights, lawsuits, or other legal challenges—which is often an especially challenging situation in the LGBTQIA+ community—Trey's kindness and sense of humor bring immediate comfort to the situation. No one ever wants to be arguing against him in court, across a board room, or over cocktails."

Despite his enormous contributions, Yates was troubled for years with imposter syndrome. "I didn't think I was good enough to be in these leadership positions. It was all in my mind, but I think it came from those younger years when I was called 'a fat faggot.'"

Learning with Every Case

Yates has constantly looked for new ways to serve his clients, his community, and the city. Living in an international metropolis, Yates has never been afraid to represent clients from diverse ethnic or religious backgrounds.

As he looks back on the past 40 years, Yates admits that working as a divorce attorney has taken a toll. "It's a very toxic, stressful environment for the lawyer, as well as the families."

But it has also given him a much-deserved sense of purpose and fulfillment. "I have enjoyed having to think on my feet, processing a thousand things at a time in my head."

Yates has also served on the boards of the Houston Grand Opera, Unity Church, and Bering Omega Foundation. He is an ombudsman for people needing long-term care. "Some Medicaid facilities are horrible. People have no idea."

As a board member of the Hermann Park Conservancy, Yates was involved in the successful efforts to restore the park to its original plan. "It was designed by the same man who designed New York's Central Park. Then World War I happened, and the original design had never been completed." Presently living near Memorial Park, Yates confides that he also loves to walk in the newly expanded areas there.

Reflecting on a Blessed Life

Yates is bewildered by the political scene today, which doesn't make sense to him. "I have this fight within myself: do I continue to lean in? It's so distasteful, and turning it off and not listening to it is also a temptation. Is decency still a virtue? It seems that telling the truth doesn't mean much anymore. Things have become so crude and angry. But I live in a bastion of liberal friends."

Yates does feel that it is important for voters to become more educated about the people they elect who can have a direct effect on them, sometimes with the simple stroke of a pen. "I have a lot of gay clients, and they are worried about the results of the recent election."

Yates also sees the rights of transgender children being eroded, and feels that the Supreme Court may try to undo marriage equality. "It would send things into chaos and basically return marriage-equality issues to the states. One day a kid would have two dads, and the next day he would have none."

Life with his two rescue dogs, Moxie and Bruno, help Yates deal with it all. "I can't wait to get home to them at night. There is nothing like walking through the door and feeling that unconditional love. If people listened to how I talk to them, they would think I was insane. But they are my kids."

Yates feels that he has lived a blessed life. "I live a life of abundance—not just money, but my relationships, loving a job that I get to do, the spiritual journey I am on, a sense of curiosity, and the supportive community I live in." Now, he says, he is focused on the future, looking for other opportunities to help his community and the city.



Yates with the major underwriters for Le Cirque Fantastique, which included former Texas first lady Nellie Connally.

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In every corner of Houston, women are leading with vision, resilience, and a deep commitment to their communities. Whether in sports, advocacy, or business, these trailblazers are shaping the city's future and creating lasting change.

Angela Hucles Mangano, the new president of women's soccer for the Houston Dash, is committed to player development and long-term investment in the game. She is focused on ensuring that the next generation of athletes is prepared to succeed.

Carrie Rai, Alyssa Kelly, and Giana Ramirez lead the volunteers at Tony's Place, a drop-in center providing support to homeless youth in Houston. These women ensure that our most vulnerable young people have a place to turn to in times of crisis.

Ashley and Jacquie Creath are proving that tradition and progress can go hand in hand. These longtime rodeo volunteers help make the annual Out at the Rodeo an event that expands LGBTQ inclusion at one of the city's most iconic events.

For nearly four decades, **Susan Christian** has been the mastermind behind Houston's biggest civic events such as our annual 4th of July fireworks celebration. Her work has strengthened the city's sense of connection and pride—something she hopes to continue as Rice University's new events-planning leader.

Paris Kissel, founder of the Houston-based public relations firm behind comms, champions organizations and individuals committed to making a difference. Her passion for amplifying voices that are often overlooked ensures that Houston's changemakers receive the support they need to thrive. →

GAME CHANGER

Angela Hucles Mangano

kicks off a new era

for the Houston Dash.

by **DAVID CLARKE**



Angela Hucles Mangano has spent a lifetime breaking barriers. From her early days dominating the soccer field to her leadership roles in professional sports, she's made it clear that excellence and representation go hand in hand. Now, as the president of women's soccer for the Houston Dash, she's on a mission to elevate the team and inspire the next generation of athletes.

Hucles Mangano's journey into soccer began during her childhood when her parents encouraged her to burn off some energy. "It was like an instant love affair with the game of soccer," she recalls. "Nobody in my family played the sport. They had to describe what the game was before I signed up for the neighborhood team."

Playing on all-boys teams in her youth, she reveled in the speed, competition, and camaraderie. "Orange slices at halftime—it was such a great time," she says with a laugh. "And then I was able to just continue the love of the sport throughout my childhood and into my professional career."

Despite her natural talent, Hucles Mangano did not see professional soccer as a career opportunity for herself. "That option did not exist for me in our country," she explains. "There was no professional women's soccer league in the United States when I was growing up." That changed the year after she graduated from college, when the first US professional women's league was formed. She seized the opportunity and never looked back.

Now an executive, Hucles Mangano understands the struggles of being a woman in sports leadership. "Sometimes you don't realize the challenges you're going through as a woman because they just feel like part of the job," she says. "But overall, the biggest challenge is opportunity and availability."

Representation matters deeply to her. "There was nobody who looked like me when I was growing up," she recalls. "To see a woman—a woman of color, someone who's out and identifies with the LGBTQ+ family in a leadership role—that wasn't a thing. I never had to see it to believe it, but I know how important it is for others."

Her LGBTQ identity has shaped her journey in professional sports. "It's part of who I am, whether I'm in sports or outside of sports. The more comfortable I feel in my own identity, the better I am as a professional, and the more success I tend to have."



"WOMEN BELONG IN EVERY ROOM WHERE DECISIONS ARE BEING MADE. DON'T LET ANYONE MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU DON'T DESERVE TO BE THERE. YOU DO."

— Angela Hucles Mangano

In addition to leading the Dash, Hucles Mangano is a wife and mother of two. Balancing her personal and professional life isn't easy, but she's found an approach that works. "I've had to give myself grace," she says. "Work-life balance is hard because time spent at work means less time at home, and vice

versa. So for me, it's about integration—bringing family into work and vice versa."

As she steps into her role with the Houston Dash, her primary focus is creating stability and long-term success for the club. "Consistency is key," she explains. "We want to see growth in our staff, our players, and our culture. On the field, that means setting a clear goal—making the playoffs and then becoming consistent contenders in the league."

She also emphasizes the importance of player development. "It's not just about bringing in talent—it's about nurturing that talent and giving them the resources they need to succeed," she says. "If we create a culture where players feel supported, we will see the results on the field."

Community involvement is also a priority. With a history of working with organizations like You Can Play, which promotes inclusivity in sports, she believes in the power of visibility. "This is our city. We are Houstonians.

How we show up for one another—both on and off the field—matters,” she says. “It’s not about transactions. It’s about values.”

She’s also passionate about making sports more inclusive for young athletes. “When I was growing up, I didn’t see people like me in leadership positions,” she says. “That has to change. We need to make sure that young athletes—no matter their gender, race, or identity—see a place for themselves in this sport.”

Hucles Mangano recognizes the importance of paving the way for other women in sports and business. “There’s a study that says 94% of women in the C-suite played sports,” she notes. “That tells you something. Sports teaches you life skills and professional skills that translate into leadership roles.”

Her advice for young women aspiring to break into male-dominated fields? “No dream or goal is too small,” she says. “Put yourself out there. Be intentional about your plan. Seek out people who inspire you, and learn from them.”

She also encourages women to embrace leadership roles with confidence. “Women belong in every room where decisions are being made,” she says. “Don’t let anyone make you feel like you don’t deserve to be there. You do.”

As we celebrate Women’s History Month,



Houston Dash welcomes Fabrice Gautrat (l) as their new head coach and Angela Hucles Mangano as the club’s president of women’s soccer

Hucles Mangano reflects on the progress women have made in sports—and the work still to be done. “We’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go,” she says. “To create more opportunities, we need to continue investing in women’s sports. Visibility is crucial. Media coverage, sponsorships, fan support—it all matters.”

She also emphasizes the role of allies in pushing for change. “Men in leadership positions need to be a part of the solution,” she

says. “If we want to see true equity, we need everyone advocating for women in sports, not just women.”

With leaders like Angela Hucles Mangano at the helm, the future of women’s soccer looks bright. And as she works to bring the Houston Dash to new heights, she’s also ensuring that young girls everywhere can dream a little bigger.

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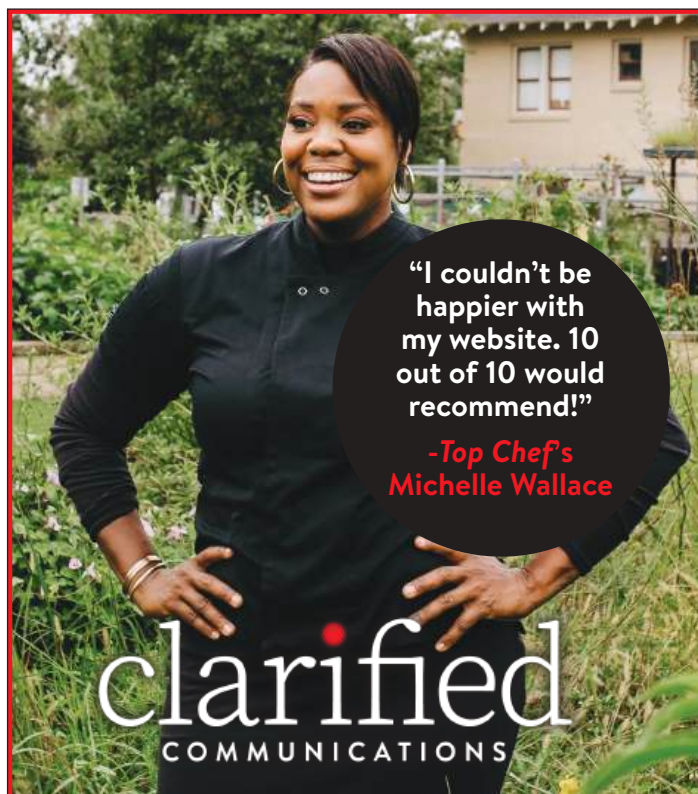
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Tony's Place Leaders
Giana Ramirez (l),
Carrie Rai, and
Alyssa Kelly

WE'RE JUST 'HOME'

The women of **Tony's Place** are leading LGBTQ youth to safety and empowerment.

by **DAVID CLARKE**

Photos by **ALEX ROSA**

Makeup by **JASON PALERMO**

Hair by **LANA BLAKE**



When young LGBTQ individuals in Houston face instability, uncertainty, and systemic barriers, Tony's Place is there to shelter them. Founded in 2016 in honor of community advocate Robert Anthony "Tony" Carroll, this drop-in center serves unstably housed and homeless LGBTQ youth by offering everything from hot meals and showers to a safe space for self-exploration. At the helm of this essential organization is executive

director Carrie Rai, supported by program manager Alyssa Kelly and engagement manager Giana Ramirez. These three women are not only leading Tony's Place but also redefining what it means to be women leading the way in LGBTQ advocacy.

Tony's Place is more than just a shelter—it's a sanctuary. As Rai, Kelly, and Ramirez put it, it's about giving young people the freedom to show up exactly as they are, without compromise. "That's what makes Tony's

Place so special," Ramirez says. "It's about community, about lifting each other up, about making sure no one is left behind."

"Creating a safe space where youth can just breathe, even for a moment, is one of the most important things we do," Kelly adds.

And as Rai affirms, "We are more than a service. We are *home*."



For more info, visit tonysplace.org.

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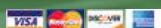
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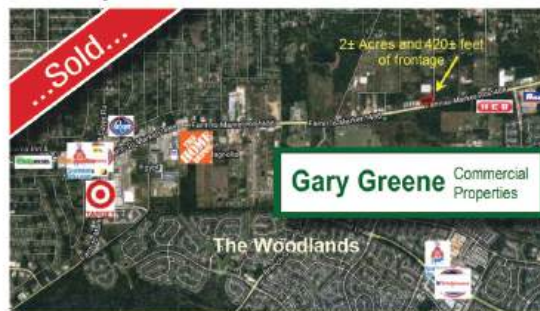
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A CAREER CALLING

CARRIE RAI

Executive Director at Tony's Place

For executive director Carrie Rai, leading Tony's Place isn't just a job—it's a calling. "This is the exact place I am supposed to be in my life," she says. "I've always been searching for the next best thing, a better opportunity in my career, and I am not searching anymore. I am where I want to be."

Originally from Canada, Rai's career spans social work, addiction services, and homeless services. But it was her personal journey—falling in love with a trans man and discovering her own pansexual identity—that solidified her commitment to LGBTQ advocacy. "Through my work in homeless services, I met my now husband, who is a trans man," Rai recounts. "I realized that I was pansexual. That's how things evolve when you get older—you realize things that you may have not realized when you were younger."

Tony's Place envisions a world where LGBTQ youth are universally welcomed, safe, and thriving. But in a time when queer communities are facing political and social attacks, that vision is elusive. "Right now, in our world, the LGBTQ+ community, especially our youth, are under attack,"

Rai acknowledges. "There are bills, there are laws, there is a society that's saying that our community is not accepted. That is really hard. What we do at Tony's Place is we make sure that everybody feels like they belong."

Rai has made community partnerships a cornerstone of her leadership. One of the initiatives she's most proud of is Craft Your Pride, an arts-based program that allows youth to create and sell their artwork, building confidence and economic opportunity. "Not only was the creation of the art therapeutic, it was an opportunity to build self-esteem through selling their work. So our clients are also benefiting economically from this."

Another major accomplishment has been expanding the Tony's Place operating hours and staff. "One thing I'm really excited and proud about is we've recently opened our doors for five days a week. We're operating Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.," Rai says. "We have case managers available for one-on-one appointments. We have our drop-in services so people can get a hot meal, showers, and do their laundry from noon to 2 p.m., Monday to Friday. We're running groups every single day."

Part of Rai's mission is making sure that the center fosters strong relationships with outside partners, ensuring youth don't have to seek resources in places where they may not feel safe. "We're really excited about the number of partners that we have in our space," she says. "When I started, it was just Alyssa and I. Now we have a full team, and we're constantly growing."

For Rai, leadership in this space is about systemic change. "We can't ask our clients to change themselves. We have to ask for the world to change around them," she asserts. "We advocate for systemic change, not individual change."

More than anything, she believes in the transformative power of a space like Tony's Place. "Tony's Place is not just for youth," she says. "It is a place of belonging. And that's what I've really come to realize—this is where I found myself."

Reflecting on the impact of Tony's Place, Rai highlights its role in building resilience. "What makes Tony's Place special is that we're not just a service provider. We're a family. We give youth the space to explore who they are, without fear, without judgment. That's what makes the difference." →



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FORGING COMMUNITY OUTREACH

GIANA RAMIREZ

*Engagement Manager
at Tony's Place*

Giana Ramirez describes her role as engagement manager as a mix of outreach, fundraising, and corporate partnerships. But at its core, her work is about forging relationships. “I like to say that my job is to dream with people, because everyone has something to offer.”

Her passion for trans representation in mental health care originally led her to social work. But at Tony's Place, she found a different path. “Since I came into this job, I've pivoted career-wise because I found my strengths are in other places, and I'm of better use to the community in other ways.”

For many LGBTQ youth—especially trans youth—finding a place to exist without having to explain themselves is a challenge. Ramirez wants Tony's Place to be that space. “At Tony's Place, we offer young people a place just to *be*. I know that seems really simple, but when you're out in the world and you're having to navigate code-switching constantly, it's a reprieve just to be in a space where you don't have to explain yourself.”

Ramirez is especially passionate about ensuring young trans people feel heard. “We want to make sure that everyone who comes into Tony's Place feels safe, seen, heard, and respected,” she says. “It's not just a sticker we put on the door—it's something that we do.”

For her, being featured in *OutSmart* is personal. “I grew up in Houston. I've been reading *OutSmart* magazine since I was a teenager. A year ago, I was in the private sector in obscurity, and now, all of a sudden, I have a seat at the table and people are listening to what I have to say.” →

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CREATING HOPEFUL FUTURES

ALYSSA KELLY
*Program Manager
at Tony's Place*

Alyssa Kelly's journey at Tony's Place began in 2017, not as a staff member, but as a volunteer navigating her own queer identity. "One of the first things that I thought about when I realized that I was queer was, I have to get involved in the community. And what better way to get involved than to give back to it?"

Kelly quickly moved into a program-assistant role before leaving in 2020. But when she returned to Houston, there was only one place she wanted to be. "Tony's Place was home," she says. "I knew exactly where I wanted to be."

As program manager, Kelly works directly with youth facing the realities of housing instability, job insecurity, and lack of access to affirming healthcare. But at the heart of her work is creating a space where young people can let down their guard. "A lot of them have to go out in the world and they're fighting. But when they come into our space, they know they can talk to somebody here. They know it's safe to let their guard down."

The impact of Tony's Place is best reflected in the youth it serves. Kelly recalls a young man from West Texas who found Tony's Place after being kicked out of his home. "He had enough money to get a bus ticket to Houston. He called and said, 'If I get there, can you help me?' I said, 'Yes, we can.'" That young man went from homelessness to stability, checking in with Kelly even years later to share how well he's doing. "They just need the chance. They just need the opportunity. And when they have that, they can do a lot."

THE JOY OF 'BECOMING WHO WE ARE'

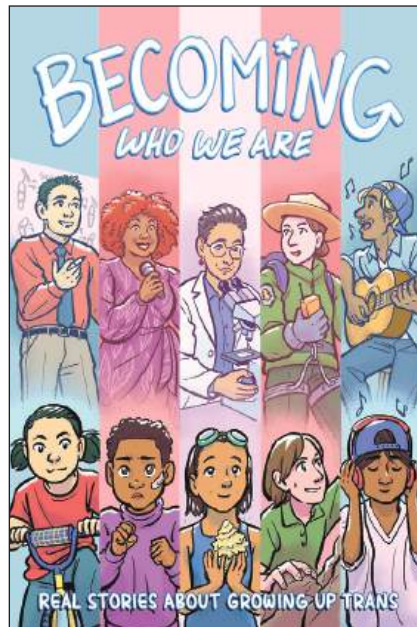
Diamond Stylz' children's book spotlighting trans resilience is nominated for a GLAAD award this year.

by BRETT CULLUM | photo by MICHAEL STARGHILL

Becoming *Who We Are* is a charming graphic novel edited by Sammy Lisel and Hazel Newlevant. The creators have compiled several stories about growing up with transgender identity, and have put them into a beautifully illustrated book that couldn't have arrived at a more appropriate time to comfort kids who may be experiencing gender dysphoria. Houston icon Diamond Stylz is represented in the collection, and she tells her story of fighting for and winning the right to wear a gown to her high school prom. The book has been nominated for a GLAAD award this year, and that means the world to everyone involved.

"These stories are important because of this new attack on LGBT people, particularly trans people, here in the state of Texas and all around the world. But as a Texan, I feel like it's important because of the book bans and the targeting of supportive parents. I think it's important to have these stories exist, and to have somebody investing in keeping these stories alive and archiving them. That is an important beacon of light for young people growing up, and for the parents who support us."

Diamond is no stranger to the GLAAD awards. "I've won a GLAAD award before for a long-form journalism," she reveals. "It was the ABC News *Soul of a Nation* edition of *PRIDE / To Be Seen*, which was a documentary with Hulu and Disney." But for *Becoming Who We Are*, Diamond finds this to be a particularly important nomination. "Because it is a children's book, that makes it way more special," she says. "It doesn't feel like it's rooted in the trauma of our experience; it is rooted in the joy, and shows how we can thrive if we have that kind of support system. So this book is so special because of that joy. It's about a rebellious spirit, a joyous spirit. My transition is rooted in radical self-love. It is rooted in the commu-



Becoming Who We Are: Real Stories About Growing Up Trans is a beautifully illustrated graphic novel for young people that highlights diverse transgender experiences. Houston activist Diamond Stylz' book, edited by Sammy Lisel and Hazel Newlevant, provides an inspiring perspective for trans youth and their allies.

nity connection with new people who have an identity that I share. It's about connectedness. That's what my transition was about: finding a new community, a new extended family, a new chosen family. And so, for me, my transition is rooted in connectedness and love."

Diamond's activism is not limited to the written (and illustrated) word. She also hosts an outstanding podcast called *Marsha's Plate*. The show is all about uplifting transgender voices and includes Diamond with her co-hosts, Bre Starr and LJ. "It is an art and archival initiative," Diamond says enthusiastically. "I introduce you to people that you might not know that are queer, that are not always transgender, but all the people who are doing trans-inclusive work. So it could be lesbian, it could be gay men, it could be straight people who know that our stories have value and include us in their work. That's what *Marsha's Plate* does. We have conversations and interviews on a weekly basis."

Becoming Who We Are is available wherever you can get books online and in certain stores, and the *Marsha's Plate* podcast is downloadable wherever you find podcasts.

Marsha's Plate gets over 30,000 listeners a month, and it's one of the biggest queer shows out there. Diamond Stylz also serves on the Harris County LGBTQIA+ Commission here in Houston, so she creates art, she creates community, and she creates joy. It's nice to know the GLAAD awards took notes.

Becoming Who We Are: Real Stories about Growing Up Trans is available at bookshop.org

WHAT: 36th Annual GLAAD Media Awards

WHEN: March 27, 2025

WHERE: Los Angeles

INFO: glaad.org/mediaawards/36/

➔ For more info, visit linktr.ee/diamondstylz.

A portrait of Diamond Stylz, a Black woman with short hair, wearing a tall, brown, textured top hat and a matching brown sleeveless top. She is resting her chin on her left hand, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a warm, textured brown. To the left, there are stacks of old books, one of which has 'THOMAS HARDY 1895' visible. To the right, there are dried flowers and a small vase.

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OF LIGHT FOR YOUNG
PEOPLE AND THEIR
FAMILIES."

— Diamond Stylz, activist
and contributor to
Becoming Who We Are

WOMEN IN POWER

LASSOING LOVE & RUSTLING UP CHANGE

Ashley and Jacquey Creath's journey from a pioneering marriage to Out at the Rodeo.

by CONNOR BEHRENS

This Ain't Their First Rodeo
Jacquey (l) and Ashley Creath



It was 2006, and Ashley Creath was at the lesbian bar Chances in Montrose. Unknown to her, her future wife, Jacquey, was also there, moving through the same crowd until fate led them to each other.

"I saw her dancing," Ashley says. "I thought she was dancing with her wife or partner. Turns out it was just her best friend."

So Ashley did what anyone in her position would do—she tapped Jacquey on the shoulder and made her move: "Hey, you come here often?" she had asked, a corny pickup line that somehow worked.

Despite their 13-year age gap, Ashley has always been the old soul in their relationship. "I'm older than she is," she says, "but really, Jacquey is older than I am inside."

The two ultimately built a life together, and that life has taken them through San Antonio, back to Houston, and into a pivotal moment in history that neither of them had expected.

It was June 26, 2015. Ashley was at work when she heard the news: same-sex marriage had been legalized nationwide. She called her wife immediately. "We need to go downtown," she said.

The two put on the same white shirts they had worn in their New York wedding three years earlier and rushed downtown to become one of the first same-sex couples to be married in Harris County.

"For us," Jacquey says, "when we left New York, the moment we stepped on the plane, we weren't married anymore. We were married for five days, and that was it. But in that Houston courthouse, in that moment, we mattered."

Their journey had taken them through activism, through Pride marches since they were teenagers, through struggles and triumphs.

And now, it has taken them into the heart of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

"We've been volunteering since 2013," Ashley says, "starting on the Merchandise Committee before moving to the Wine Events Committee. We love it. It's our way of giving back."

Jaquey and Ashley have both volunteered as members of the Wine Events Committee. The two are responsible for selling and executing all Rodeo Uncorked! events, including the Roundup and Best Bites Competition, the Champion Wine Auction and Dinner, and the Club of Champions Buyers Dinner. The committee is also responsible for the packaging and distribution of Double Barrel Sampler Cases, and it supports all wine events through marketing and communication.

"HAVING A SAFE SPACE AT THE RODEO IS IMPORTANT."

— Jacquey Creath

Joining Out at the Rodeo, an initiative dedicated to creating a space for the LGBTQ community within the rodeo, felt right for the two, and Jacquey believes that representation matters now more than ever.

"The rodeo had a certain flavor, I guess," she says. "And I don't know if being gay was looked upon as not being accepted, but there weren't a lot of LGBT faces. But the response to Out at the Rodeo has been incredible. Last year, a thousand people showed up. There are people that want this, and we just must facilitate it for them. We're very serious about activ-

ism in our committee. Having a safe space at rodeo is important."

Their dream? To one day see an official LGBTQ rodeo committee, where funds could be raised for scholarships benefiting LGBTQ youth. Currently, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo holds livestock auctions where the proceeds benefit kids who raise animals.

"Watching Out at the Rodeo grow, I can't wait to see what happens in five years and what we can do," Jacquey says.

Additionally, the duo would like to have a Pride Night at the rodeo, similar to what the Houston Astros and Rockets do.

"We've gone every summer when they do Pride Night," says Ashley. "It's packed. Our community is there with their flame burning high, and it's so fun to go see that. Everyone—all parts of our community—is there."

For those in the LGBTQ community who are scared in these tumultuous times, Ashley believes that leaning on your friends and family is incredibly important.

"Reach out to your friends if you can't reach out to spaces like the Montrose Center," she advises. "There are plenty of places that you can go for support. I know right now is very hard. It's hard some days to get out of bed for some people. I understand that. But you've got to reach out to your community. Lean on your community, your family, your friends. That's what I'm hoping for with this event, that people come out and just really appreciate how nice it is to have a place like Out at the Rodeo to come be who we are for a few hours."

WHAT: Out at the Rodeo 2025

WHEN: March 22, 2025, 3 p.m. to 11 p.m.

WHERE: The Champion Wine Garden at NRG Stadium

INFO: linktr.ee/outrodeo



Ashley and Jacquey Creath's wedding at the Harris County Courthouse was featured on the front page of the *Houston Chronicle* on June 26, 2015—the day same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide. The couple is pictured at right during a Rodeo Uncorked event.



AN EVENTFUL CAREER

Event-planning visionary **Susan Christian** embarks on a new chapter at Rice University.

by BRETT CULLUM

Susan Christian has worked for the City of Houston for about 40 years, and her time there was spent planning and running major municipal events. Inaugurations, 4th of July celebrations, inaugurations, Pride parades—you name it, she had planned it. Susan recently announced her retirement from that post to accept a new event-planning position at Rice University. She's excited to continue her mission to build true community out of the events she helps create.

"I was tapped by Mayor Bob Lanier in 1992 to build an annual year-round, sustainable

civic celebration program," Christian explains. "His wife, Elise Lanier, and Mayor Bob valued the power of event marketing, and they were working on the neighborhood parks to bring them programs. To quote the late mayor, 'You know we can build parks, but what good do they do if people aren't in them?' It was really an exciting time. That's how we built the program, focusing on every neighborhood in Houston. We were trying to build big events of magnitude in Houston. I've loved working on that."

When pressed about the benefit of having so many events in Houston, Christian says, "We're primarily a city of people who have moved here, right? When you open up your

doors to others who have not experienced Houston, whether on a neighborhood level or a huge citywide level, it helps build the spirit of the city and get them involved. Once you hook someone, it's a great experience for you and your family, your kids, your grandkids, or whatever. You want more of that. We focused on improving and lifting up the quality of life. I personally have a real focus on getting people engaged in their community. Those experiences beget volunteerism. Take a place where there may have been a lot of negativity or criminal aspects before, and when you infuse that with positive action, those criminal elements go away. I loved my job with the City of Houston.



(Left) Susan Christian with her wife, Laura Spanjian, and their two sons. (Right) Mayor John Whitmire presenting Christian with a City Proclamation.



On February 20, 2025, Susan Christian was honored at the Hobby Center for Performing Arts, celebrating her remarkable career with the City of Houston and decades of impactful leadership.

I was honored to work for seven mayors and move their agendas forward with the power of events. I'm a very lucky person."

When asked about her favorite city celebration, Susan waxed philosophical about the impact of the annual 4th of July celebration downtown. "It was very important for us to have that patriotic, inclusive celebration for everyone. Independence and freedom are important things. We had an average of 50,000 people show up every year. We were in people's homes because it was televised. Having those events televised was very important to me because not everyone can get out, or they don't want to be in a crowded situation."

Christian also contributed to building up the LGBTQ community through her efforts in facilitating the annual Pride festivals and parades. "Of course, there were the Pride parades, which we coordinated and built up to a certain level."

Christian is married to Laura Spanjian, and they have two sons who are 10 and 13 years old. The two make it a priority to balance home and career. "My partner, Laura, is brilliant and wonderful," Christian says. "Together,

**"IT'S THE HARD PARTS
THAT KEEP YOU GOING,
BECAUSE THERE ARE
GREAT REWARDS.
YOU'RE MOVING THE
COMMUNITY FORWARD."**

— Susan Christian

we make it happen. Our sons? We take them with us. My sons learned how to volunteer at a very young age and they love it, so we keep them engaged. My parents were amazing—the importance of community has always been in my family, and that's what we wish to instill in our children."

In reflecting on her move to Rice after such a long career with the City, Christian confides, "I've always wanted to have another career outside the City of Houston. I gave the City of Houston my best. I really did. When I think of Houston, I think of the wealth of opportunities

in this huge city on a global scale. That's also what attracted me to Rice University! When I think of the university, I picture a smaller city that still has this incredible global impact. I am so happy to be able to help Rice with its focus on massive growth. They have some very dynamic leaders who have brought in some really amazing people. I look forward to working on their strategy. I mean, how do you say no to Rice University? Going to the Elton John and Billy Joel concert was my first experience at Rice. My second experience was going to listen to Madeleine Albright speak at the Baker Institute. Wouldn't that be fun to have some big concerts at Rice University? I don't know if they're gonna let me do that, but I hope so."

Clearly, Christian remains ready for anything. She's done so much for the City of Houston, and she's about to do more for Rice University. "It's been a heck of an experience," Christian says, "but of course some of those moments have been hard. It is the 'hard' that keeps you going, because at the end of the hard there are great rewards. You're moving the community forward. And that's really what I'm all about."

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A photograph of three chefs in a kitchen. On the left is a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a black chef's coat. In the center is a woman with her hair in a bun, also in a black chef's coat. On the right is a man with a large red beard and glasses, wearing a black chef's coat. They are all smiling and standing in front of kitchen equipment.

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FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

Paris Kissel is using storytelling to spark change and challenge norms.

by **IAN L. HADDOCK**
photos by **HARVID LARES**

Paris Kissel is the Founder and CEO of bekind comms, a public relations and communications firm that exclusively serves clients who share the mission of making the world kinder.

The business's mission is simple, but it comes from the complex story of a woman who has been driven by a commitment to compassion throughout her life.

Kissel is a first-generation college student growing up in Alabama at her family's carnival. Being reared in the deep South, she understood early on, as she explored her queerness, that keeping it discreet seemed to be her only option.

"I was a very quiet child," she reveals, "and this felt like something that needed to be tucked away so that I could be more palatable to everyone around me. And at that time, there weren't any stories, or at least any accessible to me, that normalized what I was going through."

This catalyzed her exploration of the stories of those with marginalized intersections, and catapulted her into digging deep into stories that compelled people to be more considerate of differences. Outed shortly thereafter, she delved into feelings of isolation and discovered her natural inclination to live out loud and proud by developing her storytelling skills. This moment of being outed, which was intended to shame her, was the cause for a significant →

shift in how she reclaimed herself and started to ask some deep questions.

“When I was outed,” she says, “I realized just how many of my loved ones were also struggling in silence. What if we had just been open from the start with each other? What if we had shared our stories and supported one another? What if I started being vulnerable and honest?”

Kissel found herself scrolling through websites with raw narratives, like Tumblr, and traveling outside of her state to discover people who were just like her: confident in their identity, but with few possible models of comfort. “This realization,” she says, “is the backbone of bekind comms.”

The public relations firm that she ultimately manifested empowers clients with passion and purpose in advocacy, civil rights, and community connection. For Kissel, this ensures she has a clientele who will inspire her daily, stand for the causes she believes in, and are genuinely good people. Against all odds, she has made many connections with clients nationwide and beyond as a powerful force of commentary and active communication in outlets such as *Time* magazine, *Essence*, and *Billboard*.

“FOR TOO LONG, BLACK AND QUEER FOLKS HAVE HAD THEIR STORIES TOLD FOR THEM, HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED TROPES MEANT TO SHRINK THEIR COMPLEXITIES, HAVE BEEN CENSORED, OR HAVE BEEN ENTIRELY ERASED. I SEE MY WORK AS A WAY TO CHALLENGE THAT.”

— Paris Kissel

Still, as a woman in business, it has not always been easy. While working in Washington, DC, she began to develop self-doubt about what she could accomplish based on her gender. “Agencies frequently tout their values and commitment to inclusivity, but it is far too often just language used for a website,” Kissel says. Behind the scenes, she alleges, they tolerate sexism, sexual harassment, bullying, and more.

“Public relations is a women-dominated field,” she notes, “but I have been at agencies

where there isn’t a single female senior-level employee. I was raised by so many strong females—my great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, aunt, and sisters all working and living beside me in my childhood—but somehow I forgot that power when I was in male-driven agencies.”

It wasn’t until Kissel returned to Alabama to see what her sisters had accomplished within the male-dominated carnival industry that she began to believe starting a business was within her capabilities. This clarified her purpose and exposed her deep desire to uplift those who were farthest at the margins.

The work she does at bekind comms is personal, because behind every statistic and policy debate there are real people with real stories. Her goal is to act as a storyteller and bring the humanity to the forefront. Kissel’s clients represent a spectrum of people often overlooked, many of them Black and queer. “For too long, Black and queer folks have had

their stories told for them, have been assigned tropes meant to shrink their complexities, have been censored, or have been entirely erased. I see my work as a way to challenge that,” she emphasizes.

Kissel’s tireless efforts have empowered events like the Black Queer Advancement Festival (BQAF) to emerge as national events celebrating acts of resistance through music, dancing, community building, and resource sharing. It is this passion and drive that ensure everyone feels seen and valued. “I truly believe it saves lives,” she concludes. “I know that BQAF is reaching people in the South who are struggling with their identities and feeling unseen or unheard. This event is showing them that not only are they *not* alone, but they are part of a vibrant, thriving community that welcomes them.”



Keep up with Paris on Instagram
@pariskissel and @bekindcomms.



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A Passion for Queer Storytelling

Ben Chavez explores the power of LGBTQ identity and community in his premiere of *Last Day, County Fair*.

by DAVID CLARKE
Photo by CLAIRE McADAMS

Houston-based artist and advocate Ben Chavez is set for a whirlwind month. On March 6 and 7, he brings his deeply personal work, *Last Day, County Fair*, to Performing Arts Houston's New/Now series at downtown's Wortham Center. Then he lights up the stage at the Diana Foundation's annual awards gala on March 28. With his powerful storytelling skills, Chavez continues to carve out a space where music and LGBTQ advocacy intersect.

Chavez is excited about his world premiere of *Last Day, County Fair*, a project that blends music and storytelling to explore themes of queer identity, small-town culture, and self-acceptance. Inspired in part by his husband's coming-out journey, the piece follows a hometown performer who faces the ultimate test when he comes out to his family after years of community support.

"For me, coming out felt like a ticking clock," Chavez explains. "Depending on your circumstances, there's often secrecy, pressure, or fear—wondering if the people who've always supported you will still show up when they learn who you really are."

Through *Last Day, County Fair*, Chavez hopes to spark conversation and empower LGBTQ youth navigating their own journeys. "This piece is for everyone, but especially for two groups: young queer folks questioning their self-acceptance, and those on the fence about what it means to love and support a queer person in their lives," he says. "I wish I had more art that spoke directly to me growing up, so I want to be a part of creating that space."

Chavez is one of three winning artists in Performing Arts Houston's annual New/Now commissioning project, which selected him from over 60 local artists. As part of this initiative, he has received full funding for production and marketing support to bring *Last Day, County Fair* to life.

"Performing Arts Houston is such a community-driven organization," Chavez says. "When I stumbled upon their submission call on social media, I thought, 'Why not?' I pitched the idea, sent in some demos, and was honored to receive the support to develop this piece."

Beyond the stage, Chavez is deeply committed to community engagement, particularly with LGBTQ youth. In December, he led a songwriting masterclass with Hatch Youth at the Montrose Center, helping young creatives channel their stories into music.

"Art is meant to be shared, and songwriting is such a powerful way to process emotions," Chavez says. "When I was younger, I turned to songwriting when I felt like I had no one to talk to. It became my therapy, my way of documenting my experiences."

When he encourages young artists to find their voices, Chavez emphasizes that formal training isn't a prerequisite. "You don't have to be a concert pianist or have a music degree to share your truth," he insists. "If you have something to say, document it. A melody, a lyric, even a voice memo—it could become something greater than you ever imagined."

Chavez will team up with renowned Houston music director Alex Navarro and vocalist Courtney Markowitz for the 72nd Diana Awards gala, the signature event of the country's oldest LGBTQ nonprofit organization. Chavez promises a Broadway-themed night to remember.

"I'm so honored to be part of this historic event," Chavez says. "Houston has this incredible queer arts community, and it's amazing to be surrounded by so much support and talent. We're going to put smiles on faces and give audiences an unforgettable show."

Having grown up in New York City, Chavez never expected to call Houston home, but five years in, he's become one of its biggest champions. "Houston is this hidden gem for artists," he says. "You don't think of Houston as an arts hub the way you do New York or L.A., but it

has everything—musical theater, opera, film, contemporary arts, and a genuinely supportive community."

The Wortham Center, where *Last Day, County Fair* will debut, stands as a testament to that community support. It is well documented that more than 3,500 private donors—nearly 2,200 of whom contributed \$100 or less—raised \$66 million to build the downtown performing-arts mecca amid Houston's banking and oil recession of the 1980s.

As Chavez prepares to premiere *Last Day, County Fair*, he is already thinking about what's next. "This project wants to be an album," he says. "Like *Jagged Little Pill*—which had a life of its own before becoming a Broadway show—I want this music to live, to reach people in different ways."

And while he dreams of expanding the piece into a full theatrical production, one thing is certain: Houston is where he wants it to happen. "I'd love to see this project fully staged here in the city I love," he says. "This is my pitch—calling all directors, choreographers, and producers. Let's make it happen."

For now, audiences can experience the first iteration of *Last Day, County Fair* at the Wortham Center with pay-what-you-can tickets, ensuring accessibility for all. "It's important that anyone who wants to be in the room can be there," Chavez says. "I hope people come and see themselves in this work, no matter where they are in their journey."

With his talent, passion, and dedication to storytelling, Chavez is proving that queer stories—especially ones rooted in honesty and hope—can never be told too often. "We need these stories," he says. "And I'm ready to share mine."

WHAT: *Last Day, County Fair*, part of Performing Arts Houston's New/Now series
WHEN: March 6 and 7
WHERE: Wortham Center's Cullen Theater
INFO: performingartshouston.org

A full-page photograph of Ben Chavez. He is a man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a black leather jacket over a colorful patterned shirt and dark trousers. He is leaning his right arm on a black digital keyboard. The background is a vibrant pink with a large white circle behind him, and a shadow of his figure is cast on the pink surface. The text is positioned in the lower right area of the image.

"THIS PIECE IS FOR
EVERYONE, BUT
ESPECIALLY FOR
YOUNG QUEER FOLKS
QUESTIONING THEIR
SELF-ACCEPTANCE."

— Ben Chavez



Michelle Payne (l) and Sharon Medley



When Michelle Payne and Sharon Medley exchanged vows on January 19, 2025, they weren't just celebrating their love—they were making history. Their wedding at

Love United Methodist Church in Baytown marked what is believed to be the first public lesbian wedding in the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. (Kyle Young and Michael Gierl, who were featured in the January 2025 *OutSmart*, are believed to have celebrated the first public gay wedding in that local Methodist conference). More than just a ceremony, Michelle and Sharon's wedding was a testament to love's ability to endure, inspire, and transform.

Michelle and Sharon's journey together wasn't conventional, but their romance and happiness together was definitely meant to be. When they first met at a casual gathering of friends, neither expected to find their forever person. Michelle, who had been married to a man and was raising a family, had spent years suppressing a part of herself, while Sharon, fiercely independent and content in her own solitude, had built walls around her heart.

"I was in a marriage that wasn't fulfilling, but I had convinced myself it was enough," Michelle recalls. "Meeting Sharon changed

everything."

Their connection deepened when Sharon, battling cancer at the time, moved in with Michelle's family out of necessity. What started as an act of care and compassion soon blossomed into love. "I was hesitant," Sharon admits. "I had been on my own for so long, and I didn't think I needed anyone. But Michelle kept breaking down those walls, brick by brick."

Michelle recalls the moment she knew Sharon was the one. "When she tried to leave, thinking it was best for my family, I couldn't let her go. That was the moment I realized I had to choose my happiness," she says. "And

my happiness was with her."

After years of building a life together, Michelle and Sharon knew they wanted to get married. But Michelle, who had experienced a proposal before, wanted Sharon get to experience that special moment of surprise and joy. On Christmas Eve, 2017, Michelle dropped to one knee and proposed. Sharon, overcome with emotion, quite literally fell to her knees beside her.

"I wanted to be the one to ask," Sharon laughs. "But Michelle made sure I got my moment, too." A few months later, on quiet Sylvan Beach, Sharon proposed right back, making their engagement truly a shared experience.

A Milestone Ceremony in Baytown

Michelle Payne and Sharon Medley's historic wedding united their community in love.

by DAVID CLARKE | photos by TROY WHITENECK



“After I said yes, this man who had been sitting nearby walked over and said, ‘Congratulations, I could tell this was something special,’” Michelle recalls. “It made the moment even more memorable.”

Despite their wanting a more traditional church wedding, financial constraints and exclusionary policies at their church prevented Michelle and Sharon from officially tying the knot for several years. But when the United Methodist Church removed language prohibiting same-sex marriages from its bylaws in 2024, their United Methodist church’s membership in Baytown immediately encouraged them to set a date.

“At first, we weren’t sure if we should rush into it,” Sharon admits, “but then we thought, why not now? We had waited long enough.”

Michelle adds, “We also wanted to make sure we did it on our own terms. There was always that lingering fear of political shifts, but more than that, we were ready. We weren’t waiting anymore.”

With only two months to plan and limited funds, the soon-to-be brides turned to their community for support. Through a Honey-Fund campaign, friends and church members alike contributed to make their dream wed-

ding a reality. From DIY floral arrangements to a venue donated out of love, everything about their wedding was a reflection of the people who stood by them.

One of the most touching moments came when Sharon, whose family declined to attend due to their religious beliefs, was walked down the aisle by members of their church choir. “The entire choir stood with me,” she says, still emotional. “It was overwhelming to see so many people step in and say, ‘We are your family.’”

Michelle recalls being moved to tears seeing the support Sharon received. “I turned around and saw them all standing there. It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life.”

Their wedding, set in a rustic winter wonderland adorned with borrowed Christmas trees from members of their community, was nothing short of magical. With four pastors officiating different parts of the ceremony, Michelle and Sharon stood at the altar, seeing each other in their dresses for the first time.

“It was more than we ever imagined,” Michelle says. “We felt seen, supported, and completely in love.”

Sharon adds, “Walking toward Michelle at the altar, with our community surrounding us,

it felt like every hardship we had overcome led us to that moment. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

The reception featured a cake made by a family friend, a stunning charcuterie spread, and a celebration filled with joy and gratitude. Their honeymoon at Walt Disney World, funded by their community’s generosity, was the perfect way to start their new chapter.

Beyond their personal love story, Michelle and Sharon see their wedding as a beacon of hope. They are dedicated to fostering an LGBTQ community in Baytown, a place where acceptance hasn’t always been guaranteed. “We want others to know that they are loved, that they belong,” Michelle says. “Our wedding wasn’t just for us—it was for everyone who needs to see that love always finds a way.”

Sharon echoes that sentiment: “If sharing our story gives even one person the courage to live their truth, then it was all worth it.”

As they look to the future, Michelle and Sharon remain committed to each other and to creating spaces where love, in all its forms, can thrive. Their story is one of courage, faith, and the unwavering belief that love wins.

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PRIDE HOUSTON 2025 LOGO UNVEILING & ANNOUNCEMENT OF PRIDE GRAND MARSHAL NOMINEES FEBRUARY 13, 2025

Pride Houston 365 revealed the 2025 Pride Celebration logo and introduced the grand-marshall nominees during a festive event at Lustre Pearl. The evening's host was MC Dirty, and entertainment was provided by Alexyeus Paris, D'Vaylon Iman Dickerson, Artemis Hunter, and others. Grand-marshall nominees across multiple categories were announced: in the Female-identifying category, the nominees are Josephine Jones, Marisa Fretwell, Kendall Toarmina, and Porscha Brown.

Male-identifying nominees are Daron Yanes and Ian L. Haddock. The Gender Non-binary/Non-conforming nominees are Nakita Bowman, Chip Ware, and Han Schaible. The Houston LGBTQ community is fortunate to have many supportive allies, as demonstrated by this year's nominees for Ally Grand Marshal: Jon Rosenthal and Sara Brook.

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The Wags & Whiskers Luncheon at Hotel ZaZa–Museum District was a heartwarming celebration of community, compassion, and beloved pets. This year's "Lassos & Leashes" theme honored Frank Billingsley, a Houston broadcasting icon with a 42-year career in meteorology. Beyond forecasting, Frank is a passionate advocate for men's health and adoptee rights, sharing his journey in his book *Swabbed & Found*.

Emmy-winning journalist Ernie Manouse served as honorary chair, adding his signature passion for storytelling and community engagement. Emcee Casey Curry led the program that featured a gourmet meal, a Pet Fashion Show produced by Todd Ramos, and an inspiring Fund a Need segment with spokesdog Moose, benefiting Interfaith Ministries' Animeals on Wheels program.

With so many supporters and the lively atmosphere, the event highlighted the power of giving back—not just to our community but to our four-legged friends. Wags & Whiskers is becoming a beloved tradition that unites Houston's animal lovers for a meaningful cause.



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A Season of Second Chances

Pisces energy meets the Mercury and Venus retrograde.

Our retrograde period continues with both Mercury and Venus going retrograde this month. Mars finally went direct on February 23. Both Venus and Mercury will go retrograde in Aries and Pisces this month. Venus is our planet of commitments, personal values, love, and beauty. When she is retrograde, we review our partnerships, consider a makeover of ourselves or our homes, and explore the value we have to others.

Venus retrograde helps us to see the past so we can make corrections. With Mercury retrograde, communication can be delayed, traffic can be worse, the internet may not work as well, and we have the chance to look back at our decisions and make corrections.

We are already feeling the effects of both Venus and Mercury retrograde. They both will be direct in mid-April. We also have eclipses this month on the 14th in Libra and on the 29th in Aries. It's a busy month!



ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

You Rams are in a rest-and-retreat mode as the month begins. This is a better time for taking mental-health days, doing yoga, meditation, or Tai Chi, and taking extra-good care of yourself! You are more sensitive to your environment, and that will have a greater impact on you. With both Mercury and Venus retrograde in your sign, this will be a month of looking back and reconnecting with people from your past. All of your partnerships will be under review; some you may retain, and others you will let go. There continues to be a strong focus on family and your home. You may be doing repairs or upgrading what you have. Career review is also active with these ongoing retrogrades. Connecting with an employer from your past can prove to be fruitful.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

Career shifts are already occurring. You may be considering doing something on your own or changing your direction totally! Social and business organizations can be very helpful in providing options and other opportunities for you. Friends can also be more important for you this month as they provide real emotional support. This can also be a very good time for you to connect to a business organization or support group to expand your possibilities. With your ruler, Venus, going retrograde, you will be reconsidering your ongoing path with your partners, both business and personal. In the latter part of the month, you will want to take a step back and make sure that what you are doing now is in alignment with your internal calling. You may want to put off final decisions until after mid-April when the planets are direct.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

This month, career activity is going to be the main topic for you! And with Mercury and Venus both retrograding in your career sector at the end of this month, there is an opportunity to rethink your current

path and direction. For some of you, this can be a time to consider doing something on your own. If you are older, you might want to cut back or retire. With the retrograde planets affecting your career, old problems that have not been resolved will show up, and this will be the month to deal with them. Partnerships are still positive, but we are all reviewing our commitments this month. This continues to be a good time to upgrade your education, consider relocating, and taking your partnership to the next level. The best time for decision making is after April 15. Take your time and look in every nook and cranny for the best possible resolution.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

In the first half of the month, your curiosity is very active, and you are expanding your education, studying different cultures, and thinking about places to escape to. This is enhanced with both Mercury and Venus retrograde in this area of your zodiac. Your career area comes into greater focus in the latter half of the month. You are looking for a career path that connects more to your ideals of a spiritual life with purpose and an internal calling. It must also be useful and practical, as well as aiding others in their goals. With the retrogrades, you may be reconsidering your current career and the lure of being a stay-at-home parent. This will impact your family and your relationships. You have been more focused on yourself and your needs since late October, and not as ready to compromise as you usually are. The best decisions are made after April 15.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

Although you have a lot of plans brewing, you will still be taking time to think about when to put your plans into action. With our current retrograde period, decisions after April 15 will prove to be the best. You are reviewing all aspects of your life. Your view of relationships is changing as you remove toxic activity

and toxic people from your life. Your tolerance overall is much lower! You also may be rethinking where you live and work. In the first half of the month, you are discovering the hidden cost of relationships, the price of compromise, and how you are valued by others. In the latter half of the month, you are working on solutions to resolve your consternation. Getting out of town can help you see more options and clear your mind.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

With your ruler, Mercury, going retrograde in the middle of the month, you will be slowing down and taking care of things you have been putting off or have forgotten about. You are taking your health and self-care much more seriously. You may be improving your exercise and eating programs, as you are looking to get rid of toxins from your food and work environment. Partnerships are the main focus this month. You are reevaluating your expectations in partnerships. With difficult partnerships, a resolution has to be found. With more positive partnerships, this can be a time of renewal, making sure your goals and views are in alignment, and getting closer to understanding the real value your partner has in your life. This is a very good month to work on reducing debt and investigating ways to invest. All decisions are best made after April 15.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

This month, there is an emphasis on health, work conditions, co-worker relationships, and setting boundaries so that you aren't overloaded. This would be an excellent month to restart any of your previous health-improvement programs. This month can also show problems with office equipment, communication problems between co-workers, and inefficient methods of operation. You will be looking to resolve these issues at work and in your daily life. You will be expecting others to pick up their share of the responsibility. In the latter part of the month, partnerships are the focus.

This will be a big time of review for you in this area. Good relationships get better, and difficult ones must be resolved.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

Your creative cycle continues to be strong this month. This is a time when you are looking for more fun and enjoyment in your life. This may come through activities with your partner or friends, and strengthening connections with your children. This also continues to be a good time to consider taking a side hobby and turning it into a money-making venture. This is also a very good month to improve your health and exercise programs, visit your doctor, and explore natural ways to improve your everyday surroundings. You are becoming more sensitized to your environment and things you have been able to ignore, so you may find that more difficult. At the core of this is the shift that is going on with your family. You are exploring and releasing the childhood fears that have held you back. You are shedding your skin.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

Home, family, roots, genetics, your home, and your current location are all under review. For some, this can be a time to build your family and establish some roots and stability. For others, this can be a time of downsizing to reflect your current state. This is an excellent time for home repair, upgrading the kitchen, and improving the landscaping. This is also a time where the family power structure and hierarchy is shifting. You have options to take on a leadership role

or step back and let others deal with the responsibility. You are definitely going to want to lighten your load as you travel through life. This can be a time when demanding relationships can really get on your nerves. In the latter half of the month, you are ready for some fun and play, and you will not want to push yourself as much. Keep your options open and flexible.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

This whole year has been about you creating more order and making your time more useful in your daily activities. You are expecting others to be more mature in taking on their personal responsibilities. And if they do, you are more likely to want to help them along their way. With your family, you are setting boundaries and expecting everyone to pitch in. There are some big shifts going on with your family, and you may have to step into a different role within the family. This may affect where you live and your occupation, as well. If you are older, this can be a time of cutting back or retiring. Partnerships still require energy, love, and attention. This can be a great month to renew your bonds with your loved one. This can also be a good time to renew goals with business partners. Difficulties must be resolved if you are going to move forward in your partnerships.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Pluto, the planet of transformation, detoxification, shedding your skin, and recognizing your own personal power, has entered your sign and will remain there for the next 20 years. It is making its strongest

impact on those of you born in the early days of the sign. However, all you Water Bearers are feeling some part of this. This is making you look at all aspects of your life: what you want to keep and what you want to throw away. Your tolerance levels are *very low*! As this month opens, you are exploring ways to enhance your resources, raise your fees, and find greater value in what you do. In the latter half of the month, you are more talkative and busy improving your daily habits. You are more direct in your presentation of yourself, and you're making a greater impact on others.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

Happy Birthday to the Mermaids and Mermen! This is your yearly cycle of review, possible renewal, and a time to set new goals and directions for yourself. This month is having a strong impact on you, with both Mercury and Venus going retrograde and impacting your sign through the middle of April. This will have a strong impact on your partnerships and will help renew them. You could find new goals that bring the relationship closer. This can also bring old lovers back into your life, as well. You will have less patience with those who don't take responsibility—especially partners in business, romance, and friendship. Finances are highlighted in the latter half of the month. You may ask for a raise, increase your fees, or even renew a skill you haven't used in a long time. You may be looking at relocating or doing some downsizing, as well.

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The Cowboy Casanova

Casper Cain is devilishly entertaining.

By SAM BYRD



Casper Cain knows how to raise a little hell. Since starting nearly two years ago, he's already risen to the top to become the winner of OSM's

Gayest & Greatest "Best New Drag King." He's suave, and he oozes sex appeal every time he performs. So don't ghost on Casper—find out more about what makes this drag king tick.

Pronouns? They/Them He/Him in drag.

Inner avatar? An Italian stallion, of course!

Hometown? Houston

Drag birthday? December 21, 2022

Story behind the stage name?

I wanted a stage name that sounded like something my parents might have named me if I was born male. I wanted something that sounded country. I chose Casper because it felt right and checked both boxes when I heard it for the first time. Cain comes from my friend Carson Cain, who I knew from college. He was a huge supporter of anything creative I did and was the first person I wanted to call when I found drag. He passed away in 2020, and taking his name felt like a good way to honor his legacy. Plus, Carson Cain and Casper Cain sound pretty similar, so it all felt like a natural fit.

What got you interested in drag?

I kind of found drag by accident. My friends from college were in town for a week and wanted to go to Pearl Bar since there aren't any lesbian bars in Spokane where they're from. There happened to be a drag-king show that night. I watched for about two numbers and leaned over to my best friend and whispered, "What is this? I think I want to do this." I found the show's producer and ended up leaving that night with a booking.

Describe your performing persona.

Casper is the embodiment of confidence, sensuality, and charisma. When the music is on, and he's onstage or in the limelight, he's untouchable—the hottest person in the room. And he's fully aware of that fact. He knows you want him and that you want to see more of him, so he's ready to show you anything. He can be whatever



you want him to be, and he can do it all pretty damn well. That sounds so cocky, but so is he.

What advice would you share with your younger self?

Life is too short to spend it in the past or the future: be present, and always seek that which brings you love and clarity.

Have you ever had a defining moment in your life? If so, share more.

My sister's passing was the most defining moment of my life. There is a distinct "Before Alessandra died" and "After Alessandra died" feeling attached to all of my memories now. As much pain as remembering that she's gone brings me, it makes me more grateful for every day I have because I know tomorrow isn't promised. I want to live a life that makes her proud. She lived fearlessly, fully, and authentically in a way that liberated those around her to do the same. She never judged, and she extended the same love to her family as she did to a stranger. The defining moment, I guess, is the standard Alessandra left me when she left all of us: to live and love like her.

Tell us your reaction when you found out you won OSM's 2024 Gayest & Greatest award for the best new drag king.

I was beyond shocked, honestly—very excited but initially just shocked. The second emotion that came over me was gratitude. Casper is only where he is today because of the relentless support of other people. I became suddenly and acutely aware of the roles everyone who's ever supported me has played in my success so far—my drag families, my friends, partner, siblings, show producers, community members, and show supporters. It was very humbling and touching to know that many people care about me and appreciate what Casper has contributed to this scene.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I'm a quadruplet.

Marry, Shag, Kill: Jack Daniels, Johnnie Walker, Jim Beam?

Kill all of them. I hate whiskey.

Where can we see you perform?

Pearl Bar every Wednesday at 9:30 p.m., and randomly around Montrose.

Follow Casper Cain @casper_cain7 on Instagram and @casper_cain on TikTok.

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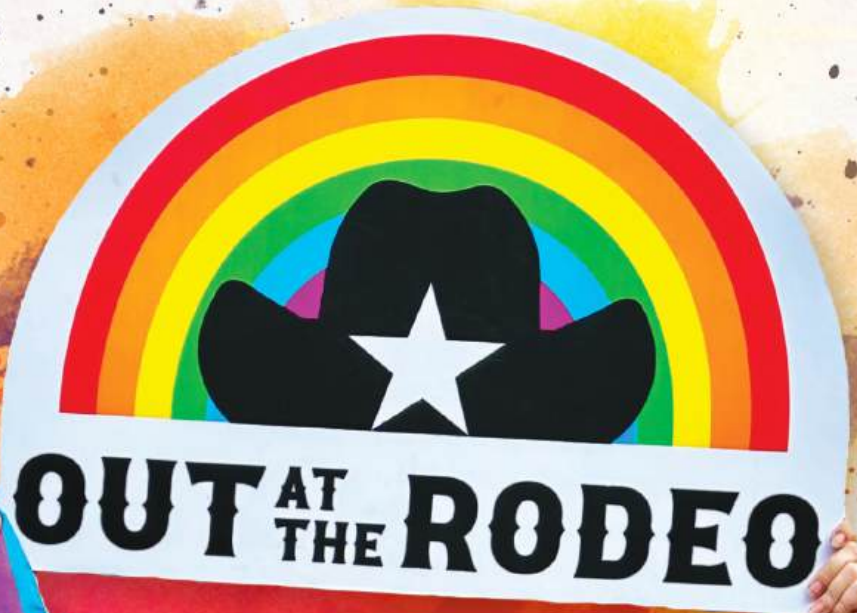
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