

Press Briefs: Ann Courts Republicans, Marvin Seduces Us!



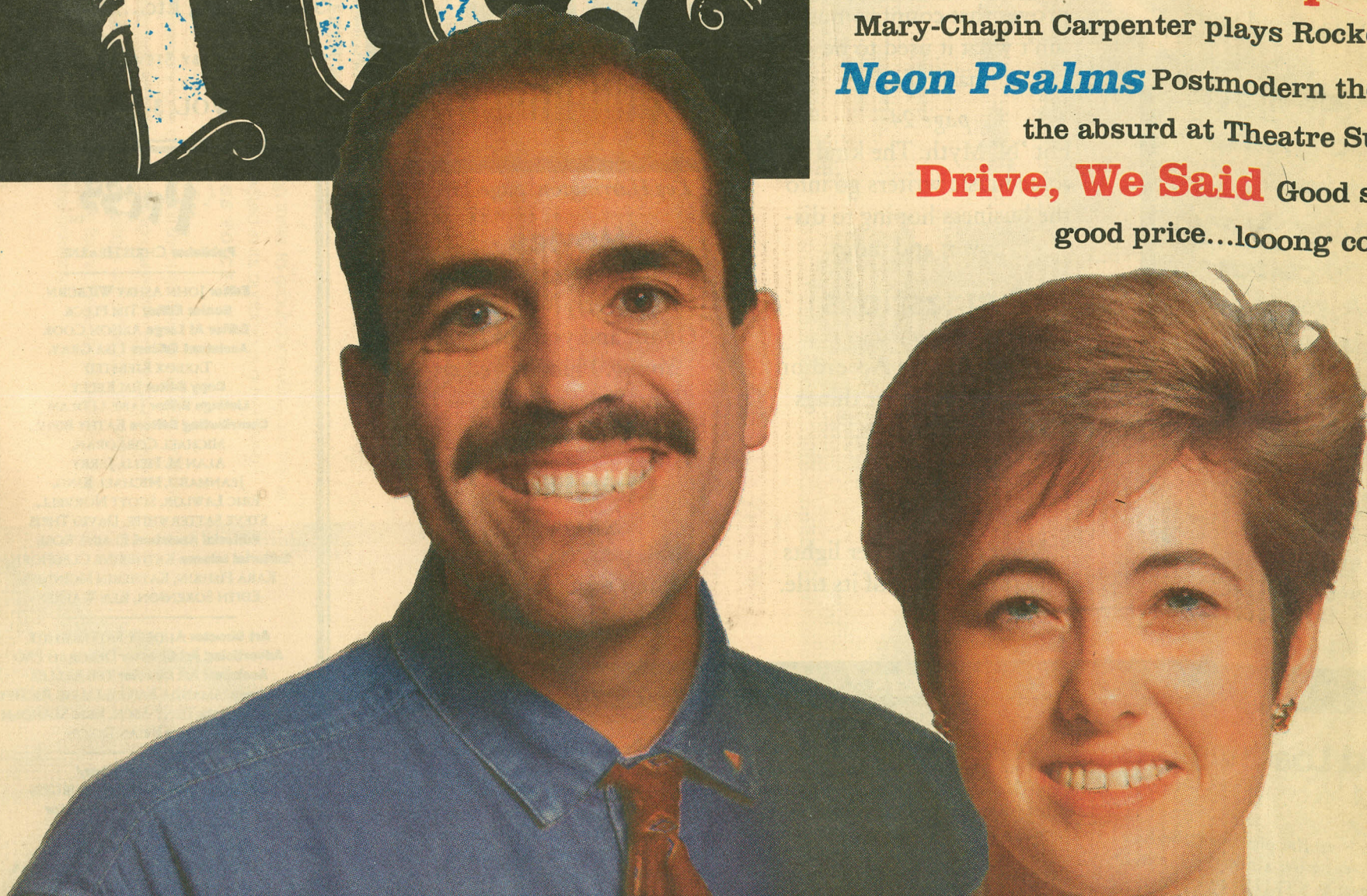
Cryin' Time Theis reviews Julia Roberts' new tear-jerker **Homeless?**

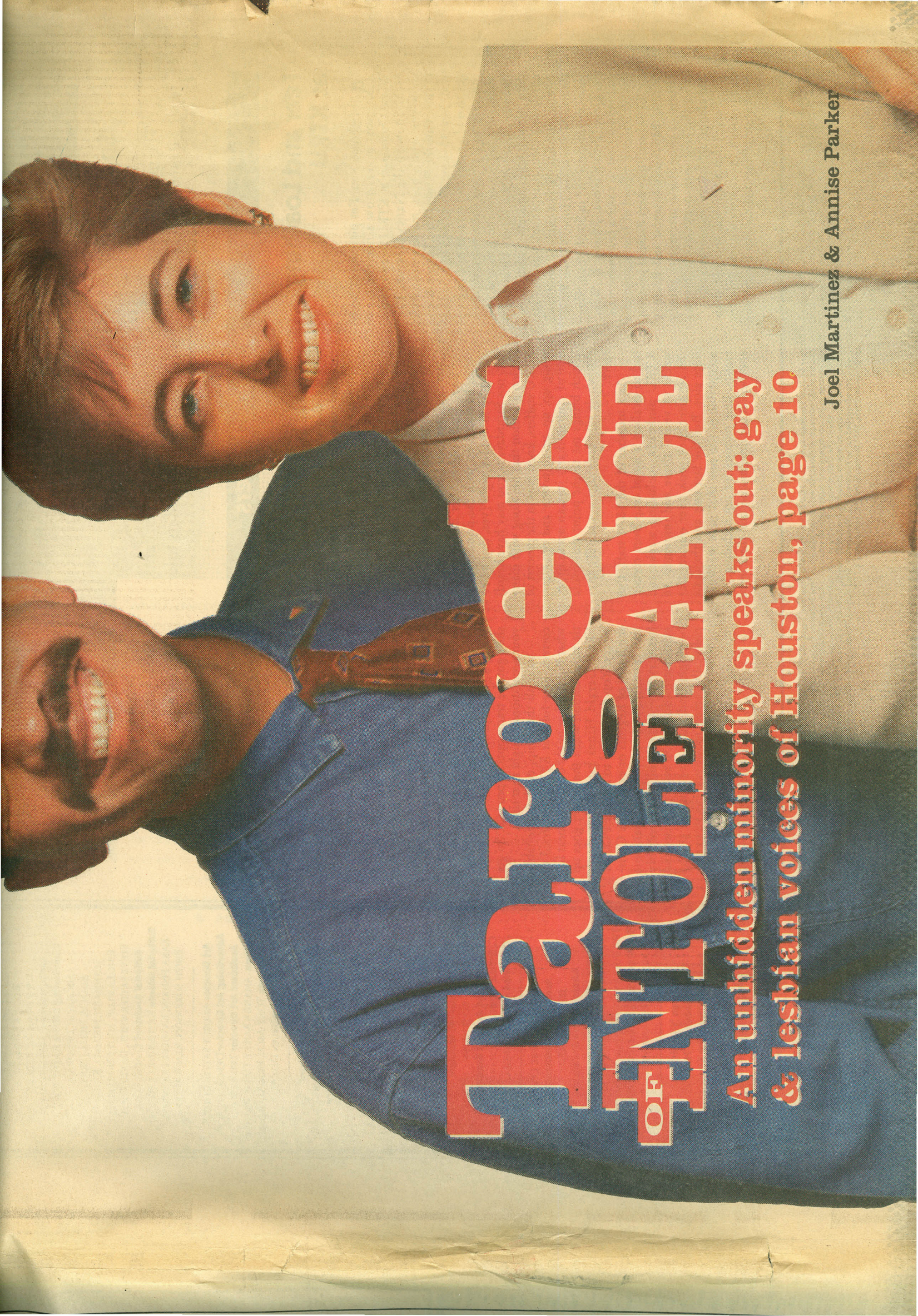
See page 46 **What Pipes!** 18-year-old Caroline Wonderland belts 'em out

Intelligent Introspection

Mary-Chapin Carpenter plays Rockefeller's **Neon Psalms** Postmodern theater of the absurd at Theatre Suburbia

Drive, We Said Good schools, good price...looong commute





Tolerance OF Tattoos ANCE

**An unhidden minority speaks out: gay
& lesbian voices of Houston, page 10**

Joel Martinez & Annise Parker

Living & Loving in

NO TREATMENT NECESSARY

We've learned to
accept who we are

BY L. JOEL MARTINEZ

RECENTLY a friend, in his late forties, confessed to me that he had once had aversion therapy to cure him of his homosexuality. The way he told me was so nonchalant, so matter-of-fact, that the tone and manner of speaking were as shocking as the information itself. "I had aversion therapy, and then a few months later I started dating a nurse..."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "Aversion therapy? With electrical shocks?"

"Electrodes on the arms," he said, "and slides of men on the screen."

It took a few minutes for the image to register fully. It seemed a bit like medieval torture or the Spanish Inquisition — unreal and distant.

Since our conversation I've had time to think about my friend's experience and I've concluded that my generation of gay men — those of us in our thirties — have grown up with a different way of thinking and a different perception of the world. Aside from the fact that aversion therapy in itself has a certain abhorrent quality, the thought that I or any sane gay man would voluntarily subject himself to such a frightful procedure seems unthinkable.



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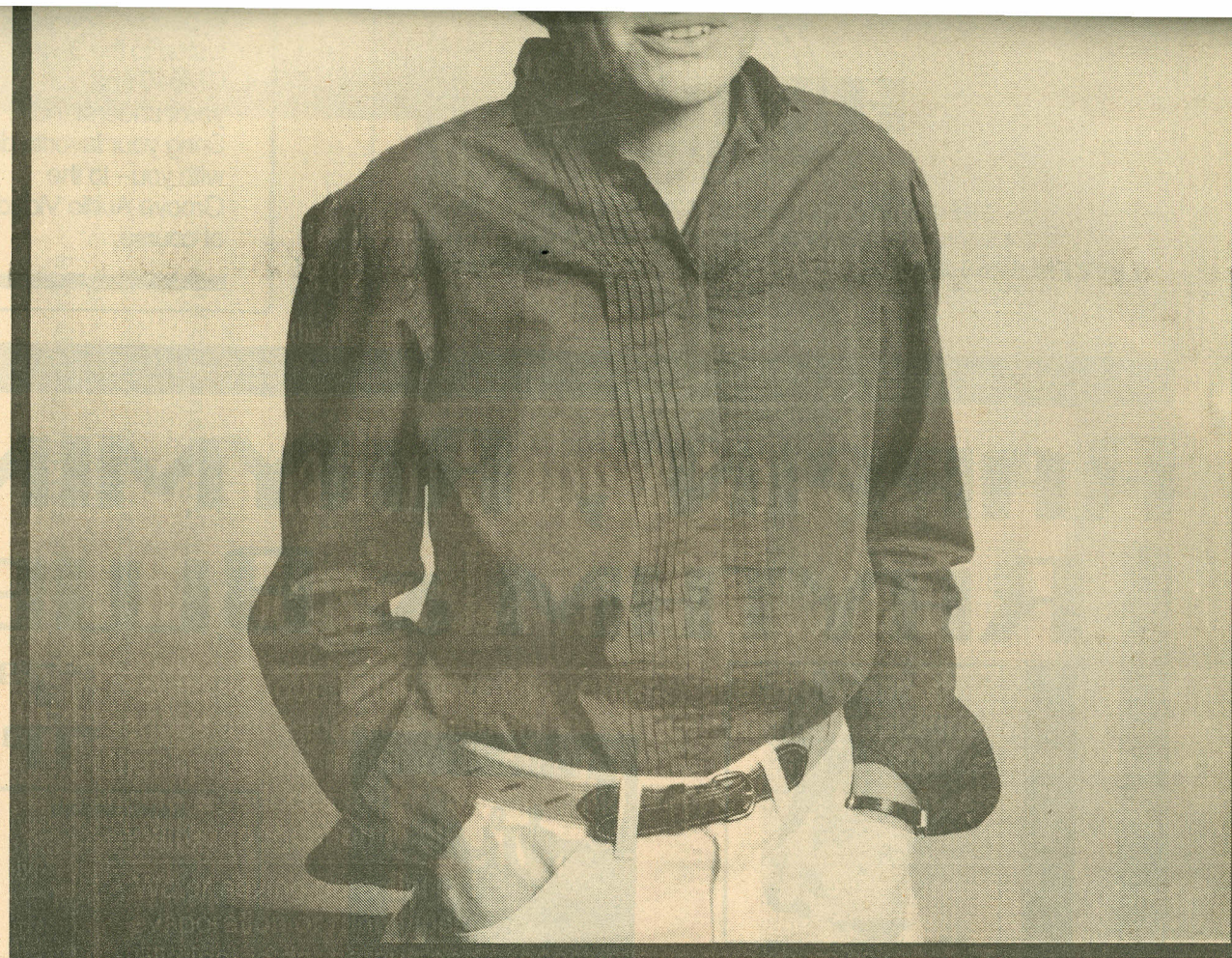
Since our conversation I've had time to think about my friend's experience and I've concluded that my generation of gay men — those of us in our thirties — have grown up with a different way of thinking and a different perception of the world. Aside from the fact that aversion therapy in itself has a certain abhorrent quality, the thought that I or any sane gay man would voluntarily subject himself to such a frightful procedure seems unthinkable. All things considered, this speaks well of the younger generations of gays. We have fewer doubts, greater self-respect and an expanded ability to accept and assert our place in the scheme of things.

Credit deserves to be given to those who fought before us — those who confronted the police at Stonewall (the Stonewall riots in New York City are generally credited as being the birth of the Gay Liberation Movement), the many political activists who have stood up for our rights at great personal cost, the organizers of the many colorful pride parades, the litigants and their supporters who fought and continue to fight against arcane laws. The list is endless. We have our heroes and our history.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not deluded into thinking that we have gained acceptance politically or socially in this society. ("Wouldn't it be wonderful to be cherished for what we are?" remarked a friend longingly after hearing of certain Native American tribes who reserve a special place in their society for homosexuals. "All we need is a small space," he said.) But the point is that we have made progress toward our goals of acceptance, and that progress has earned us a right to celebrate.

My cousin who is gay and in his fifties still concocts elaborate schemes of "roommates" and "best friends" to hide his gayness from his seventy-year-old parents. It's a deliberate and active effort. And his parents still ask about his roommate, Dennis, long after that romance has ended and Dennis has exited to another life. Each new roommate becomes a new "son" and part of an extended family.

Not that I can sit in judgment of that way of dealing with things. It's just that things seem so much more straightforward for me. My parents know I'm gay. They



POKEY ANDERSON: "You slay a lot of your own dragons by coming out."

know that the spare bedroom is just that. They know that if something should happen to me, all my possessions will go to the person who has essentially been my spouse for the past ten years.

In my early twenties I was married to a wonderful woman, who to this day is a close and intimate friend. My parents imagined us to be the perfect couple — I, recently graduated from law school, she, half way through medical school. We would be prosperous and happy, they thought. And in my mother's mind we would become the perfect family as soon as we had children. Things didn't work out that way, and soon I found myself talking to my mother, long distance, explaining my divorce in terms of my sexual preference. There was a reluctant and unhappy acceptance — an acceptance that has always been a bittersweet combination of love and resignation.

My mother still doesn't have room in her mind to accommodate images of me having sex with another man. Not likely, not soon. But she does accept in a generalized and deliberately unfocused way the existence of this sexual preference and the possibility, however remote, that I may be happy. This is progress, however incremental.

Now, of course, there is the matter of AIDS. No words can fully describe the irrationality and the horror. Sometimes it seems like an enormous mistake, a nightmare from which we will all simultaneously wake. The past ten years have been a bit like the movie *Poltergeist*. You buy a house, a lovely house in a different but safe neighborhood. The sun is shining, the streets are clean. All the houses

VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

the Plague Years



Portraits by
Steve Satterwhite

imagine yourself having to deal with the insinuation that the illness that will probably end your life is the punishment from a loving God. Just how bad are we?

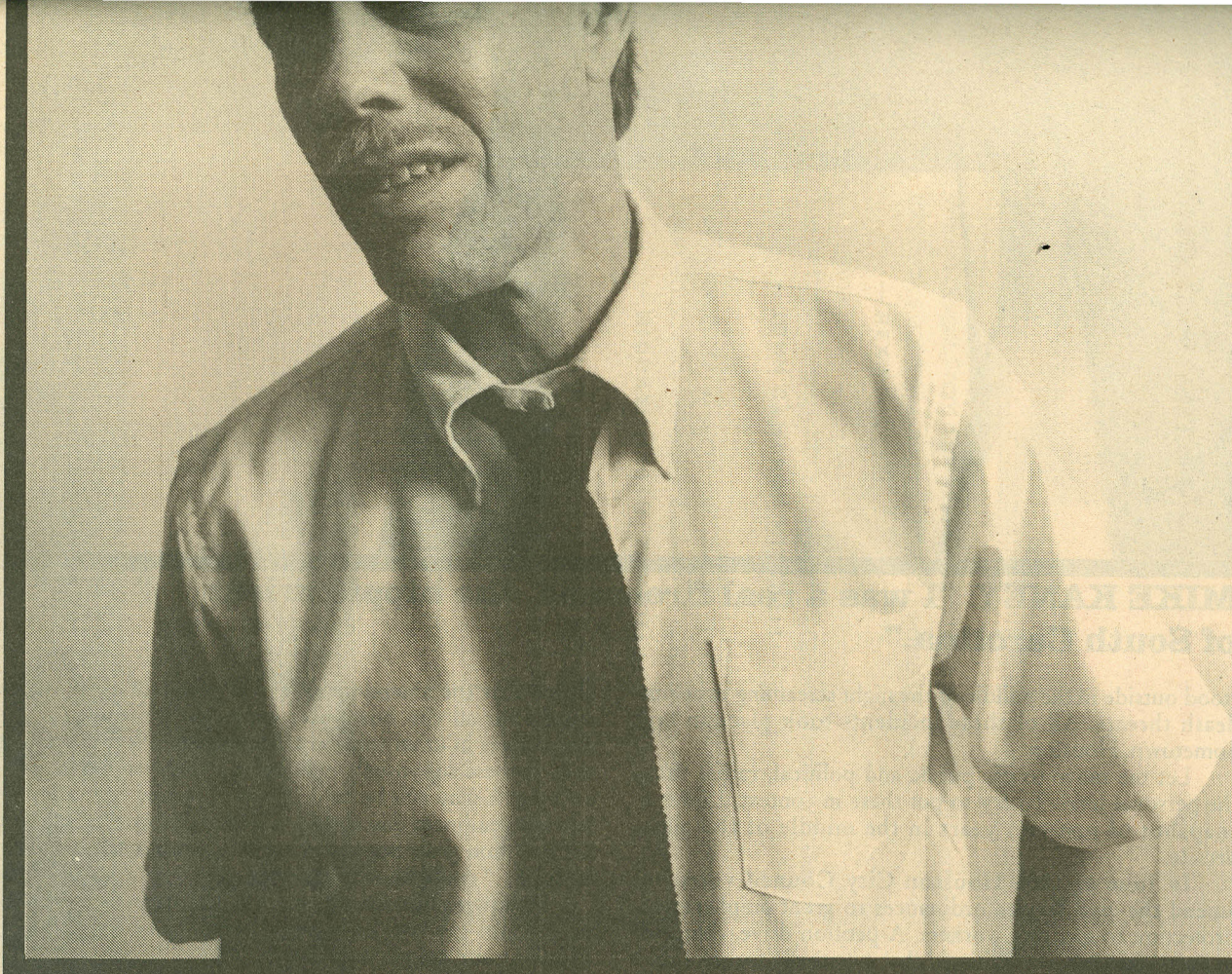
Obviously AIDS has not been the only issue in the lives of gay men and lesbians in recent years. It has been, however, without a doubt the most traumatic. In a sense it has been this generation's aversion therapy. It has made many of us leave the cities in fear of contagion, it has made many of us celibate, it has made many of us cautious, contemplative and serious, it has made many of us widowers and widows. But the other side of the coin is that AIDS has made many of us heroic and human. The care and compassion with which we have taken care of our own is unprecedented. A new form of medical politics has been born, in which those afflicted with illness take the reins, at least in part, of their own treatment. We, as a group, have taken care of ourselves and our own. There is a lesson to be learned here.

Occasionally I still think about my friend, sitting in a chair, waiting for those random shocks to his arms. It's frightening and sad. "It wasn't too bad," he has told me. "I've gotten over it."

I've tried, too, to imagine myself in that situation. I can't. The only thing I can conjure up for myself is a scenario where I'm sitting in the treatment chair and somehow I've managed secretly to snip the wires on those electrodes. The inquisitors are sitting behind a two-way mirror watching, ready to push the button that produces the shocks. They don't know that the electrodes are dead as doornails. And I sit there pretending to be "treated," while the inquisitors, the Jesse Helmses and Bob Dannemyers of the world, continue to flash slide after slide of beautiful men.

Eventually, I smile.

*L. Joel Martinez is a
Houston freelance writer.*



LEE HARRINGTON: "We may have a Neil Simon play with a gay cast."

around you are like your own. Ten years later you find that your house is sitting on a mountain of poltergeists — angry ghosts that leak out of your television set and suck you in through a hole in the upstairs bedroom. It's numbing and terrifying.

It is the dormancy that has been so insidious. It is that the virus, like the poltergeists who lie still until many, many houses are built, has waited. If AIDS had a dormancy of six months, many would have died sooner, but fewer would have been infected.

Sometime in the late '70s a friend who was studying biochemistry at Rice University commented, "Aren't we lucky everything we contract can be cured? Imagine our

lives before the invention of penicillin." It seemed an odd statement at the time. Who had reason to imagine scenarios of fatal, untreatable diseases when life was swirling by in an upbeat, happy way? But even at that time many among us were carrying a virus that was latent and would wake to terrifying results years later.

As the spread of the virus touches more and more groups — pregnant mothers, children, heterosexual teenagers — gay men have made an effort to disassociate themselves from the disease. Perhaps someday that disassociation will be complete and the connection between AIDS and homosexuality will only have historical significance. But for now the term "AIDS" elicits the word "gay" more than any other. And as long as that association exists, people will speak of the "gay disease" and more easily attribute metaphorical significance to what in truth is no more than another facet of nature. AIDS has no more divine or moral meaning than the common cold. Still,

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COMMON GROUND

How adversity made us visible — to the world and ourselves

BY ANNISE D. PARKER

WHEN the *Houston Press* asked me to write an article for this edition, I found myself at a loss. They requested a "personal essay," a view of the last ten years of gay life in Houston from a woman's perspective. Rather than merely look at a defined period of time or specific events, I'd like to try to convey a sense of our lives.

In some small way I was irritated at the concept that there might be a male or female side to the story, that it

& FACES OF LIFE

was one more attempt at dividing our sometimes tenuous community. But in a real way the experience of the past ten years is profoundly different for lesbians and gay men. And that difference has a name: AIDS. It is the difference between watching a horrible accident unfold before your eyes — knowing you cannot stop it, knowing you cannot refuse to look, knowing you must do all you can to help the survivors — and being a part of that accident.

If you truly contemplate what being gay means, I think you will find it remarkable that there is any common ground on which to build a community. Gays and lesbians are a unique minority in the sense that many of us can conceal our true identities, and that society likes to pretend we don't exist. At some point in our lives we chose either to embrace who we are and accept the consequences, or to forever lead a life of lies and concealment. This is a "Catch 22." We have control over the degree of discrimination and societal condemnation to which we are subjected in that we control how open we are about our sexual orientation. We therefore don't face a commonality of discrimination. We are of every class, race, ethnic and religious background. We share nothing but the genders of our sexual partners.

To compound these differences, I think that gay men and women have always had rather different lifestyles. Two distinctive subcultures have emerged that parallel rather than converge. We choose at times to act in concert for common goals. We separate to deal with issues that touch us differently.

Lesbians are women oriented toward women, emotionally and intellectually, as well as physically. We have our own organizations and businesses. We have our own body of music and literature. There is a lesbian aesthetic that is strongly rooted in feminism.

As women, we are acculturated to doing things in pairs. Girls are taught that it is not safe to do things alone. They are encouraged toward home-centered pursuits and cooperative activities. Is it surprising that those of us who grow into being lesbians continue that pattern? It protects us, even while it may limit us.

Many lesbians are mothers with custody of children, or who have chosen to be single parents. Society expects that unmarried women will live together, for economic and security reasons. There is greater cultural latitude in women showing affection. A woman alone is more unusual than a pair of women. When we settle into our houses in the suburbs with our kids and pets, we often become invisible.

Society hasn't allowed gay men that deeper level of anonymity. Anti-gay strictures throughout history have focused on gay men and usually ignored gay women. As men, their greater financial resources provide some protection. AIDS has shredded closets and decimated that economic bulwark.

I decided twenty years ago that I did not want to be invisible. I have struggled for those same twenty years to keep that vow. Perhaps there are those who experience



MIKE KANEY: "I was a real firebrand, the hippie priest of South Carolina."

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I decided twenty years ago that I did not want to be invisible. I have struggled for those same twenty years to keep that vow. Perhaps there are those who experience their epiphanies and are profoundly changed or inspired and never look back. I know there are those who have never been able to hide and therefore haven't had the luxury of coming out. Many will never even take the first step toward coming out. But I think that most are like me; we keep working at it, step by step, adding personal milestones as we go. Struggling because coming out can be dangerous. Fear is a healthy response.

I don't mean fear of that pervasive, impersonal homophobia that provides the subtext of our daily lives. That we live without the social, governmental and family supports that heterosexuals take for granted. We ignore that to preserve our sanity. I mean a more personal fear.

I have never been physically attacked by someone who perceived me to be gay, but I know those who have. I have never been fired from a job because an employer found that I was gay, but I have lived with those who have. I have not been rejected by my family, but I have helped some of those kids living (and dying) on our streets who have.

Since coming out, I have been verbally attacked and subjected to obscene phone calls. I was the target of an attempt to expel me from college. I have had my tires slashed. I have never had a cross burned on my lawn, but I have coped with a neighbor who both papered my home with Bible tracts and



MIKE KANEY: "I was a real firebrand, the hippie priest of South Carolina."

stood outside in the middle of the night screaming drunken death threats. All of these incidents took place in my hometown, Houston.

Let me move to the public and political, rather than the personal level. To try to put these in context, I offer a snapshot of just two years in the middle of this past decade.

In June of 1984 Houston City Council voted to amend the civil service ordinances to grant employment protection to gay city workers. A petition drive, centered in local churches, was initiated that eventually forced a ref-

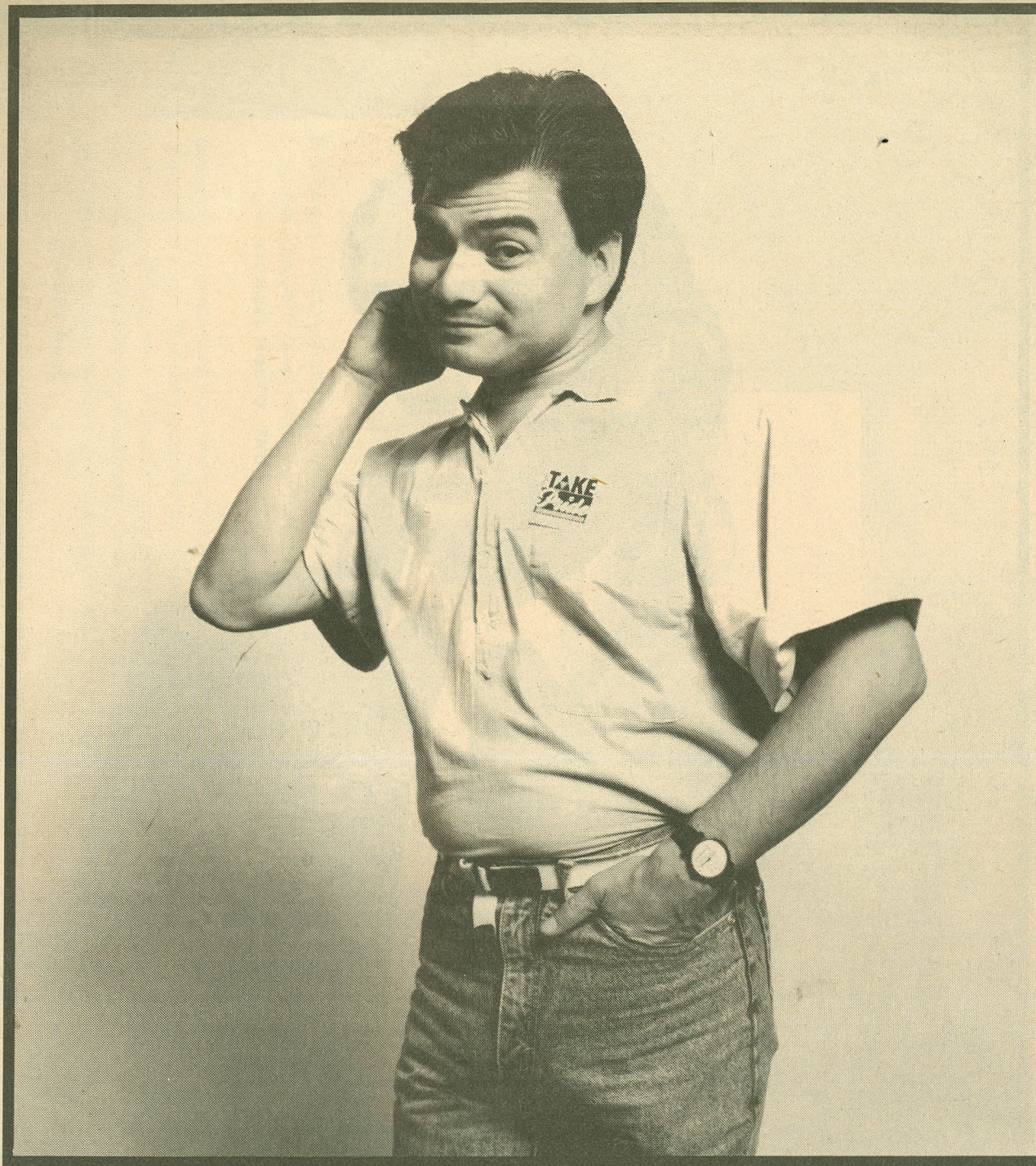
claims that the amendments would mandate a gay quota system for all city businesses generated a rift with traditional allies in other minority communities. It was a shock that, in these supposedly enlightened times, an individual's civil rights may still be subject to a vote, and that an ordinance amendment that simply added sexual orientation to a list of "thou shalt not discriminate in employment on the basis of..." could be so frightening.

Following six months of inflammatory rhetoric and vicious anti-gay attacks, voters rejected the amendments by a four-to-one margin in January 1985.

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erendum vote on the issue. Opponents of the employment amendments mounted a well-funded campaign that included television advertising, direct mail and phonebanking to spread, not just an appeal to vote down the amendments, but an attack on the very existence of homosexuals. False

For the November 1985 city elections, the core of this anti-gay activity evolved into the "Straight Slate," whose candidates ran on a platform that included restricting the rights of gay people, if not chasing them out of Houston. The mayoral candidate endorsed by this group, former



JAMES LAQUE: "Being Hispanic, being gay, we share something very kindred."

Houston mayor Louie Welch, made national news by police harassment and raids on gay clubs. The idea that

SUDDENLY, LAST EVENING

An insider's guide to the lavender lounges

BY SEBASTIAN VENABLE

WHY is it that, with all the complaints about lousy phone service in this city, I have the one phone — by my bed, of course — that does, in fact, ring. And only when I'm napping after a particularly hard day at the mall.

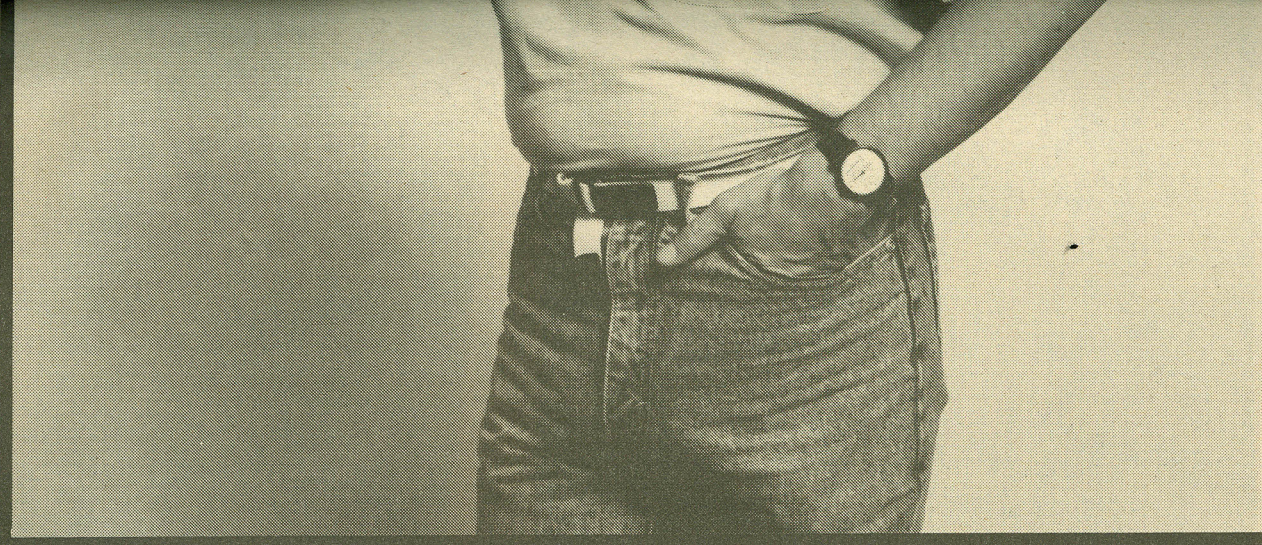
I mean, come on, reach out and touch me some other time — not, my dears, after a harrowing day at Neiman's.

So anyway, there I am, lying in bed with a cold compress on my forehead when who should call but my dear friend and cousin Catherine. She's had a really rough day — the nuns at St. Mary's refused to let her smoke again — and she really needs a drink. So I pull myself out of the bed, ring for Foxhill to bring a pitcher of daiquiris to the atelier, and call Violet to let her know I'll be out for the evening.

After downing the daiquiris and dressing in my finest Versace shorts, I load up the Lexus and head over to St. Mary's to pick up Catherine. Bless her heart, she really is a lovely girl — looks quite a bit like Elizabeth Taylor — and I really do care for her — really! She's so very much like me, and well, I don't know a whole lot of girls who are willing to go with their oh-so-handsome cousin as he makes the rounds of the neighborhood lavender lounges — you know, gay bars. But Catherine does, and we have grand time wherever we go.

Catherine is feeling particularly down today, especially since her doctor has recommended some kind of brain surgery — something about trying to block out some bad memories or the like. As a result, she wants many drinks and, praise all that is holy, she doesn't care where she has them. Well, anyone who knows me knows the kind of clubs I appreciate, and they also know that given the opportunity, I run with it. So, off to Pacific Street we go.

Now, for the one or two of you who don't know where Pacific Street is, to both of you I say, *find it!* It's the one block in the city that provides more bang for the buck than the Great White Way in New York. Here you can find drag queens walking hand-in-hand with leathermen; preppies mingling with (yech!) blue-collar workers, dogs and cats living together. Why, it's a veritable melting pot of the gay experience. And all of this just a hop, skip and a



JAMES LAQUE: "Being Hispanic, being gay, we share something very kindred."

Houston mayor Louie Welch, made national news by remarking, while he thought a TV camera wasn't on, that his solution to AIDS was to "shoot the queers." City politicians felt these fanatics sufficient threat to keep incumbents from campaigning in the gay community or seeking public gay support.

The gay community was still reeling in the spring of 1986 when the state health director issued a call, later dropped, for quarantine of persons with AIDS. Then a string of armed robberies of gay bars culminated with the fatal shooting of lesbian bar owner Marion Pantzer.

Hopes of a favorable ruling on state sodomy laws by the U.S. Supreme Court were dashed in June. The court upheld Georgia's law making sodomy, homosexual and heterosexual, a felony. Weeks later the court refused to hear an appeal of Texas' 21.06 homosexual sodomy statute. Hundreds of thousands of gays in Texas found themselves again criminals.

That same summer the state Republican party adopted a platform that said homosexuality is "a perversion of natural law and is biologically, morally and medically unsound" and "leads to moral decay and subsequently to the erosion and breakdown of the traditional family unit." The platform also mandated quarantine of persons with AIDS.

Is it any wonder that we often live with a bunker mentality? That the majority of us try desperately to hide? We are your children. We are your friends. We are your co-workers. And we are always under attack.

The modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement dates from a singular incident that occurred in New York City in late June of 1969. A group of gays spontaneously banded together and, in a three-day fit of rioting and protest, proclaimed that they would no longer acquiesce to

police harassment and raids on gay clubs. The idea that overt, brutal bigotry could be faced, and faced down, set off changes that are still reverberating today. Some of us decided that we would accept nothing less than our equal place as citizens.

But nearly half of the years of our movement's life have been lived in the shadow of an epidemic. Our movement has been changed and marked in ways we could never have anticipated.

If you had set out to create a situation to scuttle the gay-rights movement, you might have created AIDS. It has given a platform to the religious right, allowing them to propose egregious affronts on our personal liberties. It has pulled millions of dollars from gay and lesbian organizations. Money that had been used to litigate or celebrate is now used to try to keep people alive. It has erased years of trying to be seen as whole individuals rather than through our sexual practices. It has killed many of our best and brightest.

But just as AIDS has harmed us, it has also brought the gay and lesbian community together as nothing else could. It has made us visible, both to the world and to each other. It has made us real to a society that would prefer to ignore us. It has made us realize that we need each other.

Our lives have changed, both because of and in spite of our civil rights movement. We still have to fight the public battles. And we have to find a way to sustain ourselves through it all. Gay and lesbian pride week is our time to come together and sustain each other.

Annise D. Parker is co-owner of Inklings, an alternative bookshop. She's a longtime political activist, a native Houstonian and a graduate of Rice University. She plans to run for the Houston City Council District C seat this fall. District C includes the Montrose and is currently held by Vince Ryan.

Verse shorts, I load up the Lexus and head over to St. Mary's to pick up Catherine. Bless her heart, she really is a lovely girl — looks quite a bit like Elizabeth Taylor — and I really do care for her — really! She's so very much like me, and well, I don't know a whole lot of girls who are willing to go with their oh-so-handsome cousin as he makes the rounds of the neighborhood lavender lounges — you know, gay bars. But Catherine does, and we have grand time wherever we go.

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I'm very fortunate, I guess, because since I'm me, I get a higher level of service at most places than the average person. So when I pull up in front of Heaven, it's not uncommon for some kind person to park my car for me. Well, after all, when Catherine needs a cocktail, I'm certainly not going to keep her waiting by circling the block, looking for a parking space.

Tonight, thank God, is no exception, and after surrendering my keys to a very cute little boy in khakis and top-siders, we're quickly inside, safe and secure in the knowledge that blissful intoxication will soon help Catherine forget all her troubles.

It is, as usual, absolutely packed. As we walk in the front bar, we are both cruised by some very attractive-looking men. Catherine just has that knack, you know, what with those violet eyes and all. And I...well, I do cut quite a striking figure myself, and I do, after all, have more money than God. So we cause attention. And it's never, "Oh look, it's Sebastian and his cousin" or "There's Catherine and her friend." It is always "Catherine and Sebastian have entered the room." Or "Sebastian and Catherine are ordering a drink." We eclipse all others.

Heaven is one of my favorite places. It has some of the best entertainment around. The front bar that we just entered has some of the most glorious dick dancers on the face of this planet. Now, why they are called dick dancers, I'll never know. Very few of them have much dick to speak of and, well, if you've ever watched them it's painfully clear they have never met Arthur Murray.

But good heavens, they are pretty. Especially Bob, or

Dante, or whatever name he's using that week. Just go up and ask him, he'll tell you how pretty he is! Catherine likes Dante. She feels that he has potential and, with a little instruction, could make a suitable husband for either of us. I, of course, feel that the less instruction the better — just leave him the uncouth, butch thing that he is.

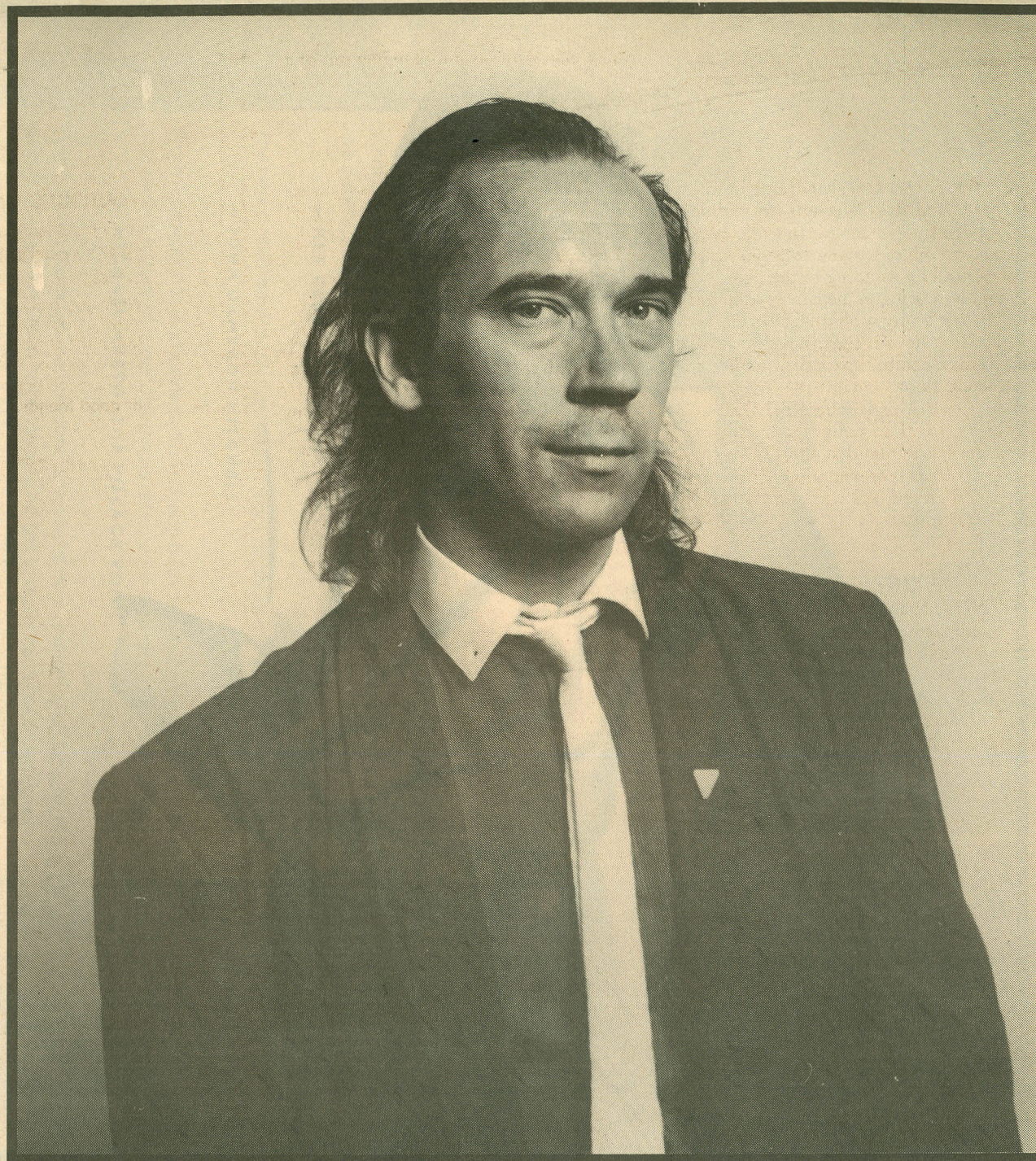
Heaven is also home, by the way, of some of the finest female impersonators in the country. My very dear friends Naomi Sims (a former Miss Gay America, Miss Gay USA and Miss Gay Universe) and Donna Day (Texas' largest talent) grace the stage at Heaven each and every Thursday, and the club is always packed for their shows.

But Catherine is getting a little bored at Heaven — she's been so hard to please lately — so we wander next door to JR's. Now, JR's is quite an experience. Here, in one room, is more starch than has been used by the entirety of Pilgrim Cleaners since the chain was founded mumble years ago. The creases in some of these boys' pants have been used in *Halloween, Parts I-V*, and the attitude of the clientele is as stiff as their shirt collars. Not to mention that, since this is Houston's premiere cruise bar — you know, a place where eligible young men go to meet other eligible young men — the staff tends to believe that they are just a tad bit better than you or I. Now I admit that Violet taught me that one's carriage is a sure sign of good breeding, so I must always maintain an air about me, but as Julia Roberts said in *Steel Magnolias*, "an ounce of pretension is worth a pound of manure," and my dears, there's enough in this bar to raise corn. Why, do you know that they even had the audacity to card Catherine? They would never do that at Regine's, but then, this isn't Regine's.

Catherine did not have her I.D. — Sister Ballenciaga kept it, along with her Silk Cuts — so we left there and went across the street to a dreadful little place called the Montrose Mining Company. Now, I suppose that if I were a lumberjack or a bricklayer, instead of the suave and sophisticated man about town that I am, I might like this place. Some of the men are, well, interesting — so much hair and muscle everywhere. But really, this place ships in sand from Galveston — not even the Cote d'Azur — for their beach parties. Tonight they happen to be having a torn Levi party, and the sight of so much skin through torn clothing seems to upset Catherine, so she begs that we leave.

I ask her where she wants to go now, and she mentions that she knows of a little place named Miss Kitty's Dance Hall and Saloon across the street. I had heard of this establishment, but had never ventured into it — it always had the appearance of a hustler bar or something, and I always preferred the beach or a hotel ballroom, as does Catherine. But to satisfy her, poor dear, we went.

I have to admit, I have never seen quite such a varied group of people in one place at the same time. Transgenderists, hustlers, cowboys, leathersmen and people of severely questionable breeding — all congregating under one roof. This was not a place that either of us wanted to spend much time. There was no place to sit that I could be



JACK VALINSKI: "The truth of it is, we're all over the community."

tion, but the management has added one of the most uptown dinner. As with Pacific Street, the clientele makes a

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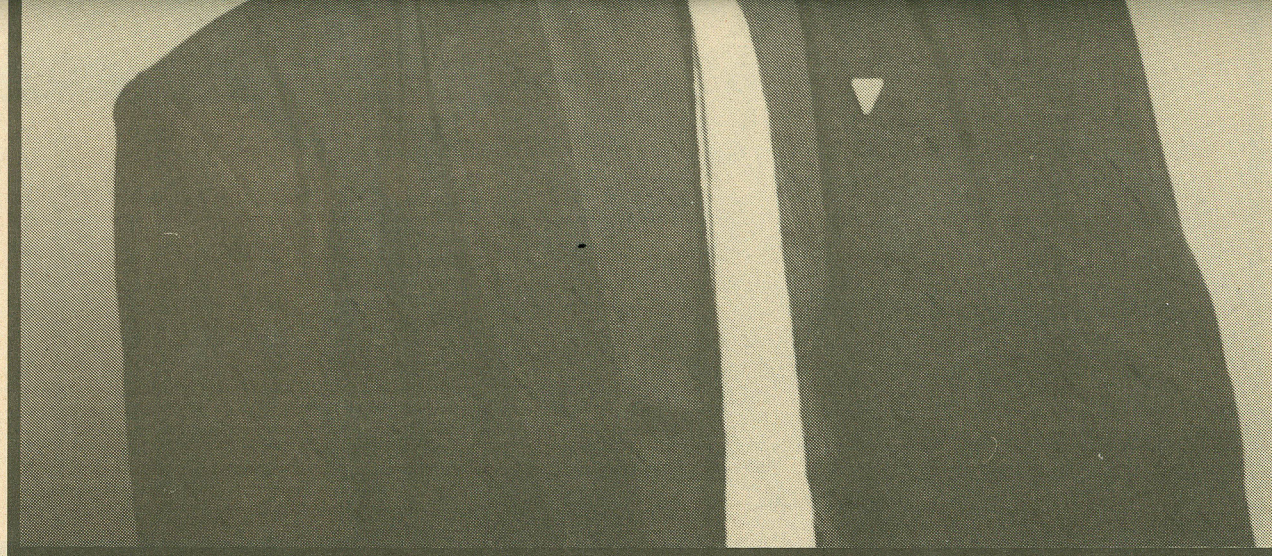
kept it, along with her Silk Cuts — so we left there and went across the street to a dreadful little place called the Montrose Mining Company. Now, I suppose that if I were a lumberjack or a bricklayer, instead of the suave and sophisticated man about town that I am, I might like this place. Some of the men are, well, interesting — so much hair and muscle everywhere. But really, this place ships in sand from Galveston — not even the Cote d'Azur — for their beach parties. Tonight they happen to be having a torn Levi party, and the sight of so much skin through torn clothing seems to upset Catherine, so she begs that we leave.

I ask her where she wants to go now, and she mentions that she knows of a little place named Miss Kitty's Dance Hall and Saloon across the street. I had heard of this establishment, but had never ventured into it — it always had the appearance of a hustler bar or something, and I always preferred the beach or a hotel ballroom, as does Catherine. But to satisfy her, poor dear, we went.

I have to admit, I have never seen quite such a varied group of people in one place at the same time. Transgenderists, hustlers, cowboys, leathermen and people of severely questionable breeding — all congregating under one roof. This was not a place that either of us wanted to spend much time. There was no place to sit that I could be assured that my linen shorts would not come out resembling some Desert Storm camouflage. Catherine was, however, intrigued by the marquee, which announced the upcoming drag shows. My other very dear friends Tommie Ross, a former Miss Gay USA, and Lindsay Love and Lauren Brach — each of them a former Miss Gay Texas — were appearing at the club, and Catherine wanted to see them. I told her that we would invite them up to the house sometime and she could meet them in person, or maybe we could go over to their homes sometime. "Oh, let's do that," I pleaded. "Let's do that, that's better." She asked me to shut up, but I continued, "but that gang of kids shouted vile things to me about the waiter." Catherine was, thank God, in no mood to argue, so we left.

I asked Catherine what she was in the mood for. She had had only one or two cocktails by this time, so she was definitely not as out of touch as she wanted to be. "I really don't care, Sebastian. Wherever you would like to go is fine with me. Just please don't make me wear that swimsuit..." Her voice trailed off, so I didn't quite understand what she could have possibly meant by that comment. But I could tell that she was getting weary and that it might be best to go someplace calm and soothing to settle her nerves. I knew just the place.

We retrieved the car and headed across Montrose Boulevard to Missouri Street where the tasteful little club Missouri Street Station sits, beckoning the weary and bleak of heart to enter (Proust has always been one of my favorite authors). Now, Missouri Street Station used to be Missouri Street Cafe, way back in the mid-'80s, so its location is no mystery to people who have worked or lived in the area. It hasn't changed much since its former incarna-



JACK VALINSKI: "The truth of it is, we're all over the community."

tion, but the management has added one of the most impressive arrays of talent in Houston, including the always divine Marsha Carlton, the oh-so-handsome duo Euphoric Heat and Dallas' answer to Montgomery, Plant, Stritch and Minelli, Less Miserables. The Station, as Violet calls it, is really a lovely little place, but mother just doesn't like the "sisters of Sappho," as she calls them, so we rarely ever go there. This isn't to say that this is a lesbian bar, because they have not made that distinction. It is, however, heavily weighted in that direction, and Catherine, comfortable as she is with all my friends, just doesn't have a good time in places like that.

I was afraid that the Station would elicit the same reaction from my dear cousin but thankfully, she was accepting of my choice. We listened to the piano for a while, letting the tinkling of the ivories lull us into a mellow mood, as we both scanned the room, noticing the attractive crowd that had assembled. "Oh, look," I declared, "that one is appetizing," as if I were selecting items on a menu. "Oh, but that one is appetizing."

It was at that time that both Catherine and I realized that we had not eaten. Since we were just around the corner from Charlie's and since we had not made reservations at Tony's, we decided just to pop over and see what the daily special was. Now, for those outer-Loopers among you, I must describe Charlie's: picture the original Los Tios, before it was remodeled, and Mel's Diner. Now, place them next door to each other, knock down the walls between them, add a baby grand and an entire staff of gay waiters, and you have Charlie's. It carries eclecticism to the extreme, and also operates under the assumption that "eclectic" is synonymous with "bad taste."

Charlie's can be an entertaining alternative to an

uptown dinner. As with Pacific Street, the clientele makes a trip in from River Oaks almost worth the effort with just scads of the aforementioned drag-queen-cum-leather-daddy combinations, in addition to the more traditional (read: "normal") members of the gay community. I once remember, on one of those six-mimosa mornings, seeing a very handsome young father with his three children partaking of their morning meal right next to a table of bartenders who had poured just one cocktail too many and were definitely the worse for wear. I can only imagine that this father, obviously a Democrat, was attempting to give his children the most well-rounded upbringing possible.

Well, I digress. Catherine and I ordered the safest thing on the menu — a hamburger (what, pray tell, can you do to a hamburger?) — and left as quickly as possible. Catherine seemed, at this point, to be a little perkier, so I thought maybe it was time to hit one of the popular dance halls. We had already been to Heaven, and both Catherine and I just hate to attend any function or gathering wearing the same gown that we were seen in just hours before, so Heaven was out. Rich's is the only other disco that caters pretty much exclusively to members of the lavender set, so it was agreed that we would go there next. Catherine said that any place, at this point, was fine, so long as I promise that we would not leave until she had had at least 36 cocktails. While it was already close to midnight, I felt sure that this would not present a problem.

Now, Rich's, for those of you who don't know, is Houston's answer to the Palladium in New York or Heaven in London. If any of you remember the old days in New York when 54 was open, then you can understand Rich's. It's big! Really big! Two huge levels of high-tech industrial dance and drink space that is, on the weekends,

filled to capacity with some of the most breathtakingly beautiful people ever to assemble in Houston. Violet and Catherine never have any trouble making sure that I am introduced to many of these beautiful people, if only because there are so many of them. They range in age from college frat boys, oh-so-handsome in their tight jeans and Bass Weejuns, to middle-aged gay businessmen sporting the latest Ungaro ensemble, striving to look young and beautiful by standing in the light, just so. I admit to being in the latter group but, after all, that's why we have Catherine.

The first floor is the dance floor, with lots of cruise and bar space surrounding it. The second floor contains two quiet bars and art space. This is where the Diverse-Works set loves to congregate and, my dears, the Pei pyramid at the Louvre has not seen a finer representation of raw talent. In this crowd, the one that Catherine and I just naturally attract, you hear words like "mercurial" and "forward-thinking," as opposed to the "Miss Things" and "awesomes" of the lower level. Now, granted, there is a certain homogenization of the two levels, but Catherine and I never allow it to diffuse our aura.

One of the things that we enjoy so about Rich's is that, if Houston were to have a club that attracts the glitterati as 54 did in New York, Rich's would be it. Many a night Violet or Catherine and I would enter the club and find people we knew from all around the world waiting for us, just as it used to be with Andy and Liza and Jerry and Calvin at 54. It, quite frankly, attracts the best and the brightest.

Catherine and I downed about 18 cocktails each — well, they seemed so weak — before deciding that we really weren't in the mood to be sociable. Plus Sister Ballenciaga was bound to have noticed by now that Catherine was not in her room, so we thought it best to move on. But, I warned Catherine, not before one pit stop at the Ripcord, around the corner from Miss Kitty's and Pacific Street. The one thing that I have always loved about the Ripcord is that it reminds me of the more expensive furniture at Roche-Bobois — you know, lots of leather and heavy wood. Regrettably, as at Roche-Bobois in recent years, most of the

ed rather brusquely on her hairstyle (this from a man with his butt hanging out of a pair of cheap leather chaps). As I dropped her off, she began to babble. She mentioned young boys with knives and tin cans coming at her across a beach. She ranted about climbing a huge hill, only to come to a clearing where young boys were cannibalizing a freshly killed corpse. And she finished with tales of a dungeon-like cell with hulking and sinister apparitions surrounding her and putting out cigarettes in their hands. I told her to take a valium and go to sleep immediately or, I felt sure, brain surgery would be inevitable.

As I drove home, I reflected on the old days — the days when Violet and I traveled through the capitals of Europe in search of youth, love and a poem of summer. I remembered when Catherine and I first arrived on the scene in New York, one long-ago summer, and became the toast of the town, surrounded by bright, young people. And I remembered my afternoons in the atelier in the Garden District in New Orleans, where I and the other young men went to be in private. And I thought of the night just passed. And, suddenly, I wasn't young anymore.

It was then that I hurled myself on my bed, unplugged the phone, and put one of many cold compresses on my head, as thoughts of Violet, ascending in her caged elevator, entered my head.

"Oh, my darling, we are lucky. To have each other and need no one else — ever!"

Sebastian Venable is a pseudonym.

SHORT INTERVIEWS

A founder of The Company We Keep, a gay and lesbian theater

LEE HARRINGTON

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I've always found it humorous, in my travels, to find that so many people who find emotional and sexual outlets in leather find those who wear lace to be distasteful. Come now, folks, drag is drag. The Ripcord, however, is based on a separatist philosophy, so that, while there is never any question that I am a man, my Versace shorts somehow reduce my masculinity to something less palatable. And having Catherine with me creates such a fury that, to be honest, that's why I go to begin with. I think it's very important to offer individuals the opportunity to rage — if it weren't for me and my Versace shorts, what else would they have to kvetch about? And stop to think about it. How much more distasteful can it be than to get grease, cigarette burns and spilled drinks on my beautiful shorts? It's just as difficult for me to stomach the Ripcord as it is for them to stomach me. And *they* don't have inordinately large dry cleaning bills to contend with when I leave them.

Catherine by this time was beyond comforting. She knew that the time had come for me to take her back to Saint Mary's; she was barely tipsy and, worst of all, someone at the Ripcord had comment-

my bed, unplugged the phone, and put one of many cold compresses on my head, as thoughts of Violet, ascending in her caged elevator, entered my head.

"Oh, my darling, we are lucky. To have each other and need no one else — ever!"

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SHORT INTERVIEWS

A founder of The Company We Keep, a gay and lesbian theater

LEE HARRINGTON

IN the short run AIDS is the most critical problem that gays face, but in the long run, I think it's low self-esteem. I stayed 22 months in Atlanta, and I just fell into a group there called SAME — Southeastern Artists Media and Education — and watched them deal with self-esteem issues onstage. I was struck by that encounter and said, "When I get back to Houston, I'm going to start a small theater company, and we're going to deal with self-esteem issues."

"The Company We Keep's founding theme is celebrating the contributions of lesbians and gays to the theater; our first priority is to run a good quality theater club in Houston. Even though there are so many gays in theater, in biographies, in articles and reviews, either that's not mentioned or it's treated with disdain. We're going to deal with gay and lesbian material, but not exclusively. We may have a Neil Simon play with a gay cast.

"We got started with our first production in the summer of 1989, the twentieth anniversary of Stonewall. It's a play called *Street Theater*; it's a comedy but it's also serious, about fighting back. *P.S. Your Cat Is Dead* is the first major effort we've had since *Street Theater*, and we're

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DEBORAH MONCRIEF BELL: "We love women in a woman-hating society."

going to do more productions

"I'm also a single parent; I have three boys adopted. It's interesting that people don't think automatically of a male as a single parent. We'd be out to eat in restaurants and people would try to figure out first where my wife was, and then what color she would be. They were wrong on two or three counts there."

other people. We've been very strong in our pro-choice activities that basically don't benefit lesbians; lesbians aren't a big market on getting abortions.

"I'm waiting for a time, and I think it's coming, when lesbians speak out for programs that would benefit lesbians in particular. One is lesbian health. Apparently lesbians are more likely to get breast cancer, which is of course epidemic among women. One of the problems is that lesbians have felt alienated from the medical care system. Just filling out the application, they'll say 'name of spouse,' 'method of

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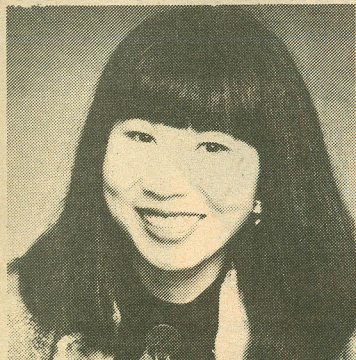
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DEBORAH MONCRIEF BELL: "We love women in a woman-hating society."

going to do more productions

"I'm also a single parent; I have three boys adopted. It's interesting that people don't think automatically of a male as a single parent. We'd be out to eat in restaurants and people would try to figure out first where my wife was, and then what color she would be. They were wrong on two or three counts there."

Co-owner of the
bookstore **Inklings &**
host of "Breakthrough"
on KPFT-Pacifica

POKEY ANDERSON

OPENING a bookstore had been in the back of my mind for probably 15 years, because I spend a lot of time in them. Annise [Parker] and I started having lunches to talk about the possibility; we researched, we had notebooks inches thick. Basically it seemed like it was a feasible thing. We had started researching in May, and we opened on December 3, 1988, which was faster than it seems.

"I'm still doing the 'Breakthrough' show on KPFT. A lot of times on radio you get people who are just flipping the dial; somebody said they nearly drove off the road, they were so happy to hear a show that was positive about lesbians. Other people are appalled.

"Lesbians have been very generous in our support of movements that benefit

other people. We've been very strong in our pro-choice activities that basically don't benefit lesbians; lesbians aren't a big market on getting abortions.

"I'm waiting for a time, and I think it's coming, when lesbians speak out for programs that would benefit lesbians in particular. One is lesbian health. Apparently lesbians are more likely to get breast cancer, which is of course epidemic among women. One of the problems is that lesbians have felt alienated from the medical care system. Just filling out the application, they'll say 'name of spouse,' 'method of birth control,' and pretty soon you're coming out to somebody. You're vulnerable when you should be getting care."

Co-chair of Gay/Lesbian
Pride Week and
co-host of "Wilde 'n'
Stein" on KPFT-Pacifica

JACK VALINSKI

PRIDE Week is a celebration for the gay/lesbian community. The highlight, of course, is the parade. The parade is one of the largest in the city, the only parade that doesn't happen downtown. It's also a chance for us to get the word out that yes, there are gay and lesbian people who are stable, who are working hard to try to change society.

"We're very easy to ignore in the newspaper, on TV. We recently had a



STEPHEN SACHITANO: "Don't ever assume that anyone you know is straight."

march on Austin where AP said there were 28,000 people; the *Houston Chronicle* had a little paragraph, the *Houston Post* had nothing. It hurts real bad when stuff like that happens. The truth of it is, we are not represented in the mass media near any proportion that we are in society.

"My hope is that we are going to start working together; that a person can be in a job situation and be able to talk about their lover, about important things in their life; that that isn't seen as 'flaunting it.' A number of activists are not only trying to make it better for gay and lesbian people. We're trying to make it better for everybody."

yourself, this is not something I can change. I find it very hard to believe that my god is going to condemn me for eternity because of the way I am.

"I came out to my parents the first Christmas I went home, and my parents decided they would not pay for school any longer. I'm putting myself through school now. If I were given that chance all over again, to come out to my parents, I would do it again, because the honesty is so much more important to me than the money. I don't lie to people. If someone asks me if I'm gay, I'm going to tell them.

"A lot of times people coming out may not feel completely comfortable with

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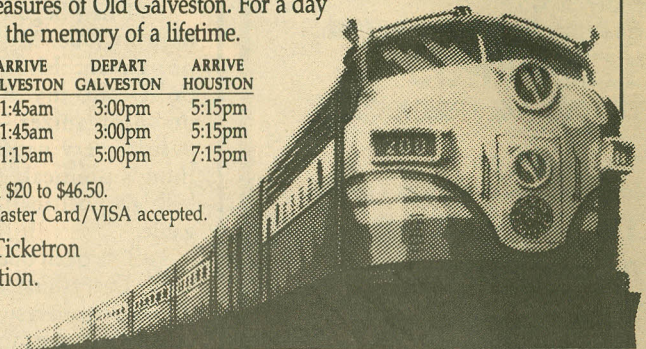
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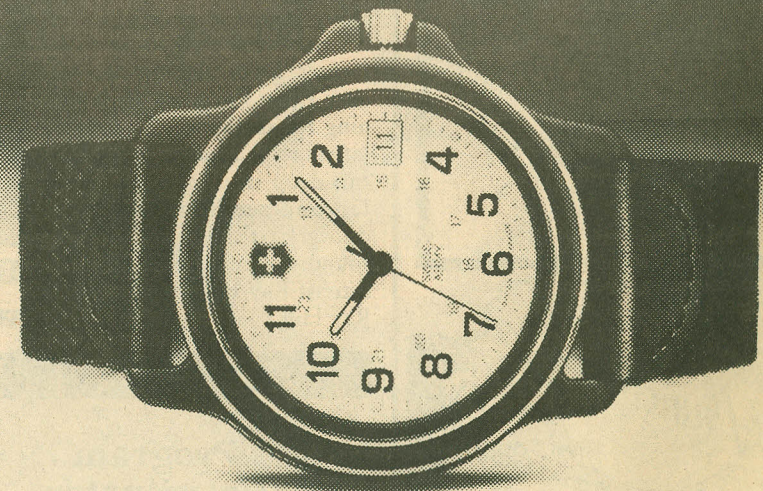
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STEPHEN SACHITANO: "Don't ever assume that anyone you know is straight."

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President, Gays & Lesbians of Rice University

STEPHEN SACHITANO

I BASICALLY came out to myself when I came to Rice; GALOR is one of the first organizations that I got involved in. We really deal primarily with people who are coming out on the university campus. We're there to tell them, "There isn't a lot to fear. There are people doing exactly what you're trying to do, who are gay and who are on campus and doing just fine." I want to keep that going because I know how much it meant to me.

"Feeling homosexual feelings tore me apart; my religion was very important to me, but I was being told that my god could never love me. It took me a long time to realize that this is not a reason to hate

yourself, this is not something I can change. I find it very hard to believe that my god is going to condemn me for eternity because of the way I am.

"I came out to my parents the first Christmas I went home, and my parents decided they would not pay for school any longer. I'm putting myself through school now. If I were given that chance all over again, to come out to my parents, I would do it again, because the honesty is so much more important to me than the money. I don't lie to people. If someone asks me if I'm gay, I'm going to tell them.

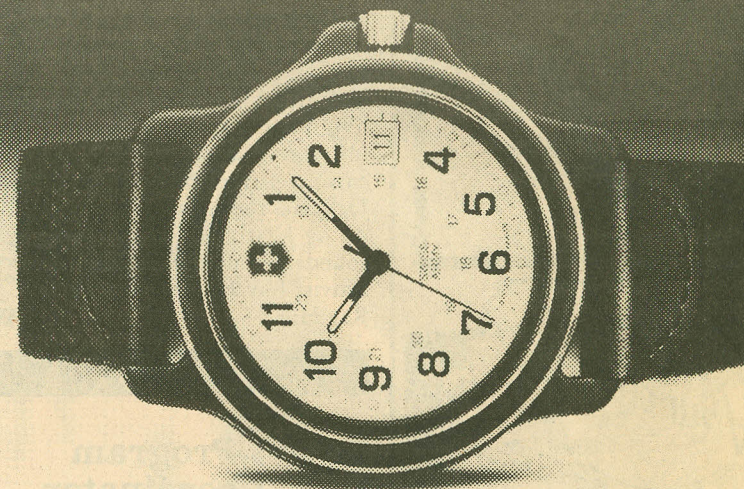
"A lot of times people coming out may not feel completely comfortable with being gay. But all you have to do is meet and talk with gay people to know that being gay does not mean that you have to fit a certain mode or lifestyle. Don't ever assume that anyone you know is straight."

Former jail inmate, civil-rights activist & host of "The Prison Show" on KPFT-Pacifica

RAY HILL

I MAGINE for a moment waiting for the revolution to come. That leaves a breeding ground for someone to be less than socially responsible. I found this wonderful work, basically Robin Hood work: steal from the rich and give to myself. I stole antiques, art and jewels. It's not bad work. The retirement system, however, sucks.

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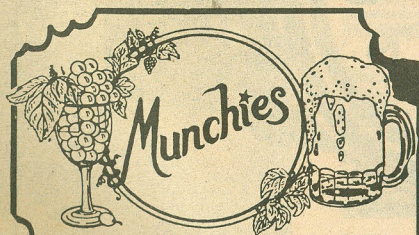
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TUESDAY
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"In 1970 I took full retirement, which meant that I got busted and carried to jail. I was tried, convicted and sentenced to 160 years. That'll hold you a spell. I served four years and four months.

"Anything that happens every day for four years and four months is going to impact your perceptions. My number one project now is watchdog over people with AIDS in jails and prisons; my other field of activism is prisoners' rights.

"I had begun my activism back in 1966. My father was a politician, his father was a politician, my mother was a union organizer — I come by politics very naturally. Everything's political; even gay and lesbian politics is a numbers game.

"I've been openly gay since 1956. Everything I do, even on prison reform issues, I do as an openly gay person. I think my being openly gay has helped gay inmates; it has certainly helped them with AIDS, because I've done an awful lot of AIDS education.

"Keeping up with gay people's problems in institutions: I enjoy that, I'm good at it, but it's not what I'm going to do forever. I will announce on January 1 that I'm going to be running for justice of the peace. I intend to be a judge; as a judge I can drop into Harris County Jail and see how people are doing firsthand. 'Judge Hill' sounds so much better than 'gay activist Ray Hill' or 'ex-convict Ray Hill.'"

Program
Coordinator
AIDS Foundation
Houston



BART LOESER: "There's no need to fear people who have HIV."

who pretty much deserve it.' And that's still the way a lot of the heterosexual community feels.

"It's a ridiculous way of looking at it. It's basically denial, which is what I think of as the primary enemy we're fighting here. It's not AIDS, it's not HIV; it's denial.

"I got involved with the AIDS Foun-

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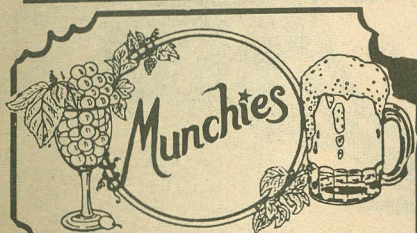
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FRIDAY JUNE 21:
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PHIL FREEMAN

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because I've done an awful lot of AIDS education.

"Keeping up with gay people's problems in institutions: I enjoy that, I'm good at it, but it's not what I'm going to do forever. I will announce on January 1 that I'm going to be running for justice of the peace. I intend to be a judge; as a judge I can drop into Harris County Jail and see how people are doing firsthand. 'Judge Hill' sounds so much better than 'gay activist Ray Hill' or 'ex-convict Ray Hill.'"

BART LOESER: "There's no need to fear people who have HIV."

**Program
Coordinator
AIDS Foundation
Houston**

BART LOESER

IN the gay community we were just going into our sexual revolution in the late '70s and early '80s. People didn't really think about promiscuity, especially at that time. If you met one person over the weekend and had sex with them, you didn't think of that as promiscuous. But when you add it up, one person every weekend, you're talking about 52 people in a year. And some people would go out three to five times a week. And maybe have sex with more than one person in one day. Maybe.

"Back in the mid-'80s, a lot of people in the gay community didn't feel AIDS was our problem, just the way the straight community doesn't feel it is today. It was only a problem if you fell into a certain group, if you were one of those party animals who went out until all hours of the morning and did all the different drugs. It was really easy to say, 'The ones who are dying are the ones

who pretty much deserve it.' And that's still the way a lot of the heterosexual community feels.

"It's a ridiculous way of looking at it. It's basically denial, which is what I think of as the primary enemy we're fighting here. It's not AIDS, it's not HIV; it's denial.

"I got involved with the AIDS Foundation because I was one of those people who denied it was my problem. And then one of my best friends called me up and said he'd been diagnosed with ARC, AIDS-related complex. It made me stop and think; I said, 'If he could be HIV positive, maybe I could be.' I decided to get tested, and found out that I was positive.

"I wear many hats here, as most of us do. I coordinate our hotline, and I also direct our safer sex outreach program.

"The only education the gay community has had is by ourselves. The government wants to write off the entire community, saying, 'They've done such a great job of educating themselves, we'll just spend money teaching the heterosexuals and IV drug abusers.' These are important areas, but you're talking about a population where 40 to 50 percent of the population may be HIV positive. Yet probably less than a quarter of them practice safer sex consistently.

"I've lost probably well over a hundred good friends, acquaintances, colleagues; a month and a half ago I lost my lover. Most of us in the community in our 20s, 30s and 40s have been devastated by AIDS. But many of the very young may not feel it's their problem. They think, 'Young people don't get AIDS; it's the older ones who get AIDS.' The older ones have AIDS. The younger ones have HIV.

"I know people 21, 23 who have AIDS; I think they got the virus at age 15, 16, 17. Where were we with the information for them at that time? We were being told by their parents that their kids were not having sex. Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world.

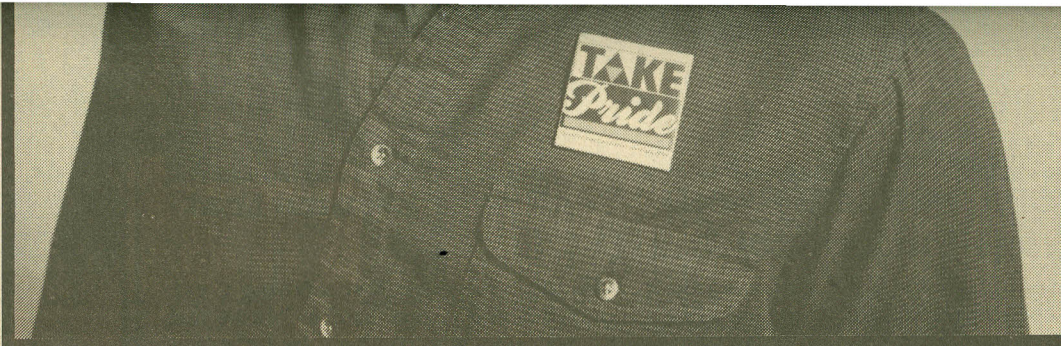
"We try to get this out for education purposes, but we're so hampered by society. Last year the Texas State Legislature told us we could do education and some outreach to the gay community, but we could in no way promote homosexuality. I guess it depends on how you define promoting homosexuality; I like to promote a healthy attitude towards one's life, whether you're gay or straight.

"What causes major problems with AIDS is the homophobia. People have to get over the fact that a homosexual is not made — a homosexual is born that way. If someone cannot deal with your being gay, that's their problem. I put in the paper that Bruce died of AIDS, that I was his partner in life. I thought the listing of AIDS was important. So many people die of AIDS, and if they're listed in the paper, they never mention AIDS. It's hidden.

"Without the facts, you can't even make a decision about safer sex. I try to increase awareness, education, try to save lives that don't need to be lost.

"There are a lot of people in the AIDS area who may be in it just for the money. When an organization hires people who are incompetent, who don't give a damn about what they're doing, they shouldn't be in this field. I'm doing this because I care very much about my community.

"AIDS can be stopped. It's real easy. We're just not seeing it happen."



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Activist, co-host of
"Wilde 'n' Stein"
on KPFT-Pacifica,
mother of two

DEBORAH MONCRIEF BELL

MY first sexual relationships were with girls. I didn't see anything wrong with it. But it wasn't until I left my marriage at the age of 33 that I realized I was going to be a lesbian and chose to live as one. It was right and I just knew it.

"To me, lesbians are the most revolutionary people because we love women in a woman-hating society.

"I have two sons, ages 19 and 14. I have always been open with them. With the older one it was more of a problem; it took him a while to come to grips. He once brought some friends over, and they told me how much they enjoy the gay and lesbian radio program that I do. I got to a point where I realized he was not only accepting but in a lot of ways proud of me.

"The younger one has pretty much been around me and my activism his whole life. He seems to be pretty cool. I'm sure my children don't go around telling everyone that their mother is a lesbian, but they respect the fact that I'm an activist.

"Of course I'm a little biased, but I think children of lesbians are going to be the neatest people. A lot of children in those houses are hard-fought-for children; child abuse is much less in gay households. They have to overcome so much, but they also have insight. I think my children are less prejudiced. They are more open-minded. They are more able to make decisions for themselves because they've been set that example."

"GLHU is doing a lot now to go beyond its own realm of the gay community. Something we're going to try to implement every Christmas is to adopt a family — not a gay family, just a family who needs assistance. We also are trying to put together a fund so we can offer scholarships to those that aren't financially able to attend school. As far as AIDS education, we've put together workshops and seminars not just aimed at the gay Hispanic male, but at the Hispanic male in general.

"We're known socially through our events, but we're trying to instill more political interest in our members and followers. To this day, among many of the Hispanic community, they still encounter a lot of prejudice. They still encounter setbacks socially, in their careers, politically. But there's a lot of potential in the Hispanic community; there's a lot of potential in the gay Hispanic community. What we're trying to do is plant the seed with the young gay Hispanics, letting them know that there's a lot of pride in being gay, there's a lot of pride in being Hispanic. There isn't anything that they cannot do."

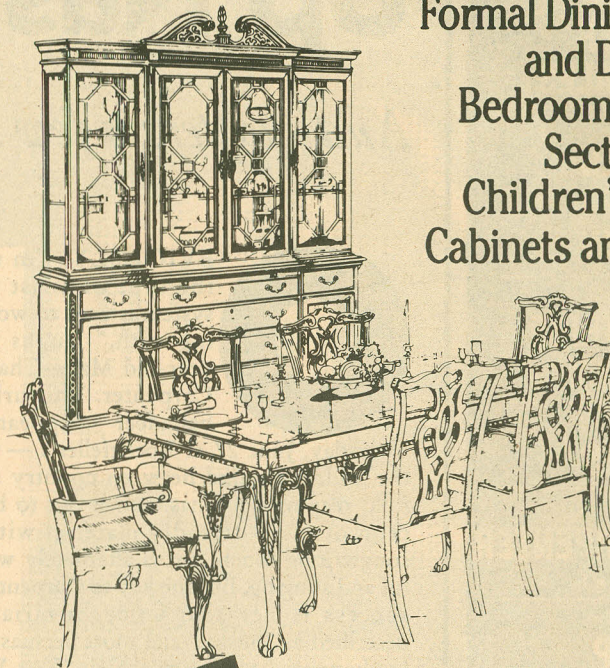
President of Dignity,
a religious
organization for
gays and lesbians

MIKE KANEY

WHEREAS most people talk about being a cowboy or a fireman, I always wanted to be a priest. I was ordained in Charleston, South Carolina, as a Roman Catholic priest in 19 — oh, myword — 62. I was a real firebrand back then, the hippie priest of South Carolina.

"I'm sure I was gay my whole life; it's just that we weren't given the opportunity

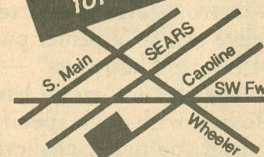
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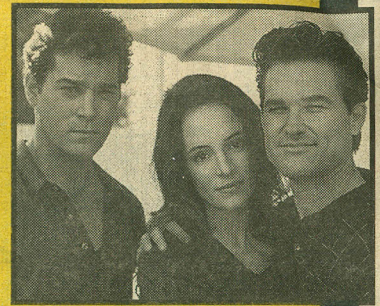
Alex

Briefs: Underground Shopping At Randall's With Queer Nation

HOUSTON PRESS

JUNE 25-JULY 1, 1992
THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

WHO
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Bad cop **RAY LIOTTA** stalks
KURT RUSSELL and **MADELEINE**
STOWE in **UNLAWFUL ENTRY**
Movies, page 44

THE NEW IMAGE OF GAY POWER IN



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THE NEW IMAGE OF GAY POWER IN HOUSTON

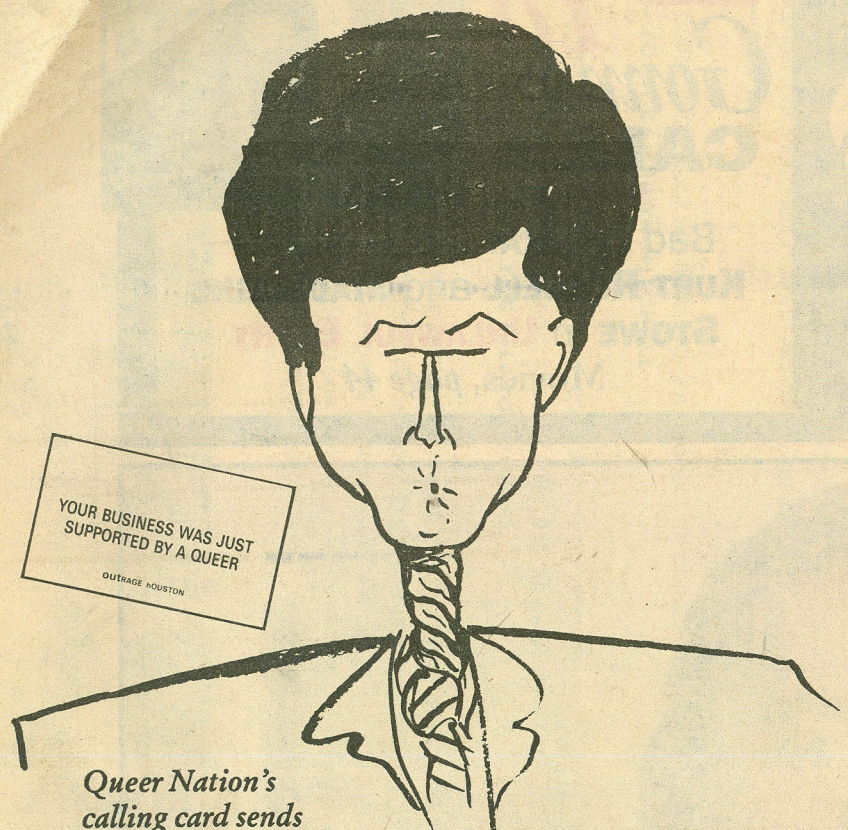
Out and about: the politics of sexual preference, a lesbian night on the town, complete listings for Gay Pride Week and more

Christopher Bacon, president of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus and a lawyer at a prestigious downtown firm

Classifieds: Rebuild your engine, your home or your love life!

June 25-July 1, 1992

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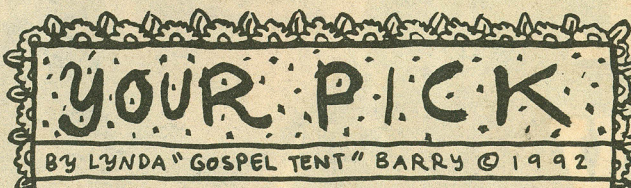
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Volume 4, Number 26

Cover photograph by Pam Francis.

ERNIE POOK'S COMEEK BY LYNDA BARRY



THEN FREAKED OUT JEFF TELLS HIS MOM.
WHO THEN FREAKS OUT AND TELLS HIS
FATHER WHO IS A DOCTOR WHO PICKS
UP THE PHONE AND SAYS 'I'LL ARRANGE
IT.' THE ONLY PEOPLE IN ESTHER'S
HOUSE WHO KNOW ABOUT IT ARE WANDA
AND LILLY. TWINS, EXCEPT WANDA SAYS
IT'S MURDER AND LILLY SAYS IT ISN'T.
AND WANDA SAYS SHE'S GOING TO TELL
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THE GAY COMEBACK

After a decade

THE CHANGING FACE OF GAY POLITICS

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THE WOMEN'S ROOMS

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THE GAY COMEBACK

After a decade
of suffering
and defeat at the
polls, gays
and lesbians
hope for
a rebound

BY CHRIS BACON

THE CHANGING FACE OF GAY POLITICS

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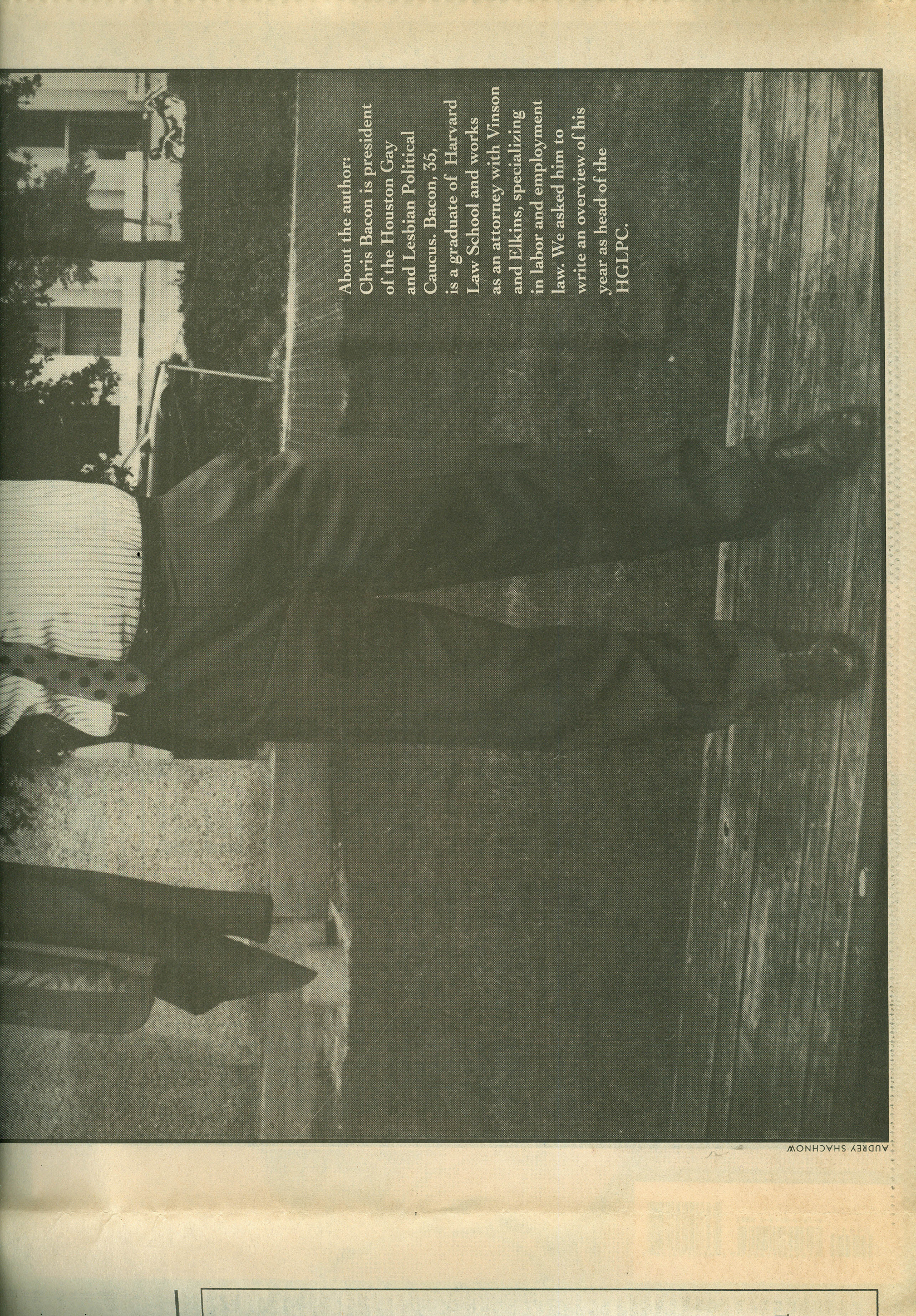
HE PIANIST IS playing Mendelssohn. A group of several hundred men and a handful of women are holding their monthly dinner meeting of college professors and businessmen. Some have their own businesses, but many work for Houston's best-known corporations, law firms and universities. They primarily meet to network and socialize, but they also take on their share of charitable projects. Like most

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About the author:
Chris Bacon is president
of the Houston Grav



About the author:
Chris Bacon is president
of the Houston Gay
and Lesbian Political
Caucus. Bacon, 35,
is a graduate of Harvard
Law School and works
as an attorney with Vinson
and Elkins, specializing
in labor and employment
law. We asked him to
write an overview of his
year as head of the
HGLPC.



F. CARTER SMITH

Gay politics in Houston hit its high point as Mayor Kathy Whitmire celebrated her 1981 victory with supporters at the Parade Disco in Montrose.

business organizations the group is predominantly male and white.

They are also gay.

As coffee is served at the Ritz-Carlton, in another part of town 70 young men and women, mostly in their twenties, are arguing loudly in a brightly lit and overheated room. Several of the men sport long sideburns adorned by even longer earrings.

Though a man and a woman have been designated as facilitators (gender and ethnic parity are *de rigueur* here), there is little order in the discussion. The topic for tonight is the upcoming

I have not but that I hope to see *Howard's End* this weekend. Before I can finish Norman has drifted off and is oblivious to my presence. Minutes later he awakens again and starts mumbling.

In the mid-'80s Norman had been one of the most visible gay activists in Houston. He had served as President of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus (HGLPC), the position I now hold. In my dining room I have a picture of Norman at the height of his activist career displaying his muscular dark frame and contagious grin wrapped in an Armani suit. Now he is gaunt and

already infected with the devastating virus that would alter gay activist politics over the next decade.

Sure, AIDS is everyone's problem, but in a community where maybe half of the men are infected, AIDS becomes an obsession.

Some argue that AIDS has weakened the power of the gay community, and they are certainly correct insofar as our community has suffered a tremendous loss of human talent. But it would be wrong to conclude that the struggle to cope with AIDS has eclipsed traditional gay and lesbian issues such as

candidates recognize the power of HGLPC's 10,000-plus mailing list.

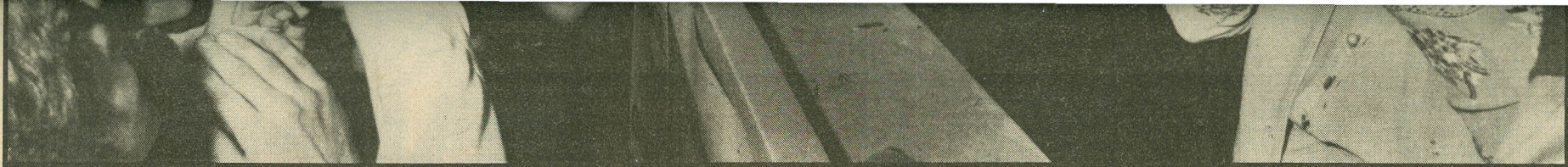
The election of Mayor Bob Lanier is an indication of the change. Lanier took no time in firing, for example, the much-despised city health director, John Arradondo, who had long offended gay and AIDS activists with his incompetence and insensitivity. Lanier has also shown a willingness to speak up on the AIDS issue.

Lanier has come a long way in terms of awareness of gay and lesbian issues since he appeared before the HGLPC as a freshly announced candidate. The future mayor was clearly

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F. CARTER SMITH

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Though a man and a woman have been designated as facilitators (gender and ethnic parity are *de rigueur* here), there is little order in the discussion. The topic for tonight is the upcoming Republican National Convention — the media opportunity of a lifetime for Houston's most radical gay and lesbian group. The members of Queer Nation, unrestrained in their expressions of anger towards George Bush, excitedly brainstorm on strategies of disruption.

One could not imagine two more different crowds; yet each, in its own way, is attempting to create change in a society that has long ostracized people because of their affectional preference. Both share common experiences. Regardless of their education, race, socioeconomic or even HIV status, gays and lesbians are often rejected by their families, verbally assaulted, fired from their jobs, denied health benefits, denied custody of their children, harassed by police, falsely imprisoned, discriminated against and denied entry into the country solely because of their sexual orientation. Many have also watched friends die.

Later that night I sit in a dark room at Twelve Oaks Hospital.

The only light in the room comes from the hallway. My friend Norman lies dying. For a few minutes he seems to recognize me and asks lucidly if I have seen any movies recently. I tell him that

I have not but that I hope to see *Howard's End* this weekend. Before I can finish Norman has drifted off and is oblivious to my presence. Minutes later he awakens again and starts mumbling.

In the mid-'80s Norman had been one of the most visible gay activists in Houston. He had served as President of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus (HGLPC), the position I now hold. In my dining room I have a picture of Norman at the height of his activist career displaying his muscular dark frame and contagious grin wrapped in an Armani suit. Now he is gaunt and unshaven. Every few minutes he has a minor seizure. I hold his hand.

Houston in 1992 is very different from the Houston of a decade ago, when Kathy Whitmire had just been elected to office. That was a time of unbridled optimism, an age of innocence for the gay and lesbian community. Its members were an integral part of the coalition that elected the new mayor, and positive change seemed inevitable. Some things did change for the better (the police ceased their periodic raids of Houston's gay bars, for example), but Montrose hardly became the Gay Camelot. The young mayor would keep a cautious distance from her gay supporters and relations between them and city hall would eventually chill. But on the night of Whitmire's runoff victory over Sheriff Jack Heard, she celebrated with gay supporters at the Parade Disco on Richmond. It would have been impossible then to foresee the 1985 referendum in which the citizenry of Houston overwhelmingly rejected a city ordinance prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. Nor could anyone in that crowd suspect that many of the men cheering Kathy's victory were

already infected with the devastating virus that would alter gay activist politics over the next decade.

Sure, AIDS is everyone's problem, but in a community where maybe half of the men are infected, AIDS becomes an obsession.

Some argue that AIDS has weakened the power of the gay community, and they are certainly correct insofar as our community has suffered a tremendous loss of human talent. But it would be wrong to conclude that the struggle to cope with AIDS has eclipsed traditional gay and lesbian issues such as custody rights, the decriminalization of sodomy, anti-discrimination ordinances, hate crimes legislation and the legal recognition of our relationships.

And amid the suffering there has been achievement.

Few communities have reacted with as much compassion, intelligence and organization to a crisis as the gay community has in dealing with the AIDS crisis. Every gay organization in Houston is preoccupied in some way or another with AIDS. Some raise money. Some provide services to persons with AIDS. Some educate. Some lobby government. Some demonstrate.

The Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus is the *grande dame* of Houston's gay organizations and it may be quieter today than it was a decade ago. HGLPC no longer engages in demonstration politics anymore, leaving that business to the younger Queer Nation. But HGLPC continues to exert its influence on local politics by using the more traditional tools of block walking, voter registration and phone banking. While several years ago many candidates avoided seeking the HGLPC endorsement, today most Democratic

candidates recognize the power of HGLPC's 10,000-plus mailing list.

The election of Mayor Bob Lanier is an indication of the change. Lanier took no time in firing, for example, the much-despised city health director, John Arradondo, who had long offended gay and AIDS activists with his incompetence and insensitivity. Lanier has also shown a willingness to speak up on the AIDS issue.

Lanier has come a long way in terms of awareness of gay and lesbian issues since he appeared before the HGLPC as a freshly announced candidate. The future mayor was clearly uncomfortable as six members of HGLPC questioned him on a variety of issues ranging from the city's failure to provide adequate education for AIDS prevention to the police department's unwritten hiring policy that discriminates against gays and lesbians. Lanier, a political novice at that time, had been poorly briefed for the occasion and was ignorant on the issues.

It didn't help matters that he was stuttering badly and sweating like Richard Nixon. At one point, one of the interviewers, clearly exasperated with the unending discussions of Lanier's business experience, blurted out, "Mr. Lanier, do you know any gay people?" After a long silence, Lanier slowly responded: "You've got to realize that I am 67 years old. When I was younger we didn't know that such *things* existed."

To his credit, the mayor learns quickly. During his runoff campaign against Sylvester Turner, Lanier shocked mainstream activists when he invited a contingent of Queer Nationalists to meet with him in his River Oaks mansion. A love feast between Jesse Jackson and Newt Gingrich would not have

THE CHANGING FACE OF GAY POLITICS

Chris Bacon tells
how he found a new career
and a political voice

INTERVIEW BY TIM FLECK

WT

I think there was always the guilt that comes from Old Testament passages.

I guess I denied it to myself for a long time.

One of the reasons I left teaching was that when I finally decided I was gay, I was not in the best environment to be true to myself. It wasn't until I was at Harvard Law School when I fell in love for the first time. Harvard was a very good place to come out.

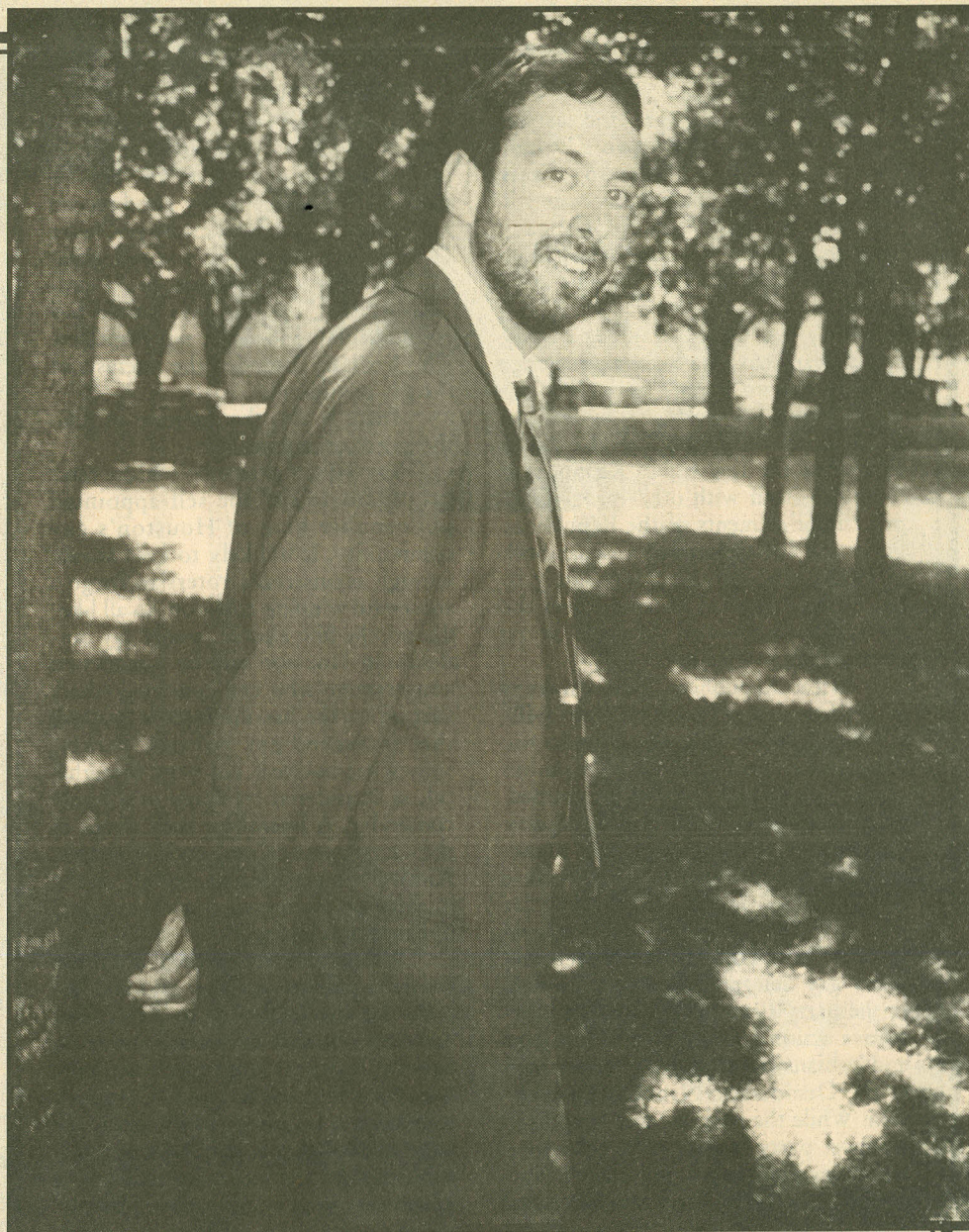
that. You really can't be yourself, and you have to worry you'll be discovered.

How difficult was it to be totally honest with your family?

My family was never a problem. My parents are highly educated, and I'm very fortunate that was not a battle I had to deal with. I had to explain partly because I sent conflicting messages for so many years. I had girlfriends. I think my family was not entirely surprised,

ate an imaginary life and imaginary girlfriends. I'm afraid that no matter how challenging and interesting one's job may be, I don't think that working in a place where you cannot develop friendships with your peers because you are afraid they might find out who you really are... that can be very disconcerting.

Unfortunately this is a pattern not only in law firms but in much of corporate America. We're beginning to see things change. Gradually, some law



AUDREY SHACHNOW

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Chris Bacon tells
how he found a new career
and a political voice

INTERVIEW BY TIM FLECK

WHEN DID

you realize you were gay?

CHRIS BACON: As much as I thought I knew myself, it wasn't until my late 20s that I finally acknowledged that I was gay. I guess I spent a good part of my first 28 years fooling everyone: my family, my girlfriends, my employer, and even myself. I think from time to time the thought that I might be gay entered my mind, but I would dismiss it for a variety of reasons. At that time I was teaching high school in Baytown, and the thought of being gay was a complicating factor in that particular career. And although I didn't grow up in a religious family, I had a flirtation with fundamentalism in my college years, and

I think there was always the guilt that comes from Old Testament passages.

I guess I denied it to myself for a long time.

One of the reasons I left teaching was that when I finally decided I was gay, I was not in the best environment to be true to myself. It wasn't until I was at Harvard Law School when I fell in love for the first time. Harvard was a very good place to come out.

Why did you pick the legal profession for a career change?

I'm not going to say that being gay had everything to do with me leaving teaching. I think I was beginning to suffer burnout from teaching, and I wanted a change. Going to law school gave me an opportunity to get into who I was.

A lot of journalists go to law school because they realize they're never going to make real money where they are. Was money a factor for you?

Actually, it was not. Once I decided I was a gay man, I felt that the law was probably one profession where you have more protections. It certainly is one of the more tolerant professions, and maybe that was part of it. And also, I found the law interesting. I felt that as an attorney, I could be more of an agent for change than as a school teacher, although I think school teaching does play a valuable role in society... a lot of young gay persons would benefit from having role models in the classroom, and generally they are deprived of that. Many professionals in the teaching and other professions choose to be discreet and quiet, and there's a price you pay for

that. You really can't be yourself, and you have to worry you'll be discovered.

How difficult was it to be totally honest with your family?

My family was never a problem. My parents are highly educated, and I'm very fortunate that was not a battle I had to deal with. I had to explain partly because I sent conflicting messages for so many years. I had girlfriends. I think my family was not entirely surprised, but I think I had to explain to them to set the record straight. But that was never an issue with either of my parents, and they have always been supportive of me.

When you came to Vinson and Elkins, were they fully aware you were gay and perhaps would be an activist on that issue in Houston?

I made a point of discussing my sexual orientation with the partners in the section where I work before I came to work here. To this firm's credit, they have never been concerned about my personal life. Their big concern is the quality of work I produce. I'd like to say this firm is typical of major law firms, but I doubt it is.

I have many friends who are in other major law firms in Houston who are convinced that if they were to reveal their sexual orientation they would be terminated. I have a friend who recently lost a lover to AIDS. It's very painful when you're going through the turmoil of nursing someone who is your most important person in life and yet at the same time you are afraid to ask for a leave of absence. You feel forced to cre-

ate an imaginary life and imaginary girlfriends. I'm afraid that no matter how challenging and interesting one's job may be, I don't think that working in a place where you cannot develop friendships with your peers because you are afraid they might find out who you really are... that can be very disconcerting.

Unfortunately this is a pattern not only in law firms but in much of corporate America. We're beginning to see things change. Gradually, some law firms and corporations are changing their attitudes.

I'm very comfortable in sharing my life with the people that I work with in my department. [But] I work in a huge firm. My guess is that there are some people who are not keen on the high profile that I have as a gay activist. That's okay. When you work in such a large place, there are people I'm not too crazy about in the law firm.

V&E has a tradition of civic involvement in a lot of areas. Perhaps you're just on some new frontiers?

Historically this is probably a far more diverse firm than a lot of the big firms. Some of the major law firms in Houston resemble the Nixon White House, whereas Vinson & Elkins prides itself on the fact that it has people that are very involved in both political parties and a multitude of activities. Nevertheless, I realize I probably do sometimes walk a thin line by working as a high-profile gay activist and in a traditional top-notch law firm. I try to be sensitive to that, and I certainly do not want to embarrass the firm, and that is why I usually avoid their name being



AUDREY SHACHNOW

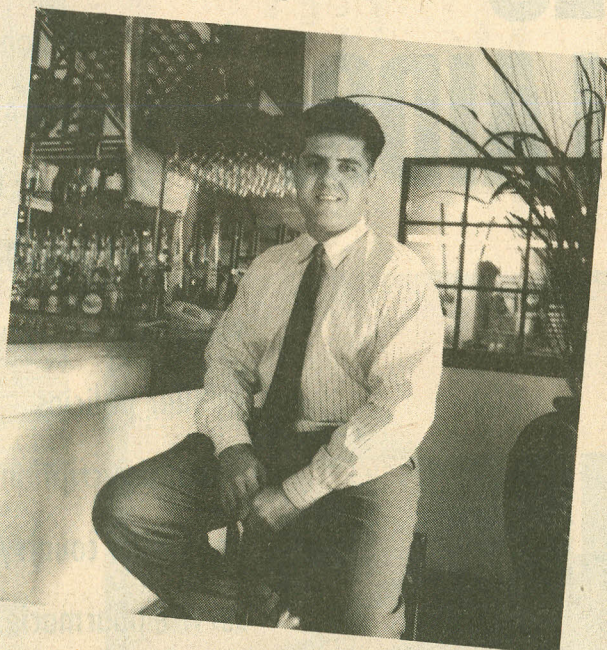
"I know lots of people are reading the PRESS because they're always telling me, 'Hey, I saw your great ad.' "

— ALDO
Owner/Partner
**LA STRADA,
GALAXY DINER & BAR**

"I have two completely different types of restaurants: **La Strada**, a well-established restaurant for fine dining that's fun, and **The Galaxy Diner & Bar**, a brand-new restaurant that serves up low-priced 'diner' food 24 hours a day.

"My ads in the **HOUSTON PRESS** work *very* well for *both* places, so we know the paper's got a good cross-section of readers of all ages. People come at different times for different reasons, but we seem to touch them all through the **PRESS**.

"The ads for **La Strada** work to keep our image up and our name out there, and that's important. For instance, my wife and I have several favorite restaurants that we just *forget* to go to, but our **PRESS** ads constantly remind people that **La Strada's** here, and that we make great pasta. I *know* lots of people are reading the **PRESS** because they're always telling me, "Hey, I saw your great ad."



mentioned. They did not choose to become involved in gay politics; it was my choice.

Do you have a personal radar for homophobes?

I think many people are uncomfortable with gay people, but I don't think the discomfort stems from homophobia or hatred all the time. It stems from lack of experience or lack of knowledge.

In the same way some whites are uncomfortable in the presence of blacks?

Yeah. To give you an anecdote, one law-firm associate once told me that he really enjoyed the friendship he had developed with me. "You know," he said, "you're the only gay person I've ever known." I said, "My guess is that you've known quite a few, but I'm the only one you've ever been able to identify." This is a very educated person, someone who had been in the Navy, and he was in his mid-thirties. It sometimes is amazing to me that someone could go through life [and think] I was the first gay person they ever met.

That's why I say that the most effective activism we will have in the '90s will be those people who choose to be out in a very normal way. That is really how you effect change, when people get to know you and work side by side with you. It just happens to be an additional fact you are gay. They begin to see you not as some monster but rather just as a person. The kids who came in from the Woodlands and murdered Paul Broussard dehumanize gays and lesbians — they do not realize these are people of flesh and blood. When you realize gays and lesbians are everywhere, in your schools and your families, in the workplace, then you begin to view people differently. It's exactly like white people dealing with black people. One of our problems is that we tend to live in different worlds, and we don't understand and give a chance to people with different backgrounds.

The Queer Nation folks obviously

tion. They are very impatient, and they have come to the point where they are not going to compromise, and they really don't care if the heterosexual world likes them. They are going to demand their place whether it's given to them or not. There's a nice ring to that, but it's not realistic, and sometimes they can actually create a greater backlash than there had been originally.

With the Republican convention coming up, the media will likely focus on every confrontive action. Queer Nation will likely be a major part of that...

I tell you, the things I like best about Queer Nation is when they do things with humor. In their early days in Houston their demonstrations were probably gentler and less angry.... Although there is a time and place for anger, sometimes it causes people just to close up completely and not hear the message.

Queer Nation also serves the purpose of making a lot of the moderate groups look a lot better. Take an organization like the Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus, which Queer Nation has frequently attacked as being an establishment and a sell-out organization. They've also made us somewhat more effective, because when we call on city council or when we want to talk to people in the legislature, we're considered very much a mainstream, ordinary group. We may not have been considered that except for the fact Queer Nation had made waves prior to that. Sometimes they sort of adopt a bad-cop role, making us the good cops.

Queer Nation's style is not my style, nor is Malcolm X's style my style. Yet Malcolm X played an important role in black politics, and you need a variety of strategies to effect change.

The Republicans are apparently tuning up to wage a Presidential campaign based on family values. That seems to be a phrase loaded with different meanings for different people. Mothers without husbands have already been slapped

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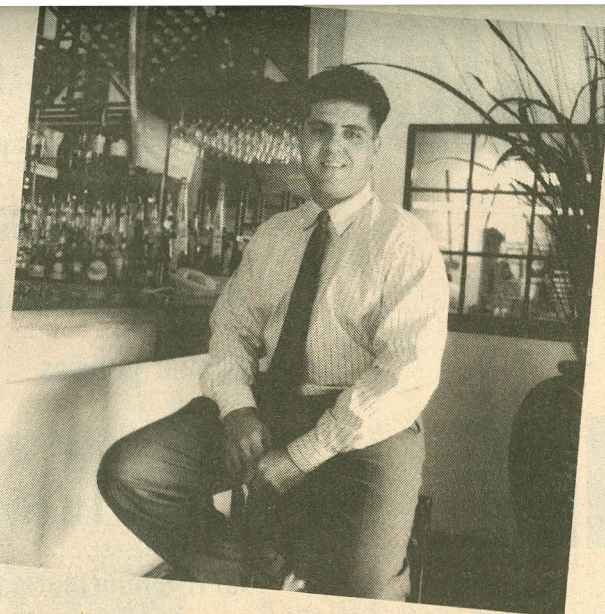
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"At the **Galaxy**, our **PRESS** ads work more directly to bring in new customers. We do more of a 'punch-type' ad that'll feature a daily or a weekly special. The **Galaxy**'s kind of a 'Diner For The 90's.' Besides the regular great stuff we have things like a 'No-Bull Sandwich' without meat that appeals to the more health-conscious readers of the **PRESS**.

"I ran one ad featuring a Thursday Happy Hour — the day the **PRESS** comes out — and had the best Happy Hour I've ever had. It was a jammin' little party, so I can tell you from experience that advertising in the **PRESS** works.

"It *definitely* works every week for us."

THE HOUSTON PRESS It's Good For Business



That's why I say that the most effective activism we will have in the '90s will be those people who choose to be out in a very normal way. That is really how you effect change, when people get to know you and work side by side with you. It just happens to be an additional fact you are gay. They begin to see you not as some monster but rather just as a person. The kids who came in from the Woodlands and murdered Paul Broussard dehumanize gays and lesbians — they do not realize these are people of flesh and blood. When you realize gays and lesbians are everywhere, in your schools and your families, in the workplace, then you begin to view people differently. It's exactly like white people dealing with black people. One of our problems is that we tend to live in different worlds, and we don't understand and give a chance to people with different backgrounds.

The Queer Nation folks obviously have a different philosophy in trying to fling terms like "queer" that have been used as epithets or terms of hatred back at straights, in much the way that some blacks have made the word "nigger" a term of pride and defiance. How do you feel about that in-your-face strategy?

I have very mixed feelings. I am glad that they have done such a good job of identifying the issues, and I think that's probably Queer Nation's most important role. Some of these issues would never have been addressed had they not made a commotion. Unfortunately, and I hate to use the media as a whipping boy, Queer Nation certainly is a much more attractive story than just the ordinary Joe Schmoe who happens to be gay. Because they use theatrics, temper-tantrum politics, they do draw media attention to issues. That's important, because if it weren't for Queer Nation, people might not know that gays are often beat up just because they are gay.

On the other hand, a lot of the members of Queer Nation are very young and they want instant gratifica-

tion. That's why I say that the most effective activism we will have in the '90s will be those people who choose to be out in a very normal way. That is really how you effect change, when people get to know you and work side by side with you. It just happens to be an additional fact you are gay. They begin to see you not as some monster but rather just as a person. The kids who came in from the Woodlands and murdered Paul Broussard dehumanize gays and lesbians — they do not realize these are people of flesh and blood. When you realize gays and lesbians are everywhere, in your schools and your families, in the workplace, then you begin to view people differently. It's exactly like white people dealing with black people. One of our problems is that we tend to live in different worlds, and we don't understand and give a chance to people with different backgrounds.

Queer Nation's style is not my style, nor is Malcolm X's style my style. Yet Malcolm X played an important role in black politics, and you need a variety of strategies to effect change.

The Republicans are apparently tuning up to wage a Presidential campaign based on family values. That seems to be a phrase loaded with different meanings for different people. Mothers without husbands have already been slapped — is there an anti-gay message as well?

Gay people cringe when they hear the term "family values," because it's used in the sense of the nuclear family that we see in Norman Rockwell paintings. That makes us uncomfortable, because families come in many shapes and sizes.

Gays and lesbians often make great efforts to create alternative families even when they are single. Part of it is a survival mechanism. Much more so than single straight people, gay people usually have a network of friends that take care of them, that they can spend holidays with, that will take care of them if they get sick. We've worked very hard at that because we've realized that is a survival skill that we need. These alternatives are families. I have created an alternative family.

I don't think a lot of us take Dan Quayle very seriously, but there's certainly an effort of the Bush-Quayle ticket to hold on to the conservative right. I don't think they're trying to alienate gay people. But certainly they have never been great friends of the gay and lesbian community.

AUDREY SHACHNOW



Viva—grandmother and erotic dancer—tends bar at Juliet's, assisted by her partner Maria (in background).

THE WOMEN'S ROOMS

A tour through Houston's "other" single-sex scene

BY ANN WALTON SIEBER

Missouri Street Station

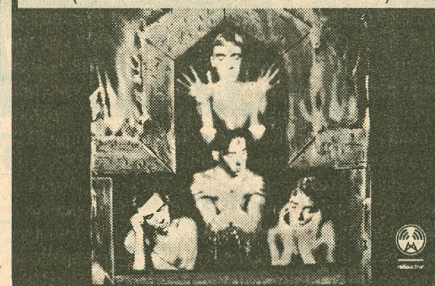
just off Montrose and Westheimer are lined with cars and women walking

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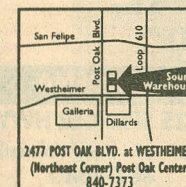
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ROOMS

A tour through Houston's "other" single-sex scene

BY ANN WALTON SIEBER

Missouri Street Station

I Throughout my life one thing's been evident, One thing's been thoroughly clear My lust for women can't be denied That's right, I'm thoroughly queer.

— Diane Williams

IT'S CALLED THE Professional Women's Network, but it's really just a bar scene. Every Wednesday, the streets and sidestreets

just off Montrose and Westheimer are lined with cars and women walking from vehicles, creating that charged "this is the place to be" feeling long before you actually get to the din inside the patio-style bar. In my evening there, I met an activist, a pipeline inspector, a court reporter and an "image consultant." But no one seemed especially interested in talking about her profession, especially to a reporter with a pad in hand, since many of the women don't feel safe enough to be "out" at work.

This is the Missouri Street Station, and it is the place of choice early in the evening. Later in the night the scene will shift to Bacchus II. Then come Thursday as the sun goes down, the place is Juliet's, where comedian Nancy Ford holds forth on an open mike. And the club for the weekend is the Ranch, whose three-bars-in-one are legendary for drawing in an average of 800 women a night.

These four bars are one of the important ways for lesbians in Houston to meet each other, although of course not the only way. Finding each other has always been a dilemma for the gay community, especially since

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Greenspoint Mall
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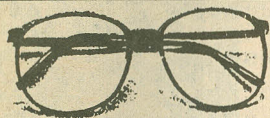
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11266 FONDREN
(Target Center)
271-3995

ROSENBERG

1102 HERNDON
(Lamar Plaza)
342-3995

PASADENA

6825 SPENCER HWY.
(Across St. from Walmart)
487-8080

Denis'

lesbians have a sort of "other gay population" status. Their low visibility relative to male gays in the eyes of mainstream culture can be frustrating.

"You can get on the train at many points," says Skye Strider, who has worked for two years at the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, a resource for both crises and good times. "You start to meet people and you get on mailing lists and what not. It's just that getting on the train can be difficult."

Although many things have changed in the lesbian community, "there probably are the same number of bars," comments Pokey Anderson, the owner of Inklings bookstore and comoderator for twelve years of the Friday morning *Breakthrough* show on KPFT — both community touchstones. In fact, there didn't used to be anything *but* bars if lesbians wanted to meet as lesbians.

"There weren't any lesbian groups," Pokey says. "No switchboard, no bookstore. [Back in the '70s], I'd be sort of like a ping-pong ball — I'd go over to NOW... then when I'd get tired of explaining to women what it was like to be gay, I'd go to the gay male groups and explain what it was like to be a woman. I could have one or the other."

Getting on the Train

THE SUNSET is dramatically visible through Missouri Street's ceiling-high picture windows as we get on this evening's train. The building inside and out is painted a sedate forest green on white. The bartenders are all men — tall and lanky with artsy hair. The black woman DJ in a back booth wears a T-shirt that says "Fuck What You Heard." There are ceiling fans and red lights; the noise level makes it difficult to converse.

To move through the crowd at Missouri Street is a sensual experience: a hand placed on a shoulder to gain passage, sliding between a trim athletic

a running spat, but it's not about flirting. It's whether they're going to see *Patriot Games* that evening. They have only come out to the bar tonight to talk to me, to give me some perspective on lesbian couples.

Samantha is a court reporter. Gwen used to work in a shipyard until she and Gwen fell in love. They decided that Gwen should quit her job so they could spend more time together. "She's my housewife and mother," Samantha says affectionately, rubbing the inside of Gwen's blue jean-clad leg. "But she wants to do it," she adds quickly. "Oh I do," Gwen says seriously. Gwen cleans house and irons Samantha's suits; they do the cooking together. Samantha is teaching Gwen to edit her depositions — again, with the goal of having more time together.

They've only been together for six months, but are both certain it will be forever. They fell in love in Galveston, at Dickens on the Strand. They smile a lot, especially when they look at each other. The word "adore" comes to mind.

Samantha and Gwen are a happy example of a U-Haul relationship, as defined in a joke I heard several times in the course of the evening. What does a lesbian bring on the first date? Flowers, candy, the regular. What does a lesbian bring on the second date? A U-Haul and everything she owns.

I'm told that lesbians tend to fall in love fast, and then stay with their love for a long time. Why is this? "Lesbians have a real impetus towards monogamy," says Skye Strider. "The community is not that big. It's just harder to find someone. Especially if you're more educated, then you're a subgroup within a subgroup."

Skye tells me about something she jokingly calls "gaydar," that sense by which lesbians find each other in a crowd of straights. Skye says one sign is when straight women meet your eyes, they usually glance away, anxious not to seem rude. Gay women, on the other hand, will connect with a knowing gaze of recognition. Or an odd number of earrings. Skye has two in her left ear, one in her right.

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To move through the crowd at Missouri Street is a sensual experience: a hand placed on a shoulder to gain passage, sliding between a trim athletic front of one woman and the ample back of another. It is a genteel sort of cruising. The more overt cruising comes later.

"All the women know to come here to cruise," says Samantha, an outgoing woman who shares her tanned beer-advertisement beauty (minus the sense of phoniness) with her lover Gwen, along for the ride tonight (these are not their real names). "The people who they were too afraid to talk to, first you meet here, then you have a few drinks and go over to Bacchus."

Bacchus II is walking distance around the corner, a not-ferny-in-the-least-bit bar with pink and aqua beach scenes painted on its windowless inside walls. The drinks are cheaper and stronger than at Missouri Street.

Samantha and Gwen don't usually go out to bars.

"Couples who go out to bars fight," Samantha explains. "What need is there to go to a bar? If you were married, would you go to a bar with your husband? You'd just fight because you think people are flirting with him." Samantha and Gwen are indeed having

defined in a joke I heard several times in the course of the evening. What does a lesbian bring on the first date? Flowers, candy, the regular. What does a lesbian bring on the second date? A U-Haul and everything she owns.

I'm told that lesbians tend to fall in love fast, and then stay with their love for a long time. Why is this? "Lesbians have a real impetus towards monogamy," says Skye Strider. "The community is not that big. It's just harder to find someone. Especially if you're more educated, then you're a subgroup within a subgroup."

Skye tells me about something she jokingly calls "gaydar," that sense by which lesbians find each other in a crowd of straights. Skye says one sign is when straight women meet your eyes, they usually glance away, anxious not to seem rude. Gay women, on the other hand, will connect with a knowing gaze of recognition. Or an odd number of earrings. Skye has two in her left ear, one in her right.

I'd "met" Skye earlier that day when a friend was showing me Houston's gay computer bulletin boards. There are two main gay and lesbian switchboards, Houston Alternative Lifestyle (HAL) and Exchange. Each is limited to gays and bisexuals only. The categories vary — from "Kinky Fantasies" and "The Dungeon," to "Relationships," and "Hunting/Fishing/Camping."

The only exclusively women's category is "Ladies Leather and Lace," which consists of erotic compositions and reader appreciation. ("The beauty of this particular small sports car is that it has an unusually placed gear-shift box...")

I ENCOUNTERED Skye Strider (her pseudonym on the Exchange) on the network as she chatted with her girlfriend Legal Bear; Skye was at work, and Legal Bear was using a computer at her law school. I'd never done an interview via keyboard before. I asked if the women on the bulletin board knew each other out in the real world.

Legal Bear: "Most lesbians who've

been out for a while will meet each other relatively quickly. Unfortunately there aren't ENOUGH women out here — we're always trying to recruit more (hint, hint)."

Skye Stryder: "Sometimes it's difficult to 'break into' groups of lesbians in the real world."

LB: "UGH — They're so damned cliquish."

SS: "They? Dear, we is they."

LB: "Oh right — we're the subculture. I forgot. {grin}"

SS: "Funny I always thought THEY were the weirdos?"

LB: "THEY outnumber us."

SS: "One thing about this mode of communication is that one can be a LOT more outgoing... something about it feels 'safer' than striking up a conversation in a bar of something."

In person at Missouri Street, Skye is formal but still funny. Her hair is cut boyishly short, she wears a buttondown men's shirt, a wide men's belt and heavy black shoes. Her fair skin and petite features put one in mind of a pretty young man. Skye and Legal Bear also sound as if they're a bit on the U-Haul side. She listens as Samantha and Gwen talk about a complication in their relationship.

Seven years ago, Samantha became a Christian, and felt drawn toward the Baptists. As a result, she believes that God finds homosexuality to be an "abomination." Indeed, any sex outside marriage is "absolutely an abomination, male or female." As a result, she and Gwen are trying to eliminate sex; so far, they've been successful in cutting way



AUDREY SHACHNOW

Men with artsy haircuts tend bar for the Missouri Street Station's Professional Women's Network on Wednesdays.

back, but not cutting it out entirely. I say it must be very hard. "Oh it is, it really is," Samantha says earnestly. "But God knows we're trying and that's what counts. In Judgment, he'll look at us and say 'you all were so in love and you only had sex every two weeks, you must really love me.'" As Skye is listening to this, she makes a motion to me that she is biting her tongue. "Do I have any left?" she jokes. "It's a bad thing for a lesbian to bite her tongue." It seemed like a good time to move on to Bacchus.

Bacchus

BACCHUS II IS OWNED by a man, which may be why it is named after a male god. Still, it's always been a woman's bar, even back when it was the original Bacchus on Lovett, down from KPFT.

I walk over with Diane (her real name). I met Diane at the Queer Pride meeting the night before, and she offered to be my lesbian tour guide. Although

she's only 25, she seems involved in just about every gay media outlet in town. Like Samantha and many other women I meet, Diane wears a cross around her neck. She views religion and homosexuality from a different perspective than Samantha.

When Diane was growing up, she had a very close friend with whom she did everything; the two even lost their virginity around the same time. While they were teenagers, they lost track of each other for three years, during which time Diane realized she was gay. She moved in with her lover and had a steady job managing a video store. One day her childhood friend called, looking for help. She was eight months pregnant and needed a place to get away from her boyfriend, who was beating her up and doing drugs. The friend brought over her bottle of Jack Daniels, and told Diane that she was drinking and doing cocaine, despite being pregnant. However, when she figured out Diane was gay, she began condemning her and saying she was going to go to hell.

"I just couldn't understand that at all," Diane said.

We go into Bacchus and Diane is explaining to me how she didn't like the women's bars at first because she thought they were sleazy. A woman flings her arms around Diane from behind and squeezes. Diane laughs in greeting. The woman is young and has a little black X marked near her pulse. I can't hear over the music exactly what the X signifies, but when you press it, she lunges at you — although in my case



They
put
down
their

You're only as sick as your secrets, recovering alcoholics say. And Musette, Charlie and Gwen all have ghosts in their pasts, ghosts they have desperately tried to lay to rest in a haze of alcohol. When each of these women begins the struggle to stay sober, their paths, and their secrets, are destined to collide—and each of them finds that sometimes you have to break a heart in order to heal it.

the lunge seemed more polite than lusty.

The crowd is a mixture of old and young, dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts tucked in. Although it doesn't seem possible to generalize, three young women tell me the crowd over at the Ranch is younger and prettier. Excited about being interviewed, they're like people acting up for a TV camera.

"Lesbians are the greatest!" yells one, who is wearing a baseball cap.

"Straight people aren't going to understand it no matter what you write!" says her friend, who looks like a freshman college student.

"The most beautiful women you ever seen are gay women!" says the third, a pretty girl with curly hair and a beaming, sweaty face.

"Like her," the student says, pointing to a tall woman a few paces away.

"I'm in love with her!" says the baseball cap.

I ask if what's considered beautiful in the gay community is the same as what's considered beautiful in the straight community — big breasts, thin, small hips.

"You bet!" they chorus.

"Tits and ass!"

"But with women, it's more of an emotional than a sexual relationship," the student says, calming down.

"Yeah," the curly haired one says. "You don't just hop from one girl to another."

"Women tend to stay together a lot longer," says the baseball cap, "and they're a lot tougher when they break."

"I CAME OUT WHEN MY KIDS WERE FOUR AND FIVE YEARS OLD," VIVA SAYS. "THEY'VE BASICALLY ALWAYS HAD TWO MOTHERS; AND MY GRANDKIDS, THEY'VE HAD THREE GRANDMOTHERS."

A tall, emotionless black man passes though the crowd with single roses for sale. A young hip-looking woman who looks like she'd qualify as attractive in

the straight youth culture is dancing on a raised pedestal in black loafers and rolled-up jean shorts. It's your basic dancing and drinking scene: the B-52s

"Love Shack" is playing, and the owner of Juliet's is here, playing with the Juliet's pool team in a tournament against the team from Bacchus. Diane looks at herself in a mirror: "I'm having a bad hair day and I didn't even know it."

Juliet's

JULIET'S GOT ITS NAME from the women's bar that preceded it, Romeo's. Before Romeo's, the bar (located on Richmond just east of Montrose) was Just Marion and Lynn's, a Houston institution. Both Marion and Lynn were mainstays of the lesbian community throughout the '70s and '80s, until one night Marion was fatally shot in a robbery attempt in the bar. Hundreds of women came to her funeral. Marion was a large woman, an old-style lesbian in her gruff, manly demeanor, who would always make sure she said a few words of welcome to newcomers. She collected clowns; several clown paintings remain on the walls at Juliet's in tribute.

When we enter, we're greeted by Viva the bartender, a short black woman who looks to be in her late 40s or early 50s.

"How are you?" I ask.

"I'd be doing great if I didn't need to go to the bathroom so bad," she says. We assure her our drink order is not so pressing it can't wait until she relieves herself. "Hallelujah," she says and runs off. After she returns and makes our

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drinks, she gets a big flashlight and props herself on top of the beer cooler to show us pictures of her grandchildren.

"To say she's proud is an understatement," says Diane, using "pride" in a different context than I've heard it used all week, Pride Week.

"I came out when my kids were four and five years old," Viva says. "They've basically always had two mothers; and my grandkids, they've had three grandmothers." She is wearing an oversized red T-shirt with shiny beads sewn in a pattern on the front; hoop earrings with teddy bears dangle from her ears.

Maria, Viva's longtime partner, is working the deejay booth for the dozen or so people in the bar. Maria comes and gets a drink while Viva is showing off her pictures. She is a handsome woman, a little intimidating, in a denim vest covered with brads. They were united seven years ago in a binding ceremony, the leather community's equivalent of a marriage.

"My grandkids — now this is what *they* say — their father's mother is the *mean* granny, Maria is the big granny, and I'm the little dark granny." One of Viva's granddaughters is named Alegria-Maria, a combination of the names of her daughter and her lover. She says she and Maria have never had any trouble as an interracial couple. "Except in Louisiana. That's a whole different thing."

The bar is a hodgepodge of decorations. In addition to the clowns, there are several Nagel prints. A plaster bust of some unrecognizable woman, complete with breasts, looks down from a shelf near the black ceiling. A calendar gives background on Dorothea Dix, who "healed more sick than Florence Nightengale." An automated dart board has a sticker on the floor marking the throw line, "The Bull Starts Here," a double meaning doubtless not intended by the sticker's author. The bathroom doors, both M and F, have hand-lettered signs, "By law: Only '1

"We're family," says Viva. "It's a family bar. There's no pretention here. We allow people to be themselves here. It don't matter."

Sometimes Viva will perform for the benefits and shows. She does erotic dances, sometimes with snakes.

"Unfortunately people think reptiles are a phallic symbol, and they're not," she says. "They represent mother earth." She used to own a five-foot and an eight-foot snake. When she performs now, she borrows snakes.

Although she says without regret that she is in semi-retirement, Viva was named Mistress of Leather 1992 by the National Leather Association. I ask if that means she's into S&M. "That's what leather means," she says, without derision in her voice. "You don't just wear it." She toured for most of her adult life on the burlesque circuit as a "pseudo-voodoo" performer.

"It's pseudo because some of what I do is commercial and some is real," she says. "The energy is real." She says she's too old to perform professionally now. But more importantly, she says there's nowhere left to perform: all the old burlesque halls have been superseded by the topless bars.

"The art is gone," she says, propping herself back up on the beer cooler. She brings a sack of tortilla chips and a cup of jalapeño nacho sauce to share. "They started hiring high-school girls who thought they were making of lot of money if they got \$100 or \$200. They'd play three songs, about ten minutes — there'd be no continuity, just taking off their clothes without any art form to it. And they had to put up with so much bullshit. They'd be this far from a customer, putting up with maybe the customers touching them..." Viva hops down to mix a drink. She gives tiny controlled bumps to Maria's music as she walks. On her way back, she bobs her head back over the bar, enjoying the dramatic effect, "And I started out as a Playboy bunny."

We leave our barstools to go sit at a table with an image consultant we'd

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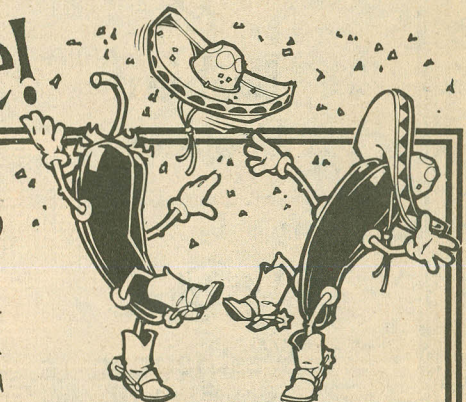
See Page 65

Herb's Here!

Herb Cilantro's

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June 26 & 27 RESOLUTION

They say that

IMITATION IS THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY

We're flattered. Really.

But when it comes to mental health services, wouldn't you rather have the original rather than a copy?

"My grandparents now this is what *they* say — their father's mother is the *mean* granny, Maria is the big granny, and I'm the little dark granny." One of Viva's granddaughters is named Alegra-Maria, a combination of the names of her daughter and her lover. She says she and Maria have never had any trouble as an interracial couple. "Except in Louisiana. That's a whole different thing."

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Several large, prominently placed posters warn: "If you think your chance of getting breast cancer is one in a million, the fact is it's ONE IN NINE." These are left over from a recent benefit for a customer who is close to dying of breast cancer. In another benefit for an older customer who was sick and has since died, one of the bar regulars wrote a play about the woman. Many Juliet regulars are older members of the lesbian community. They seem as though they have found a corner away from a not-very-welcoming mainstream, and they are just going to leave it at that. "No comment," a woman with a slightly weathered face says to me with a wan smile when I explain I'm putting together a story, even though by that time of the night I myself am getting too tired to ask any more questions.

"I wanted to bring back the tradition of Just Marion and Lynns," says Juliet's owner, Betty Berkley. "Warm and friendly, just a neighborhood bar."

now. But more importantly, she says there's nowhere left to perform: all the old burlesque halls have been superceded by the topless bars.

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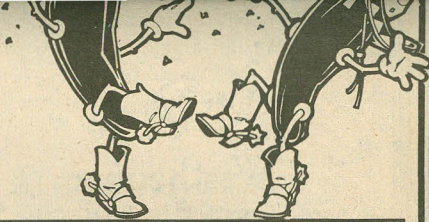
We leave our barstools to go sit at a table with an image consultant we'd met much earlier in the evening at Missouri Street. She is still mischievous and bright-eyed — I don't see how she does it. Maria, Viva's partner, is lit up in the deejay booth across the empty dance floor as she dances by herself, hands lifted to hold on to her headphones, eyes closed. Viva goes over to a microphone she has at the bar. "Turn it up!" she says, not an order but a joyous request.

I'm getting tired, and I'm tired of bars, straight or lesbian. I notice a shift in my perception. The entire evening, I've been assuming that pretty much every woman I've encountered is gay or bi, and it's beginning to feel like the dominant culture. This is the norm, the heterosexual way is the deviation. The following day, a coworker asks, "Did you see women kissing?" I realize I don't remember, I hadn't really noticed. For days following my bar crawl, the world looks gay. As I see women drive past me in their cars, or as I pass women in the supermarket or ride with women in the elevator where I work, I find myself assuming they are gay. I have to come back consciously in my thoughts and remind myself that they may well not be. But then again...

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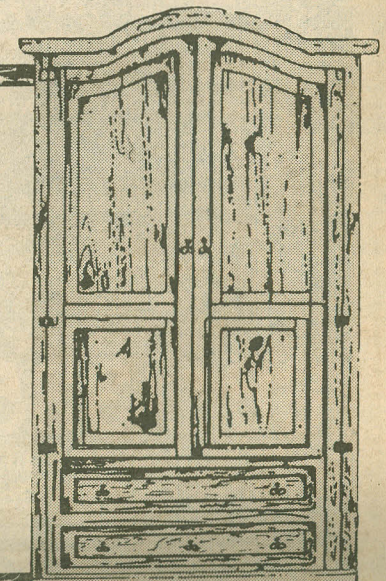
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THE BI'S AND WHEREFORES OF GROUP SEX

In porn and the personals, is the bisexual
wife mostly a male fantasy?

BY JENNIFER FARLEY

bisexuality has gone under deep cover, since most of the blame for the spread of heterosexual AIDS has been heaped onto the supposed legions of closeted husbands who sleep with boyfriends on the sly and then pass the virus onto their victimized wives. Judging from the mainstream media, male bisexuality is nearly unmentionable and dangerous; but women's, particularly married women's, can be affordably indulged.

Radio talk show host Jim Pruett admits that many of the women who call his show — especially "Married

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In porn and the personals, is the bisexual wife mostly a male fantasy?

BY JENNIFER FARLEY

A

RE married women who engage in threesomes with their husband and another woman really bisexual? Or is it that in some instances, both women are being exploited as performance artists while they indulge a male fantasy? If the risqué sex game is really not a male power play, why are comparatively few men willing to participate in a mostly-male threesome? And why have mostly male threesomes not made it into mainstream entertainment, while female ones have?

Experts say true bisexuality, among males or females, is rare. Yet the images of female bisexuality are served up for male enjoyment by Hollywood, skin magazines and on local airwaves by KLOL talk radio hosts Mark Stevens and Jim Pruett. Meanwhile male

bisexuality has gone under deep cover, since most of the blame for the spread of heterosexual AIDS has been heaped onto the supposed legions of closeted husbands who sleep with boyfriends on the sly and then pass the virus onto their victimized wives. Judging from the mainstream media, male bisexuality is nearly unmentionable and dangerous; but women's, particularly married women's, can be affordably indulged.

Radio talk show host Jim Pruett admits that many of the women who call his show — especially "Married With Fantasies" — call to talk about bisexual experiences and desires in order to please their men. Says Pruett: "It has a lot of appeal for our rock-and-roll, mostly male audience. I don't know why, it's just Never-Never Land." Pruett suggests that the double-standard acceptance of female bisexual behavior in threesomes has something to do with penetration, but also with "a very exciting and intriguing male fantasy."

"I think about 99.9 percent of men are into it," says Pruett, who brags, "I guess you could credit us with bringing female bisexuals to the air in Houston. They're just a lot of fun to talk to — so are the lesbians."

Historically, the taboo against female extramarital sex is rooted partly in property law. Men own it; women are it. But these days, anyway, a wife's lesbian affair is often tolerated by husband, whereas a male lover would be an acknowledged threat to the stability of the relationship. If a husband grants his permission, all is well. I know of three upper-middle-class married couples in which the wife has a long-term relationship with a female lover and the husband appears accepting. I would be

very surprised if the husband ever joins the wife and her lover in bed.

Quite different from these committed relationships are the threesome trysts that are the subject of much male fascination and speculation. Publications that accept all categories of personal ads are filled with requests for a female third party to help satisfy an allegedly ravenous bisexual wife, which seems a forced stereotype of the sexually active female. It's more likely the male's fantasy.

In mostly-female threesomes, the third party, the woman not involved in an established relationship with the man, seems at high risk for exploitation. The role offered her by the couple is often that of an object of their mutual desire, merely a vehicle for a couple's thrill-seeking. Coercion to participate in an erotic threesome with a husband and wife may also be on terms not dissimilar to prostitution. Most of the personal advertisements placed by couples seeking a third female sex partner often include references to housing, vacations and other financial incentives.

At Wish's Club, a popular suburban Houston nightspot, during the frequent "ladies-only dances," women are permitted, if not encouraged, to grind against one another in a sexually explicit manner while being observed by a gallery of mostly married men. There are no "gentlemen only" dances, and male-male contact will get patrons thrown out of the club. The club is known as a meeting ground for heterosexual couples who "swing." After paying a \$15 week-end night cover charge, couples are seat-

ed at four-top tables. The host, Bernard Wishnow, will arrange for unaccompanied couples of similar age and appearance to be seated at the same table. After that, you're on your own.

Across town at a lesbian club, the Ranch, heterosexual couples are welcome only so long as the male does not approach the female patrons in solicitation of a threesome. Says a spokesperson, "I say to each his own, but we don't put up with heterosexual men looking for a threesome going around and telling the other customers how beautiful and so on his wife is. It's just harassment. I don't care what they do in private, but I have the right to refuse service to anyone, and I'm telling you, if you aren't going to follow the rules, we don't want you in the bar."

According to a married male investment banker who has participated in mostly-female threesomes, "I think anytime you take something like this out into the public, the perception changes. You bring it out to where people can pass judgment, see it as exploitive, rather than looking at it as something sexual that happened among good friends." He says he thinks he'd be willing to participate in a mostly male two-on-one in which the activity was entirely heterosexual.

Says a woman who participated in a threesome with her husband and a relative stranger, "I guess I was a little curious, but to tell you the truth, it was really not all that big of a deal. My husband enjoyed it, I think, but I don't really think it's something we'd like, seek out,

to do again."

Is a threesome involving a married couple a violation of the marriage vows? In a conventionally moral or fundamental religious sense, most definitely. But according to a lawyer who has given the matter some thought, "The marriage vows are basically a contract, and so long as both parties agree to amend the terms of that contract, no, I don't think

so." He adds that if the stigma surrounding male homosexual experimentation were as diminished as it has become for women, he believes that plenty of married men would engage in similar experimental homosexual sex. But with their wives? I think not. And I don't think we'd see airbrushed pictures of male couplings in women's magazines, or hear war stories on the radio. □

PRIDE WEEK

Friday, June 26

TGRA PRIDE NIGHT Those wacky guys at the Texas Gay Rodeo Association are at it again with a bus tour of Houston bars plus a variety show at EJ's featuring TGRA members. 7 p.m.-1 a.m., EJ's, 2517 Ralph, 524-6344. Free.

A NIGHT IN BLACK LEATHER The National Leather Association will host a cocktail party featuring Houston's Hot IV '92, which will open Leather Pride Weekend. 10 p.m., Venture-N, 2923 Main, 526-0444. Free.

Saturday, June 27

BAGEL BLAST Bagel brunch sponsored by Mishpachot Alizim, an organization for Jewish gays and lesbians, their friends and families. 10 a.m., call for location, 520-7977. \$2.

GOLF TOURNAMENT The Ranch Texas Pride Invitational Golf Tournament benefiting Texas Human Rights Foundation. Tee off time is 11 a.m., Hermann Park Golf Course, 6201 Golf Course Dr., 956-8132. \$50 (includes green fees, T-shirt, box lunch, drinks and barbecue).

TEXAS PRIDE SCRAMBLE Another golf tournament in the name of gay and lesbian pride. This one's sponsored by Jersey Meadows

and will take place at 11 a.m. Tee-off fee is \$50.

LEATHER SYMPOSIUM Sponsored by the National Leather Association, this seminar will be a great way to learn more about the many uses of leather and the leather lifestyle. 2-5 p.m., Montrose Palace, 1505 Nevada at Commonwealth, 526-0444. Free.

PRIDE '92 CONCERT Featuring the Lone Star Symphonic Band and MCCR Choir and Soloist. 8 p.m., Rich's, 2401 San Jacinto, 527-0931. \$5.

BAILE '92 Annual Hispanic dance features the sounds of Elsa Garcia and Company with D.J. Adrian Viscarra, sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Hispanics Unidos. 9 p.m., Sheraton-Astrodome, 8686 Kirby at South Loop, 270-4548. Sponsored by the Gay & Lesbian Hispanics Unidos. \$15 advance, \$20 door.

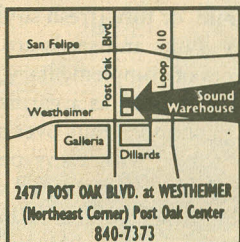
LEATHER AND EROTIC ART AND FANTASY NIGHT Local and state artists exhibit their erotic works. 10:30 p.m., Venture-N, 2923 Main, 526-0444. Free.

Sunday, June 28

PRIDE RALLY...NATURALLY Before and after the annual Houston Lesbian/Gay Parade, there will be entertainment, speeches and community booths. 3-8 p.m., parking lot at Mary's, 1022 Westheimer, 529-6979. Free.

HOUSTON LESBIAN/GAY PRIDE WEEK PARADE The highlight of Pride Week, this parade will feature bands, floats and lots of fun. 5 p.m., begins at Woodhead, down Westheimer. 529-6979. Free.

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