

BUILDING BRAZORIA PRIDE

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for equality Pg.32

REVISITING TOWN MEETING I

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for today's fight Pg.46

MAY 2025

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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**PRIDE IN
THE MEDIA**

The **TALK** of the **TOWN**

Frank Billingsley and Ernie Manouse bring
local talk radio into the digital age Pg.42

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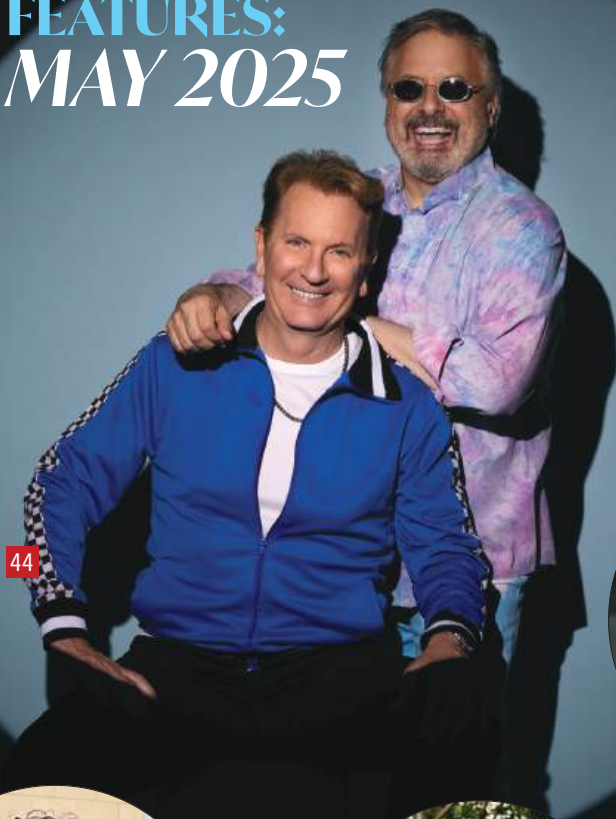
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HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

MAY 2025

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Frank Billingsley and Ernie Manouse bring local talk radio into the digital age.

Photos by Victor Contreras for OutSmart magazine.
Production Assistant: Felipe Vengoechea
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Publishers of OutSmart Magazine
3406 Audubon Place • Houston, TX 77006
713.520.7237

Subscriptions: \$42/12 Issues, \$72/24 Issues

E-mail: editor@outsmartmagazine.com

Website: OutSmartMagazine.com

Printed in Mexico

OUTSMART is published monthly. Estimated readership in Houston and surrounding areas is 60,000. OutSmart Media Company is not responsible for claims and practices of advertisers. The opinions and views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the staff or management of OutSMART. Inclusion in OutSMART does not imply sexual orientation. ©2025 by OutSmart Media Company. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part without permission of the publisher is strictly prohibited. Unsolicited material is accepted. No manuscript returned without SASE.

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We begin this month's community coverage with news from the Houston Bears social group. They discovered that their annual Bear Camp venue, Grizzly Pines, has a policy excluding transgender men. In response, they are moving this month's event to Rainbow Ranch, a queer-inclusive campground in Groesbeck, Texas. The group notes that it harbors no ill will toward Grizzly Pines, and hopes their policy will change in the future.

Then we meet Brazoria County Pride's new president, Timothy Wayne, who is expanding the group's mission in that deeply conservative area south of Houston. With partners like PFLAG and a few local businesses, they hope to become a visible community resource.

Stonewall Sports, a national nonprofit offering low-cost sports leagues, launches in Houston this month. They welcome LGBTQ individuals and their allies who want to connect through kickball, dodgeball, soccer, basketball, and more, all while supporting local nonprofits.

To honor National Asian & Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day on May 19, *OutSmart* talks with three dynamic local AAPI leaders. Evan Low's journey from city-council candidate to president and CEO of the LG-BTQ+ Victory Fund reflects his commitment to public service and representation. With the

Victory Fund's help, Low became the youngest openly gay US mayor at age 23, and his leadership will now focus on empowering LGBTQ candidates nationwide.

Then we meet Bibi Xia, an Asian American woman who curates intentional and joyful special events at Houston's iconic Pearl Bar. Signature offerings like the Sapphic Dating Show, mixers for sapphic women over 30, dance classes, and book swaps will all foster community spirit while supporting local nonprofits.

Finally, we chat with Houston's own Henry Lu, who is making waves on this season of *Top Chef: Canada*. He shares some of the challenges he has overcome, as well as what's next for his culinary career.

Our May cover stars, Ernie Manouse and Frank Billingsley, are hosting a new local talk show (along with Celeste Diaz Schurman) on News 88.7 FM and various streaming platforms. *Hello, Houston!* blends serious journalism with heartfelt storytelling and lighthearted humor, reflecting the diverse spirit of our city. Thanks to photographer Victor Contreras for the photo shoot he staged at his brand-new studio in The Silos at Sawyer Yards.

Our May arts coverage highlights artists Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin, who have

launched a project celebrating Houston's seminal 1978 LGBTQ political event that attracted over 4,000 people to the Astro Arena for a day of organizing. The duo's project also includes a symposium in June that brings together activists, artists, and scholars.

Then we visit with Houston Ballet artistic director Stanton Welch, whose new adaptation of *Raymonda* focuses on the emotional journey of Raymonda and her sisters. The production also includes Harper Watters, the ballet's principal dancer and Instagram star.

As an independent LGBTQ media outlet, *OutSmart* needs the financial support of its readers to continue doing its work. If you believe the community's stories 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 *OutSmart* 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



On March 30, 2025, the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund held its 2025 Champagne Brunch. Pictured are staff members.



On March 30, 2025, Trans Day of Visibility was held at the Montrose Center. Pictured are **Dylan Forbis, Jevon Martin, Avery Belyeu, Pete Makopoulos-Senfleber, and Rose Yard.**



On April 3, 2025, the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber hosted a Pride at Five Mixer with community partners at Native Citizen.



On April 5, 2025, Houston Gaymers held a charity drag show at Pearl Bar. Pictured are participants.



On April 11, 2025, the National Leather Association Houston held its annual banquet at the Montrose Center. Pictured are members of the NLA Houston Chapter.



On April 12, 2025, Houston Bears held their second annual bachelor auction at Play Nightlife. Pictured are participants.



On April 19, 2025, Mayor Whitmire presented a proclamation and tribute to Tim Hearn at Cleveland Park. Pictured are **Mayor John Whitmire, Mauri Bird Lucas, and Brian Bottorff.**



On April 5, 2025, Houston joined the nationwide "Hands Off" protest at Houston City Hall. Pictured are a portion of the protestors.



On April 22, 2025, the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber hosted Get Perk'd Up with the Chamber at Doshi House. Pictured are **Jack Berger, Officer Jo Jones, and Deepak Doshi.**



On April 24, 2025, Pearl Bar hosted a "Power Lesbian Panel" with Annise Parker, Tammi Wallace, Josie Pickens, DJ Rosez, and moderator Kendall Toarmina. Pictured are **BiBi Xia, Tammi Wallace, Josie Pickens, Mayor Annise Parker, DJ Rosez, and Kendall Toarmina.**



On April 26, 2025, Rice University hosted a citywide Lavender Graduation at the Montrose Center. Pictured are graduates and members of the Lavender Graduation Committee.



On April 26, 2025, the Montrose Center presented its Empowering Our Future Gala "Under the Big Top" at the Ballroom at Bayou Place. Pictured are **Kim Gustavsson and Charles Caliva.**

QUEER THINGS to DO

STAGE

May 3

BQAF Music Festival 2025

Visibility has never been more essential, and the community will gather at Stampede Houston, 11925 Eastex Freeway, to celebrate it in full force. Headlined by JT, a vocal and visible ally, the event promises an afternoon of powerful performances and pride. Returning to the stage is KenTheMan, a standout from XXL Magazine's 2022 Freshman List, alongside Asher HaVon, the first openly LGBTQ winner of *The Voice*. Festival favorite Sevndeeep will once again energize the crowd, while JeRonelle will close the day with his signature smooth R&B sound. Visibility, pride, and possibility will take center stage in Houston.

tinyurl.com/45t4jr9a



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



COMMUNITY

May 5

Pride Houston 365 Cinco De Mayo and Grand Marshal Announcement

This year's announcement of the Grand Marshal winners, Distinguished Grand Marshals, Trendsetter, and Pride Courage Awardees will celebrate the achievements and contributions of these outstanding individuals. tinyurl.com/4t7hr8vm

COMMUNITY

May 14

Tony's Place Art Night

Tony's Place is all about building queer joy, chosen fam, and creative freedom, and they do that with glitter, paint, and a whole lot of heart at Craft Your Pride, a monthly art night for LGBTQ youth ages 14 to 25.

tinyurl.com/yc2mn9af

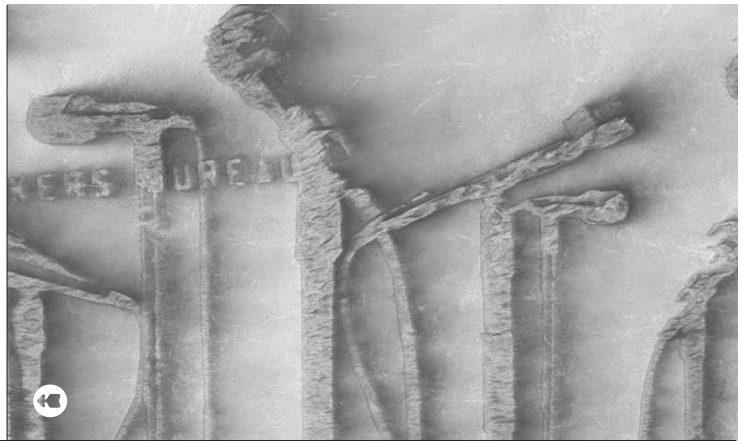
ARTS

May 16

Exhibition Opening: "Town Hall 1978-2028"

Rendezvous Center for Art presents an exhibition and symposium inspired by the pivotal 1978 Town Meeting I, a gathering of 4,000 LGBTQ Houstonians that led to the creation of Houston institutions including the Montrose Center.

tinyurl.com/yz7z8e3s



COMMUNITY

May 16-18

Bear Camp at Rainbow Ranch

Bear Camp is a Houston Bears tradition—an opportunity to get out into the “wilderness” and reconnect with nature. There will be food, drinks, swimming, and lots of fun.

tinyurl.com/ybpd4wz

COMMUNITY

May 16

Fruity Friday Bingo at Frost Town Brewing

Trans Legal Aid Clinic Texas hosts Fruity Friday Bingo, where the first card is free and proceeds from additional card sales benefit nonprofits serving Houston's queer community.

tinyurl.com/42ccfdct

COMMUNITY

May 17

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

May 17

Misfits Pool Party

Jump in and get wet with the Houston Misfits at Club Houston. DJ Easton Santos provides the poolside soundtrack for a fantastic (and hot) time.

tinyurl.com/3efkshk3



STAGE

May 22

Alyssa Edwards at House of Blues

Drag superstar Alyssa Edwards returns to Houston with her Crowned tour. Alyssa will share outrageous, side-splitting tales of her rise to fame with her signature wit.

tinyurl.com/y57xnkyj



COMMUNITY

May 24

Houston Gaymers May Meetup

The Houston Gaymers' monthly meetup is the place to make new friends while playing your favorite games. Every major system is represented with the latest titles.

tinyurl.com/3jemyhp3

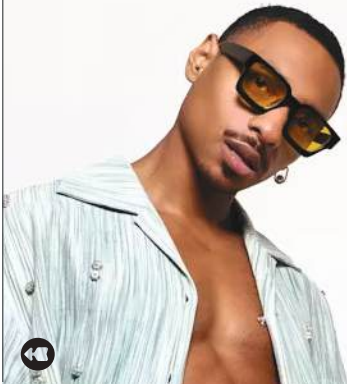
STAGE

May 24

Durand Bernarr at White Oak Music Hall

With his powerhouse vocals and witty storytelling, Bernarr's act has been coined “gangster musical theater,” part Little Richard and part Rick James.

tinyurl.com/yvewe53t



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

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QUEER THINGS to DO SAVE the DATES



STAGE

June 4

Daniel Levy at

Punch Line Houston

Multi-hyphenate Emmy award-winning showrunner, writer, actor, director, and producer Daniel Levy brings his standup set to Houston. tinyurl.com/46xmyw88

COMMUNITY

June 6

Pride in Business Luncheon and Awards

The Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce presents its signature Pride Month event. This year, the event celebrates ten years of marriage equality with special guest Jim Obergefell, the plaintiff in the historic Supreme Court case that secured marriage equality nationwide. tinyurl.com/sbhc6bur



June 26

Katy Pride Second Birthday Party

Join Katy Pride as they celebrate two years of creating safe spaces and events in the West Houston area, where individuals can live authentically and safely without persecution, judgment, hate, or fear. tinyurl.com/yc48ajsc

COMMUNITY

June 28

47th Official Houston LGBTQ Pride Festival & Parade

The annual Houston Pride Festival and Parade returns to downtown Houston. As always, the parade is free to attend. tinyurl.com/mwhzdvd6d



STAGE

June 28 and 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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Navigating Uncertain Times

Federal employees should understand their VERA, TSP, and pension options.



In an environment where agency restructuring, budgetary constraints, and workforce reductions are becoming more common, federal employees are increasingly faced with

critical decisions about their future. One such decision often involves taking advantage of early retirement options like the Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA). While VERA can present a valuable opportunity to exit the workforce early, it is essential for federal employees to understand the broader implications, and especially how it impacts their Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) and their federal pension benefits.

This article provides an overview of what to consider during uncertain times, covering VERA eligibility, TSP options, and how pensions are calculated.

Early Retirement Options under VERA

The Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA) is a tool that federal agencies can use during times of restructuring, reorganization, or workforce downsizing. Approved by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), VERA allows eligible employees to retire earlier than they normally could under standard retirement rules.

VERA Eligibility Rules

- You must be at least 50 years old with 20 years of creditable federal service, or
- Any age with 25 years of creditable service.
- Your position must be included in your agency's VERA offering, and you must be serving in that position continuously.

VERA does not automatically mean a larger pension or enhanced benefits. Instead, it offers an opportunity for those who qualify to retire earlier than they might under normal conditions, potentially preserving some benefits that could be at risk in a RIF (Reduction in Force) situation.

However, retiring early means that you may accrue fewer years of service, potentially re-



ducing the size of your pension. It's important to carefully weigh this against the benefits of early retirement, especially if you are not fully financially prepared to leave the workforce.

Retirement Eligibility under FERS

Most federal employees fall under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), which has its own set of eligibility requirements for retirement. Understanding when you can retire under normal conditions is key to evaluating whether VERA is the right option. To be eligible for immediate retirement under FERS, these are the requirements:

- Minimum Retirement Age (MRA) + 30 years of service
- MRA + 10 years (reduced benefit unless postponed)
- Age 60 with 20 years of service
- Age 62 with 5 years of service

Minimum Retirement Age ranges from 55 to 57, depending on your year of birth. For example, those born in 1970 or later will have an MRA of 57.

Your High-3 Average Salary

Your federal pension under FERS or CSRS is heavily influenced by your high-3 average salary. This term refers to the highest average basic pay you earned during any three consecutive years of service—they do not need to be the last three years of your career.

What Counts toward the High-3?

- Base pay
- Locality pay
- Administratively uncontested pay raises

What Doesn't Count?

- Overtime
- Bonuses
- Awards
- Hazard pay

The High-3 period could occur earlier in your career, especially if you held a high-paying detail, supervisory role, or lived in a high locality pay area for three consecutive years.

Example: If your highest 36 consecutive months of basic pay averaged \$90,000, and you retire with 30 years of service under FERS, your basic annual pension would be:

- $1\% \times 90,000 \times 30 = \$27,000$ per year

Or, if you're 62 or older with at least 20 years of service:

- $1.1\% \times 90,000 \times 30 = \$29,700$ per year

Understanding your high-3 average and ensuring it reflects your highest earning years can significantly impact your retirement income.

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP)

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a critical component of federal retirement planning. Alongside your pension and Social Security, it forms the third leg of the retirement income stool. When retiring under VERA, special care must be taken with how you handle your TSP, especially if you are retiring before age 59.

Withdrawal Considerations:

- If you separate from federal service during or after the year you turn 55 (or 50 for special provision employees like law enforcement), you can access your TSP without the 10% early withdrawal penalty.
- If you retire under VERA before age 55 (or 50 for special category employees), you may incur a 10% penalty unless you roll over your TSP to another retirement account and take withdrawals using IRS Rule 72(t).

TSP Options in Retirement:

- Leave funds in the TSP
- Take partial or full withdrawals
- Set up installment payments
- Purchase a TSP annuity →

Each option has different tax implications, and market volatility should be considered when making withdrawal decisions.

Investment Allocation: Uncertain times can bring market instability. Evaluate your TSP allocations among the G, F, C, S, and I Funds and consider shifting toward more conservative investments (like the G Fund) as you near retirement.

Federal Pensions: FERS vs. CSRS

While most current employees are under FERS, some long-serving federal workers may still fall under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS).

FERS Pension Calculation:

- 1% of your high-3 salary x years of service
- 1.1% if you retire at age 62 or older with at least 20 years of service
- Eligible for Social Security and TSP

CSRS Pension Calculation:

- Approximately 1.5% to 2.5% per year of service, depending on years worked
- No Social Security participation (with some exceptions)
- More generous pension but without automatic TSP contributions

CSRS employees typically receive a larger pension but need to be proactive about supplementing it since they don't receive Social Security unless they have qualifying private sector employment.

Health Benefits and Life Insurance

A major consideration when retiring early under VERA is whether you can maintain your Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) and Federal Employees Group Life Insurance (FEGLI).

To keep FEHB in retirement:

- You must have been covered under FEHB for the five years immediately preceding your retirement or from your first opportunity to enroll.

For FEGLI:

- Coverage may continue into retirement if you were enrolled for the five years before retirement.

These benefits can be a major financial advantage in retirement, and should factor into your decision-making process.

Strategic Planning

Uncertain times can create stress, but federal employees have structured benefits that offer options, even in turbulent periods. Taking a

strategic approach to early retirement through VERA, understanding your high-3 salary and how it affects your pension, and planning TSP withdrawals wisely can provide financial security and peace of mind.

Before making any final decisions, consult with:

- Your agency's HR or retirement counselor
- A financial planning professional who is familiar with federal benefits
- The official OPM guidance for retirement and TSP planning

With preparation and good information, you can take control of your future—even when the present feels uncertain.

The opinions voiced are for general information only and are not intended to provide specific advice or recommendations for any individual. Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com. Visit letsmakeaplan.org or midtownfg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.



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Houston Bears to Relocate Its 2025 Bear Camp

A Grizzly Pines policy excluding trans men prompted the move to Rainbow Ranch.

by DAVID CLARKE



In a move that both reflects the organization's commitment to inclusivity and underscores tensions around trans visibility in LGBTQ spaces, the Houston Bears have relocated

their 2025 Bear Camp event from Grizzly Pines in Navasota, Texas, to Rainbow Ranch in Groesbeck. The decision was prompted by Grizzly Pines' policy limiting entry to cisgender men, and it reflects a broader reckoning within queer communities about what it truly means to be inclusive.

"We consider transgender men to be an integral part of our community," says Houston Bears president Joe Jefferson Jr. "We want them as members, just as any other man would like to be a member, and we want them to be at

our events."

Grizzly Pines came under scrutiny following comments the campground made on March 31, 2025, which was also the annual Trans Day of Visibility. In a widely circulated social media post authored by the organization, they made it abundantly clear that the campground's policy excludes trans men. While Grizzly Pines had previously hosted Houston Bears events, the Houston Bears' board quickly rallied and voted to cancel their 2025 Bear Camp booking with the venue.

"There was nothing on their website that specifically said 'no trans men,'" Jefferson explains. "That hasn't been a stated policy." He indicated that the Houston Bears now sees that this policy was, at best, an unwritten rule of Grizzly Pines.

Upon having the trans exclusion policy brought to their attention, the Houston

Bears board reached out to Grizzly Pines for clarification. After confirming the policy, they requested an exemption for their May event. The campground declined. The Houston Bears were especially frustrated because Grizzly Pines has made exceptions to its cis-male-only policy in the past by allowing cisgender women on the property during select weekends.

"We did ask them for an exemption," Jefferson explains. "There are weekends throughout the year where they allow women onto their property. There's an event that takes place in September or October where anyone and everyone is welcome. We said, 'Hey, could you make a similar exception for us?' But they said that wasn't possible, that it's something they prepare for weeks or months in advance."

"When they said that wasn't possible, it pretty much made it impossible for us to have the event there," Jefferson says. "We didn't

want a situation where someone paid for lodging and food, showed up, and then was kicked out because we hadn't asked about their gender assigned at birth."

The decision to move Bear Camp to Rainbow Ranch, a queer-friendly campground that explicitly welcomes all LGBTQ individuals. It is located farther from the Houston metroplex than Grizzly Pines, so the decision was not made lightly.

"This decision wasn't to make a statement," declares Jorge Olivares, the organization's communications director. "We made the decision because we had to. It's about our members," he emphasizes. "But now that we're here, and this is giving us visibility, we want everybody to know that everybody's welcome. If you're transgender or nonbinary, come join us. You won't regret it."

Bear Camp will now take place May 16–18, 2025, at Rainbow Ranch. Tickets and event details can be found at [BearCamp.org](https://bearcamp.org).

While Houston Bears' leadership acknowledged that some members expressed concerns about the new location's distance from Houston, the overwhelming response has been positive.

"It was overwhelmingly positive," Olivares says. "People are thanking us for taking these steps. It actually felt really good. Very heartwarming. They had our backs."

Still, the Houston Bears are not calling for a boycott of Grizzly Pines. "We told all of our members at our general membership meeting: If you still have your reservations out there, enjoy yourself," Jefferson states. "We are not going to treat anyone differently because they made a personal decision."

Despite some social-media commentary attempting to paint campground leaders as villains, both Jefferson and Olivares reject that characterization.

"We personally, and the organization, have no ill will toward Grizzly Pines. They're not the bad guys, in my opinion," says Jefferson. "The bottom line is they have a policy we don't agree with, so we decided to move it. We hope they can grow and potentially change the policy."

Olivares adds, "They're free to have their opinion, but they could do better, too. If they change and they show us it's a real change, not just a paper change, that would be important."

Grizzly Pines was contacted multiple times via email, phone, and by text messages for a comment on their policy and the Houston Bears' departure, but Grizzly Pines has not yet responded.

For the Houston Bears, the incident has been a powerful learning moment. "We've learned not to make broad assumptions. Just because a space is declared safe for gay men

doesn't mean it's safe for all gay men," Jefferson notes. "We're going to ask the right questions going forward. We take full responsibility for not doing that before."

The organization's renewed commitment to inclusion is not just reactive, but deeply personal.

"Bottom line, it's just the right thing to do," Jefferson says. "The transgender community is under attack on many different fronts right now, and we believe it's important for them to have allies and to know they're not going through the world alone."

"We want them to be with us. And we want to be good allies," echoes Olivares. "We still have to learn, and we want to listen and grow. It's all of us. Together."

"Anyone who wants to participate in our events or wants to become a member is absolutely welcome to do so," Jefferson adds. "You belong here."

WHAT: Houston Bears' Bear Camp 2025

WHEN: May 16–18, 2025

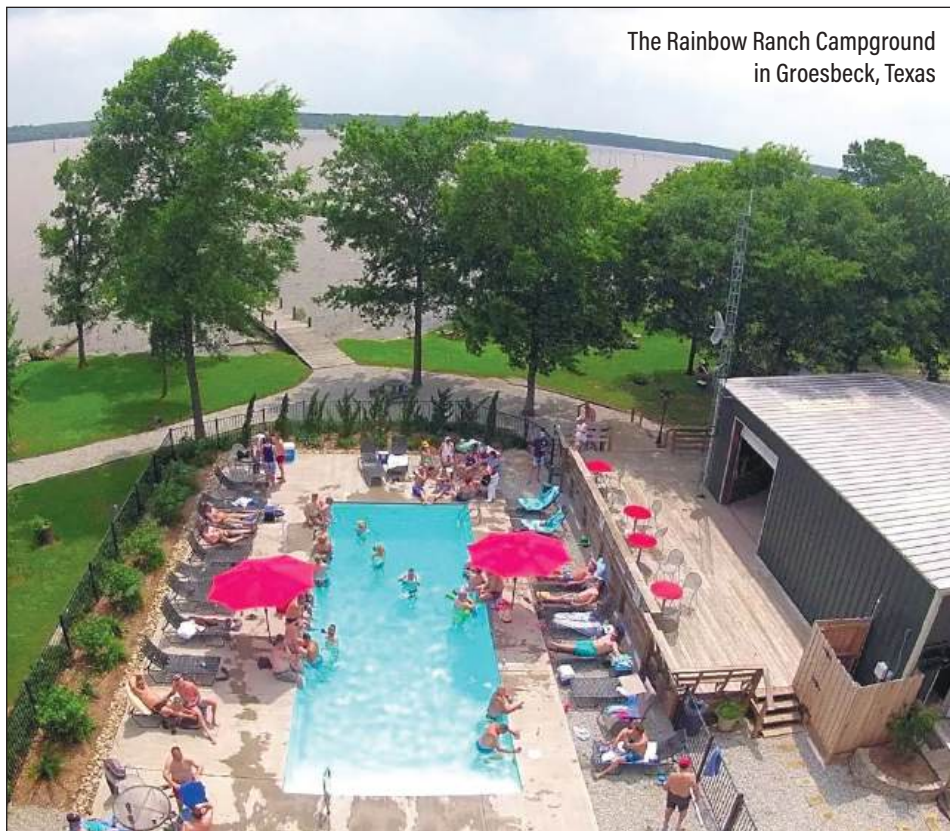
WHERE: Rainbow Ranch Campground

INFO: HoustonBears.org



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THE WORLD ALONE."**

—Joe Jefferson Jr.,
Houston Bears president



The Rainbow Ranch Campground
in Groesbeck, Texas

Raising Rainbow Visibility

Timothy Wayne breaks down barriers as president of Brazoria County Pride.

by BRANDON WOLF

Although the LGBTQ community is under fire in many parts of the country, that hasn't stopped the brave people who make up the Brazoria County Pride organization. They recently elected Timothy Wayne, a Brazoria County native, as their new president. As a young gay man who was no stranger to school bullies, Wayne is determined that current and future generations of LGBTQ youth don't experience the isolation and torment that was his reality.

Growing Up in Brazoria County

Brazoria County, located south of Houston, includes Pearland, Alvin, Angleton, Lake Jackson, Quintana, and the small, historic town of West Columbia, where the 39-year-old Wayne grew up and presently lives.

Wayne grew up in a very conservative area and remembers the school bullies of his youth. "They would beat me up in the woods near the school. They pushed me into lockers and wouldn't let me out until I said I was a faggot."

While in high school, Wayne lost his father to cancer. The youngest of three children, Wayne has two older sisters. "It is a small family, but rich in love," he says.

He recalls reading a Texas gay magazine titled *XY* and seeing "all these circuit twink[s]." He always came to Houston for the Pride parade.

When he was in high school, he would slip up to Houston with a friend. They knew older gay men who would get an entry stamp on their wrists, and Wayne found a way to transfer it to



their wrists and get into clubs.

He also attended many meetings of Houston's Hatch Youth program for teenagers. "It opened my eyes to our community as a whole. I got to see other people like me, and I didn't feel so alone."

As soon as he graduated from high school, Wayne moved to Dallas and lived in the Oak Lawn area. "It was a great way to come out of

the closet," he recalls.

For nearly a decade, beginning with his college years, Wayne was a special-events and catering director. He now works in the biotech industry.

Wayne built a house on a lake in the country. He moved his mother in because he had promised his dying father that he would always take care of her.

A Friend of Dolly

As a child, Wayne would tell people he was going to work with Dolly Parton one day. His brother-in-law played steel guitar for Reba McEntire, so Wayne was used to being backstage and thought of the singer as “Aunt Reba.”

By the time he was in college, he was acting in film and television roles. He eventually met people who were in Parton’s crew, and they invited him to be an extra in a movie she was filming, *Joyful Noise*. Her crew invited Wayne to join the entourage, and over the last 15 years, he was backstage for all of her tours and other special shows.

“Talking to Dolly is just like sitting down with somebody in your own family. She is humble and wholesome, and she’s interested in everything you have to say. She is very easy to talk with. You can tell she is coming because you smell her perfume first. She wears lots of perfume,” Wayne says.

Wayne visits Parton once a year when she invites him to come to Dollywood. His friend Scott McLelland (who performs in drag as Cloe Richards) accompanies Wayne on his annual trip. Next month, they will attend the 40th anniversary of Dollywood.

“One time she wrote on a Post-it note: ‘Don’t surrender ‘til you find your Rainbow.’ “I still have that note, and I made a huge neon sign out of it, which hangs in the entryway to my home.”

LGBTQ Youth Resources

Eventually, Wayne started a gay/straight alliance at Brazosport College in Lake Jackson. It now has a volunteer-based board. Wayne continues to work with the organization, in addition to his paying job.

“Dow Chemical had given a grant to a group of activists to start Brazoria County Pride for youth, but it didn’t get much traction,” he says.

One of the women in the group came to Wayne asking for help. He met with the group and found them to be very passionate about trying to help LGBTQ kids. Wayne suggested forming a Brazoria County Pride organization, which would have a youth division. The restructuring went quickly. A board was formed, and Wayne was named the director of social media. In January of this year, Wayne was unanimously voted in as the new board president.

“I’m really excited to take this to a new level,” he says. “I can’t fathom another kid having to endure what I did. It would break my heart. There are no local support systems, no groups for LGBTQ kids in the schools. There is nothing for kids down here. So it’s very, very much a part of our mission to create a space for people like us and celebrate them and support them. This is also why we have developed our scholarship program.”

Students can apply for a scholarship on the group’s website.

Recently, the organization began partnering with the Brazoria County chapter of PFLAG.

“Trans youth are often afraid to come out to support groups, but PFLAG offers virtual groups for them,” Wayne says. “We’re marginalized and we’re a minority down in Brazoria County. It’s very red. I have a progress flag flying above my garage door, and it’s been ripped down and thrown at my front door several times. But I hang it back up because we cannot stop.”

The group doesn’t have a physical location yet, although that is a goal. Every year, the group sponsors a family-friendly Pride festival on the first Saturday in June. The festival is held at MacLean Park in Lake Jackson. “There is a wonderful, covered pavilion there, and we rent the whole park from the city. The police

keep us real safe. They are big fans of our group,” Wayne says.

At the festival, health allies do free screenings and sign up gay men for PrEP, the HIV-prevention drug. The group partners with H-E-B and Kroger and all the major chemical plants who have tables or booths at the festival. A youth area is set up where families can make crafts. The festival is pet-friendly, and a dog parade is held with each dog getting a special bandana. There are also bounce houses for children.

Entertainment is provided by several drag queens, and the music and outfits are curated so as not to offend anyone. “The crowd grows bigger every year,” Wayne notes. “We’ve had years when the weather was a bit wonky, but it never stopped people from attending. Nearly a thousand guests show up.”

Although the group does not have a Pride parade, they are considering participating in the annual Festival of Lights parade at Christmas time in downtown Lake Jackson. They currently participate in the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade in Surfside Beach.

Brazoria County Pride offers two monthly meetings. The first Saturday of every month is a coffee social, and the third Wednesday of each month is a wine social.

Dedicated Board Members

David Edwards is a founding member of Brazoria County Pride and was their first treasurer. He is now serving on the board as the organization’s secretary. “This is my way to give back to the community,” he says.

“There are things going on that ultimately affect me but that I have no control over,” Edwards adds, reflecting on the current political environment. “What I *can* do is help the Pride organization here. I can be a source for change and advocacy.” →



Cloe Richards as Dolly Parton, with Brazoria County Pride president Timothy Wayne and fellow performer Cyn Queen.



The 2024 Brazoria County Pride Festival attracted a large crowd in Lake Jackson.



Dessie Love Blake brought Taylor Swift to life with her tribute performance at the 2024 Brazoria County Pride Festival.

Edwards' dream is that when he steps down in a few years, there will be a new board that is energized and engaged. "I would love to have been part of the legacy," he says.

Many people have thanked Edwards for what the organization is doing. He remembers the parents of a trans child who attended the Pride festival one year. Happy to see that it was kid-friendly, the next year they brought their child. He also enjoys watching the youth at the festival feeling free to be their genuine selves.

Shawna Damani is a new member of the board. "This is the first time that I've been on a board," she says, "and I feel very, very honored."

Taking on this responsibility is personal for Damani because she has three biological children who all identify as queer. She also recently came out, and her children weren't surprised, reminding her of all the flannel shirts in her wardrobe.

"It's been interesting. My kids know more about this space and how to be queer in it, but I'm meeting fabulous people and getting their wisdom, support, and encouragement." Damani's dream for Brazoria County Pride is to expand both the number and the size of the scholarships that they give. Students can apply on the organization's website.

Project Love

On February 15, 2025, Brazoria County Pride held their first major fundraiser, a Valentine gala titled Project Love. "At first, we were worried we weren't going to sell enough tickets. But we sold out 100 tickets, increased it to 200, and finally sold out 300 tickets," Wayne says. Next year, the board is considering increasing ticket sales to 500.

The gala was held in the Dow Academic Center at Brazosport College in Lake Jackson. As guests entered the party, they saw a chronological timeline of how Brazos County Pride started and their journey forward. Then there was a red-carpet walk where guests could have their photos taken.

The evening began with a cocktail hour with appetizers. The signature punch was vodka mixed with real vanilla beans.

Wayne moved his Dolly Parton neon sign to the VIP area of the gala, and a photo wall was provided as a backdrop for guests to have their pictures taken.

As guests dined, Wayne delivered a keynote speech. The panel discussion after the meal was moderated by the former president of Brazoria County Pride, Dr. Jessica Truscott. Panel members included Wayne, Tammi Wallace from the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, and Dr. Joy Kennedy O'Neill, a professor at Brazosport College. They talked about the past, present, and future of Pride.

A local theater group entertained with songs from the film *9 to 5*. This was followed by a drag show featuring a Dolly Parton tribute. Cloe Richards, Chole Crawford Ross, and Mistress Isabelle Brooks performed, and Wayne joined one montage number by impersonating Kenny Rogers. The evening ended as guests danced the night away to a DJ's music.

Money raised from the gala's silent auction will fund the group's scholarship program and festival operations. One of the items in the silent auction was a bottle of Dolly Parton perfume (limited to 1,946 bottles in honor of the year she was born), along with an autographed photo of Parton.

Damani remembers working on Project Love. "Every step of the way, it was a reminder that we were doing the right thing, doing something that matters. It was like a gay prom—just fabulous!"

The event's sponsors included most of the chemical plants in the area, plus a number of local businesses. They even received a \$2,500 donation through his TikTok account. (Wayne was a "Favorite TikToker" finalist in *OutSmart's* Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards.)

Resilience in Uncertain Times

Wayne believes the Brazoria County Pride group is coping well, considering the bigotry found in rural Texas. The group stays constantly aware of their surroundings. Pride board members realize that it's not going to be easy in the new political environment, but they feel they must continue to be a beacon of light for the local LGBTQ community.

Among the several bright spots for the group was the mayor of Lake Jackson reaching out to board members about the recent Project Love gala. "He said he's very honored to have people like us in the community who are willing to do the work we do," Wayne says.

Wayne's mother recently told him, "You get your optimism from your mother and Dolly Parton combined. You should keep working to do as much as you can, and stand strong."

Resilience and optimism are indeed what keeps Wayne moving forward. "I've had two different bucket lists and crossed everything off of them," he says. Though some have warned him that he'd never accomplish some of those things, he confides, "I don't take that as a No. I take it as an opportunity. I've had some valleys in the past—some horrible relationships. But my priorities are right, and I've re-centered myself. I thrive on progress. The thing that keeps me going is focusing on the kind of positive impact I can make in the world."

WHAT: Brazoria County Pride Festival

WHEN: Saturday, June 7, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

WHERE: Large Pavilion, MacLean Park, 93 Lake Road, Lake Jackson

 This year's festival is a family-friendly and pet-friendly event for all ages with the theme "Love Without Limits." For more info, visit brazoriacountypride.org

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A LEAGUE FOR ALL

Stonewall Sports Houston offers a space for friendly competition and community connection.

by ZACHARY MCKENZIE

Stonewall Sports, a national nonprofit that offers inclusive, low-cost local sports leagues that give back to their communities, has landed in Houston. Kicking off with pickleball on May 10, the local nonprofit offers LGBTQ Houstonians and their allies the opportunity to build community, have some fun, and do good all at the same time. The league's commissioner, Mason Fitch, spoke with *OutSmart* to share what makes this league the perfect space for everyone to play ball.

Fitch, a lawyer by trade, and his fellow board members all became friends in spaces similar to Stonewall Sports Houston. "A lot of us already knew each other from different leagues that already exist in the city," he explains. "Ultimately, we're a group of people who really appreciated and valued their experiences in gay sports, and felt like we could build something exciting in Houston."

Sports aren't just fun and games for Fitch, who shares how being part of adult athletic teams has made a positive impact on his life. "I first started playing in gay sports leagues when I was in Hawaii in 2012. I didn't really like being gay before I found that community," he admits. "I was encouraged to join a gay flag-football team, and that experience was the first time I had a community of LGBTQ people to be with and call my friends. That was such a meaningful experience for me, and I'm very grateful for it."

Influences from sports leagues he participated in while living in New York, Hawaii, and San Francisco all informed the approach Fitch is taking as a Stonewall Sports board member. The communities were centered around sports, but ultimately offered more than just friendly competition. Fitch shares that his passion for this Houston league is rooted in a desire to offer similar opportunities for others

to connect. "A sports league that operates more like a community is really what I'm looking for, and is why I am excited about Stonewall Sports Houston," he says.

The league is slated to expand the number of game options being offered, adding to what other leagues in the city already provide. "What we really want to do is be the glue between all of the sports organizations, in pursuit of creating a broader, more cohesive community," Fitch says. "Pickleball will kick off in May at Elite Pickleball Club in the Heights. Kickball will probably be the next sport that we offer. Soon, we'll be able to add others such as dodgeball, soccer, basketball, and more."

"THE VERY PURPOSE OF THIS LEAGUE IS TO MAKE PEOPLE FEEL WELCOME AND NOT ALONE. NO COMMUNITY THAT I'VE EVER BEEN A PART OF HAS FELT AS MUCH LIKE A FAMILY AS MY GAY LEAGUES."

— Mason Fitch

Supporting other nonprofits is a goal of the organization that the board takes very seriously. "Our director of philanthropy develops relationships with local organizations. We're not just donating money, but we're going to show up and partner with them. All of our board members live in Houston and are part of this community," Fitch says. "We're dedicated to listening and reaching out to folks to see

how we can support them." Additionally, Fitch explains that partnering with local businesses for financial support remains a priority for the board. "We provide sponsorship opportunities for local businesses that, for example, want to get their name out there and have their logo on our shirts."

Ultimately, Fitch and his board want to provide a space for the entire LGBTQ community in Houston to engage in friendly competition, make friends, and build new connections. "We understand that not everyone wants to play sports, so we aim to provide opportunities for folks who still want to be involved in a community," he says.

The league welcomes feedback via their website and Instagram account on how to improve this part of their mission, including supporting athletes who have disabilities. "We affirmatively want that feedback," says Fitch. He empathizes with those who feel that joining a sports league can be intimidating. "Players might be worried about how they'll perform athletically. The very purpose of this league is to make people feel welcome and not alone. No community that I've ever been a part of has felt as much like a family as my various gay leagues."

Fitch looks ahead to the fledgling nonprofit's future with optimism, confident that it will offer the same benefits to others that he's experienced. "I think people should sign up to challenge themselves and give themselves a chance to be a part of something bigger—be a part of a community. It's so refreshing because it's outdoors, it's during the day, it's not centered around alcohol, and there are people from so many different backgrounds all coming together. It really is a place where you can come and have fun with folks you may never have met before."



Keep up with Stonewall Sports on Instagram @stonewall_h.tx.

A NEW ERA FOR VICTORY

Evan Low steps up to lead the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund through turbulent times.

by DAVID CLARKE

Openly gay activist and politician Evan Low was first endorsed by the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund at the age of 20. Back then, he was a bright-eyed young city-council candidate in California with big dreams, a lot of courage, and no guarantee of success. Although he didn't win that first race, his defeat didn't stop him. He ran again, and won. At 23, Low became the youngest openly gay mayor in the United States.

Fast-forward two decades, and the now well-established trailblazer is stepping into a new role. Last February, Low became president and CEO of the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund and Victory Institute, making history again as the first Asian American to lead the crucial organization.

"My relationship with Victory was such that I was an endorsed candidate when I was 20 years old, running for the first time for City Council," Low explains. "Victory was there to catch me when I fell, and Victory was also there to push me right back into it when I ran for office in the next cycle and won at 23 years old."

Low's notable rise is a testament to persistence, representation, and the power of community investment. His personal story resonates deeply across the intersections of his LGBTQ, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander identity, especially during this politically volatile time for those communities.

"There are forces at play that are attempting to legislate us out of existence," Low warns. "As a result of that, let's be reminded about the core mission of what our LGBTQ+ Victory Fund is all about, which is to ensure LGBTQ+ representation in elected and appointed office."

Low, a former California State Assembly member, sees this fraught moment as a convergence of lived experience and organizational purpose. Both he and his predecessor, former Houston Mayor Annise Parker, are examples of the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund's many successes.

"Certainly, you know the work of Mayor Parker," Low says. "We both served as mayors. We were both graduates of the Victory Fund David Bohnett Harvard Fellowship Program.



We were both endorsed candidates, and both served as CEOs of this organization. In other words, we've been beneficiaries and products of the work of Victory, and we hope to give back."

This CEO job comes with weighty responsibilities, but Low's vision for the role is simultaneously expansive and energizing. His leadership begins at a time when conservative lawmakers across our country are unflinchingly advancing anti-LGBTQ legislation at a rapid rate. They viciously target some of the most vulnerable populations in our community, including trans youth, drag performers, and gender-affirming care.

"There are laws in multiple states that criminalize our existence," Low says. "In spite of that, we have members in our Victory Network who are leading by example, running for office despite the dangers that come with it. They're answering the call for public service as patriotic Americans."

Beyond supporting candidates in major big-city elections, Low sees Victory's strongest impacts in numerous small, often overlooked corners of the country. He's particularly focused on ensuring that candidates in rural areas and smaller municipalities receive the same support as those in more prominent districts.

"Think about that small township of 200 people in which we may have an LGBTQ+ candidate running, but without the same access to resources and a support network centered on how to run as an openly LGBTQ+ person," emphasizes Low. With support from Victory,

"VICTORY WAS THERE TO CATCH ME WHEN I FELL—AND TO PUSH ME BACK IN WHEN I WAS READY TO RISE AGAIN."

— Evan Low

these candidates are coached on prioritizing kitchen-table issues for everyday people in addition to receiving guidance on how to show up as their authentic selves and use that to their advantage.

From its earliest candidate trainings to its long-term development programs, Victory is designed to meet leaders where they are and prepare them for tangible growth. "We support them as candidates, we support them while in local office, and then we'll hopefully be able to have the capacity to support them as they seek higher office as well," Low adds.

As an Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) member of the LGBTQ community, Low brings an important intersectional lens to his work. In a political climate where racialized rhetoric and anti-Asian violence remain potent threats, Low understands the parallels and shared struggles of multiple human-rights causes and movements.

"In terms of the recent movement to stop

AAPI hate, we are actively responding to forces that wish to erase us," Low points out. "That's where we are fighting for the basic protections of human dignity that each of us, as Americans and as fellow global citizens, should enjoy. There are legacy proposals targeting both communities, and that's why intersectionality is important."

Low also acknowledges the emotional toll of the current climate, and he urges communities to resist the temptation to disengage. Instead, he says, now is the time to connect, organize, and move forward together.

"We are stronger together," Low reminds us. "We must take the time and effort to check in on one another, because it can be a very, very difficult, stressful, and perilous time to exist."

Low's call to action is grounded in hope and possibility. He dreams not just of more LGBTQ and AAPI representation in government, but of transformative leadership that reflects the full, intersectional beauty of America's diversity.

"I am hopeful that I can play a role in ensuring that Victory, and our Victory Network, meets this moment," he says. "We will show the best of what our LGBTQ+ community has to offer with inspirational candidates who are transformative statespersons that represent their communities with a deep sense of pride."

At a time when so much is uncertain, one thing is clear. Evan Low is ready to lead, and he's undeniably bringing the full weight of his story, identity, and experience with him.

➞ For more info, visit victoryfund.org.



Evan Low and Mayor Annise Parker at the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund's Houston Champagne Brunch at the Hyatt Regency Downtown on March 30, 2025. The day before, Parker hosted a private reception at her home to introduce Low as the new president & CEO of the Victory Fund.



**"I'VE ALWAYS
BELIEVED THAT
JOY IS AN ACT
OF RESISTANCE,
SO MOST OF THE
EVENTS I CURATE
CENTER AROUND
QUEER JOY."**

—Bibi Xia

THE SAPPHIC STRATEGIST

Bibi Xia is taking Pearl Bar's events schedule to the next level.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ
photo by ALEX ROSA

What started as a birthday party turned into something much bigger for Bibi Xia. When she was planning her celebration at Pearl Bar, she had no idea it would lead to her becoming the bar's events director.

"It's like Julie had a sixth sense," Bibi says, referring to Pearl's owner. "I used to organize a lot of charity events back in New York City, but I never imagined I'd be doing it in Houston."

For Bibi, events are never just about having drinks—they're intentional spaces for connection. "Especially in this uncertain political climate, we need to build our community more than ever. I've always believed that joy is an act of resistance, so most of the events I curate center around queer joy," the soon-to-be 40-year-old tells us.

That spirit shows in the details of her work at Pearl: name tags, icebreakers, and events that often benefit local nonprofits and queer sports teams. A signature event is The Sapphic Dating Show—a playful spin on the classic

television format where a contestant questions three potential dates before choosing one. "We're expanding with more game nights and mixers that speak to different parts of our community," Bibi says.

Upcoming additions include The Sapphic Newlywed Game for couples and Puma, a mixer for sapphic women over 30. Regular events like bachata dance classes and book swaps continue to foster connection in niche interest groups within the community. "I'm always listening," Bibi says. "Seeing strangers become friends—or more—is what brings me the greatest joy at my events."

Pearl Bar recently launched Side Peace as a dedicated women's sports bar, and Bibi is helping bring the queer and women's sports community together. "Our sapphic community loves playing and watching sports. We're in the right place at the right time to create something authentic and lasting." She and owner Julie Mabry plan to roll out a full calendar of watch parties, team socials, fundraisers, and special appearances.

Representation is at the heart of Bibi's mission. "I didn't come out until my mid-30s. I hadn't even kissed a girl before then, but deep down I knew," she shares. TV fandoms like Wynonna Earp gave Bibi a soft landing into the LGBTQ world, while films like *The Half of It* offered the kind of representation she had longed for. "Seeing an Asian American girl navigate her identity within an immigrant family changed everything for me," she says.

Now, Bibi proudly shows up for her community every day—visibly claiming her place without the pressure to be anything other than her authentic self. "I want Asian and later-in-life sapphic women to feel seen," she says. "It's hard to be a minority in an already marginalized community. I'll keep creating space for others to feel brave, valid, and welcome exactly as they are." Her presence, and the spaces she curates, quietly remind others: you belong here, too.

 Keep up with Bibi Xia
on Instagram @sweetsapphicdreams.



Bibi Xia with Texas State Senator Molly Cook at a Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus event at Pearl Bar. Cook made history last year as Texas' first out LGBTQ state senator.



The Curve Foundation's Collect and Connect event featured magazine donations for UH's LGBTQ archive.

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HOUSTON'S 'TOP CHEF' CONTENDER

Henry Lu brings bold flavors and queer pride to Jun, his new Heights restaurant.

by JOHN NECHMAN

photos by LUKE CHANG, JIÀ MEDIA and COURTESY BRAVO TOP CHEF



To dine at Jun in the Heights is to embark on a culinary journey that could only take place in Houston. The flavors of the Americas combine effortlessly with those of Asia, with a significant kick of Houston blended in. One of the most acclaimed restaurants in town since its opening, Jun is the brainchild of Houston native and Top Chef star and James Beard Foundation Semi-Finalist Evelyn Garcia and her out and proud partner, Henry Lu, a current contestant on Top Chef Canada.

Lu's roots run from his parents' native Fuzhou in China to the rough and immigrant-rich streets of East Bronx, where he grew up surrounded by storefronts selling Puerto Rican mofongo, soul food, and hardcore Italian, with the rhythms of these disparate parts of the planet blending to provide the neighborhood's soundtrack.

"All of this was normal food for me," says Lu. "I still view food as something that transcends and has no boundaries. I love to cook and pull inspiration from all across the board, highlighting and blurring the lines that divide us."

Lu grew up helping in his family's Chinese restaurants, partaking in just about every facet of the operations, including cooking, which particularly fascinated him. This would lead him to the French Culinary Institute and stints at some of the most innovative kitchens of New York City, where he met Evelyn Garcia, who was also gaining experience in the Big Apple. Garcia would move on to a burgeoning career in Houston, and in 2020, she persuaded Lu to make the move south, where their dreams for Jun became reality.

Lu has warmed quickly to his new life in Texas. "Houston has accepted me with open arms and become a second home to me," he says. "I couldn't have asked for a better welcoming." He is thrilled with the success of Jun, which the *Houston Chronicle's* esteemed critic Alison Cook calls "arguably the most exciting new restaurant in Houston."

"Jun is a novel for me, Evelyn and everyone

involved," says Lu. "Every day we are open is a new chapter added to the novel. We are forever changing and growing. The food, drinks, and wine are a direct expression of us."

That expression takes the form of dishes whose simple names on the menu belie breathtaking and tasty complexities. "Oysters" arrive drenched in beef tallow with green chili oil. A bowl featuring an aguachile arrives like a Kandinsky painting, with raw Gulf shrimp interspersed with cubes of taro and avocado with circular splotches of shrimp oil surrounding a crown of round radish orbs.

Don't be surprised to see heaving plates of "Fried Chicken" arriving at every table. But this isn't your typical fried chicken. Lu and Garcia employ a batter made with pungent shrimp paste, Thai chilis, and ginger, and side the bird with a sauce reminiscent of sorghum. The flavors are riveting, and this plate has already rocketed to the top of the list of iconic Houston dishes.

Dining at Jun is intimate without ever feeling stuffy. Service is attentive and never intrusive, with every staff member caring for

every table and both chefs making the rounds to ensure that everyone is enjoying their meal. "We give everyone the freedom to express themselves here," Lu says. "Jun will always be a home for everyone."

Lu and Garcia have gone on to open a daytime café at Jun called Third Place, where they hope to welcome artists, musicians, and chefs to share their talents. The duo also run KIN, which operates catering and pop-up events, as well as offering a curated line of products and ready-to-eat wholesale foods.

One of the most exciting developments in Lu's life has been being a chef contestant on Peacock's Top Chef Canada. Because the show is still ongoing on television, he's not able to share how far he made it or if he was the winner of the \$250,000 prize, but he described the experience as "one of the hardest things I've ever done. There's so much that goes into it you don't get to see on TV. But I left having met so many talented people and chefs I can call friends now. And I can't wait to bring them here to Houston for monthly Wine & Dine series dinners."



Chef Henry Lu seen in action on *Top Chef: Canada* Episode 2205, "Line Cook for a Day," proving once again that Houston chefs belong on the global stage.



Top Chef contestants Henry Lu and Zubair Mohajir team up during the "Top Chef Trivia" challenge (Episode 2204).



Top Chef Canada Season 22 kicks off with (l-r) Kat Turner, Henry Lu, Corwin Hemming, and guest judge Tom Colicchio in Episode 2201, "Across Canada, We Go!"

In his free time, Lu enjoys artistry, working out, and spoiling his beloved companion Miles, an 11-year-old Shiba Inu, collie, sheltie mix. He describes his favorite go-to meals as "trashy fast food," but Burger Bodega, Koffeteria, Street to Kitchen, Squable (for brunch), and Ema also are on his regular rotation. Though he describes himself as "single AF," he adds that "my life is fueled with so much passion that I'm super happy!"

Lu relishes his role as an out and proud gay man of Asian descent. From being president of his college's LGBTQ+ organization in New York, to his active involvement with area organizations such as Montrose Grace Place and the Trevor Project, he has come to the realization that "one of the best ways I can 'fight the good fight' is to live my best life."

And from his humble beginnings in the Bronx, Lu is now proudly living his best life in the Bayou City.

➔ For more info, visit junbykin.com.



**"ALL OF THIS WAS
NORMAL FOOD FOR
ME. I STILL VIEW FOOD
AS SOMETHING THAT
TRANSCENDS AND HAS
NO BOUNDARIES."**

—Chef Henry Lu, Jun



MONTROSE CENTER EMPOWERING OUR FUTURE GALA APRIL 26, 2025

The Montrose Center hosted its 2025 Empowering Our Future Gala on April 26 at The Ballroom at Bayou Place, where guests were treated to a night of circus-themed fun and community spirit. With the theme *Under the Big Top*, the venue came alive with vibrant décor, lively performances, and guests dressed in playful, circus-inspired attire. Hundreds attended the high-energy event, emceed by Ringmaster Dessie Love-Blake. Entertainment was front and center, with show-stopping performances by Artemis Hunter, aerialist Eddie Divas, Keymyiah Dupree, and singers Amy Armstrong and Eric Michael Krop. The festive atmosphere was matched by heartfelt moments, as youth participant Rose Daphne joined Montrose Center CEO Avery Belyeu, board member Nancy Sims, and Charles Caliva and Kim Gustavsson of Concierge Travel to speak about the organization's life-changing impact on her.



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The TALK of the TOWN

Media veterans **Ernie Manouse** and **Frank Billingsley** reunite to bring smart conversation to their afternoon show.

by **DAVID CLARKE**
photos by **VICTOR CONTRERAS**

Vibrant and trusted Houston media personalities Ernie Manouse and Frank Billingsley, along with Celeste Diaz Schurman, are serving up smart conversations, heartfelt storytelling, and occasional dad jokes every weekday on Houston Public Media. *Hello, Houston!* is their new show that blends the affable gravitas of the two beloved media veterans with the bustling energy of Houston. Manouse and Billingsley consider the show to be more than just a gig. It's a return to form, a reinvention, and a love letter to the city that they've both helped shape.

A staple format for any public-media outlet, *Hello, Houston!* didn't emerge from thin air. Like a phoenix, this program was born from the ashes of *Town Square*, the community-driven show that held space for the important conversations happening during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"When we were far enough away from COVID, Houston Public Media wanted to come back with something," Manouse explains. "They wanted to still do what we were doing, but build a bigger imprint using all this technology."

That vision also called for multiple personable hosts who had strong ties to the Houston community. "They wanted someone like a Frank Billingsley," Manouse says with a smile. As fate would have it, Billingsley happened to be itching for a new project after retiring from KPRC-TV in July 2024. →



Hello, Houston! hosts Ernie Manouse (l) and Frank Billingsley



**"WE'RE NOT HERE
TO TELL YOU WHAT
TO THINK. WE'RE HERE
TO HELP YOU LEARN
TO THINK."**

— Ernie Manouse

Billingsley's so-called "VIP retirement"—made up of "vodka, internet, and pickleball," he jokes—lasted all of two months before he texted Manouse out of the blue. "He was already tired of retirement," Manouse laughs. "I'm like, 'Wait a minute, we've got something you would be perfect for.'"

For Billingsley, the timing and fit were perfect. "I never got tired of doing weather and being a communicator," he says. "I just didn't really like the schedule anymore." The new show offers a 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. window and the luxury of doing in-depth, issues-based journalism without the hurdles of commercial TV.

"What we're doing is, I think, really good, solid journalism," Billingsley says. "We've never once been coached. We've never once been told, 'You can or cannot talk about this or that.' We're left totally up to our thoughts and whims."

Launched in March, *Hello, Houston!* is broadcast on News 88.7 FM and also available for streaming on YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts, among others. The multi-platform show is built for how contemporary audiences consume media, which includes a robust presence on Instagram. Additionally, the podcast is available in both full-length and 40-minute commuter-cut versions.

"You don't have to find us. We'll find you," Manouse says. "We're everywhere you are. And that seems to be the future of media."

The three hosts and their small but mighty behind-the-scenes staff embody their mission of serving the audience. "Unlike in commercial television where you're serving the ads, we're serving the audience," Manouse explains. "We're not looking at audience size. We're looking at the quality of the message."

"We can do what we want, when we want, and how we want," Billingsley agrees. "As long as the people that watch and listen to us are happy, then we keep doing it. It's a different formula."

The chemistry among the trio of hosts is palpable, both on the air and off. Though Billingsley and Manouse may "check some similar boxes," as Manouse puts it, their life experiences are distinct. Add in Celeste, a first-generation American and millennial mom of two with deep ties to the community, and it's easy to understand how *Hello, Houston!* manages to have layered, poignant conversations daily.

"It's like *Only Murders in the Building*—two old white guys and a cute Latin chick," Billingsley jokes. "Two old white gay guys, to be certain."

But for Houston Public Media and this show specifically, it is not just about representation. It's truly about perspective. "We bring different knowledge to the subjects, different ways of viewing it," Billingsley notes. "Sometimes we disagree. Sometimes we completely agree. Sometimes we're in the middle."

Though they're quick with quips, neither

Manouse nor Billingsley are afraid of going deep. Recent shows have tackled topics such as school vouchers, anti-trans legislation, and other political minefields Texas residents must traverse daily.

"I lost my best friend—two of my best friends—to AIDS," Billingsley shares. "That's a different perspective that I bring to the whole conversation. Only so many of us have that history. A lot of us didn't survive it."

Born in 1960, Billingsley has witnessed historic progress, including his own marriage to his partner, Kevin, in 2012. Still, he fears the pendulum may be swinging back. "We've already lost rights for transgender people. Those are already being challenged," he reflects. "And certainly, the whole *Roe v. Wade* was demolished in front of our eyes."

Despite its sometimes timely and sobering moments, *Hello, Houston!* is not a gloom-and-doom show. It offers a space where complex issues meet human stories, and where these media veterans can still find joy and surprise.

"We're not here to tell you what to think," Manouse emphasizes. "We're here to help you learn to think."

"If people know where you're coming from, then I think they'll connect with you," Billingsley adds. "They want to hear from us because they feel like they know us."

Moreover, their multifaceted presence on the airwaves offers visibility that's both intentional and organic. "We're not caring about just one or two topics," Manouse says. "We care about politics. We care about schools. We care about the arts. We care about business and medicine. We care about it all."

What makes *Hello, Houston!* special isn't just the innovative approach to distribution on multiple platforms. It's also the camaraderie of the people behind the mic and the team of producers that support the program.

"There's probably more laughter in our offices than anything else," Manouse admits. "More than any work that gets done."

Billingsley, always quick with a pun, chimes in: "I'm too old to have Grindr, so I downloaded Reminder: 'Eat. Take pills.'"

For longtime fans of Manouse and Billingsley and first-time listeners alike, *Hello, Houston!* offers a bit of everything: heart, humor, and the unmistakable warmth of familiar voices that have earned Houston's trust.

 *Hello Houston is your live weekday connection to the heart of the Bayou City. It airs Monday through Friday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Houston Public Media News 88.7.*



COURTESY

Hello, Houston! hosts Frank Billingsley, Celeste Diaz Schurman, and Ernie Manouse broadcasting live from the studios of Houston Public Media, News 88.7.



Artists Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin

Echoes of Houston's Queer Uprising

Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin honor the 1978 Town Meeting I with a powerful art exhibition and symposium.

by BRANDON WOLF | photo by JANICE RUBIN



The most iconic event in the history of Houston's LGBTQ community is the 1978 Town Meeting I, which was held in the Astro Arena on June 25, 1978. Those who

attended were astounded to see over 4,000 members of the community show up for a day of political organizing.

In addition to inspiring the attendees, the meeting produced a list of community issues and priorities. As a result, such organizations as the Montrose Counseling Center (now the

Montrose Center) and the Montrose Clinic (now Legacy Community Health) were formed.

An Anniversary Call to Action

In recognition of the upcoming 50th anniversary in 2028, gay artists Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin have begun a three-year project to showcase highlights from Town Meeting I. The men, who are married and raising a son, have already made their mark with impressive exhibitions that honor LGBTQ history in other states and in Houston.

From May 16 through July 11, Vaughan

and Margolin will be presenting an exhibition of artwork inspired by Town Meeting I at Art League Houston. The exhibition includes a monumental 88-foot-long "wind drawing" based on archival images from the seminal Astro Arena meeting. A wind drawing is created by stenciling unfixed charcoal powder on paper and blowing it away, leaving a ghost image that is then sprayed with fixates. The resulting images highlight the ephemerality, beauty, and loss of queer histories.

Also on display will be a series of custom conference tables created out of the bar tops

from Mary's, Houston's iconic gay bar that closed down in 2009 after serving as a center of Houston's gay community for decades.

On June 7 and 8, the two artists have organized a symposium to bring together the art world and queer organizations. One of the panel discussions will feature experts remembering the contemporaneous movements that made Houston a hotbed of political activism in the late 1970s. Other panels will include community elders, scholars of queer visual culture, activists, and community stakeholders.

The symposium will also include community listening sessions and visual-art activities, including a subversive meme workshop and a choreographic "body scan." The two are commissioning a group of queer artists to create manifestos for a queer future, as well as four queer poets who will document the whole symposium.

The poetry, manifestos, and other written outcomes will be compiled into a free chapbook given to all participants and various regional archives.

Among the presenters will be activists Larry Bagneris, Phyllis Frye, Deborah Bell, Harrison Guy, Phillip Pyle II, Roberto Tejada, Andy Campbell, and Dr. Rachel Afi Quinn.

Vaughan and Margolin hope the exhibition and symposium will inspire other cross-community collaborative exhibitions that honor the legacy of Town Meeting I.

The symposium will be free and open to the

public. Online registration will be required, beginning in early May.

The Rendezvous Center for Art

Vaughan and Margolin have recently launched a nonprofit, Rendezvous Center for Art, to support a wide range of interdisciplinary queer art. The first Rendezvous-supported project will be their Town Meeting I symposium.

Thanks to the generous sponsors of the Town Meeting I tribute, the two say they are very close to fully funding the ambitious exhibition and gathering, which involves paying artist fees to nearly 30 presenters, poet documentarians and technical crew, as well as the cost of flying presenters to Houston and hosting them, publishing a run of 500 chapbooks, and ensuring that the public events are completely free.

But donations are still needed to raise the \$10,000 needed to get the project over the finish line. The funding will cover both the 2025 events and the followup gatherings to continue the project each year until the 2028 anniversary of Town Meeting I.

There are some wonderful perks for those who donate, including laser-cut stencils in walnut plywood depicting the microphones at Town Meeting I. The stencils can be used to create images on a variety of materials such as cloth tote bags.

The men chose the name "Rendezvous" in honor of the first installment of their 50 States

Project, which highlighted Wyoming. That installment dealt with an early 19th-century Scottish lord-turned-fur-trader who, along with his same-sex partner, led a group of 100 same-sex-attracted men to a remote lake in what is now Wyoming for a six-week drunken bacchanal nicknamed "Trappers' Rendezvous." They also think it sounds like the name of a gay bar. "But mostly, at its core, Rendezvous speaks to coming together, to gathering, to community, to a commitment to keep showing up and sharing space," they explain.

Looking at the current political environment, the two are resolute: "We don't need to tell you that we're in precarious times. We live in a constant state of threat. The progress we've made over decades is slowly being clawed back. That fight will be won in legislatures, in voting booths, and in the street. In order to sustain that fight, we also need to fortify our humanity, our spirits, and our communities. Art has a unique capacity in that mission, and it is our deepest hope that Rendezvous can be part of making that possible."

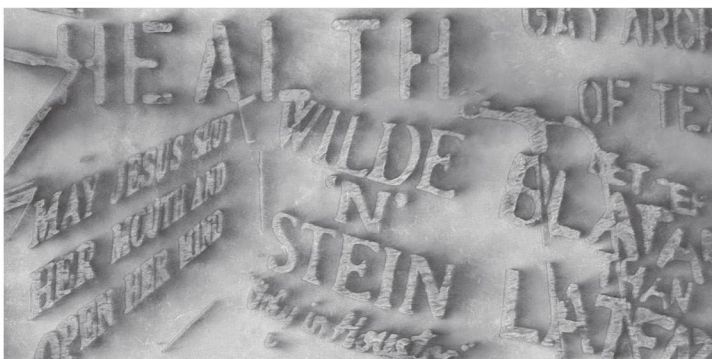
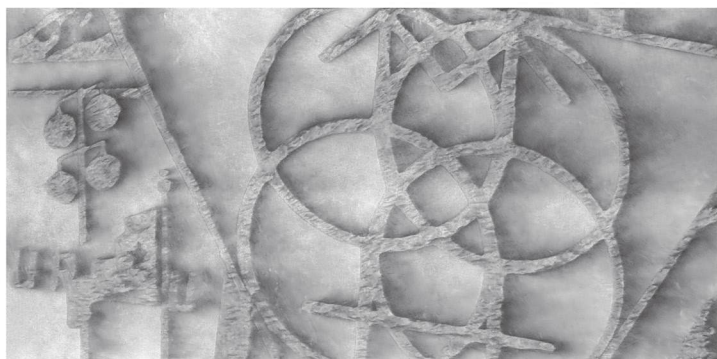
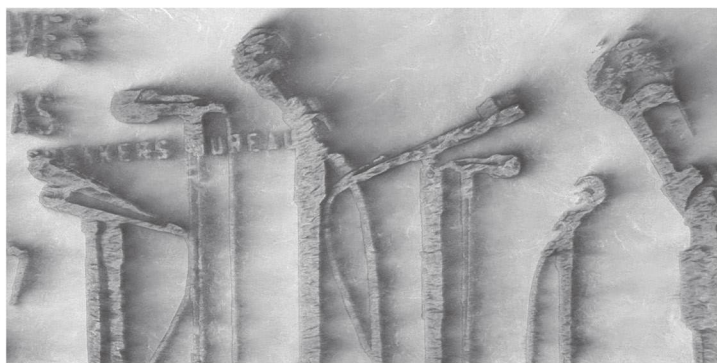
WHAT: Town Meeting 1978–2028

WHEN: May 16–July 11, 2025

WHERE: Art League Houston

INFO: artleaguehouston.org and nickandjakestudio.com/home.html

 Registration is available at rendezvouscenterforart.org/home.html



The Town Meeting 1978–2028 symposium will be a multi-year initiative leading up to the 50th anniversary of Houston's historic 1978 LGBTQ Town Meeting I at the Astro Arena.

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Houston Ballet soloist Danbi Kim as Princess Raymonda with Chun Wai Chan as Jean, rehearsing Stanton Welch's *Raymonda*.

ALANA CAMPBELL (2025), COURTESY OF HOUSTON BALLET

A Reimagined *Raymonda*

Stanton Welch's production premieres this month at Houston Ballet.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ

Houston Ballet artistic director Stanton Welch tackles one of the most beloved stories with the world premiere this month of Welch's adaptation of *Raymonda*. The full-length ballet is set to music by Alexander Glazunov.

Inspired by Marius Petipa's original 1898 choreography and other variations, *Raymonda* follows the titular character as she and her sisters navigate the complicated world of young love in the midst of a treacherous royal court.

Realizing that previous productions have been marked by technical difficulties, Welch adapted the story for modern audiences, pairing choreographic brilliance with the characters' emotional depth.

"What I tried to make in this version,"

explains Welch, "was a story about sisters and the bond between them. Kind of like a Jane Austen novel or *Little Women*, *Raymonda* is a story about several sisters who are going through similar things, but with different temperaments. That really appealed to me. We have a really strong set of soloist women who are all very close to each other in real life, but also very individual."

Mounting a full-length ballet usually takes three years or more of preparation. For *Raymonda*, Welch has been actively working on it for only two years.

Welch's parents, Marilyn Jones and Garth Welch, two of Australia's most celebrated dancers of the 1960s and '70s, performed it. Welch himself also danced excerpts as a young dancer. Variations are performed frequently

in ballet competitions, which Welch attends regularly.

"Luckily, with *Raymonda*, it's been a part of my music history since I was born," he adds, noting that he's been working on his adaptation with Houston Ballet dancers for more than a year. "It felt like I was returning to something that I knew very well. It's really beautiful music."

"In storytelling work," he explains, "I start really with just the story. We begin with just acting it out and not doing any steps. I say, 'You walk over here and you have a conversation with the queen. This is how you feel.' They begin to move into mime and act it out. That also inspires steps for me. I'll say, 'That looks great when the queen is sad and has her head down.' That becomes a movement for me."

"I'm a very prepared choreographer. I come in with a script and often some level of steps. You want the dancer to finish that step and naturally cascade into another step. That allows me to say, 'Well, from that step we can do this.' It becomes like a tennis match. I give them a puzzle, and they tumble out of it, and that becomes the next movement."

"Unique to *Raymonda*," Welch continues, "was bringing in Petipa's solos, which are traditional. Boy, they're hard! They're very hard. I think the dancers relish them and look fantastic in them. But they are things that you really have to work on. These women have been working on these solos for nearly a year now. →

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"WHAT I TRIED TO MAKE IN THIS VERSION WAS A STORY ABOUT SISTERS—THE BOND BETWEEN THEM. KIND OF LIKE A JANE AUSTEN NOVEL OR *LITTLE WOMEN*."

— Stanton Welch



JULIE SOEFER

"I don't think people realize how much time goes into this. All those hops on pointe, that's not something you can assign to someone on Monday and then they do it on Wednesday. That's something you have to prepare for and strengthen for. All of those solos have been in the works since before we finished last season."

Costume and set designer Roberta Guidi di Bagno joins Welch for *Raymonda*.

"I had always imagined Roberta as the designer for *Raymonda*," says Welch. "Roberta is an icon, really. She's wonderful to work with."

Their creative process begins with Welch writing a script and descriptions of the characters, including how much dancing they do scene by scene.

"Everything after that is her," Welch explains.

Welch gave Guidi di Bagno free rein with the costumes for *Raymonda*. "She's so glamorous, and she loves sparkly clothes. I'm always having to say 'No sparkles, no sparkles. It's ballet, no sparkles!' Here, I could say, 'Roberta, do everything that you want. Go crazy!'"

For *Raymonda*'s scenery, Guidi di Bagno created an entire palace.

"The nice thing about this ballet for her is that it all happens in a palace. We go from one ballroom to another. It's all opulent, it's all breathtaking," says Welch.

"And what's so fascinating about her as a designer is that most of what you see is actually a place. It's not just her imagination. She finds real places. She takes a photo of a window or the front of a building she likes and pairs it with a door from her family home. Every place on stage is based on real palaces and cathedrals. That's amazing."

Harper Watters is among those performing in *Raymonda*. A longtime *OutSmart* reader favorite who was recently elevated to the position of Houston Ballet principal dancer, Watters is also an Instagram star with more than 263,000 followers.

A product of the Houston Ballet Academy, Watters has spent his entire professional career with the company. "I think it really shows the strength of our company and school that we have several principals who have come to the company from the school," says Welch. "Not many companies have that, especially in America. I'm very proud of that."

"Every time I see Harper, there's an improvement. He has continuously come in and reformed, remade himself. I think that says a lot. I've choreographed on him a lot, and I enjoy it very much."



ALANA CAMPBELL

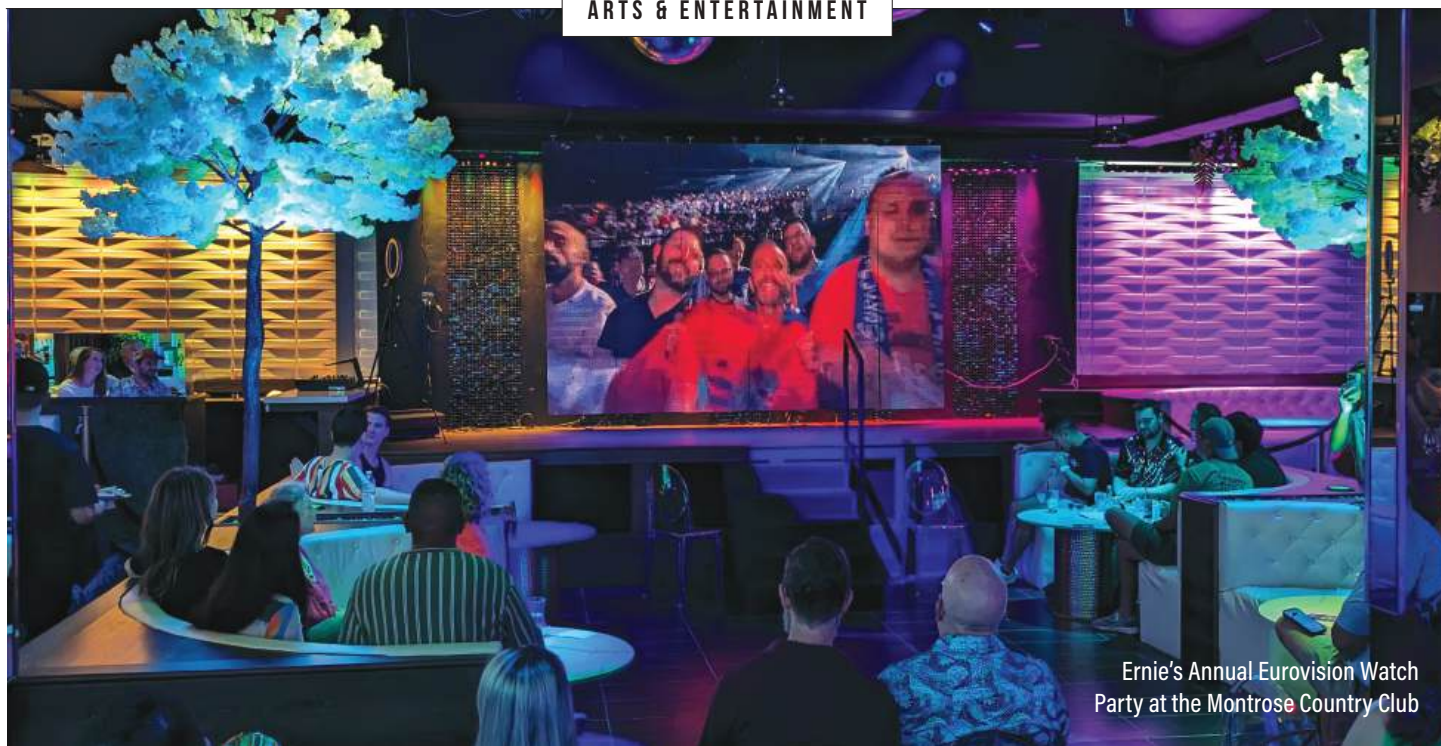
Stanton Welch leads a rehearsal with Chun Wai Chan (l) and Danbi Kim.

WHAT: Stanton Welch's *Raymonda*

WHEN: May 29–June 8, 2025

WHERE: Wortham Theater Center,
501 Texas Ave.

INFO: houstonballet.org



Ernie's Annual Eurovision Watch Party at the Montrose Country Club



I'm obsessed with the Eurovision Song Contest—the dazzling annual spectacle that combines music, culture, and flamboyant performances and is beloved

by queer audiences worldwide. This year, the 69th edition will be held in Basel, Switzerland, and I'm planning my local annual grand finale watch party at the Montrose Country Club on Saturday, May 17.

Now, are you ready for your Euro-Primer? Let's go!

The Eurovision Song Contest began in 1956 as a post-World War II experiment to encourage unity through the relatively new medium of television—a live, nation-spanning broadcast where each participating country submits an original song that is performed live before juries and international viewers. Points are awarded by tele-vote and professional juries. What began with just seven nations has grown to 37 this year, stretching beyond Europe to include Israel and Australia. That makes Eurovision the world's longest-running annual international television music competition, with a global audience larger than the one that watches the Super Bowl!

Many LGBTQ fans revel in Eurovision's campy spectacles, boundary-pushing visuals, and unabashed celebration of self-expression. From out transgender woman Dana International winning the contest with her song DIVA in 1998 to Madonna's surprise interval performance in 2019, the contest has offered iconic queer moments that resonate far beyond the stage.

Over the years, Eurovision has launched the careers of several international stars. ABBA won in 1974 with "Waterloo," and Celine

Eurovision Fever Hits Houston

Queer icons, sauna anthems, and a Montrose party to remember.

by ERNIE MANOUSE

Dion took the crown for Switzerland in 1988 with "Ne Partez Pas Sans Moi." The contest is known for its extravagant performances, diverse musical styles and, occasionally, political controversies.

This year, the betting markets have already picked who they think will take the title—by a wide margin. Sweden is currently the favorite to win with the song "Bara Bada Bastu" by the trio KAJ. The song combines comedic appeal with a nostalgic nod to the Swedish language and their saunas. Should Sweden win, it would be their eighth victory, pushing them ahead of Ireland (with whom they currently share first place). Austria's JJ follows closely with the emotive ballad "Wasted Love." But this is Eurovision, and nothing is guaranteed until the final points are awarded. (Just ask last year's Baby Lasagna from Croatia, or 2023's Käärijä from Finland. Both were odds-maker faves who missed the grand prize "by this much.")

So, what's on my Eurovision 2025 Playlist?

Seek out these songs on YouTube and enjoy. Remember, the videos and live presentation really matter—this isn't *Eurolisten*, it is *Eurovision*!

Australia

Go-Jo, "Milkshake Man." I mean, with lyrics like "I can tell you want a taste of the milkshake man," everyone will line up for one of his shakes.

Estonia

Tommy Cash, "Espresso Macchiato." Every Eurovision contest needs an artist who is a lightning rod for controversy, and this year it's Tommy.

Ireland

EMMY, "Laika Party." A Eurodance homage to Russia's famed 1950s astronaut-pup, Laika, whom EMMY hopes is still dancing among the stars.



"Bara Bada Bastu" by the trio KAJ, currently Sweden's odds-on favorite to win the contest



EMMY's "Laika Party"

Malta

Miriana Conte, "Serving." Her song was originally named KANT (the Maltese word for singing), but since that sounded just like *that* English word, it was changed. But the crowd still yells "kant" during the silent part of the song where that word once lived.

Netherlands

Claude, "C'est La Vie." A bit of a sleeper which might perform very well in the live show, it's a respite from a lot of overproduced pop bangers.

Spain

Melody, "Esa Diva." As of this writing, she may

only be in the odds for 24th place, but popularity is growing for this diva!

United Kingdom

Remember Monday, "What the Hell Just Happened?" UK used to be king, but as of late, they have hovered at the bottom of the heap. Bonnie Tyler couldn't win it for them, Andrew Lloyd Webber couldn't do it, and even Engelbert Humperdinck came in 25th out of 26 songs. Only Sam Ryder broke the British curse by coming in second in 2022, so don't expect much from this song on the scoreboard. Just enjoy the performance.

To celebrate this global event, the Montrose Country Club is hosting my annual Eurovision Watch Party on Saturday, May 17, starting at 1:00 p.m. Whether you're a longtime fan or a curious newcomer, this is the perfect opportunity to experience Eurovision's unique blend of music and spectacle in a lively, inclusive atmosphere. Admission is free—just bring sass, laughs, and your loudest cheer.

If you can't make my party, you can still catch all the action. Eurovision will be broadcast live on Peacock and streamed on Eurovision's official YouTube channel. Even if you've never heard of Eurovision, prepare to fall in love with the camp couture, crazy dance steps, tear-jerking anthems, and cross-border camaraderie.

So mark your calendars, gather your friends, and get ready to be part of the Eurovision magic. Whether you're at the Montrose Country Club or watching from home, this is one event you won't want to miss.

WHAT: Ernie's Annual Eurovision Watch Party

WHEN: Saturday, May 17, 1:00 p.m.

WHERE: Montrose Country Club,
202 Tuam Street

INFO: themontrosecountryclub.com

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Move over, Mercury retrograde—Saturn is ready to make her return to the runway!

A new book by writer and astrologer David Odyssey traces Saturn's influence on our lives at every age and analyzes trends throughout culture. Odyssey is celebrating the release of his debut book, *When Saturn Returns: Surviving Your Astrological Coming-of-Age*, which serves as a resource for understanding this “planetary life disruptor’s” influences throughout the span of one’s life. This book is for anyone intrigued by Saturn’s Return, which refers to the time when Saturn returns to the same position in the sky as it was when someone was born—roughly at ages 30, 60, and 90. Whether you’re an astrology nerd, a self-proclaimed skeptic, or novice wanting to understand how the planets inform life’s trajectory, this book will offer new insights about the phenomenon and its elusive influence on our lives.

“I have a friend who is a queer astrologer, and she really opened that world up to me. I found that astrology gave me a deeper way to

A Guide to Saturn’s Return

Astrologer David Odyssey’s new book is a resource for surviving your astrological coming-of-age.

by ZACHARY MCKENZIE | photo by ALBINA SHTUTMAN

understand what was going on in my life,” Odyssey recalls. “I think, for the gay community, astrology became this way to go a little deeper when we were speaking with one another. During the pandemic, I was reading a lot of books about astrology, and it turned into a business before I knew it.”

Working as a college essay tutor in New York City during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lightbulb went off for the Houston

native when videoconferencing became the norm. “I got really interested in Tarot and astrology, and I started pulling cards for myself and my friends. During the pandemic, there were all sorts of digital gatherings happening,” he recalls. Odyssey’s friends would send him Zoom invites in order to pick his brain. “I realized I could do this professionally from my own apartment, and I didn’t need a degree to offer readings. I would just have to make sure that

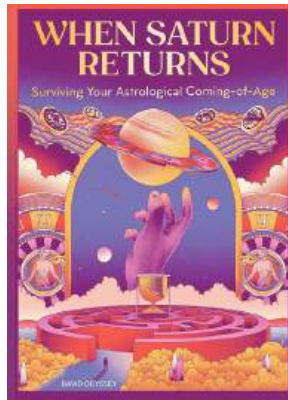
I continued to learn, did it well, and covered all my bases.”

In 2021, Odyssey began contributing to *Nylon* magazine as their astrology columnist, which allowed him the creative freedom to intertwine culture and astrology for a loyal readership. Odyssey’s success at the magazine ultimately caught the eye of publishers at Chronicle Books, who approached him to write a guide to Saturn’s Return.

“Saturn’s Return is a very popular topic,” he says. “It has even inspired music by artists like Kacey Musgraves and Ariana Grande. A lot of people want to know what’s going to happen to themselves, how the cycle of the planets affects them, and how different planets move in their lives.

The book serves as a modern personal guide to your Saturn Return. It talks about what this looks like for the culture as Saturn moves from sign to sign. “Where was Saturn during the AIDS crisis? When Stevie Nicks had her debut? When *Dracula* was published? And what does that all mean for the next century?”

Odyssey shares that the “iron planet” is constantly impacting our lives, regardless of your age. By using his knowledge of pop culture (look for references to Sinead O’Connor, Des-



“SATURN ACTS AS THIS SORT OF SYMBOL OR FORCE OF CHANGE, SOBRIETY, AND ADULTHOOD.”

— David Odyssey

tiny’s Child, and more), Odyssey’s book is not only approachable and educational, but also wildly fun to read. “If I can use an example of what Donna Summer went through when she was 29 to tell you what you might experience when *you* are 29, that is more illustrative than simply saying, ‘Think good thoughts,’” he jokes.

“It’s a way to access the information. I don’t really like to write super esoterically.”

While the book is focused on the Saturn Return phenomenon, it also explains Saturn’s movements as a sort of symbol or force for change, sobriety, and adulthood. “It tracks Saturn throughout your life in every possible configuration,” Odyssey notes. “The book is written to be returned to and referenced. As you return to it, your ability to read your own astrology and know what’s going on for yourself and the stars will be a lot more innate.”

The astrology expert encourages anyone interested in the topic to dive in without hesitation. “The book is for people of all ages. You can buy it for someone later in life, and they’ll be able to figure out how it can be helpful for them within the first few chapters,” Odyssey says. “It is meant to be extremely user-friendly, and you don’t need to know anything about astrology to read it. The book feels like the summation of a lot of sessions and readings that I’ve given, and a lot of what I’ve learned from the queer and trans clients who truly built my business. I feel like it’s a way for me to share how I see the world, and I’m really grateful for that.”

➡ For more info, visit davidodyssey.com

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A LEGACY OF LOVE

Desmond and Justin Bertrand-Pitts have created a life rooted in family and community.

by **DAVID CLARKE** | wedding photos by **ANGELA LAUREN**



In Houston's Sunnyside neighborhood, Desmond and Justin Bertrand-Pitts have spent nearly 20 years building a life rooted in love, intention, and community. Rewind 18 years and Justin, then living in Tifton, Georgia, was scrolling through BlackGayChat.com, an online forum that predates the now-ubiquitous dating apps. He stumbled across Desmond's profile and was drawn in by his dazzling smile.

"It was definitely Justin who made the first move," Desmond recalls. "He was very persistent. I'd never had anybody want my attention as much as he did."

Justin remembers it vividly, too. "I sent a message, and then I had to wait weeks for a response. It was very slow at first."

But that slow-burn connection did ignite

into something lasting. Their first date took place during a work trip for Justin. They met at a Cheddar's, and the conversation lasted for hours. Now, they celebrate their wedding anniversary and dating anniversary on the same day, November 4—which makes remembering dates a bit easier, they both joke.

"Once he moved here and we started building things together," Desmond reflects, "I thought, okay, so this thing is really real."

"When we started talking about building a life together, all the pieces just fell in place," adds Justin.

That foundation of love culminated in a wedding that was heartfelt, spiritual, and community-centered. Married in 2016, they worked with friend and planner Brian Keith of Brian Keith Productions to bring their vision

to life. "Our wedding might have been one of the first same-gender weddings in Houston," Desmond notes, "especially within our friend circle and the communities that we serve."

Bishop Shon Stewart officiated the ceremony, which incorporated elements deeply personal to the couple. "We included two elements in our wedding: communion, and then art," says Justin. "We had a poetry reader perform spoken word. We included those things that are so close to us."

Honoring their close maternal bonds without reinforcing traditional gender roles, the couple walked into their ceremony with their mothers. "We both have a great relationship with our moms, so we wanted them present," Desmond explains.

For Justin, his favorite moment of their



MARIOLA HUPERT

wedding day was when the formalities were all over. “You don’t get to enjoy everything, but we got to sit back and watch other people interact,” Desmond says. “Being able to see all our friends and family interact with each other was the highlight.”

Vendors who made their day special included florals by Dexter Rogers with coordination by Brian Keith, photography by Angela Lauren and Terran Watkins, and catering (including their cake) by chef David Alcorta, a beloved Houston culinary talent.

Over the past decade, their commitment to one another has blossomed into a desire to grow their family. Coming from large families themselves, the couple always knew they wanted to be parents.

“We have a lot of kids in our lives, god-kids and the youth we work with. But having one at home, having our own child, was something different,” Justin says.

They began the adoption process in 2018, starting with foster care. For nearly two years, they cared for a young girl who was eventually reunited with her birth family. While the outcome was the intended goal of the foster system, the emotional toll was intense.

“That broke us,” Justin admits. “We realized then that foster parenting wasn’t our calling.”

After taking some time to heal, their longing to become parents resurfaced. This time, they entered the process with a new agency,

clearly stating they were only pursuing adoption. “You go through all these weird courses teaching you how to raise a child, even though you’ve taken care of yourself and maybe pets,” Justin jokes. “It’s a really intense process, especially if you don’t like people in your business.”

Eventually, the couple attended an adoption fair with a plan to meet a specific child. “We were there to meet this little boy, but he had a sister who wouldn’t leave us alone,” Justin says. “She ended up taking Desmond to get their nails done, and it just clicked.”

“She chose us,” Desmond adds. “It was very organic.”

That little girl officially became their daughter on National Adoption Day, November 23, 2023, just a few weeks after their wedding anniversary. “Now we have two things to celebrate in November,” Desmond says proudly.

Their advice to LGBTQ individuals interested in adoption is straightforward: be prepared, be patient, and be clear.

“Don’t get emotionally attached too early, if that’s even possible,” Desmond cautions. “Talk to others who’ve adopted and do your research. The process takes time, and waiting can be frustrating.”

“Know what you want going into it, and be firm,” Justin adds. “Agencies will try to sway you, but remember, you get to design your family. Be intentional.”

That spirit of intention carries over into

another major part of their life: their church. The couple co-founded Rise City Community Fellowship, an inclusive, affirming congregation designed to be a safe spiritual space for all.

“Rise is an acronym for ‘Revival that Inspires a generation to Serve God and Empower his people,’” Justin explains. “We wanted a church without all the fluff. Just real worship in a safe space where you can show up as you are.”

While they search for a permanent location, the congregation currently meets at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum in Third Ward. It’s a unique and diverse gathering of Houstonians from all walks of life, united by a shared desire for authentic community and spiritual growth.

“We have couples of all kinds,” Justin says. “And nobody’s checking boxes. You’re just welcome.”

Through love, faith, and a commitment to family, Desmond and Justin Bertrand-Pitts have created not only a beautiful life for themselves, but also a welcoming home for others seeking connection and purpose.

For more info, visit [risecitycommunityfellowship.com](https://www.risecitycommunityfellowship.com) or @MyRiseCityCF on Facebook and Instagram.

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Thousands gathered at Sesquicentennial Park in downtown Houston on Easter Sunday for the 46th annual Bunnies on the Bayou, one of the city's most iconic LGBTQ fundraising celebrations.

Emceed by Silky Nutmeg Ganache, the event featured music from opening DJ Kio Kio and a headlining performance by Tryfe. Attendees enjoyed a vibrant afternoon of entertainment, community connection, and charitable giving under the

Houston skyline.

This year's event benefited 13 local organizations, including Allies in Hope, Avenue 360 Health and Wellness, Lazarus House, M.E.N. Inc, Grace Place, The Montrose Center, The Normal Anomaly Initiative, Open Gate Homeless Ministries, Pride Chorus Houston, PWA Holiday Charities, The T.R.U.T.H. Project, and Thomas Street Patient Services Corporation.

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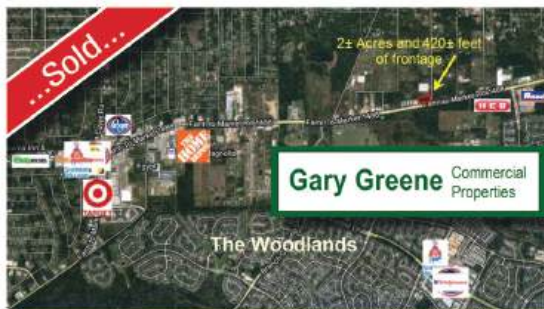


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LGBTQ+ VICTORY FUND HOUSTON CHAMPAGNE BRUNCH 2025 MARCH 30, 2025

Supporters, elected officials, and community leaders gathered at the Hyatt Regency Downtown on March 30 for the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund's annual Houston Champagne Brunch. With the theme "Pride Under Pressure," the event emphasized the fight for LGBTQ rights and the need for representation. This year's brunch also marked a leadership transition, honoring outgoing President and CEO Annise Parker and welcoming her successor, former California Assemblymember Evan Low. Notable guests included U.S. Rep. Julie Johnson (TX-32), Lauren Ashley Simmons, Gina Ortiz Jones (San Antonio mayoral candidate), Fran Watson, Eric Blackwell, Travis Torrence, and Elias Diaz (Eagle Pass City Council candidate). Actor Blake Cooper Griffin hosted, with Persephone serving as the drag queen emcee.



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BAR GUIDE



OutSmart's Bar Guide is now on your phone! Scan here to check out our directory of LGBTQ bars and clubs in and around Houston, including your favorites in Galveston, Huntsville, Spring, and College Station. Whether you're a local or a visitor, we've got you covered with this updated guide to the best LGBTQ-friendly spaces.



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By LILLY RODDY

Cosmic Shifts Bring On Bold Action

Taurus grounds the month as every planet drives our plans forward.

With all the inner planets no longer retrograde, this is the time to set your plans into action. We have had several shifts this year as the outer planets change signs, indicating shifts and changes in culture, which ideas are on the cutting edge, and which changes we need to make. We will be experiencing more of this activity through July.

The planets are clustered in Pisces and Aries. When this happens, we have limited options and we have to contend with

other people's obsessions. This will slowly break up toward the end of the month.

Positive days this month are the 5th, 6th, 17th, 22nd, 24th, 26th, 27th, and the 30th. Days of tension are the 2nd, 12th, and the 18th.

The full moon on the 12th reminds us that how much we value others is how much we value ourselves. The truth is more visible with this full moon. The new moon on the 26th shows us alternative options beyond our current path to happiness. Take the time to explore!



ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

This continues to be a time of direction changes for our life paths, careers, and the places we live. You are getting clearer about your personal boundaries and setting goals that represent you, and not what others expect from you. This can be a time when you are ready to start your own business or take on a leadership role where you are currently working. Relationship plans are also part of this time of revision, as well as finances and investments. You will be paying more attention to your spending! Your day-to-day activity continues to get busier. You may be driving more, having more to say about everything, and keeping your calendar too full. If you have children, they are wanting to take the lead in their own lives.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

This month is your annual cycle of review and setting new dreams for the next year. As the month begins, you are in a period of reflection about the meaning of life and how you can include those insights into your everyday life. This is a very good time for a retreat to reconnect with nature or your spirit, do some meditation, and take time to know what you want. Your career direction is changing, and you are having to make some changes or start something new. If you are older, this can be a time of retirement or cutting back to do something you enjoy. Family dynamics can be topsy-turvy this month, and you may need to step in and take charge. Your temper will be shorter than usual, and this can be a great time to use that energy for exercise, improving your health, and getting some time to clear your head.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

This month you are splitting your time between connection (connecting with friends and having a busier social life) and disconnection (making some personal "alone time"). In business, you are not wasting your

time with organizations that aren't in sync with your goals! You are connecting with groups and organizations that can help you along your path. This can also be a time when friends move away or cut back to make their lives simpler. You are also needing more time to yourself to get away from the noise and expectations of others. In July, Uranus (the planet of reinvention and change) will be entering your sign for the next seven years. You are already feeling this new energy as you seek more freedom and new paths. Enjoy the journey!

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Your career area continues to be very active. One part of you is looking for ways to make your life more meaningful and impactful, while the other part is looking for ways to improve what you do and make it more useful. You may be called to take a leadership role at work or within your community. You just have to make sure that you want the role and the responsibility. This can be a time when you are ready to start something on your own or take your life in the direction of partnership and children. If you are older, you may be cutting back and only working part-time. In the latter half of the month, you are connecting with friends and getting more support from those around you. Watch your spending this month! Your impulsive energy is very strong.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

This is a busy month with Mars traveling through your sign for the next 46 days. This is your time to act, start new projects, and confront the problems in your life. You may not be very patient or sleep well. This is a great time for improving your health and participating in exercise programs. Career activity is very strong as the month begins. You are working to achieve your goals via your career or as a house parent. Relationships can be tense this month, especially if there are unaddressed problems. If you are single, you are more

adventurous and ready to put yourself out there. In the latter part of the month, you are connecting with a larger social network. This can be a very good time for marketing or promoting your services. This continues to be a good time for improving your education, traveling for work or pleasure, and exploring different cultures.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

As the month begins, you are more open to new ideas, travel, and expanding your education to improve your existing skills. Money and finances are a big motivation, as you are looking to ease your financial burdens. This can also be a time of building greater trust in your partnerships. You are looking for more intimacy and the ability to share your own fears with your partner. This can be a time of discovery in your partnership, but you have to be open to that possibility. In the latter part of the month, your career energies are very active. This can be a better time for business, taking a leadership role at work, and looking for areas in which to expand. This is also a good time to emphasize improvement in your health through moderate exercise balanced with a healthy diet.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Relationships continue to be significant in your life. If you are in a partnership, this is a time of renewal. If you are in a difficult partnership, this is a time to resolve the problem. If you are single, this can be a time to put yourself out there. You are working on your boundaries and expectations in all your associations. You are hoping for more emotional intimacy. Money, finances, and debt are significant topics as the month starts. You may be looking at investments, savings, going on a budget, or finding new resources and expanding your client base. The latter half of the month is a better time for social media, travel, expanding your perspective, and sharing your experiences with others. Connecting

with friends and colleagues can be more fruitful this month, as they can offer inspiration and opportunities. You will want to be more playful!

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

Career, long-term security, and home and family are big topics this month. For some, this will be a time of starting something on your own or taking a leadership role in your current situation. If you are older, you may be cutting back or taking a whole new track. There have been an increasing number of shifts in your family over the last couple of months, and those changes are speeding up this month. You may be considering relocation, fixing up the old place, or cutting the cord with your own history. There continue to be changes in the workplace and with your schedule. You are paying more attention to your health and creating a healthier living environment. Partnerships can help by providing an alternative perspective. Reach out to others. You don't have to do this on your own!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

There is a lot of activity going on in your life this month. Part of you is looking to get out and be more social, while the other part is focused on personal and career responsibilities. You are changing and reinventing your daily life. You may be cutting back and setting better boundaries, or even changing your habits. Relationship patterns are changing, as well. You may want a partnership structure that is less rigid and demanding—one that allows for more personal

expression. In the latter part of the month, you are paying more attention to details, your health, and getting your obligations met. This continues to be a good time to turn a hobby into something that generates income. If you have children, they are needing more independence. Your flexibility is important this month.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

Family and emotional stability are key topics this month. There are changes occurring in the family hierarchy. You may be called upon to take a stronger role in the family. This can also be a time of moving or home repairs that keep things unsettled. You are also wanting a place to retreat to get away from the noise and demands. Personal boundaries are very important this month. Your concerns about your financial future are also strong as you look at alternative income sources or relying on skills from your past. This is a good month for financing or refinancing loans. And your work continues to be busy. Make sure you find some "me" time during this rather challenging month.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Relationships, personal boundaries, and speaking your mind are all strong activities for you this month. You are reassessing all your partnerships and the methods you employ in associations. If you are in a difficult partnership, you must find a solution. Your need for more freedom of choice increases. In positive affiliations, this is a time to set a new path and find ways to reinvigorate your relationships. Ultimately, this is

all about you shedding the past and redefining who you are. As the month begins, you are giving attention to your home and family. You are trying to find more safety and stability there, as well as a place where you can drop your guard. This continues to be a good time to improve personal habits and improve the use of your time. You are better at letting others know how you feel! In the latter part of the month, you are looking for some fun and entertainment.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

Finances and resources are the primary topics as the month commences. You may be cutting back, developing a budget, taking on extra work, and reusing old skills. A good plan of action can help create the security you are hoping for. You are paying more attention to your health for the next two months. This is an excellent time to start an exercise or improved-eating program and to visit the doctor for a health checkup. You are also speaking your mind and letting others know how you feel, instead of always being worried about stepping on others' toes. In the latter part of the month, home and family areas are more active. Some of you are thinking about moving or downsizing. The rest of you are wanting more wide-open spaces. This can be a good time for family reunions and healing past family difficulties. There could be some shifts in the family hierarchy in July. Your role in the family can change. Flexibility counts!

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A Nice Piece of Azz

Padma Azz brings the brass, sass, and a touch of class.

By SAM BYRD



At a young age, theater gave Padma Azz a place to escape bullying, and it did not take long for the young entertainer to fall in love with being on a stage. For

a while, she considered moving to Hollywood, but she pivoted after realizing that she liked to eat too much to be a starving artist. Not wanting to give up the stage altogether, and seeing friends who were getting their thespian fix by performing in drag, she decided to trade one stage for another, and her alter ego was born. Hollywood's loss is Houston's gain. Learn more about this rising star here.

Pronouns? She/Her/He/Him

Hometown? Port Arthur, Texas

Drag birthday?

July 29, 2019. Padma's first outing was at an annual event in Beaumont called "Cancer Is a Drag."

Is there a story behind your stage name?

I originally wanted it to be Padmé, like Natalie Portman's character from Star Wars, because I'm a little nerdy like that. Then my partner said, "Do something that's more campy and fun, like Padma Azz! You know, because you're literally padding your ass."

Story behind the outfit you're wearing?

This was my first pageant gown made by my very good friend Christina Ross. I knew I wanted something red because it's my favorite color, and I have always wanted a gown from the showgirl feather legend herself.

Describe your performing persona.

It's constantly evolving, but I like Padma to always be inviting, confident, a little sexy, and aggressive when the performance calls for it.

Any titles or pageants under your belt?

I am Miss Gay Houston America 2024. I was also second runner-up at Miss Gay Texas America last year.



Follow Padma Azz on Instagram and Facebook @Padma Azz.



What's on your bucket list?

The first two that come to mind are winning Miss Gay Texas America, and finishing my doctoral degree in occupational therapy.

Most embarrassing moment onstage?

Once I climbed up on a bar feeling the fantasy and throwing my hair around, but when I jumped down, my wig stayed attached to a hook in the ceiling.

Thoughts about legislation restricting drag performances?

Get out of people's lives and the type of entertainment they enjoy. No one is asking any politician—or individual, for that matter—to come to a show. If you don't like drag shows, stay home because you're killing the vibe for everyone else, sis.

What's your guilty pleasure?

Mexican food, and Ben and Jerry's Cherry Cheesecake ice cream.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I am naturally a very shy person out of drag, but just because I'm quiet doesn't mean I'm a bitch. It just means I haven't warmed up to my environment yet, or had a shot.

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

Be in the moment, and enjoy what you have while you have it.

What do you want the world to know about the LGBTQ community?

Like every other community and individual, we just want love, acceptance, and the ability to be our most authentic selves without fear.

If you could pick one celebrity (living or dead) to perform with you, who would it be, and why?

Dolly Parton, because not only is she a marketing and songwriting genius, she is such a genuine and philanthropic person.

Where do you normally perform?

All around Houston, here and there, but regularly at Stetsons Nightlife, 20 minutes up the road in Humble, on the first Sunday of every month; Mackenzie's Pub in Beaumont on the second, third, and fourth Sundays of the month; Barcode every third Sunday of the month at Out4Brunch, and May 31 at Halo in Bryan/College Station.

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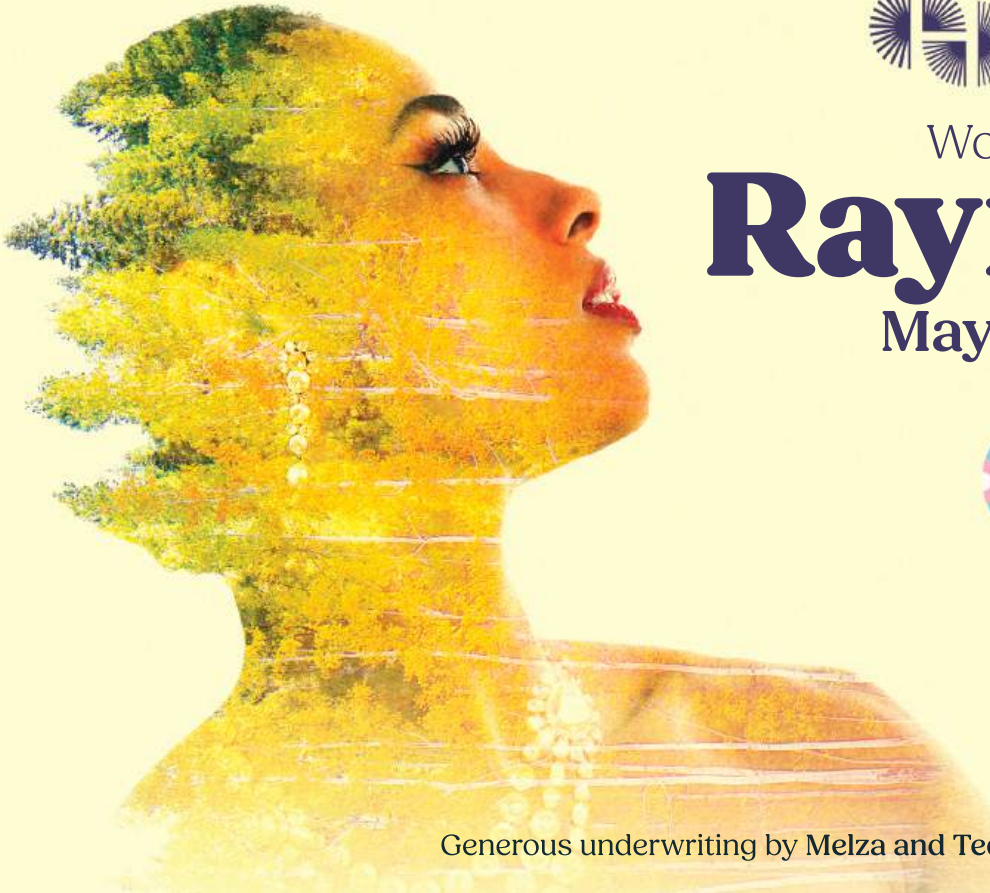
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