

OutSmart

APRIL 2025

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

A&E

CURTAIN CALL

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final Sherlock at
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SPECIAL**

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BOLD BITES

Corey Scranton spices up
Barcelona Wine Bar.

Photography by Alex Rosa/OutSmart magazine

A photograph of two young men smiling and hugging, overlaid with a blue tint.

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We begin our April issue by remembering Dr. Bruce Smith, a beloved Montrose dentist who died last month at the age of 74. He was a fearless advocate who welcomed AIDS patients at

his practice during a time when most dentists refused to treat them. From co-founding the Bering Dental Clinic to helping establish the Tony's Place youth shelter, Bruce's life was marked by compassion, courage and tireless service to Houston's LGBTQ community.

This month's food and drink section highlights a few LGBTQ entrepreneurs who are taking Houston's culinary scene to new heights. At The Kennedy, elegant cuisine meets upscale nightlife in a piano-bar setting that blends East Coast flair with Houston warmth. And across town, Marlén Mendoza of Ema HTX is redefining breakfast with bold Latin flavors and some of the best coffee on the planet. At Boogie's Boilin', partners Denita Forges and Whitne Dilliehunt serve up New Orleans-style seafood with love and purpose as they grow their business.

We also spoke with Marin Slanina as she moves on from her popular queer-owned Heights eatery Star Sailor and looks forward to her next venture. Then we catch up with com-

munity connector and food lover John Frels, the driving force behind the popular and lively Houston Heights Foodies group on Facebook.

We also take a look at the newly opened Montrose Country Club, created by hospital-ity veteran Jeff Harmon. With a chef-driven menu by Sicilian-born Diego Chiarello, plus poolside dining and day-spa amenities open to everyone, the club offers a new gathering space in the heart of the neighborhood.

Barcelona Wine Bar is offering more than tapas and wine—it's creating a welcoming space with heart. General manager Corey Scranton brings charm and purpose to the table, whether he's greeting guests in his beautifully restored former Hollyfield Laundry building or co-chairing the Out for Good Gala—which raised \$400,000 for the Montrose Center. Corey makes it clear that hospitality and community service go hand in hand.

In this month's arts coverage, we celebrate the career of actor Todd Waite, who is retiring after 25 years with the Alley Theatre, and then preview Cynthia Erivo's upcoming appearance with the Houston Symphony under the baton of conductor Steven Reineke. Music also takes center stage at this year's Black Queer AF Music Festival, where visibility and community activism meet rhythmic joy. And at the

Museum of Fine Arts, a major retrospective on Art Deco icon Tamara de Lempicka explores the timeless glamour of her paintings—some of which are owned by avid art collectors Barbra Streisand, Elton John, and Madonna.

This month's business feature highlights Joshua's Native Plants, the beloved Heights garden center that founder Joshua Kornegay created as the go-to place for gardening inspiration from around the world.

As an independent LGBTQ media outlet, *OutSmart* needs the financial support of its readers to continue doing this work. If you believe the stories of our community deserve to be told—especially in a time when LGBTQ rights are under attack—please consider becoming a charter member of the OutSmart Foundation for LGBTQ News and Media. Your monthly donation helps us remain a visible voice for Houston's LGBTQ community. We cannot do this without you. Your support truly makes a difference.



Greg Jeu
Publisher



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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



The Montrose Country Club held a sneak preview on March 1, 2025. Pictured are **Blackberri**, **Jeff Harmon**, and **Diego Chiarello**.



On March 6, 2025, ActOUT at the Alley Theatre was held for "The Glass Menagerie." Pictured are **Aaron Rublein**, **Carol Blacknall**, **Davin Hutcheson**, **Kevin Pope**, and **Matthew Janak**.



Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber held an event at Hearthstone Country Club on February 5, 2025. Pictured are **Jack Berger**, **Jenny Judd**, **Tamika Caston-Miller**, **Pam Johns**, and **Brooks Ballard**.



On March 7, 2025, Pride Houston 365 presented its Cufflinks and Cocktails Tasting at Avant Garden. Pictured are **Nathaniel Gonzalez**, **Venita Howard**, **Ancilleno Solomon**, and **Haley Hulk**.



Lazarus House held its Bubbles and Breakfast Tacos pre-walk brunch before participating in the annual Allies in Hope Walk to End HIV on March 9, 2025.



On March 9, 2025, Allies in Hope held its annual Walk to End HIV at Sam Houston Park downtown. Pictured are walkers lined up for the walk to begin.



On March 13, 2025, Bringin' in the Green, benefiting the Montrose Center, was held at the home of Chris Robertson. Pictured are members of the Montrose Center staff.



The Misfits Houston hosted Rhinestone Cowboy at The Montrose Country Club on March 15, 2025. Pictured are members of Misfits Houston and the OUT at the Rodeo team.



OUT at the Rodeo, the LGBTQ Day at the Rodeo, was held at NRG on February 15, 2025. Pictured are attendees in the Bluebonnet tent.



On March 15, 2025, Pride Night was celebrated with the Houston Rockets and included several LGBTQ organizations. Pictured is a group of supporters of Pride Houston 365.



The Diana Foundation celebrated its 72nd Awards Show "Decorum" at Pour Behavior on March 28, 2025. Pictured are **Joelle Espeut**, **Tanner Williams**, and **Judge Phyllis Frye**.



Trot for Trans Visibility Houston 2025 began at Frost Town Brewing on February 22, 2025. Pictured are some of the participants.

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QUEER THINGS to DO

COMMUNITY

April 20

Bunnies on the Bayou 46

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



STAGE

April 24

Out@TUTS for Waitress

Theatre Under The Stars presents its Out@TUTS reception for LGBTQ theatergoers and friends featuring light bites, drink specials, and live music. tinyurl.com/4z7d9btp



STAGE

April 9

Cynthia Erivo with the Houston Symphony

The *Wicked* star brings her gravity-defying voice to Jones Hall for a performance backed by the full Houston Symphony. tinyurl.com/b9v7b4yt

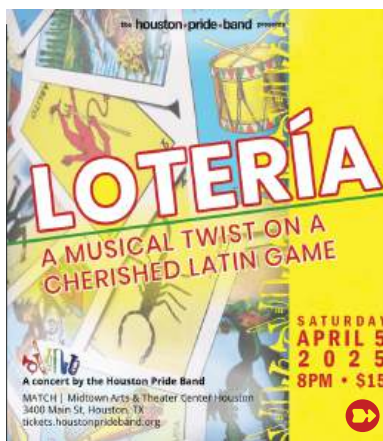


COMMUNITY

April 5

Houston Gaymers Drag Show

Join the Gaymers for their Charity Drag Show—a fabulous fusion of gaming, anime, and nerd culture. Proceeds benefit designated charities. tinyurl.com/bddwnt3b



STAGE

April 5

Houston Pride Band's Lotería

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

STAGE

April 8

St. Vincent - All Born Screaming Tour

Grammy Award-winning queer musician St. Vincent brings her All Born Screaming tour to White Oak Music Hall. tinyurl.com/5n7wrzmz

STAGE

April 12

Houston's Got Bollywood: Love in the Stars

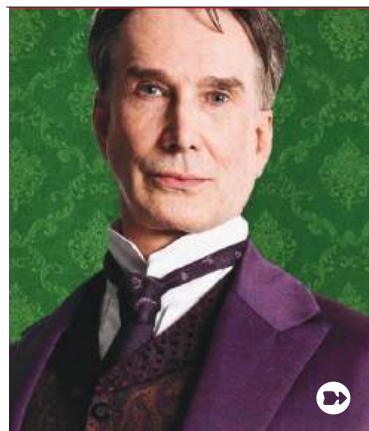
Miller Outdoor Theatre and Moksh Community Arts present a Bollywood-style dance theatre production inspired by astrology and its planetary influences, weaving a tale of love. tinyurl.com/5n795sx8

COMMUNITY

April 12

Houston Bears Bachelor Auction

The Houston Bears present their annual Bachelor Auction that celebrates community and raises funds for Omega House, Out for Education, and TLACT. tinyurl.com/358xfct



STAGE

April 17

Alley Theatre's ActOUT for Baskerville

Ticket holders for this production of the Sherlock Holmes mystery *Baskerville* can enjoy a pre-performance mixer with music, socializing, light bites, and drinks. tinyurl.com/mv2ht7z2



ART

Through May 26

Tamara de Lempicka at MFAH

Museum of Fine Arts Houston presents a major retrospective of Art Deco icon Tamara de Lempicka. The exhibition traverses Lempicka's career from Paris to the decade she spent in New York and Los Angeles in the 1940s. tinyurl.com/5ybsz5h6

COMMUNITY

April 19

Trans Legal Aid Clinic

Volunteer clinic attorneys will assist in updating your name and/or gender marker on your identifying documents. tinyurl.com/29jczurh



COMMUNITY

April 26

Montrose Center's 'Empowering Our Future' Gala

This Montrose Center gala benefits Hatch Youth's comprehensive LGBTQ youth services. This year's theme is Under the Big Top, and circus flair is encouraged. tinyurl.com/2ru2dhk3

COMMUNITY

April 26

2025 Lavender Graduation at the Montrose Center

The Lavender Graduation celebration is a citywide event honoring LGBTQ students from colleges and universities across Houston. tinyurl.com/3424bdxf

MORE QUEER THINGS TO DO →



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ROUNDUP OF LGBTQ
HAPPENINGS IN HOUSTON!




QUEER THINGS to DO

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COMMUNITY

May 3

Allies in Hope 2025 Ally Awards

The inaugural Ally Awards celebration honors the Junior League of Houston's decades-long support of Allies in Hope, and particularly the Camp Hope program that has served children impacted by HIV for over 25 years. tinyurl.com/mrx22tjd



STAGE

May 3

BQAF Music Festival 2025 - Visibility

The Normal Anomaly, Inc. presents the BQAF Music Festival, an annual event that showcases the best of our Black LGBTQ and ally communities through arts and culture. tinyurl.com/45t4jr9a

STAGE

May 29

Out@TUTS for In the Heights

Theatre Under The Stars presents its Out@TUTS reception for LGBTQ theatergoers and friends featuring light bites, drink specials, and live music. tinyurl.com/4z7d9btp



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

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Retiring with Confidence

The “buckets of money” strategy can help protect your future.



As individuals approach retirement, financial planning becomes increasingly important to manage assets effectively. One approach to organizing retirement savings is the Buckets of Money Strategy. This strategy helps individuals allocate investments based on short-, intermediate-, and long-term needs, providing liquidity for immediate expenses, stability for mid-term needs, and growth potential for the future. By segmenting assets into these distinct categories, retirees and pre-retirees can create a structured investment plan that balances accessibility, risk management, and long-term sustainability.

Understanding the Strategy

The Buckets of Money Strategy divides retirement savings into three distinct categories. The first is the short-term bucket, which covers immediate expenses and serves as a cash reserve. This bucket consists of highly liquid, low-risk assets such as savings accounts, money market accounts, CDs, or short-term Treasury bills. The purpose of this allocation is to ensure that essential expenses such as mortgage payments, medical costs, or planned travel can be covered without the need to sell investments during market downturns. Since economic and market fluctuations are inevitable, having readily available funds in this bucket can help individuals avoid tapping into long-term investments at inopportune times.

The intermediate-term bucket is designed for financial needs that arise within three to seven years. This portion of the strategy focuses on preserving capital while providing some income and moderate growth. Investments in this category may include high-quality bonds, conservative balanced funds, or laddered fixed-income securities. The goal of this bucket is to generate a reasonable return while limiting exposure to excessive volatility. It can be particularly useful for medium-term expenses such as home renovations, vehicle purchases, or unexpected medical costs. The intermediate bucket acts as a buffer, helping individuals transition between their immediate cash needs and their long-term investment goals without being overly reliant on either.

The long-term bucket is allocated for investments with a time horizon of seven years or more. This portion of the portfolio is designed

for long-term growth and typically consists of equities, mutual funds, exchange-traded funds (ETFs), and other growth-oriented investments. Since this bucket has the longest time frame, it can better withstand short-term market fluctuations while benefiting from the potential for compounding and capital appreciation. The objective of this allocation is to keep pace with inflation and support financial needs throughout later years of retirement. Many individuals allocate a significant portion of their portfolio to this bucket, as it provides the highest potential for long-term growth and helps one work toward financial security well into the later stages of retirement.

Key Considerations

One of the key benefits of this approach is that it provides a framework for managing market volatility. The short-term bucket ensures that funds are available for immediate expenses, reducing the need to sell investments during a downturn, while the long-term bucket allows for continued market participation with a focus on growth. The intermediate-term bucket plays an essential role in bridging the gap between short-term cash needs and long-term investments, helping to manage withdrawals strategically and reduce the risk of prematurely depleting retirement savings. By structuring retirement assets in this way, individuals can establish a clearer approach to financial planning and transition into retirement with greater confidence.

Another important consideration is that the balance between these buckets should evolve over time. For example, early in retirement, an individual may allocate more funds toward growth-oriented investments in the long-term bucket to maximize returns. As they progress through retirement and begin drawing more from their assets, they may shift a larger portion of their portfolio toward intermediate and short-term assets to provide greater liquidity. Rebalancing these buckets periodically allows individuals to adjust to changing financial circumstances, economic conditions, and personal goals.

Tax efficiency is another crucial factor when implementing this strategy. Tax-deferred retirement accounts such as IRAs and 401(k)s, taxable investment accounts, and Roth IRAs all offer different tax advantages and should be utilized strategically within each bucket. For example, withdrawing from a taxable investment account first may help defer taxes on retirement accounts, allowing tax-advantaged assets to continue growing. A financial professional can help individuals structure their withdrawals in the most tax-efficient manner possible.

Implementing the Strategy

To put the Buckets of Money Strategy into action, individuals should first assess their financial needs and anticipate expenses in the short, intermediate, and long term. This assessment should include analyzing living expenses, debt obligations, healthcare costs,



PLAN WISELY. YOU WON'T GET A DO-OVER.

A successful retirement in the future can often depend on having a solid plan now. If your money isn't working as hard as you are, it may be time to act—there are no do-overs in retirement planning. Now is the time to consider developing a strategy that can help you work toward your financial goals. I specialize in providing comprehensive, objective financial guidance with the goal of maximizing every remaining moment of the retirement countdown.

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Remembering Bruce W. Smith

The pioneering Houston dentist was known for his philanthropy and fearless AIDS activism.

by ROSS SMITH, TONY SHELTON and RICH ARENSCHIEDT



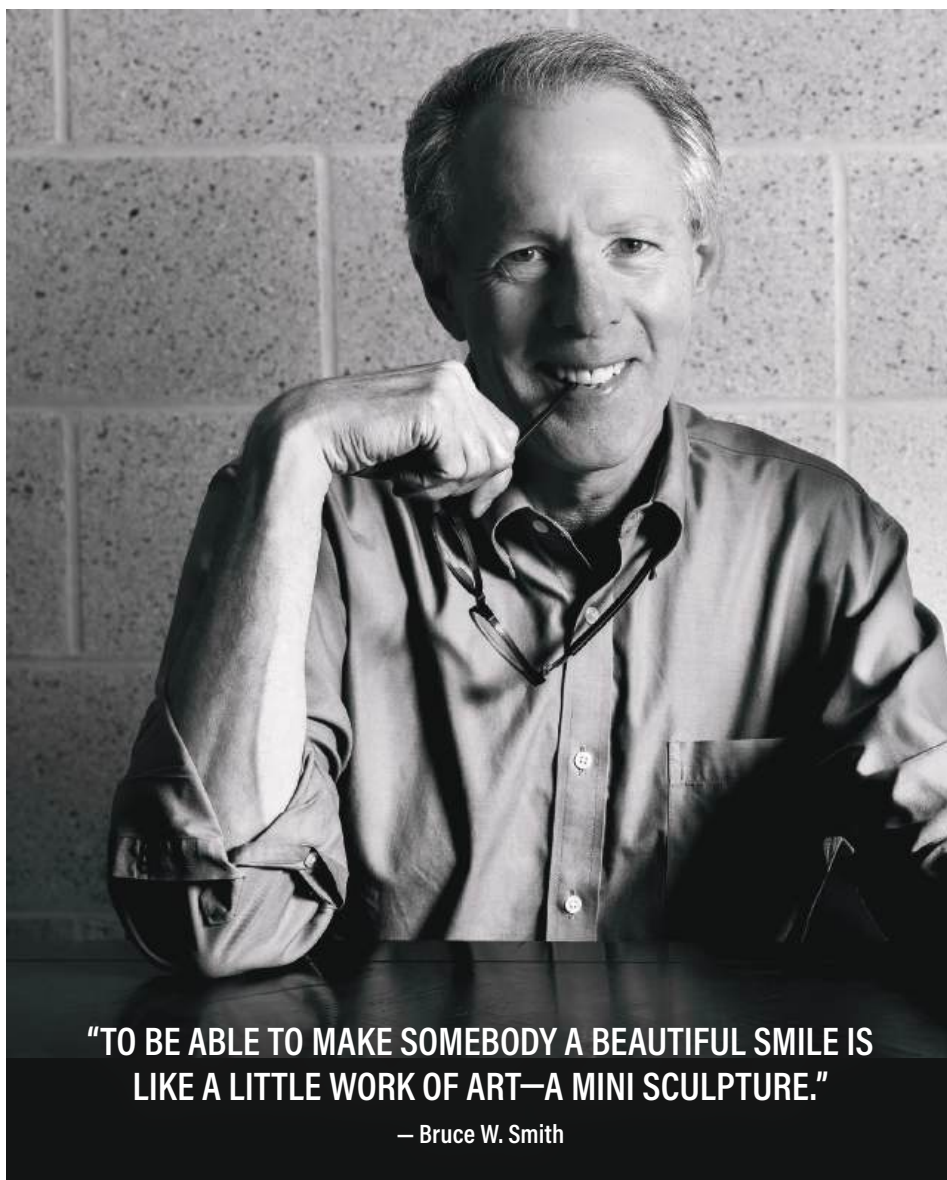
With the passing of Bruce William Smith, D.D.S., at the age of 74 on March 19, 2025, the world lost an outstanding dentist, a gifted sculptor, a philanthropist,

a political activist, and a hero to people suffering from AIDS in the early years of that epidemic.

Bruce was born on March 3, 1951, in Troy, New York. He graduated from Richardson High School in Richardson, Texas, and then graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington with a degree in microbiology and a minor in chemistry.

From the time he was a child, his mother had instilled in Bruce a deep love for all people and a desire to serve others. During college, a summer job in a dentist's office revealed to Bruce a way to combine that desire to serve others with his scientific aptitude, his artistic ability, and his talent for working with his hands. Bruce said, "To be able to make somebody a beautiful smile, it's like a little work of art—a mini sculpture."

Bruce earned his Doctor of Dental Surgery (D.D.S.) degree from the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio. After graduation in 1979, he joined the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service. As a young lieutenant, he was stationed at Prairie View A&M University, where he focused on sterilization and infection control practices and provided dental services to needy people in the Hempstead, Texas, area. After two years, he left the Commissioned Corps and established his dental practice in a small bungalow in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. It was at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and his scientific background, his compassion, and his courage made him a community hero. There was no precedent →



"TO BE ABLE TO MAKE SOMEBODY A BEAUTIFUL SMILE IS LIKE A LITTLE WORK OF ART—A MINI SCULPTURE."

— Bruce W. Smith

and no protocol in the mid-1980s for treating AIDS patients. Very little was known about the disease at the time, and other dentists in Houston were declining to treat people with AIDS. When a young AIDS patient in a local hospital with a horrible toothache could not find a dentist who would treat him, Bruce stepped forward and said, "Let's get this guy taken care of."

Bruce didn't stop there. He developed the protocol for safely treating such patients and taught this protocol to many dentists around the country and abroad. Along with a small group of other dentists and supporters at Bering Church, he founded the Bering Dental Clinic to provide free treatment to people living with HIV/AIDS. That clinic grew and continues to treat thousands of patients with similar needs, as a part of another organization.

Bruce loved his family. When a tornado hit a town where one of his brothers lived, Bruce didn't wait for an invitation; he just called and said, "I'm on the way." When family or friends needed advice, Bruce was always there. Whether it was about the best type of dental crown to use or a tricky technical problem around the house, Bruce took great pleasure in helping.

Bruce met his husband, the late Tony Carroll, in the mid-1990s, and they soon became known as the ultimate power couple. Tony was a couples therapist, and the two were often affectionately referred to as Dental & Mental. They were known for their elegant parties, many of them organized in support of political candidates such as former Mayor Annise Parker, former U.S. Congressman Chris Bell, and former City Council Members Sue Lovell and Ellen Cohen.

When marriage equality became law in the province of Ontario, Canada, Bruce and Tony flew to Toronto and were married in a dual ceremony with longtime friends Ross Smith and Tony Shelton on November 28, 2003. Determined to solidify their bond, both symbolically and legally, Bruce and Tony would go on to have marriage ceremonies in New York and Texas as marriage equality became the law in the U.S.

Planning for their dream home in Montrose took Bruce and Tony to England numerous times to gather design ideas and buy art and antiques. Their lavish home, completed in 2012, included large rooms for events and even a built-in Rodgers organ for Tony, an accomplished musician. Their life together was interrupted by Tony's death on December 29, 2015, while the two were visiting New York City.

Tony and Bruce were the driving force behind the founding of Homeless Gay Kids—Houston, later renamed Tony's Place after

Tony's passing. Over the years, Bruce supported the Bering Dental Clinic, the Bering Omega Foundation and Bering Community Service Foundation, the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, the Human Rights Campaign, Lambda Legal, the Texas Freedom Network, Planned Parenthood, the Lesbian and Gay Rights Lobby, the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, Houston Grand Opera, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and PFLAG.

"HIS LEGACY GOES FAR BEYOND HOUSTON. HE WAS THE PRINCIPAL ADVOCATE FOR HIV PATIENTS IN THE DENTAL ARENA, ESPECIALLY WITH REGARD TO REDUCING THE STIGMA AND FEAR SURROUNDING TREATMENT."

— Dr. Mark Nichols, colleague

Colleagues Share Their Memories

Randy Mitchmore, D.D.S., credits Bruce with having a meaningful impact on his life and work. "In 1996 I was living in a small East Texas town. I had divorced, had a 4-year-old daughter, was coming out, and was being run out of town by the KKK. I was scared to death. I saw Bruce's ad in a magazine and reached out, explaining my situation. Without hesitation, he and Tony invited me to their home, fed me, and reassured me that I could move to Houston and open a practice. I was overwhelmed by their warmth and hospitality. It was my first experience of seeing a committed gay couple in a long-term relationship. It opened my eyes to a whole new world of gay life. They introduced me to people and to many different groups. They supported every LGBTQ organization imaginable.

Colleague Mark Nichols, D.D.S., remembers meeting Bruce in the mid-1980s as the dental community was confronting the AIDS epidemic. In 1985, dentists were starting to become fearful of treating patients with HIV, especially after the death of actor Rock Hudson. At that time, Nichols was practicing in Houston and had agreed to treat an HIV-positive patient. His staff, however, refused, telling Nichols, "If you see this patient, we will leave." Nichols then located Bruce, who immediately agreed to treat her.

In 1987, Nichols heard about the Bering Dental Clinic, at that time open only on Fridays and run entirely by volunteers. Bruce and Ed Cordray had dental practices in Montrose, and many patients began losing their jobs, insurance, and access to dental care. Ed (who was a member at Bering Church) and Bruce contacted church leaders and asked for help. Bering allotted some classrooms, none of which were suitable at that time for a dental practice. Consequently, a lot of time, effort, and resources were spent making the space operational. Bruce raised a lot of money, making important society contacts with many individuals, including Carolyn Farb, who championed their work.

Bruce was always up to date on the latest treatments. There was no internet at that time, and much of the available information wasn't accurate. As Bruce began to develop treatment protocols, many people came to the Bering Clinic to observe him, as Bering was one of only two dental clinics in the country dedicated to treating AIDS patients.

Bruce mentored Nichols and many other dentists. Nichols remembers: "I was able to watch him sit down with patients and work on them. Bruce was very comfortable and at ease, not at all afraid. I thought, 'If he can do that, so can I.' His legacy goes far beyond Houston. He was the principal advocate for HIV patients in the dental arena, especially with regard to reducing the stigma and fear surrounding treatment. It took years for that to happen, but he was the first."

Bruce is survived by his brothers Alan Smith and wife Lynda of Indialantic, Florida; Barry Smith and wife Debbie of Richardson, Texas; and Scott Smith and wife Cindy of Prescott, Arizona, as well as numerous nieces and nephews, longtime close friends Tony Shelton and Ross Smith, and a host of other friends. Bruce is preceded in death by his husband, Tony Carroll, and his parents Gordon H. Smith and Arian Bohlayer Smith. Bruce's brothers are comforted by their belief that Bruce had a spiritual awakening about three years ago and that the four brothers will be united someday.

 *Friends are cordially invited to attend a visitation to be held at the Bradshaw-Carter Funeral Home, 1734 West Alabama St. in Houston, beginning at 3:00 p.m. on Sunday, April 13, with a celebration of Bruce's life starting at 3:30. Following the service, there will be a reception from 5:00 until 7:00 p.m. at a location to be announced at the service.*

At Bruce's request, in lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to Tony's Place, Houston Grand Opera, or the ACLU.

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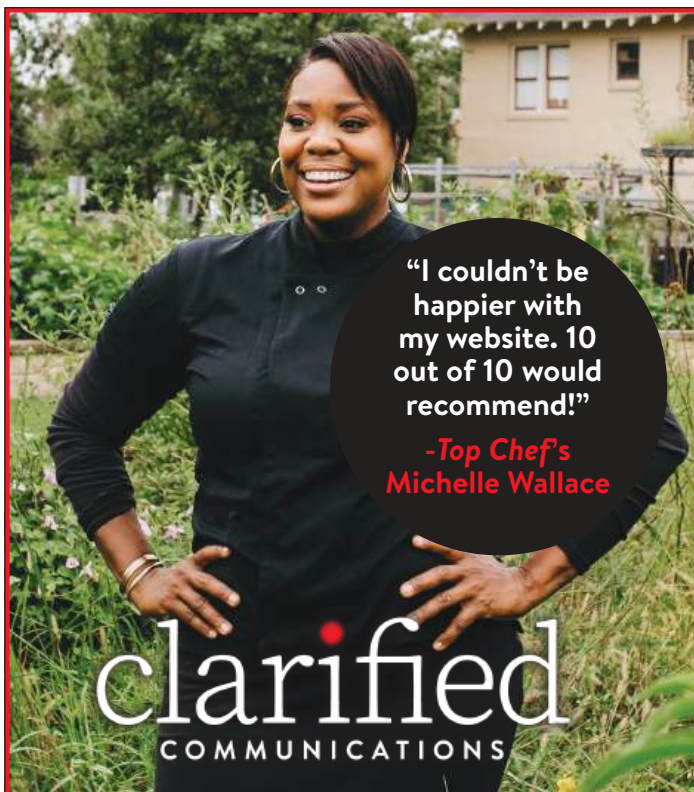


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In a city as diverse as Houston, it's no surprise that some of its most exciting culinary experiences are being shaped by bold LGBTQ visionaries. Their intimate supper clubs, buzzy tapas bars, soulful seafood boils, and community-minded coffee shops are redefining what it means to gather together with pride.

Powerhouse couple Denita Forges and Whitne Dilliehunt are serving up both seafood and community with their mobile-concept Boogie's Boilin'. Marlén Mendoza of Amanecer Coffee Co. is redefining breakfast at Ema HTX, where horchata cold brew and café de olla connect with the city's rich Latin heritage. Andres Castro's

upscale supper club The Kennedy combines East Coast elegance with a lively piano-bar ambience, while Corey Scranton at Barcelona Wine Bar continues to pair bold Spanish flavors with a passion for community advocacy.

Meanwhile, The Montrose Country Club is adding a splash of glamour to the local nightlife scene with a bold new menu and resort-style swimming pool that is open to all, and Houston's well-known foodie influencer John Frels uses his popular Facebook group to promote Heights-area eateries with lively online discussions.

Together, these innovators are building more than businesses—they're building community, one meal and one inviting new gathering space at a time. →



The Kennedy features bold cocktails, refined cuisine, and live music in the heart of Montrose.

FOOD & DRINK SPECIAL

Raising the Bar in Montrose

The Kennedy blends East Coast elegance with live music, luxe cocktails, and intimate dining.

by DAVID CLARKE

Houston is known as a foodie's paradise because its dining and nightlife scene is filled with sleek, contemporary establishments. But one of the newer kids on the block, The Kennedy, stands apart from the crowd. Nestled at 3210 West Dallas St., this intimate and luxurious supper club and piano bar brings a rich, lived-in ambiance reminiscent of some iconic East Coast institutions. Owner Andres Q. Castro envisioned The Kennedy as an "adult playground" where guests can transition effortlessly from coffee to cocktails, and from intimate dining to lively entertainment.

"I think what inspired me to open it up was just seeing the lack of East Coast flair in Hous-

ton," Castro explains. "Everything just seems so modern and new. I really wanted to bring a smaller, bite-sized dining experience that was more social."

The moment guests step inside, they will recognize that live music is a cornerstone of the establishment's upscale atmosphere. A gorgeous Yamaha grand piano, carefully curated artwork, and luxe cocktails all combine to set the tone. "I found the piano for a great price, and that was the first piece of furniture I bought," Castro says. "I designed around the piano because it was such a focal point for me. It just feels very rich and luxe.

"We're definitely trying to bring back dress-up culture," he adds. "My gay friends love to dress up, so I really wanted something

that was elevated—where you feel some kind of excitement towards the night."

Together, Castro and his head chef Adriana Maldonado have cultivated a space that is stylish yet approachable, refined yet playful. "We try to check off as many boxes as we can without doing too much," Castro explains. "We want to be your go-to place for entertainment."

With its timeless aesthetic and exquisite menus, The Kennedy is already becoming one of Houston's most distinctive destinations. Whether you come for the cocktails, the music, or the cuisine, The Kennedy will prove to be an experience worth dressing up for.



Visit thekennedyhouston.com or follow @thekennedyhouston on Instagram.

A man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a grey pinstriped suit jacket over a white t-shirt and matching grey trousers, sits on the black leather bench of a grand piano. He is holding a glass of amber liquid in his left hand. The setting is a bar with a red wall, a large chandelier, and a bar counter in the background.

A HOSPITALITY VISIONARY

Andres Q. Castro
Proprietor



A Houston native, Andres Castro has been immersed in hospitality since he was 17. He worked his way through nightlife promotion, restaurant ownership, and even private-jet hospitality before launching The Kennedy. His deep understanding of the guest experience that he gained along this journey informs every detail at The Kennedy.

While proudly and openly gay, Castro doesn't define The Kennedy solely by its LGBTQ ownership. "I don't define myself like, 'I'm gay, this is my establishment,'" Castro says. "I'm just a person with a vision. But I think being gay has really helped me do this, because I have great taste and I have great connections. My chef is lesbian, my publicist is gay, my photographer is gay. Now that I have a platform, I want to help more gay people."

The Kennedy has become a space where Houston's LGBTQ community can gather in an elegant, welcoming setting. "Gay people want an elevated experience, as well, and we've never really had that in Houston until The Kennedy," Castro notes. "It's a safe space where you feel welcome, seen, and respected."

Of course, not every guest immediately understands The Kennedy's distinctive vision. "Some people don't like the DJ, some people say the piano's too loud. But at the end of the day, I created this because I knew it was missing in Houston. And people like it," he says. With weekend reservations consistently filling up and quickly, it's clear that Castro's instincts are right on track.

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CUISINE CRAFTED WITH FLAIR

Adriana Maldonado, Head Chef



The Kennedy's culinary heart has been created by Chef Adriana Maldonado, whose background in the restaurant industry spans three decades. Originally from Mexico, the talented lesbian chef honed her skills at Austin's W Hotel before moving to New York, where she opened three restaurants. Now, she brings her expertise to The Kennedy, blending classical French techniques with Spanish and Mexican influences.

"I'm usually more comfortable with Mexican food, so this was a little bit out of my comfort zone," Maldonado admits. "But I pretty much took all the experiences that I've had in New York and infused it all into bringing this menu together." The result is an innovative take on American tapas, where every dish tells a delicious story through highly palatable seasonings and delightful platings.

The lamb chops, lobster spaghetti, and Bordeaux-braised short ribs are certainly must-try items. For Maldonado, the lamb dish is a true standout. "I did it to create the perfect bite: tzatziki, feta polenta, and lamb chops with gremolata on top."

Maldonado takes pride in running a kitchen where creativity thrives. "In the restaurant community, there aren't that many women chefs," she notes. "I'm just lucky enough to have Andres, a colleague who is also gay and gives me the space to do everything creatively that I want to do."

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**FOOD &
DRINK
SPECIAL**

Brewing Up a New Breakfast Tradition

Marlén Mendoza infuses
pride and passion into
Ema HTX's coffee creations.

by JOHN NECHMAN

Mornings, and especially weekends, around the triangle formed by North Main, 19th Street, and Studewood in the Heights tend to get super busy, primarily due to the hordes of Houstonians who have discovered Ema HTX. The restaurant's exquisite, mostly Mexican-inspired baked products, breakfast masterpieces, and meticulously crafted coffees have earned its owners both a 2024 Texas Michelin Bib Gourmand and a Houston Finalist spot in the 2025 James Beard Awards. One of the three founders of Ema, and the one in charge of all things java, is out-and-proud roaster Marlén Mendoza.

A native of Houston's historic Segundo Barrio, Marlén has gained a considerable following over the years, forming her own company, Amanecer Coffee Co., and roasting beans for several area businesses (which are also for sale at local farmers markets). Sojourns to Honduras, Brazil, and Mexico helped solidify her passion for coffee, and her love for Latino culture and flavors informed a line of her own flavor-packed concoctions that have become some of the most coveted morning elixirs in town. →

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The trio behind Ema HTX honors ancestral traditions through their inspired Mexican dishes and coffee.



It didn't take long for Houstonians to start lining up for Marlen's incredible Oaxacan horchata cold brew, a chilled atole with espresso, and a spectacular creation called Xoco Mocha, featuring a cacao base layered with velvety cajeta, oat milk, and the fragrant herb hoja santa.

In 2024, Marlen joined forces with local chefs Stephanie Velasquez and Nicolas Vera to create Ema HTX, which has quickly become a destination breakfast spot for locals and visitors. The trio became consumed with a desire to meld their shared experiences with top quality ingredients to create a place that glorifies their love for Mexico, yet creates an experience that could only be Houston.

"It's our attention to detail that really makes us special," Marlen boasts. "We've visited the best breakfast palaces of Mexico City and other places we've traveled, and our goal is to bring so much of those special places we know back to Houston. We're changing the way Houstonians think about breakfast."

Hoja santa French toast, redolent of anise? Chilaquiles smothered in the tender Mexican brisket known as suadero and topped with dill sour cream, piquant salsa verde, and home-made queso fresco? Some of the best conchas north of Mexico City's legendary El Cardenal?

**"I'M PROUDLY
QUEER, AND WE
FORESEE DOING
A LOT MORE WITH
THE COMMUNITY
IN THE FUTURE."**

— Marlen Mendoza

And the conchas come coated with vanilla, cacao, matcha, almonds, or blue corn. No wonder diners eagerly wait in lines that often stretch out the door and down the sidewalk.

Marlen strongly suggests that diners order the Horchata Berlinese as soon as they see it, because it's usually the first item to sell out. This seemingly simple brioche donut stuffed with a horchata cream filling is a perfect blend of Europe and the flavors that make calorie-cruising the streets of CDMX neighborhoods like Roma and Condesa such a delight. You'll see why the *New York Times* named it one of

the best dishes in America in 2024.

"Another must-try is our café de olla. We make ours with an espresso brew and a mélange of spices. There's really none quite like it in Houston," says Marlen, adding that the café de olla is also available in many other formats, such as a bracing iced latte or a flat white.

Ema's success means little rest for the hard-working team that creates the morning magic. When she does have spare time, Marlen spends it with her partner of two years, a hair stylist, and their two adopted cats, Lonie and Gus. Marlen describes herself as a movie buff and a true foodie, and she especially loves the intoxicating flavors of India and Pakistan. On her days off, you're likely to find her savoring her favorite dishes in Houston's bustling Gandhi District. And during those rare times that she has substantial time off, she enjoys long nature hikes.

Ema and Amanecer have also partnered with other LGBTQ businesses on various pop-ups. "I'm proudly queer, and we foresee doing a lot more with the community in the future," she says.

 **Keep up with Ema HTX on Instagram**
@emahtx and Amanecer Coffee Co.
at @cafesitahtx.

**FOOD & DRINK
SPECIAL**

Tapas, Wine, and Purpose

Corey Scranton's vision for
a vibrant community fuels
Barcelona Wine Bar.

by JOHN NECHMAN



No one will mistake Westheimer Road, Houston's most iconic street, for Barcelona's revered Las Ramblas. But the lively area around Westheimer's inter-

section with Dunlavy has its own "only in H-Town" Montrose quirkiness. Nestled within this sector, and bringing a taste of the Catalan capital to Space City, is the buzzy new tapas bar Barcelona Wine Company.

Chances are high that when you step inside, the handsome caballero greeting you will be general manager Corey Scranton. Whether he's chairing events and raising beaucoups of funds for community organizations such as the Montrose Center or handling duties at his busy restaurant, Corey is in control. An out-and-proud gay man, Corey is also "a proud Ragin' Cajun, through and through" who was raised in South Louisiana. He adds that he's also a nephew of none other than Sam Houston. "To say that I feel connected to Houston is an understatement. I belong here."

Corey is passionate about making sure diners feel like they are transported to another world when they enter his restaurant. Visitors to the city of Barcelona—and to most of Spain, for that matter—know that dining is both an art and an obsession. Meals are enjoyed at a leisurely pace, and lively table conversation, called *sobremesa*, is as essential to the experience as the wine and food. Restaurants generally don't get busy until 9 p.m., and a meal can last well into the wee hours.

Barcelona Wine Company, which opened in September of 2023 in the century-old former Hollyfield Laundry building, with its original vaulted ceilings and stone façade carvings,

allows Houstonians to experience a taste of Catalan culture. The menu features a variety of small plates (tapas), charcuterie, cheeses, paellas, and an extensive list of curated wines from vineyards around the globe, priced quite reasonably and with a special focus on organic and biodynamic wines. The vibe is buzzy yet also intimate—a perfect spot for camaraderie, romance, and spectacular food.

"You can come in solo and hang at the bar," Cory suggests. "You can come in any sort of outfit or style and feel right at home. You can order a snack and a drink or feast through a table of tapas with a large group. We've really tried to make something that meets you wherever you are, and for whatever kind of hangout you want to have."

Though Barcelona Wine Bar is a national chain, the Houston branch is uniquely local. Executive Chef Thomas Laczynski, who formerly helmed the kitchens at Ouzo Bay and Loch Bar, has created many dishes crafted specifically for the Houston palate and made with locally sourced ingredients—offerings that will change with the seasons.

**"WE'VE TRIED TO MAKE
SOMETHING THAT MEETS
YOU WHEREVER YOU
ARE—FOR WHATEVER
KIND OF HANGOUT
YOU WANT TO HAVE."**

— Corey Scranton

Corey suggests diners not miss such stand-out dishes as the chicken pimientos, as well as the olive-oil pancakes from the brunch menu. Other favorites are the patatas bravas, which are tender cubes of potatoes fried to a perfect crispiness, then served in a paprika-infused "brava" sauce and a garlic aioli. Another classic is the gambas al ajillo, featuring jumbo Gulf shrimp in a sauce of Guindilla peppers, scallions, and garlic. And the restaurant has already staked a claim to serving one of the city's best versions of paella: the "Salvaje" is a veritable meat fest, packed with chunks of pork, chicken, and chorizo.

Barcelona Wine Bar has been a stalwart supporter of LGBTQ causes, including sponsoring local charity events that benefit the Montrose Center. And Corey's passion for his job is matched by his passion for such causes as working to end LGBTQ homelessness in Houston and supporting the work of organizations such as HRC and the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund. The latest Out for Good Gala, which Corey co-chaired, raised a record \$400,000 for the Montrose Center. "I look forward to many more opportunities to make change. It is our responsibility to keep Houston safe for those at risk," he says.

In his spare time, Corey and his partner, Alejandro, spend time with their beloved rescue dog, Charlie. They've also decided to take every opportunity to be politically active. "All of us are at risk right now," he emphasizes. "Our basic civil liberties are at risk, and I intend to do everything that I can to keep us protected and to make sure future generations feel safe."

▶ For more info, visit barcelonawinebar.com.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARCELONA WINE BAR



Guests enjoy the lively evening atmosphere at Barcelona Wine Bar, where flavorful tapas dishes pair perfectly with wines from around the globe.

FOOD & DRINK SPECIAL

Serving Up Success

Denita Forges and Whitne Dilliehunt's love story has birthed a child and a business.

by IAN L. HADDOCK | photo by PISCES310 PHOTOGRAPHY



Denita Forges (l), Whitne Dilliehunt, and their son, Langston



A few of Boogie's Boilin' creations

Denita Forges and Whitne Dilliehunt are partners in love, parenting, and managing their Houston-based seafood venture Boogie's Boilin'. Their love story began when they met entirely by accident. Denita, a renowned emcee for parties and events, was headed to her hometown of New Orleans to participate in a second-line parade for a women's organization. Inviting some of her friends on the trip, Denita was introduced to one of the women heading to the event with them—Whitne. Overcome by her beauty and demeanor, Denita stayed in touch with her once they returned home to Houston.

Sometime later, the friendship blossomed into a deepening connection. "Whitne isn't just my partner," Denita says, "she's my peace, purpose, and everything I didn't know I needed."

Their love story helped birth Boogie's Boilin', which has become one of their full-time businesses.

Letting Whitne experience the liveliness of New Orleans through cuisine, Denita began to cook different dishes for her, as well as doing seafood boils for many of their gatherings as their families began to mesh. Denita's grandfather was her inspiration. She sought to emulate the way he had prepared food for her entire family throughout her life. Now it was her turn to take on that passion to feed their

families whenever they came together to eat and connect.

At one of these family gatherings, in the midst of raving about the food, someone suggested it should be a business. Whitne, who has always believed in Denita and understood the need to monetize their talents, enthusiastically supported the idea. Denita's grandfather had always called her "Boogie," and thus it wasn't long before the restaurant named Boogie's Boilin' came into existence.

Boogie's Boilin' is based on growth, love, and customer appreciation—simple concepts that the owners believe will continue to sustain the brand. Their business model is based on personal experience, including mobile

pop-ups, hands-on catering, and connecting directly with the people they serve. “In Louisiana,” Denita says, “we show love through food, and there’s something special about gathering around a good meal that warms the soul. I want Boogie’s Boilin’ to become a household name for catered events—baby showers, birthday parties, celebrations of all kinds—where we’re not just serving food but sharing love through every boil.”

As their business has grown, they’ve also added a beautiful baby, Langston, to the mix—another manifestation of their growth as a power couple. Many people assume that combining a business partnership with a domestic relationship would complicate things, but they feel strongly that this is not the case. “People often say you shouldn’t mix business with family,” says Whitne, “but it has been a blessing in every way for us.”

This sentiment is shared by Denita, who adds, “I get to love my partner, my child’s mother, my financial advisor, and my best friend—all in one person.”

Recently, Whitne and Denita shared a new goal: winning a pitch competition for their business. Denita has won a few on her own, but Whitne—the more reserved of the two—has never participated. The competition, spon-

“IN LOUISIANA, WE SHOW LOVE THROUGH FOOD. THERE’S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT GATHERING AROUND A GOOD MEAL THAT WARMS THE SOUL.”

— Denita Forges, co-founder of Boogie’s Boilin’

sored by a program called Project Liberate, was centered around making a social impact through a business to reduce inequities among LGBTQ communities of color. Their group project, called The V.I.B.E. Movement, will focus on mentoring and empowering underserved youth and young adults by providing structured mentorship, resources, and a clear path toward achieving their personal and professional goals. Their “No Cap, Just Growth” initiative will offer direct mentorship services and organize a no-cost, three-session mentor-

ship program where selected youth receive focused, impactful support.

The project has received funding from The Normal Anomaly Initiative’s grant from Gilead Sciences, which will provide the group with a \$10,000 sponsorship after it completes Project Liberate. Denita also won a previous pitch project for Project Liberate in 2023 and received direct support for Boogie’s Boilin’.

“Winning always feels amazing,” says Denita. “The hard work, the blood, sweat, and tears that go into preparing for a competition—and then sealing it with a victory—makes every challenge worth it.” Smiling, she continues, “This time around, I had an incredible team, and a huge part of that team was my wife, Whitne. As I mentioned earlier about love, parenting, and business, achievements are great on their own, but when you accomplish something with the people who support and uplift you, it takes on a whole new level of meaning.”

Many people would not be able to manage such an intersected life, but Denita and Whitne find joy in simultaneously building a life together and raising a beautiful baby boy. As Boogie’s Boilin’ takes off, the possibilities seen in this loving partnership seem boundless.

➡ For more info, visit tinyurl.com/8pt3kkcw

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FOOD & DRINK SPECIAL

A Vibrant New Oasis

Chef Diego Chiarello makes a splash at the Montrose Country Club.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ



COURTESY

Chef Chiarello brings bold flavors to the table at the Montrose Country Club. Pictured is the signature Country Club Sandwich, a rich Bolognese, and Crawfish Étouffée Egg Rolls.

Houston's Montrose neighborhood, long known as the city's LGBTQ epicenter, is about to welcome an exciting new addition to its entertainment and dining landscape. The Montrose Country Club, an upscale-yet-accessible restaurant, day club, and nightlife venue, officially opened its doors on March 14. With a resort-style 65-foot swimming pool as

its centerpiece and a chef-driven menu that elevates comfort food to new heights, this multi-million-dollar destination is poised to become a social oasis for locals and visitors alike.

The vision behind the Montrose Country Club comes from hospitality veteran Jeff Harmon, the creative force behind beloved LGBTQ-friendly spots like Halo, Revelry, ReBar, and the legendary Rich's Houston.

Harmon's latest endeavor brings a fresh twist to Montrose nightlife by seamlessly merging a high-quality dining experience with a lively poolside retreat, with no membership required.

"We wanted to create something truly unique for Montrose—an inclusive, high-energy social hub that blends fantastic food, craft cocktails, and a one-of-a-kind poolside

experience,” says Harmon. “The name might sound exclusive, but make no mistake: this is a country club for everyone.”

Beyond its sparkling pool and sophisticated ambiance, the Montrose Country Club promises to be a culinary hotspot. Executive chef Diego Chiarello, a Sicilian-born culinary expert with an impressive résumé that includes stints in Manhattan and Houston, brings his signature flair to the kitchen, crafting a menu that seamlessly blends Italian, Southern, and Cajun influences.

Originally a pastry chef, Chef Chiarello is excited about the freedom that MCC allows him.

“When I joined Montrose Country Club, I asked about the expectations; I asked for directions,” he recalls.

“Jack is from New Orleans. He wanted to keep things Southern. He told me, ‘We have a lot of Mexican people in Houston; you’re from Italy, and I’m from New Orleans. I want something to make everyone feel welcome. I want to give people options.’ And I love that. I like to experiment with different ingredients, flavors, and techniques from different countries.”

Chiarello’s menu is a feast for the senses, featuring shareable small plates such as Shrimp Ceviche, Crawfish Étouffée Egg Rolls, and Fried Goat Cheese Balls. Hearty salads like the Italian Chopped, Grilled Caesar, and Cobb provide fresh options, while handmade flatbreads and signature entrées—like the Montrose Club Sandwich, MCC Burger, and indulgent comfort-food classics like Chicken Piccata, Bolognese, and French Onion

“THE NAME MIGHT SOUND EXCLUSIVE, BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE: THIS IS A COUNTRY CLUB FOR EVERYONE.”

—Jeff Harmon, owner

Meatloaf—ensure there’s something for every craving.

“We have shareables,” says Chef Chiarello. “I’m excited about that—the options they give people. The shareables are not exactly bar food or appetizers, but something that’s not quite as heavy as a full lunch or dinner. You can enjoy the shareables by the pool or inside by the bar.”

For those with a sweet tooth, the pastry chef-curated dessert menu is a highlight, with indulgent treats such as Churro Cheesecake Egg Rolls, Chocolate Chip and Caramel Cookie Skillet à la Mode, and Sweet Corn Tiramisu—the perfect finish to any meal.

“It’s my goal to create dishes that are not only visually stunning but also packed with flavor,” says Chiarello, who has been featured on The Food Network for his culinary expertise. “The Montrose community has a discerning palate, and we want to provide an experience that excites and satisfies,” he adds.

The Montrose Country Club is more than just a dining experience—it’s a luxurious retreat in the heart of the city. Its 65×25-foot

cocktail pool serves as the centerpiece of the venue, providing guests with a year-round escape. Heated in the winter and chilled in the summer, the pool ensures the ultimate comfort, while private cabanas, plush daybeds, and handcrafted cocktails set the stage for relaxation and socializing.

With its welcoming, high-energy atmosphere and dedication to exceptional hospitality, the Montrose Country Club is set to become more than just a bar or restaurant—it’s a celebration of Montrose culture and spirit.

“The addition of this space represents the continued evolution of Montrose as a destination,” says Harmon. “This is a place where the community can gather, celebrate, and make memories—whether it’s over a chef-prepared meal, a signature cocktail, or a poolside party.”

Chef Chiarello adds, “We opened the pool a few weeks ago, and it’s been very successful. Look around. There’s nothing like this anywhere else. The pool, the food, the vibe—all of this is unique.”

Open seven days a week, the pool and day club offer day passes for \$20 before noon and \$25 after, with exclusive VIP and Founders Membership options available for those who want reserved lounging and access to special events. The venue will also feature a curated lineup of DJs, live performances, and themed parties, ensuring the energy never fades—whether it’s a sunny afternoon by the pool or an electric night under the stars.

 For more information, visit themontrosecountryclub.com.



The Montrose Country Club's poolside and lounge spaces

FOOD & DRINK SPECIAL

Pour One Out for Star Sailor

The Heights safe haven says farewell, but founder Marin Slanina is sticking around.

by DAVID CLARKE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

When we chose to spotlight Houston's beloved queer-owned eatery and bar Star Sailor in our April, we never could have predicted that founder Marin Slanina (she/they) would be announcing Star Sailor's closing at the end of March. For four years, the Heights hot spot has been more than just a place to grab a burger and a drink. It has truly been a sanctuary for Houston-area LGBTQ individuals and their allies. A fully queer, bi, and trans-staffed business, Star Sailor cultivated an atmosphere of inclusivity and warmth, earning accolades that included LGBTQ+ Business of the Year from the LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce and multiple recognitions in *OutSmart's* 2024 Gayest & Greatest Awards.

Despite its impact, the reality of running a small business in a challenging economy has caught up with Slanina and her award-winning team. "We actually found out yesterday that we are going to be closing this location," Slanina shared, with tears in her eyes and the weight of the news evident. "But I do think it would be impactful to talk about why spaces

like this are so important, and why we need to protect them."

From day one, Slanina set out to build an all-inclusive safe space. Star Sailor was never just intended for Houston's queer community, but for every person in need of a place to belong. "That was the mission from the beginning," she explains. "I didn't really identify the queer piece of myself with the business until it started unfolding naturally—through how we described ourselves, the vendors and artisans we worked with, and even the way we talked about our food."

That philosophy was apparent in everything Star Sailor did, from their gender-neutral bathrooms marked with playful icons like Baby Yoda and a mermaid to their diverse menu which catered to various dietary preferences. "It was something I immediately knew was a problem that needed to be solved," Slanina says, "and Star Sailor was that solution."

Star Sailor's heart wasn't their playful and approachable menu, though. It was their staff. Slanina intentionally fostered a respectful yet fun work environment where employees were given the freedom and opportunity to thrive. "A huge piece of opening this space for me was

creating a workspace for people who might not fit into traditional work environments," she explains. "Yes, we have policies, procedures, and handbooks, but there's also a human element to it. You can't expect everyone to fit into a rigid structure and still perform well under pressure."

That ethos didn't go unnoticed, as last year's Gayest & Greatest Awards recognition proved. "That was probably the biggest honor for me," Slanina admits. "It showed that our team felt safe enough to be themselves, and because of that, they were able to extend that warmth and care to every guest who walked through our doors."

While inclusivity was Star Sailor's bedrock, the food and drinks definitely kept people coming back. "We started with the Smash Burger on day one," Slanina says. "It's a niche style of burger that everyone can get behind. You can build it up to be massive or keep it simple. It's just really approachable, fast, and done really well."

"We created an all-inclusive menu," she adds. "Just like we made an all-inclusive space. We made sure the menu had something for everyone, whether you drink alcohol,

don't drink alcohol, love caffeine, or just want something sweet."

The decision to close Star Sailor wasn't an easy one for Slanina. "Bottom line, we ran out of money and ran out of time. We got hit really hard last year. The building's plumbing is a nightmare. Any time we got busy, the toilets would flood. And then there were the weather-related setbacks. We just couldn't make up for it."

Still, Slanina remains hopeful that her experience will serve as a much-needed and very loud call to action. "Hopefully, this can be a wake-up call for our community to be a little more mindful about where we spend our time and money," she asserts. "We lost a space, but that doesn't mean we have to keep losing them."

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— Marin Slanina

Luckily for Houston, Slanina isn't planning to walk away from her work in the hospitality industry. "My hope is to continue offering my skills to help create more spaces like this," she says. "I hope to work with restaurants and bars that have the resources, and help them foster environments that are inclusive, safe, and welcoming."

Though Star Sailor's doors are now closed, its impact remains—as does Slanina's mission of creating spaces where everyone belongs. Star Sailor deeply resonated with Houston's LGBTQ and foodie communities, so while this chapter may be ending, the spirit of Star Sailor is sure to live on.

For those wanting to stay in touch, support Slanina's future ventures, or discuss partnership or mentorship opportunities, she asks that you reach out to her via Star Sailor's Instagram as @star_sailor_htx or by email at starsail-orhtx@gmail.com. Both will remain active, as she is passionate about helping others create truly inclusive restaurants and bars.

"This is just the beginning," Slanina emphasizes. "I'm hopeful that our community will learn from this and rally behind the places that matter."



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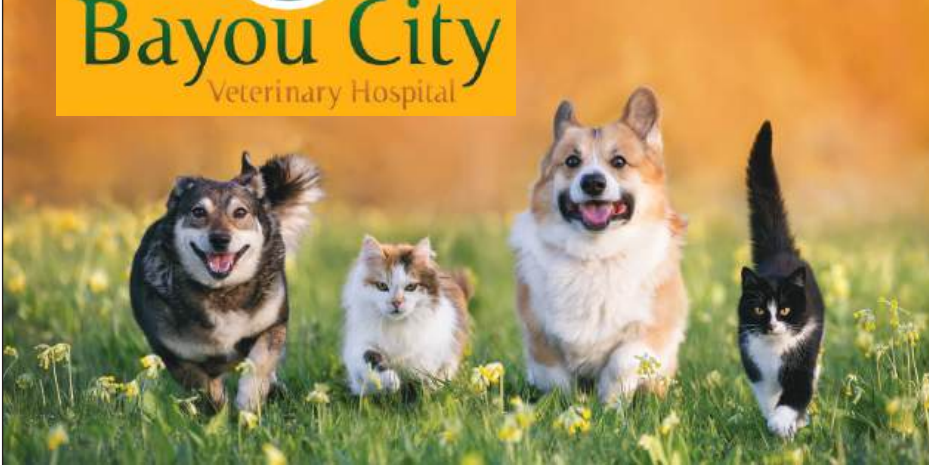
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FOOD & DRINK SPECIAL

The Heights Foodie Guru

Meet John Frels, the man behind Houston Heights Foodies, a Facebook conversation group.

by KAREN DERR

John Frels says he dreams about food. Frels has been a successful mortgage broker in Houston for decades, but if you love to dine out and his name sounds familiar, you probably know him from his work as an admin on the dynamic and sometimes controversial Facebook group Houston Heights Foodies.

The group was founded by Heights neurologist Dr. Reeta Achari and her husband, Bill Dixon, to promote conversation and sharing about healthy eating and nutrition. She asked her friend and Heights resident Frels to help administer the group. He cooks, but he's also an avid supporter of local restaurants, especially in the Houston Heights where restaurants had struggled to thrive without the sale of alcohol due to a Victorian-era ordinance prohibiting its sale within the original Houston Heights boundaries. That changed in 2017, and the area has fast become a dining destination.

Dining out soon became the focus of Houston Heights Foodies, and that suited Frels just fine—although he never anticipated the group would grow to its current membership of 45,000—fueled in part by disaster and controversy. “If anything, we have very passionate members in our group,” he explains.

During the pandemic, when sit-down restaurants like Cavatores on Ella were closing, Frels encouraged owner Federico Cavatore to start serving to-go meals. One evening, a grateful customer tipped \$1,000 on a \$19 order. Staff members took home a nice payday that day, and Cavatore's, of course, survived.

Frels elaborates on why he gladly works on Houston Heights Foodies and four other in-the-loop foodie groups. “I wanted to focus on an area,” he says. “If I say I'm hungry for something and someone posts that there's this great place in Sugar Land, I don't want to drive to Sugar Land!” Focusing on community and local food comes naturally to him. “I enjoy it because I love food and I love people,” he says. Like his mother before him—who was driven to inspire young people—he has a strong sense of purpose. He feels he is here to serve as a connector of people.

Frels tells one story with obvious pride. He walked into Sweet Bribery in the Heights and



a young lady working there recognized him and said “Hey, you're John Frels. I have this job because of you. I saw it on Houston Heights Foodies.”

“Things like that just make me feel good,” he says.

But what about the drama that makes Houston Heights Foodies so addictive to some members? Frels has a theory: “You know the thing that always starts the fights? I think people just don't write well, and they want to say something but they say it poorly. Then people jump on them, and that's when the fight starts.”

Then there was Bagelgate. “That was funny,” Frels chuckles. “That was with Brazos Bagels and Space City Bagels.” That argument revolved around bagel artisanship and what constitutes a fresh-made bagel and local characters. To this day, members apologize for mentioning bagels, even when they are just looking for an honest recommendation.

Group members tend to call down posters who are unduly negative about a local restaurant experience. “What I call bash and dash: ‘This place sucks, don't go there.’” Frels explains, “So, tell us your story. And then they get mad. Then I just have to delete things, especially when it gets political.” One miffed Heights-adjacent restaurant went as far as posting on their kiosk sign that Houston Heights Foodies Suck. However, two other restaurants used their signs to show support for the group. Frels shrugs, “Our net gain was a thousand new members.”

Frels has founded or administers four other Facebook foodie groups, so he's regularly dining all over the inner loop. “The other groups prompt me to get out of our Heights bubble.” Case in point: he says that there is no dim sum in the Heights.

Besides the Facebook groups, he is involved in the Heights Chamber of Commerce Executive Board and also the Houston Heights Association. He is the 2025 chair of the HHA Great American Pie Contest, which will be held July 14 at the Heights Fire Station. The annual event is for both home bakers and restaurant professionals. Details for entry in this neighborhood favorite event will be coming soon at HoustonHeights.org. Note from Frels to would-be contestants: “I'm hoping for a crawfish pie, or maybe tomato.”

He and his husband, Dr. Keith Vassallo, own SmallWorldTravelCompany.com. “We started a travel business. We are still our best customers, but it's fun to do it for other people.” Frels may dream about food, but he also travels for food. He says he thinks he had a past life in New Orleans. His favorite thing about traveling in Vietnam was having pho for breakfast. He had a tomato pie once in Charleston that was the best thing he's ever tasted. For his 60th birthday on April 24, he'll be cruising around the Greek islands. “Once again,” he says, “I'm thinking, ‘Ooooooh, the food!’”

And just what does he like to cook at home? “I tend to like homier things. I like casseroles. I'm a big casserole guy.” His mother's favorite meal, which Frels often made for her, was Rachael Ray's meatloaf roulade.

 For more info, visit facebook.com/groups/houstonheightsfoodies.



**"IT'S A JOYOUS DECISION TO LEAVE WHEN YOU
STILL FEEL APPRECIATED AND APPRECIATIVE
OF THE SITUATION THAT YOU HAVE, AND STILL
LOVE THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH."**

—Todd Waite

ACTOR TODD WAITE TAKES HIS LAST BOW

The Alley Theatre veteran appears as Sherlock Holmes in his final performance.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ | Photo by ALEX ROSA



Actor Todd Waite says goodbye to his signature character in Ken Ludwig's *Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery* this month. After performing in 135

productions with the Alley Theatre over the last 25 years, Waite is retiring as a member of the resident company.

Now 65, Waite once said he didn't want to appear as an elderly Sherlock. While he loves the character and enjoys exploring the role, he's afraid the audience would reject a doddering detective.

"My concern is the audience starting to go 'Really, gurrll?'" he says, laughing.

Instead, he's leaving both the character and the theater while at the top of his game.

"It's a joyous decision to leave when you still feel appreciated and appreciative of the situation that you have, and still love the people you work with," he says. "There's not a single moment at the Alley that makes me want to leave. It's just that my body wants a little more time between projects. But you can't tell what the future will bring. If someone wants to write a wonderful Sherlock where I appear as a ghost, I'd be willing to do that," he smiles.

Openly gay, Waite first came to the Alley when his then-romantic partner was in rehearsals for the musical *Jekyll and Hyde*. While visiting the theater from his native Canada, where the couple were based, Waite met Edward Albee, a frequent Alley collaborator. Albee was in production for his dramatic play *Three Tall Women*.

"I thought, *this theater is doing a massive musical and an Albee at the same time*. I was so impressed that I read for company member and director James Black."

In 1999, Waite made his Alley debut in *As Bees in Honey Drown*, with Black directing.

Roles in Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia* and the one-man Christmas show *The Santaland Diaries* quickly followed.

"I thought I was in heaven," says Waite.

Santaland, which was an instant hit with audiences, ran for eight seasons.

"In *Santaland Diaries*, I saw the same people in the audience year after year," he says. "I can't tell you how much I loved that!"

More recently, Waite was seen in the Alley Theatre's productions of the Agatha Christie classics *And Then There Were None* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

As Sherlock, Waite won even more legions of fans. *Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery* marks the sixth time that Waite appears as the famed detective.

"Each Sherlock is a little different, because the scripts are different. What's common to all the Sherlocks is a sprung coil in the mind that's ready to go into the physical," Waite notes.

Adapted by Ken Ludwig and directed by Eleanor Holdridge, *Baskerville* is billed as a suspenseful comedy.

"This play is a love letter to actors!" Waite says. "I'm going out with a Sherlock that is also tongue in cheek. Ken is really a master at comedy. He's a really wonderful person of the theater, and he loves actors."

"This show doesn't take the Sherlocks of the past too seriously. As much as I've loved doing them, they're not Shakespeare. This play is a platform for melodramatic fun. This is among the most fun of any of the shows our audiences will see."

The *Baskerville* cast includes Christopher Salazar as Dr. Watson, Dylan Godwin, Elizabeth Bunch, and Brandon Hearnberger also appear, each performing between 8 and 16 characters.

"The actors at the Alley maybe don't get credit for the fact that they are doing a role while they are learning another one," Waite says. "Dylan Godwin will have been rehears-

ing our play for two weeks while performing in *The Glass Menagerie*. That's what we do, as opposed to six weeks of rehearsal, an out-of-town run, and then an opening. Yeah, by then you'd better have a hit! I want to be a Lamborghini that directors and playwrights can take anywhere," he declares. "Then I can say *Yeah, watch me; I can do that*. So rarely at this point in a career do people push you. And all I want to do is get better. I just want to get better, better, and better. Artistic director Rob Melrose is determined to do that with us."

"It's fun to go out on a show that showcases everything the Alley can do. Thankfully, the Alley has the budget to hire the designers and build their ideas. This is a crazy, massive showcase of not only actors but costumes, lighting, and a massive set."

Waite credits Alley audiences and its board members' enthusiastic support for the theater's ability to mount such artistically and technically complicated shows.

"Our audiences know theater," Waite says. "Our board members know theater. They care about theater and bring their money to the table to support it. There's a joy to giving money that's more than spending and getting. It has its own reward."

Waite's retirement plans include some travel, lots of relaxation, and a few select projects. There are, however, no plans to move back to Canada.

"I'm going to retire here because I never want to be far away from hobbling into a Houston coffee shop and having someone say, 'We really appreciate your work.' The audiences, the Alley—it's family. And it's here."

WHAT: Ken Ludwig's *Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery*

WHEN: April 4–May 4, 2025

WHERE: Alley Theatre, 510 Texas Ave.

INFO: call 713-220-5700 or visit alleytheatre.org.



VISIBILITY TAKES THE STAGE

Meet three of the artists who are combining music and advocacy at the **Black Queer AF Music Festival**.

by IAN L. HADDOCK

Music is a universal language amidst the crowded storm of attacks that are hard to keep up with. Companies are rolling back their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts while legislation is being proposed to criminalize people of transgender experience for existing as their whole selves. To make matters worse, there are proposals to disband the Centers for Disease Control's HIV-prevention programs, and the Department of Education has been subject to a presidential executive order that dismantles nearly all of it. Equally distressing is the detaining of members of our immigrant community who have made their home in our country.

These coordinated efforts are making many people in our community fearful of the future, and what that means for the lives they have built. These trends have horrendous implications for people at the margins, specifically LGBTQ+ and people of color, many of whom are now apprehensive, as it seems every

intersection of our community is being threatened to be silent and fade into the background.

More unfortunate would be if these pressures resulted in the acceptance of being muzzled. Silence is acceptance, and silence is the antithesis of how the LGBTQ+ community has arrived at a point where they have garnered these rights that are now targeted to be rolled back. Just as in the past, visibility is not just for the advocacy of these communities, but also so that those who are too afraid to speak or be seen can see that there are still hope and possibility models. With voices lifted and heard, more allies will understand our lyrics, and the community can become a choir.

This is the reason why the theme of this year's two-day Black Queer AF Music Festival is "Visibility." From unapologetic allies like the chart-topping headliner NLE Choppa to TazDaRealist (an openly transmasculine man), they are using this year to create the soundtrack to the movement for Black and LGBTQ+ people. This issue of *Outsmart* features interviews that shed light on three of the festival's acts.

Music has served as a great convener over many subcultures as it connects generations and a diverse array of people. Storytelling has been used in communities for centuries to keep traditions alive and history documented. The BQAF Music Festival is yet another use of these necessary media during times that breed instability and division. In a world that makes you want to tune everyone out and turn the music up, the BQAF Music Festival will be a place to come and feel right at home.

Listen to the BQAF 2025 playlist and see what other artists will be playing at the festival. Meet them at a free welcome reception on Day One of the Festival on May 1, 2025, as well as on Day Two (May 2).



Follow *The Normal Anomaly* on Instagram @thenormalanomaly.

WHAT: Black Queer AF Music Festival
WHEN: Saturday, May 3, 2:00–7:00 PM
WHERE: Stampede Houston, 1925 Eastex Freeway
INFO: normalanomaly.org/BQAF

Eli Liberty

The Pop Star

Photo by CHRISTIAN POWELL

Eli Liberty is a highly versatile performer whose musical repertoire includes pop, R&B, and K-pop elements. He was surrounded by inspiration while being raised in Chicago. Now living in Atlanta, he understands the power of representation and storytelling. Drawing inspiration from both cities—and a range of artists who focus on performance like Beyoncé, Michael Jackson, and K-pop artists like BoA—Liberty will bring an unforgettable set to Houston. Using his personal experiences as a Black LGBTQ+ artist, he is keen on including the specific experiences of his community, including themes of mental health, desire, and self-liberation.

“I keep my work authentic by drawing from my own journey—whether it’s overcoming past struggles, embracing my identity, or exploring deep emotions like anxiety and resilience,” he says. “My goal is to create art that makes people feel seen, heard, and empowered.”

Eli is a multi-hyphenate in many disciplines including dancing, acting, and music, and his use of artistic media as advocacy is unmatched. Documenting his own experience of using the long-acting injectable Apretude for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV in viral posts via Instagram is one of the many ways he uses his platform to bring

visibility to important topics.

“For me, visibility is about showing up fully and unapologetically as myself,” he says. “To be visible is to be powerful. I bring visibility by taking up space—physically, vocally, and artistically.”

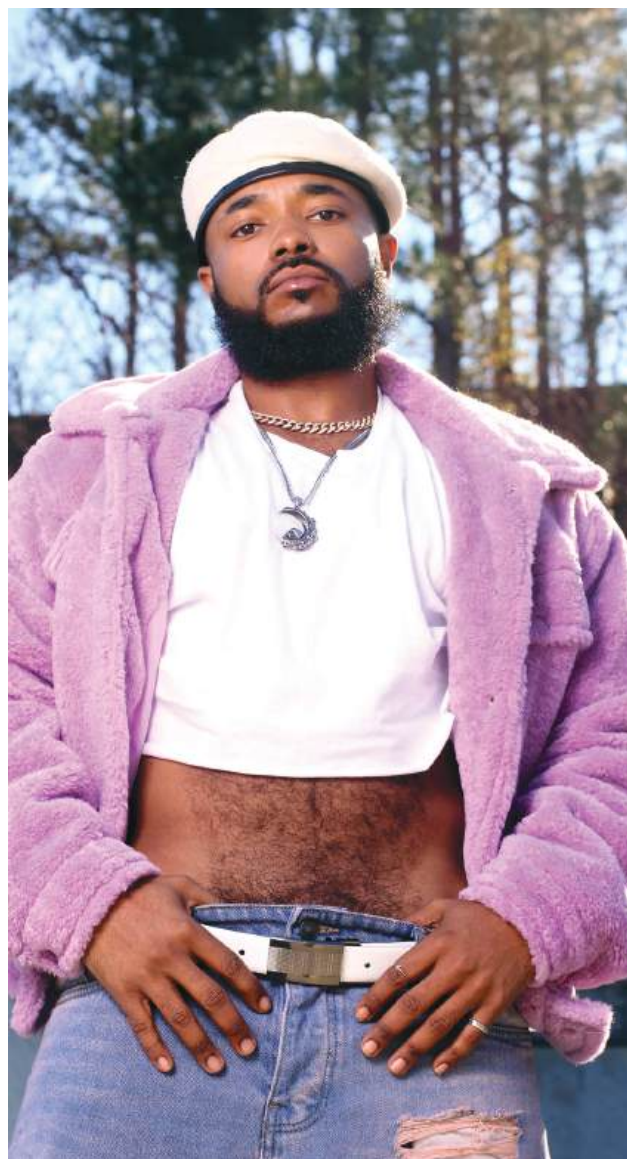
Building his artistry from the ground up, Eli stays true to his vision and continually evolves as a performer and songwriter. On the BQAF Music Festival stage, you can expect a high-energy, immersive performance blending his sensuality, emotion, and precision style. Through honest lyrics, intense choreography, and captivating visuals, he will tell the story of an emerging pop star taking over the music world as only he can.

“As a Black LGBTQ+ artist, I know how powerful it is to see someone owning their space, their sound, and their identity,” he says. “I know what it means to grow up not seeing yourself reflected in mainstream music, and I want my presence on that stage to be a reminder that we *belong* here and deserve to take up as much room as we want.”

Eli’s journey is far from over, but each step is meaningful and will take him to the next level—including a mesmerizing performance at the BQAF Music Festival.



You can follow Eli Liberty on Instagram @elilibrary_



JeRonelle

The Soul Balladeer

Photo by @IMJERONELLE

JeRonelle is a soulful R&B artist based in Los Angeles. Inspired by artists like Usher, Whitney Houston, John Legend, and Daryl Coley, you get an old-school feeling from his music with a young, fresh perspective. Originally hailing from Omaha, Nebraska, JeRonelle always dreamed of becoming a star. But with few artists coming from his environment, he wasn’t sure those aspirations were achievable. Success was his when he became a contestant on Season Two of *The Four*, a music competition on Fox. Since then, he has collaborated with Drake and has opened for other artists, including Durand Bernarr. →

"Little by little, I've gotten closer and closer to my dreams and have been blessed to accomplish a great deal in what seems like a short period," he says. "As an independent artist, our journey is unique and full of challenges, but I'm so thankful for what has been, and I look forward to what will be in the future."

JeRonelle wasn't always comfortable with his sexuality, but as he has evolved, so has his artistic output. Though many of his songs are romance songs with a '90s vibe, he rarely uses pronouns to describe who he is singing about. This leaves room for people to feel personally connected to his songs, while still allowing him to keep a sense of discretion and mystery in his music. The journey continues as he commits to intentionally being in queer spaces such as the BQAF Music Festival.

"This year marks my second year as a performer at the BQAF Festival," he says, "and I'm so excited to be a part of it! I had a blast last year during my first appearance, and I'm looking to continue the fun while also elevating my set. I'm aiming to have a set that is fun, soulful, and super engaging. Fans can expect me to bring my absolute best to the stage this May in Houston!"

R&B artists don't always get the shine of artists who make music that people dance to and go viral on TikTok, but if last year was any indication of how the crowd loves his music, we know it will be a fantastic experience. JeRonelle knows that this visibility is a choice, and he wholeheartedly accepts the challenge. "I pride myself on being the kind of artist that generally finds a way to stay as visible as possible, so hearing that 'Visibility' was chosen as the theme for this year's festival felt right on point, and the kind of legacy that I look to leave throughout my career."



You can follow JeRonelle on Instagram @imjeronelle.



Nomi Imon

The New Queen

Photo by @EYEHUNEE

Nomi Imon is a trailblazer in her own right. Already an established dancer and choreographer, her dive into the music industry has been one to watch. A Dallas native, Nomi began her performance development with the Dallas Black Dance Theatre.

Professionally trained in hip hop, classical ballet, modern, jazz, and African genres, she brings all of her intersections into her artistry at a time when those intersections are being criticized in today's political climate.

A proud woman of transgender experience, Nomi has used art for advocacy for many years. Quoting an interview with Prism Health North Texas, Nomi is "currently on a mission to balance all passions connecting the arts to health care and safe-sex education while providing the space for the community to heal through trauma and experiences using expressive movements and positive storytelling." At present, she is a prominent face for The Freelux Project and is currently seen in marketing campaigns for Southern Black Policy and Advocacy Network led by State Representative Venton Jones. There couldn't be a more critical time for her visibility and the need for connecting to audiences through something as universal as music. "Tuning to the frequency of the community," she says, "my beats, choreography, and lyrics speak to various demographics."

Though her music is not yet available on streaming platforms, you can find her performing in her hometown. As a member of the Black queer ballroom community, she is able to bring an element of surprise when her performances move from classical dance to hip hop and right into voguing effortlessly. Without realizing it, the audience hears clear HIV and substance-abuse prevention messages. She's expected to bring this and more to her performance at the BQAF Music Festival. In addition to being entertained, she promises that the audience will also hear "clear messages in harm reduction and safe-sex practices."

Houston natives Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion, as well as Lady Gaga, are her inspirations, and we see them heavily imprinted into her captivating performances. In addition, she always brings her authentic life stories and experiences, creating a cohesive production and ensuring she is not hiding from the current political climate. With this being the first time she has performed in Houston, we are excited to welcome her to our stage with open arms.

"I'm most proud of being able to use my art as a light to my peers," Nomi declares. "I'm very excited to be performing at my first big festival. It's a celebration!"



You can follow Nomi Imon on Instagram @nomi_elevation.



@thenormalanomaly

SATURDAY, MAY 3, 2025 | 2 PM-7 PM



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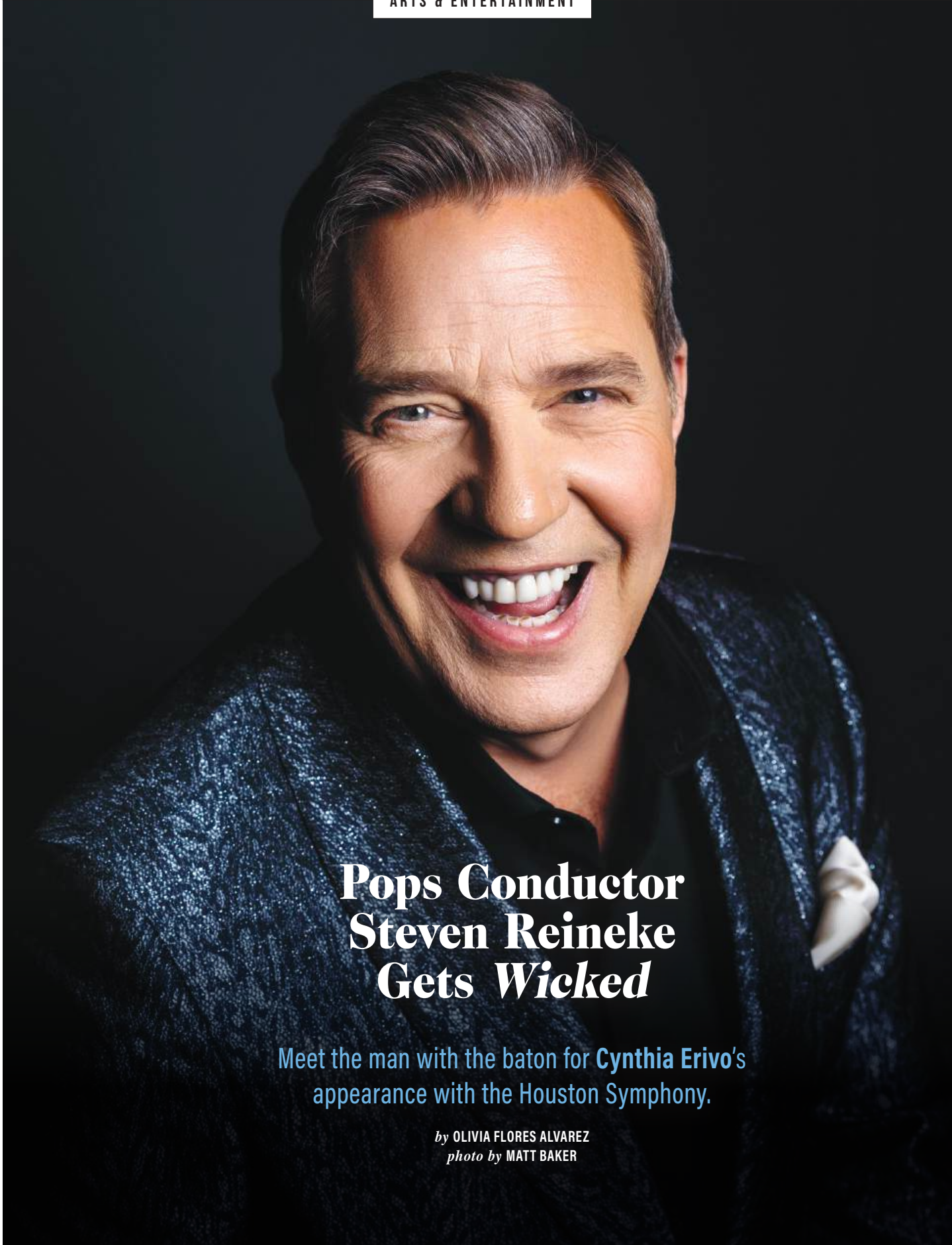
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Pops Conductor Steven Reineke *Gets Wicked*

Meet the man with the baton for **Cynthia Erivo's**
appearance with the Houston Symphony.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ
photo by MATT BAKER



British actor/singer Cynthia Erivo is just one Oscar away from joining the EGOT club (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony awards, a rarely achieved standard of excellence). With two Oscar nominations already to her credit, there's no doubt she'll soon be among that exalted company.

Erivo has just completed a whirlwind awards season where she promoted her most recent film, the blockbuster *Wicked*. Now the openly queer star Erivo is coming to appear in two concerts with the Houston Symphony.

Principal Pops conductor and openly gay Steven Reineke recently chatted with *OutSmart* about some of what we can expect at the show, and reveals why Erivo included the Houston Symphony in her limited concert tour.

Olivia Flores Alvarez: You've worked with Cynthia Erivo before, haven't you?

Steven Reineke: I've worked with Cynthia a handful of times before. She and I are friends. I'm very excited that she's going out to do dates with various symphonies, and that we were able to snag her for dates here in Houston. It's really exciting.

The press release for the concert says audiences can expect to hear Erivo's songs from *The Color Purple*, *Harriet*, and *Wicked*. Can you tell us anything more about the lineup for the concert?

I'm looking at it right now. We're still working on nailing down the exact songs. I know there's also a little Etta James and a little Nina Simone. It's quite an eclectic mix of music. Some are things I've done with her in the past, and there are some new things. Other than that, I can't give away too much about the program.

You've worked with dozens of illustrious singers. What makes Cynthia Erivo so special?

Your body is your instrument when you're a vocalist. Cynthia is just built differently than a lot of people. She's been blessed with this amazing voice and has an incredible range. She can also produce so many colors and different timbres with her voice.

The other thing that really makes her so special is how she's able to imbue each song with emotion and passion. She's such a great actress. She does this thing with her voice; I don't know what it is. I could listen to her sing the phone book. It's just incredible. Whatever she touches, she puts so much into it that she grabs your complete attention. That's a special artist that can do that.



MELISSA TAYLOR

She's also completely genuine. In real life, she's just as sweet as she appears onstage. She is a lovely person.

You've said that *Sweeney Todd* is your favorite Broadway musical. Where does *Wicked* fall in terms of your favorites?

Oh, I love *Wicked*! I've seen *Wicked* on Broadway probably 14 times. I absolutely love that show so very much. *Sweeney Todd*, I know, is not everyone's cup of tea, but I just think it's perfect. I don't think there's one single note out of place. I think it's Sondheim's masterpiece.



Cynthia Erivo

MARK SELIGER

Ms. Erivo has selected only a few cities for this concert tour. Is her appearance with the Houston Symphony an indication of the orchestra's excellence?

The Houston Symphony is one of the country's finest orchestras. They play beautifully.

What do you most like about the orchestra as its principal pops conductor?

One thing I really like is the orchestra's personality. The orchestra has a really good vibe to it; there's a sense of camaraderie. We're able to get in there and make great music without a lot of egos getting in the way. We're all on the same team, and it feels really comfortable.

It seems like pops concerts are the sweet spot for symphony orchestras. It's excellent music that's more accessible to the general public. The Houston Symphony is not only performing with Cynthia Erivo, it's also performing with other non-classical guest artists—movie soundtracks to accompany screenings of the films, for example. Pops concerts draw fans that might not go to a classical music concert.

I agree with that. That's why I specialize in it. I think what we call the pops side, the popular side of things, is such a broad spectrum that we can present to a wide variety of people in the community. That's one of the reasons that I love it.

WHAT: Cynthia Erivo with

the Houston Symphony

WHEN: 7:30 p.m., April 8 and 9, 2025.

WHERE: Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, 615 Louisiana.

INFO: 713-224-7575 or visit houstonssymphony.org.



Unidentified photographer, *Tamara de Lempicka at home in New York, c. 1943*

TAMARA DE LEMPICKA ESTATE



She was smart. She was sexy. She was savvy. Most importantly, she was incredibly talented.

"Tamara de Lempicka," a retrospective of the Polish-born painter currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), chronicles both her daring work and her even more daring life.

The exhibition opens with a wall-size image of the bisexual Lempicka. She is glamorous, chic, staring boldly into the camera, yet half of her face is in shadow. That is classic Lempicka—revealing and concealing at the same time.

The 90-plus works that make up the exhibit continue on the same theme. From the start of her career in Paris in the 1920s to her time in America during the 1940s and later when she eventually ceased exhibiting in the 1950s, her work and persona were simultaneously disclosed and obscured.

"I think it's fascinating that she didn't mind anyone knowing that she was gender fluid, but she felt that if anyone knew that she and her family were Jewish, they would be

Deco Diva

Tamara de Lempicka's art and glamorous bisexual life shine at an MFAH retrospective.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ

at risk," says Alison de Lima Greene, curator for contemporary art and special projects at MFAH.

Early in her career, she even hid the fact that she was female.

"She didn't want to be labeled a woman artist," says Greene. "At first, she was reluctant to even sign her name. She never used her maiden name. When she submitted her work for exhibition, she signed it *Lempicki*, the masculine form of her husband's name.

"There are all sorts of discussions about the queer masquerade and the ideas of 'pass-

ing' that are attached to people who are in any way 'other.' She created this vivid persona, in what were tough political times, that drew attention to telling details."

With influences from the Cubist movement, fashion, and theater as well as design, Lempicka created her own style. The women in her portraits had ribbon-like hair. Their bodies are a combination of both angles and curves. They were equally solemn and carefree.

It was not only her style of painting that set Lempicka apart. She was a social lioness as well, and a star of Paris café society.



Tamara de Lempicka, *Portrait of a Young Woman in a Blue Dress*, 1922, oil on canvas, private collection

“Her ability to publicize the contradictory aspects of her life was rare. On one hand, she was the urban aristocrat wearing diamond jewelry. And on the other hand, she was the socially closeted libertine. I think she managed to play both those very different games at once. And she did it with incredible, consummate assurance,” notes Greene.

While leading a tour at the museum recently, Greene pointed out the fact that *Portrait of a Man (Tadeusz Lempiki)*, which depicts Lempicka’s husband, was located directly across from a portrait of her longtime lover, Ira Perrot.

“I couldn’t resist,” Greene laughingly tells us. “It was a little bit naughty, but I couldn’t resist.”

Lempicka’s affairs took a toll on her marriage. Evident in *Portrait of a Man*, Lempiki’s left hand, where his wedding ring should have been, was left unfinished and sans a wedding band. The couple was divorced soon after. Lempicka went on to remarry and have many more affairs.

After exhibitions of her work in the early 1950s failed to impress either critics or fans, Lempicka decided to stop showing her paintings.

“By 1951, after some shattering experiences, she said, ‘Well, I have income from my husband. I don’t need to put myself through the indignity of being exhibited and not appreciated.’ So she pretty much withdrew from the public eye while still maintaining a very happy social life.”

Lempicka returned to popularity in 1972 when an exhibition of her early work was shown at the Galerie du Luxembourg in Paris.

“There was an ambitious young dealer who could see that there was already a sort of resurgence of Art Deco, and so he pursued her,”



Tamara de Lempicka, *Portrait of Ira P.*, 1930, oil on panel, private collection

Greene tells us. “He finally convinced her that if she showed her Art Deco work with him, it wouldn’t be disdained and would restore her reputation. Indeed, he was right.”

Barbra Streisand, who contributed to the exhibition catalog, was among those who discovered Lempicka during that time and became an avid collector, as did Elton John and Madonna.

“Her work is avidly collected by people in

the theater world who can appreciate that sort of masquerade persona,” says Greene. “I think that’s why people like Madonna and Barbra Streisand are so very struck by her.”

WHAT: Tamara de Lempicka exhibition

WHEN: Through May 26, 2025

WHERE: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet

INFO: mfah.org

Gardening Without Borders

Inside Joshua Kornegay's worldwide search for unique horticultural finds.

by KAREN DERR

Joshua's Native Plants & Garden Antiques has been Joshua Kornegay's passport to travel the world. Customers journey from as far away as Dallas and Louisiana for plants and advice, browsing offerings from the Far East, the Chihuahuan Desert, Italy, and beyond. With bonsai, Italian bronze sculpture, and pottery from Vietnam, Joshua's is a different kind of garden-center experience.

Kornegay's passion for finding rare and unusual items to delight his customers has spanned more than 30 years. "I now shop worldwide with ease," he says. While he travels abroad on buying trips each year, international suppliers also seek *him* out. His strategy is twofold: meet with suppliers and artisans who sell to him directly for the best prices, and visit garden centers for inspiration and—more importantly—for leads on new sources for the diverse offerings that Joshua's is known for.

"I never have a vacation without some business—never," Kornegay admits. "When traveling, I visit garden centers and look at their tags and the boxes behind the dumpsters, searching for new artists and suppliers." He also visits private gardens off the beaten path to spot landscaping trends he can bring back to his customers.

On a trip to Italy last August, he connected with a fellow garden-center owner. "There was the barrier of language," he says, "so we spoke in horticultural Latin about the plants and became fast friends."

"We're going again this July," Kornegay confides. "An immersive trip is really the only way to go. Sure, you can hire a tour guide, but it's so much better to stay with a local who was born and raised there. I travel to see the hidden treasures—like the Mithraeum."

Spend any time with Kornegay and you'll learn something new—about gardening, or maybe even about ancient Rome. Mithraea are hidden, cave-like temples that predate Christianity. According to a paper that Martin Luther King Jr. wrote while in seminary, Mithraism was a secret cult of men who worshiped Mithras, god of the sun and light. The cult was eventually edged out by Christianity, possibly because women were strictly excluded.

"I always take a day for hiking when I



Joshua Kornegay with a unique cactus at his Heights nursery

travel. In Italy, it's the Appian Way", says Kornegay. During hikes, he compares the local flora to Texas native species. He's observed that the area north of Rome is strikingly similar to Austin and Central Texas. "But people in Italy think nothing of digging in their backyard gardens and finding a skull," he adds.

Kornegay champions diversity when it comes to giving Houston gardeners the widest array of landscaping choices. "Whether it's natives or 'bread and butter' stock, there's so much more out there than wax leaves and red tips. And there are thousands of indigenous species that thrive in our floods and droughts. They're just not available anywhere else," he says. "I try to zero in on that."

Ahead of the curve on the trend of drought-resistant plants, in 2016 he installed an 80-foot succulent section. Today, succulents are more popular than ever. "I don't have to talk people into them anymore," he contends. "Everyone in the Heights wants xeriscaping with succulents. We have great sources here in Texas. I know almost every grower in the state."

Kornegay applies a hands-on approach to quality and selection. "I visit these farms personally, walk the greenhouses, and pull what I want," he says.

Previous buying tours in the Far East have yielded a wide assortment of ceramic planters and pots. "Most of our pottery comes from

Vietnam,” he says, “which is the best-made pottery on the planet for outdoor use. I buy direct, get the best prices, and my customers are thrilled.” His finds are delivered in 40-foot containers straight from Vietnam. His inventory includes fountains made from large ceramic pots, assembled on site in the Heights, which he can offer for less than similar items from traditional markets and trade shows.

“Coming up in May, I’m getting a couple of crates from China of rare 20-year-old bonsai,” Kornegay notes with obvious enthusiasm. Though tariffs will make them more expensive, he believes the increase is temporary. After surviving the pandemic and several devastating freezes, he’s unfazed.

Reflecting on the pandemic years, Kornegay considers himself lucky. His nursery was deemed essential and continued operating as an open-air business selling edible plants. Many other small businesses weren’t as fortunate. “People hugged me and said, ‘Thank you for letting me keep my sanity.’ Some would come and stay for the day,” he says.

For someone who enjoys traveling to exotic, far-flung places, Kornegay surprisingly makes his home in a neighborhood that’s more Mayberry than Malaysia. He grew up in Houston’s mid-century Oak Forest neighborhood and now lives in his childhood home. His



Distinctive pottery and native plants from Joshua’s international inventory.

daily commute to work in the Heights is just 10 minutes—to the same neighborhood where his parents used to bank and shop.

“A friend gave me the best advice I was ever given when he encouraged me to buy the corner of 18th Street and Nicholson,” Kornegay confides. Now, he says, not a week goes by without a developer approaching him about selling the property. “I’m in no hurry to do anything else,” he says, “so why would I sell?”

If you had to guess what keeps Joshua Kornegay passionate about his work after 30 years, it would probably be his curiosity and love of the unusual. He’s an avid reader and lifelong learner.

So, what’s new at Joshua’s? “When I was a kid, there were half a dozen rock shops in Houston you could visit, but they’re all gone. So now I offer a collection of crystals, rocks, minerals and fossils.” The shop’s collection of “earth’s treasures” includes geodes from the Chihuahuan Desert. “I’ve made a contraption so we can crack them open for you. I see 60-year-old straight men get giddy when we crack one open.” The geodes for cracking start at \$15. That’s a whole lot of fun for a small investment.

For more info, visit joshuasnativeplants.net.

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Jorge Serrano (l) and Paris London

King and Queen for a Day

Paris London and Jorge Serrano had a royal courthouse wedding.

by DAVID CLARKE



Love can find us in the most unexpected of places. For Paris London, a longtime Houston entertainer, former Houston Rockets dancer, and media personality; and Jorge

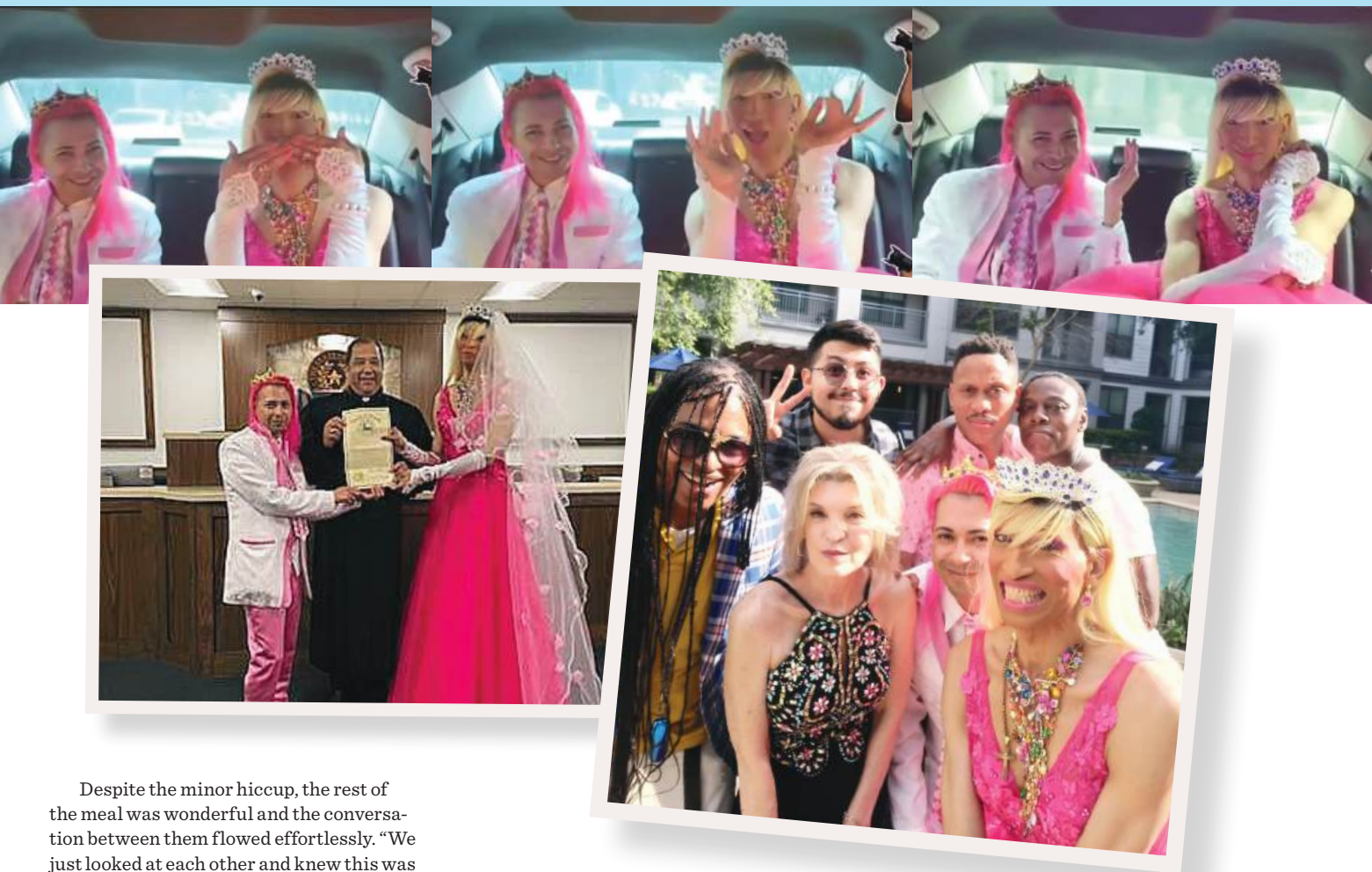
Serrano, a quiet and kind-hearted Houston native, their journey began on the Grindr app—a fact they share with pride. They know that love and modern-day fairy tales can begin anywhere. “Why be ashamed of where you came from or where you’re going?” Paris says. “Hopefully, others can read this and see that love is possible, even in places they may not expect.”

After connecting on Grindr, their friendship quickly deepened as Jorge’s sincerity and generosity won Paris over. “This has been the most real, down-to-earth, genuine kind of love,” she shares. “He’ll give his last dollar to help someone. That was a no-brainer for me.”

Jorge describes Paris as loving, caring, and outspoken—traits that convinced him early on to take the next step. When the time came to discuss the future, Jorge was clear: “I see myself settling down,” he told Paris, which initially caught her off guard. Ultimately, she embraced the idea. “Because of his sincerity, I was like, ‘You know what? Yes. I’m ready to take the next step,’” Paris recalls.

But before they knew they were destined for marriage, Paris and Jorge shared a memorable first date at El Patio, one of Houston’s beloved Tex-Mex eateries. “I was so nervous,” Paris recalls. “When it comes to lights and cameras, I’m in my element. But with something real, like a first date, you have to be 100 percent authentically yourself.”

Jorge agrees. “My hands were sweating,” he admits. The nerves, however, quickly gave way to laughter when Paris bit into her chips and realized they were stale. “I almost went back there to make my own chips,” she laughs. “But that moment actually broke the ice. It became something we still laugh about today.”



Despite the minor hiccup, the rest of the meal was wonderful and the conversation between them flowed effortlessly. “We just looked at each other and knew this was special,” Paris says. “That night was about us, and we talked about everything! Life. Love. Dreams. I told him, ‘You can trust me with all your might.’ I wanted him to know that I was in this for real.”

That evening, and ever since, Jorge has been captivated by Paris’ energy. “Every time I see her communicate with people, it just brings joy,” he says with obvious fondness. “It’s like she’s an angel, spreading positivity.”

From that night forward, the two became inseparable, setting the foundation for the love story that would lead them to the altar.

Their courthouse ceremony—held on July 7, 2023, just one day before Jorge’s birthday—was anything but ordinary. Paris and Jorge embraced a regal theme, donning crowns as they said their vows. “We wanted to be the King and Queen of our own story,” Paris explains.

This charming theme resonated with those around them, including courthouse staff who couldn’t help but take notice. “Two of the clerks saw us and came running over, saying, ‘We follow you! Your wedding is live in the courthouse!’”

Paris’ colorful and eye-catching pink gown was expertly designed by Camille La Vie in Memorial City Mall. “They made my wedding dress phenomenal,” Paris says. “Shout-out to Shannon!”

To match his bride, Jorge wore a pink-and-

white suit that was expertly tailored by Suits You. “His suit was so shiny—just like my wedding dress, with jewels and diamonds,” notes Paris.

One of the most poignant moments of the day came when Paris’ mother, who had been battling cancer, made a surprise appearance at the ceremony. “They told us she wouldn’t be able to leave her bed. But right before we said ‘I do,’ there was a knock at the door,” Paris remembers. “They opened it, and there she was. I lost it. That was all I wanted.”

Jorge also carried his mother’s presence with him. “Before she passed, we told her we were getting married. She smiled. She knew this was real,” Paris adds.

Following their courthouse ceremony, the couple and their loved ones celebrated at Hawaiian Bros Island Grill, a place that holds deep personal meaning for them. Jorge was the restaurant’s very first Houston employee, and Paris is a social-media influencer for the brand. They were thrilled to be able to include the restaurant in their special day.

“The whole place was decorated with huge balloons and big signs. ‘Congratulations to the married couple!’ It was all put together by the staff,” Paris recalls. “To have a restaurant recognize our love in that way was incredible.”

The reception featured Hawaiian Bros’

signature dishes, including island-inspired chicken plates, teriyaki favorites, and their beloved Dole soft-serve ice cream. “We have something for everyone,” Jorge says of the establishment’s expansive menu. “From the spicy Kilauea Chicken to the classic Huli Huli, and even gluten-free options.”

Their cake, a three-tier masterpiece from Sam’s Club, rounded out the feast. “We picked it up the day of the wedding, right before the rain cleared and two rainbows appeared—one for each of us,” Paris recalls

The couple’s love story continues beyond their wedding day. Together, they run Elite Entertainment TV, a media company that blends Paris’ decades of media experience with Jorge’s growing passion for content creation. “People can book us at @officialparislonon on all social platforms,” Paris says. “We want to show the world that your dreams can come true once you put in the work.”

Looking back, Paris and Jorge hope their story serves as an inspiration to others. “There is a fairytale ending,” Paris concludes. “There is true love out there for each and every one of us. If you dream it, you have to make it happen. Love is no different.

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OUT AT THE RODEO 2025 MARCH 22, 2025

The LGBTQ community showed up in force for this year's Out at the Rodeo day during the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Hundreds of attendees gathered under the Bluebonnet Tent in the Champion Wine Garden to celebrate inclusion and visibility, joined by Out at the Rodeo president Eric Hulsey, vice president Anthony Ferrell, and longtime volunteers Ashley and Jacquie Creath.

The event, proudly sponsored by OutSmart magazine, included the rodeo's first-ever drag show featuring

Blackberri, Adriana LaRue (who shared a heartfelt tribute to Selena), and a show-stopping set by Muffy Vanderbilt III. Following the drag show, DJ Stephen Jusko kept the energy high throughout the evening.

Since its founding in 2016, Out at the Rodeo has carved out a space for LGBTQ Houstonians and allies to participate in Houston's cherished rodeo event. With elected officials and community leaders also in attendance, this year's celebration was a standout moment in rodeo history.



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ALLIES IN HOPE 2025 WALK TO END HIV MARCH 9, 2025

Allies in Hope (formerly AIDS Foundation Houston) hosted the 36th Annual Walk to End HIV at Sam Houston Park, welcoming participants—including children and pets—for a family-friendly day. Proceeds support the organization's HIV-prevention services, testing, housing programs, the Stone Soup Food Pantry, and Camp Hope. Teams and individuals continued their fundraising until April 1, uniting the community in the fight to end HIV in Houston.



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By LILLY RODDY

A Month of Momentum

Aries finds energy and focus as retrogrades end.

April starts off slowly, but picks up speed as we move through the month. This is going to be an especially busy month. Mercury, our communicator, will be direct by the 12th, and Venus, planet of love and money, will be direct after the 15th. We are finally coming to the end of the long retrograde period that started last October. This should feel like the

actual beginning of the year. Good days this month are the 4th, 6th, 8th, and the 20th. Tense days this month are the 7th, 12th, and 20th. The 20th will be intense, but good! The sun enters Taurus on the 19th, Mercury in Pisces enters Aries on the 16th, Venus in Pisces enters Aries on the 30th, and Mars starts the month in Cancer and enters Leo on the 18th. Our moods and motivations will change throughout the month.



ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

As the month begins, you Rams are in a rest-and-retreat mode. You need more personal time than usual, as you are more sensitized to the environment. You gradually feel more energized as you progress through the month. After midmonth, you feel more confident in your choices. This should help your partnerships to move forward. Career choices are going to be very important to all Arians for the next couple of years. Some of you will take a leadership role, some will start their own thing, and others may retire. You are more financially focused in the latter half of the month. Home and family continue to be important, as you may be relocating, remodeling, or contending with family drama. It's much easier to get your message across after the 16th.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

This is a mixed month for you. You are having strong social and business activity, but you are also looking for some personal retreat time. You feel more like your old self after the 19th. This is a good time to connect with friends, especially those from the past. You are reviewing your business associates and organizations to determine if they are worth your time and effort. There is also a lot of energy around your career direction. Business may be changing, and you will have to change with it. Some may choose to do something on their own, while others may cut back. Home and family take center stage after the 18th. There could be family drama where you may need to step in and take a leadership role. This will also put more emphasis on your career and the next steps you need to take. The New Moon in Taurus on the 27th will help light the way!

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

Your busy, active life continues this month. You have been working on getting your career secure over the last year. You are moving into a time when you are ready to push forward. Friends, business associates, and professional groups can really be beneficial

for you this month and next. You may also be more active with your community and neighborhood. This continues to be a good time to promote your business, improve your partnerships, expand your education, and make vacation plans. Uranus, the planet of change and reinvention, enters your sign in July, but you are feeling it now. The last time Uranus was in your sign was 84 years ago. You may be more restless and need to make some changes, so you don't feel so restricted. You will need more light, more space, and more options!

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

Career and long-term choices about security are high on your list this month. Both Mercury and Venus have been retrograde in your career sector since last month. You have been thinking about taking a new direction, taking a leadership role, or if you are older, cutting back. You are trying to align your career with your deeper callings and drives. You are questioning your life purpose. In the first half of the month, this is an excellent time to reconnect with existing clients/customers and friends from your past. After mid-month is the time to start new endeavors. Your energy level remains strong and you feel more confident about facing challenges. This continues to be a good time to improve health and fitness activity. Your social life improves after the 19th. This is an excellent time to network, improve your social-media presence, and spend time with your children.

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

You are hoping to take it easier this month. You are more than ready to step back from your routines and let your mind relax. This is a good time to expand your education, work with international businesses, and start a podcast. It's also a particularly good time to promote yourself and your services on social media. Your career and professional side is activated after the 18th. You want to take the information you have gathered and apply it to improving your career standing.

After the 18th, Mars, planet of action and leadership, enters your sign for the next 68 days. This will help you get projects started. This is also an excellent time for improving health, standing up for what you believe, and taking action on matters of importance for you. You may not be very patient and it can be harder to get to sleep. Pace yourself.

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

Relationships continue to be your primary interest this month, and with both Mercury and Venus retrograde, the need for renewal and bonding is strong. If you are in a difficult partnership, problems have to be resolved or you may not continue. You are looking for real intimacy, trust, and camaraderie. Career activity continues to be strong for self-promotion, advertising, and social media. Your career area is going to be very active over the next few years, as Uranus, planet of intellect and freedom, enters your career sector for the next seven years. You will be feeling this by June 2025. You are continuing to work on lowering your debt and finding ways to live more economically. This also is a good month to improve your health and fitness routines. Some existing problems may need your attention, and this is the time to act!

LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

Health, your work environment, and relationships continue to be on your radar. With Venus, your ruler, and Mercury both retrograde, you are reviewing all partnerships past and present. You are getting clearer about telling others what you expect, instead of hoping they will figure it out. Difficult partnerships must be resolved or they may end. This continues to be a good time to improve health and fitness routines. You also have been trying to improve your work conditions over the last year. This can be the time to improve your home-office environment, acquire new equipment, take on a leadership role, and improve communications with other employees. Your spiritual side is also being activated. You will find yourself exploring the deeper

questions of why we are here and what the plan is. By midmonth it is time to move forward.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

You are experiencing change with your home life, your relationships, your career, and with your own identity. At home, there are some major shifts in your family as younger people ascend the family hierarchy. Your role is changing, as well. You may be looking at moving or having some repair work done on your home. Relationships may add pressure to your life because you aren't sure about the path you are going to take. Career activity is in the spotlight after the 18th. This may be when you decide to act. You have been reviewing your work situation and what changes you will make. You will want things to run the way you want them to. If you are older, you may be cutting back and using your time for personal projects. In the latter part of the month, partnerships become your priority. You are clearer about your own needs.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

Home and family have taken a major role in your life over the last couple of years. You have had to be responsible for others and didn't always have time for yourself. This process is already changing as you are looking to have more fun. Your hobbies and personal interests can be directed toward a side gig, spending more time with your children, and finding new friends for fun and adventure. You are looking to express your personal creativity, no matter what that looks like. Relationship shifts are occurring this year. Your partner

may change jobs, retire, or take off on a journey of self-discovery. This is a renewal time for your partnerships. Do they still fit? In the latter half of the month, you are getting your routines in order and improving your work conditions.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

The significant areas of your life, career, self-expression, relationships, and home are all activated this month. Your home and your sense of foundation and stability are being impacted. This is often a time when there is a change in the family structure. You may also be looking to downsize, relocate, or move back home to be closer to your family. This process has you thinking about how all this affects your career and professional life. You may be ready to start a home-based business that gives you more freedom and aligns with your need to find greater meaning to life. With both Mercury and Venus retrograde as the month starts, you will be ready to make some decisions after the 18th. In the latter part of the month, you will be more than ready for a break.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

You are trying to create more order in your daily life. You are concerned about how effective your time is, and you question your self-worth. You are communicating more clearly and assertively. You are becoming more aware of your boundaries, and you are doing something about it. Relationships can feel dicey, as you are reviewing who you are and what you do. Pluto, the planet of transformation, is traveling through

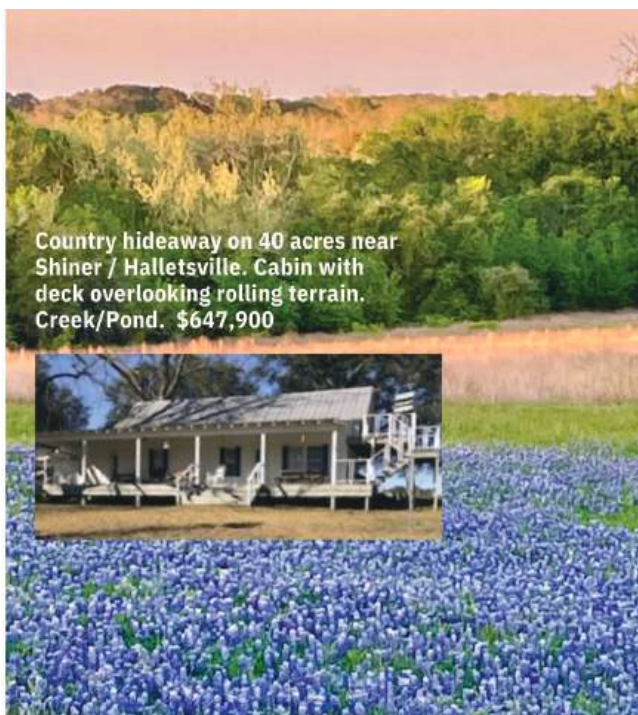
your sign. Old parts of you are passing away and you are lightening your load. Your partnership needs are changing, so your partnerships need to change to accommodate that. You are setting a different direction for yourself. Your views and perspective about your career, where you live, and your primary relationship are all changing. This is a good time to clean out closets and storerooms, and explore the deeper changes within yourself. This activity is very strong around the 18th, and you will feel more comfortable acting on your ideas after that time.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

You have been working on bringing more control and stability into your life. This month, you are looking at finances, retirement, and career stability. You may be investigating investments, reducing debt, and reviewing your salary or fees. Financial stability becomes more important over the year. This has to be matched with a greater sense of fulfillment in your work or life choices. Communications are better after the 19th. You are ready to take some action. You are also going through a period of reviewing your home and career. There are changes going on in your family that may redirect your plans. For some, the family hierarchy is changing, and you may be needed there. You may also be looking to relocate or even start a new career that more adequately reflects who you are now. You definitely want more options and fewer demands on your time.

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Visionary Drag Queen

There's more to Iris Seymour than meets the eye.

By SAM BYRD



Iris Seymour's body is an eye full, with a quick-witted sense of humor to match. She knows all, she sees all, and she blabs it to everyone during her side-splitting trivia shows

and performances. Believe it or not, the busty beauty attended the University of Houston for biomedical engineering but then left college to nurture her drag career. It seems like her hindsight was 20/20, because once she started drag, her performing career came into focus. Read on to find out what makes this queen such a spectacle.

Pronouns?

She/Her in drag, Hehe/Haha out of drag.

Hometown?

I've lived all over the greater Houston area my whole life.

Drag birthday? November 16, 2017

Is there a story behind your stage name?

I used to wear my real prescription glasses while in drag and I wanted to make it my "thing," so I chose an eye motif: Iris, like the pretty part of the eye, and Seymour, like a bitch can "see-more" with her glasses on. You could also say I "receive-more" (wink wink).

Describe your outfit in this photoshoot.

I make everything I wear, and I wanted this costume to represent my pad-making business that I'm internationally known for: Seymour Butts LLC. But also, it's about seeing what's underneath it all for a drag queen. It's very cerebral.

What got you interested in drag?

Seeing my now drag mother, Estella Blow, onstage just having fun and getting tipped down with very little technical skill. That was very inspiring to me. I was a color-guard gay, so getting paid to perform seemed like a dream come true.



Describe your performing persona.

Iris is that MILF who is willing to suck her way to the top and then impress everyone with her mind and work ethic when she's CEO.

Any titles or pageants under your belt?

I've won Blackberri's first local competition, BlowBerri's Battle Zone, and Dessie's Drag Race Season 21.

What's on your bucket list?

I really want my pad business to get so big that I need employees. And booking something on television would be cool, as well.

Most memorable moment as a performer?

I've done so many amazing things, but I'm most proud of the Seymour Parody musicals my family does. I love doing something that no one else in the city is doing.

What's your ultimate goal as a performer?

I think any artist's goal is to leave behind a legacy and make art that is memorable and elicits a reaction. I'm willing to try a lot of things to do so.

Thoughts about legislation restricting drag performances?

I think it's unconstitutional to infringe on the freedom of expression, and any attempt will be handled in court.

What are your favorite hangout spots?

My safe haven is Ripcord, and I'm so honored to have my trivia show there.

Tell us about your drag family.

It's the best part of my drag. I have some of the most uniquely talented kids in Houston. Not too many people can rival the Seymour Family in terms of talent.

Tell us about your aesthetic.

Iris is a very librarian whore in a purple wig.

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

You will hardly ever see me without my glasses. That is *the* accessory that is synonymous with Ms. Seymour.

Any advice for up-and-coming drag performers?

Brand yourself as uniquely as you can, and live in your own delusion onstage. There is no room for unremarkable or insecure drag.

Where and when do you perform?

I have my trivia show at Ripcord, my regular monthly spot at Halo in Bryan, and I go anywhere else I'm asked to be.

Follow Iris on Facebook as Iris Seymour and on Instagram @Iris.Seymour



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— KENNETH JONES, *Pharmacist*

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