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# OCT. '20 **OutSmart** HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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## LABOR OF LOVE

Husbands  
Angel Cabrera and  
Brian Ponce cook up  
authentic Mexican  
fare in Spring Branch  
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**WINNERS INSIDE!**

**2020 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS**

# GAYEST & GREATEST

FEATURING

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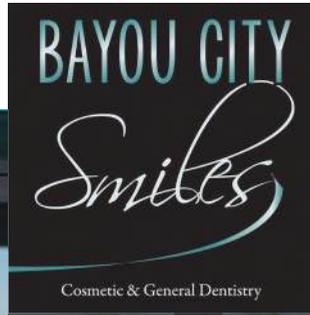
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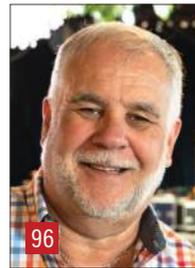
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- SignatureCare Emergency Center, *Best Urgent or Emergency Care Center; Best Rapid Covid-19 Testing Site*

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- Dalton DeHart, *Favorite Male Community Photographer*
- Out of the Closet/AIDS Healthcare Foundation, *Best Thrift Store*
- BUDDY'S, *Best Community Bar*
- Alley Theatre, *Best Regional Theatre*
- AIDS Foundation Houston, *Favorite HIV/AIDS Support Organization*
- Brooks Ballard, *Favorite Male Real Estate Agent*
- Cyber One Solutions, *Best Managed IT Services*
- David Alcorta Catering, *Best Wedding/Event Catering Firm; Best Wedding Cake Bakery*
- Kimberly Shockley, *Best Female Accountant/Bookkeeper*
- Lane Lewis, *Best Male Insurance Agent (tie)*
- Mad Hat Maven, *Best Creative Agency*
- Patrick Torma, *Best Male Insurance Agent (tie)*
- Dr. Roy Rivera Jr., *Best Male Physical Therapist*
- Shenice Brown, *Best Female Insurance Agent*
- Shan Randle, *Favorite Female Real Estate Agent*

#### RUNNERS UP

- Amegy Bank, *Best Houston Corporate Diversity Group; Best Mortgage Company; Most Supportive Local Business*
- EastWest Bank, *Best Bank*
- Houston Dynamo & Houston Dash, *Favorite Professional Sports Team*
- Houston Rockets, *Favorite Professional Sports Team*
- Regions Bank, *Best Bank*
- Shell, *Best Houston Corporate Diversity Group*
- SignatureCare, *Best Covid-19 Testing Site*
- United Airlines, *Best Airline*
- REFUGE Marketing & Consulting, *Best Creative Agency*
- Buddy's, *Most Supportive Local Business of the LGBTQ Community; Best Bar Steak Night; Best Happy Hour; Favorite Men's Bar*
- Dustin Harwell, *Best Male Insurance Agent*
- Tammi Wallace, *Best Female LGBTQ Businessperson; Favorite Female Community Hero*
- Christyna Lewis, *Best Female Financial Planner/Advisor*
- David Alcorta Catering, *Best Wedding/Event Catering Firm; Best Wedding Cake Bakery*
- Heather J. Taylor, *Best Female LGBTQ Businessperson; Favorite Female Community Hero*
- Jason Rocha, *Best Male Insurance Agent; Favorite Male Community Hero*
- Jennifer Majors Baca, *Best Female Insurance Agency*
- Dr. Randy Mitchmore, *Best Male Dentist*
- Phyllis Frye, *Favorite Trans Female Community Hero*
- Shane Theriot, *Best Male Financial Planner/Advisor*

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# 5 Must-Have Fall Accessories

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FOR YOUR FINGER | *Modern + Vintage Bands*

FOR YOUR LAPEL | *Vintage Cartier Nail Pin*

FOR YOUR WRIST | *Girard-Perregaux Vintage  
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FOR YOUR HOME | *Deakin & Francis Decanter*



# TENENBAUM JEWELERS

**M**arginalized communities have borne the brunt of Donald Trump's attacks on human rights since he was elected president in 2016. Under four years of his administration, we've seen transgender service members banned from the military, a reversal of gender-affirming policies in public schools, a rollback of LGBTQ healthcare protections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic—and that just scratches the surface.

If it isn't already clear, our civil liberties are at stake in the November election. After seeing the harm that can be caused by only one term of a queerphobic, racist, and sexist commander in chief, voting Trump out on November 3 should be an easy decision. However, there are progressives

who hesitate to support Joe Biden and Kamala Harris because of their less-than-perfect record with marginalized communities. These concerns are valid, and if elected, Biden and Harris should continue to be held accountable for their actions as they work toward making amends with the communities they've hurt.

The duo has already made several commitments to improve the lives of disenfranchised Americans. One example is the promise to pass the Equality Act within their first 100 days in office. That legislation will reverse several discriminatory actions from the Trump-Pence Administration, and will finally guarantee LGBTQ people equal protection under federal law.

The presidential election isn't the only important race on the ballot. State and local elections have just as much (if not more) of an impact on our everyday lives.

So be sure you're registered to vote by October 5, and try your best to vote early between October 13 and October 30. For a list of voting locations and hours, visit [harrisvotes.com/PollLocations](http://harrisvotes.com/PollLocations).

If you're still deciding who to vote for on some of the down-ballot races, be sure to check out our election coverage in this October 2020 edition. Writer Lillian Hoang has compiled a list of the 19 Texas candidates endorsed by the LGBTQ Victory Fund political advocacy organization, while writers Ryan Leach, Kim Hogstrom, and Sam Byrd have profiled out Houston candidates Kim Ogg, Michelle Palmer, and Kelli Johnson, respectively. Writers Zach McKenzie and Marene Gustin also sat down with LGBTQ ally candidates MJ Hegar, Sri Kulkarni, and Sima Ladjevardian to discuss their pro-equality positions.

Also in this issue, we cel-

brate the winners of our Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards. Don't miss our features on 15 of these winners, each of whom have made Houston a better place through these uncertain pandemic times. We hope you'll also join us for a special evening online as we show our 2020 winners the love during a virtual Facebook Live awards ceremony on Wednesday, October 21, at 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit [facebook.com/outsmartmagazine](http://facebook.com/outsmartmagazine).

Remember to go vote, continue working for change through grassroots efforts, and we'll see you next month!



Lourdes Zavaleta  
MANAGING EDITOR



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# Feeding Houston's Most Vulnerable

**Pride Pantry's weekend distributions at Barcode help those affected by the pandemic.**

By **LOURDES ZAVALETA**

**D**ue to the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, people across the nation have struggled to make ends meet. And for quite a few LGBTQ folks—who face additional hardships and higher rates of unemployment compared to the general population—surviving has been even tougher.

In order to make a difference for Houston's queer community, Joe Melton and his friends launched PRIDE Pantry in August to distribute non-perishable items, toiletries, and pet food in the heart of the city's Montrose gayborhood. The pantry is open every weekend inside of Barcode Houston at 817 Fairview on Saturdays and Sundays between noon and 5 p.m.

Melton, also known as the popular Texas drag queen Tara Dion, is a vice president of marketing for a real-estate development firm. As a gay Montrose resident, he knows the importance of uplifting his community.

"Montrose has always been a safe haven [for LGBTQ folks], and even though its borders have opened up, there are some people who only feel safe and comfortable [in this part of town]," Melton says. "It's important that we provide [resources] for those individuals, and let other Houstonians know that people in Montrose are good citizens."

Melton says he first thought about helping

others who were affected by the pandemic when a Houston friend posted on Facebook asking for dog food that they could not afford. After learning that another friend in Dallas created a distribution box for his neighbors in need of water and non-perishable items, Melton and his partner, Keith Gordin, began planning for a similar project. Melton and Gordin then shared their idea with about 20 friends, and together they raised \$1,500 to buy groceries and other items to start the Pride Pantry.

While looking for a spot to house the pantry (which was originally supposed to be basic shelving that could be put outside), Melton called for a meeting with bar and restaurant owner Grey Stephens and asked to use one of his parking lots to distribute the resources. "He said, 'No, it's too hot. Let's do better,'" Melton says. Instead, Stephens offered him space inside of Barcode, his LGBTQ club on Fairview.

"Joe was ecstatic," Stephens says. "I was happy to help. These people came up with an amazing idea. All I did was unlock the door."

When Melton told artist Crystal Murley about the pantry, she offered to use her skills to paint a sign for the Barcode entrance. "I wanted to create some type of iconic representation to put out there and let people know they're loved."

The sign, which took Murley about 40 hours

to create, reads "Pride Pantry" inside of a rainbow-colored heart inspired by the Pride Flag. The heart is surrounded by the pink, white, and blue colors of the transgender Pride flag, with black and brown representing LGBTQ people of color. "I wanted the sign to be all-inclusive," she says.

Murley notes that the back side of the sign is a deconstructed version of the same Pride flag colors, featuring uplifting statements that read "You are supported" and "We're in this together." "I wanted to include these positive affirmations because, unfortunately, suicide rates are increasing right now," Murley says. "People are becoming more depressed. I just wanted them to know that they have somewhere to go where they can get the items they need, and to let them know that they are loved."

After purchasing items with the money they raised, Melton's Pride Pantry team hosted a successful "stock the pantry" event at Barcode prior to their grand opening on August 22 and 23. "Anyone who has been to the bar knows that the bar top is 40 feet long," Melton says. "It was so full that the tables and the pool table were also covered with donations. It was overflowing."

When Pride Pantry opened for the first time, they welcomed around two dozen people who picked up resources. Since its launch, around 30 have visited the pantry each weekend. The group has worked to keep visitors safe from COVID-19 by requiring face masks and social distancing.

Pride Pantry has primarily used Facebook to share its needs, sign up volunteers, and promote the resources that they're giving away. Occasionally, the group has perishable food such as eggs and milk that they distribute while the items last. People can donate to the pantry on the weekends when it is open.

Going forward, Melton hopes that Pride Pantry continues to be a vital resource for Houston's LGBTQ community. However, Pride Pantry has started looking for a more permanent space to house the project now that Barcode has reopened due to a relaxation in COVID-19 restrictions. "Grey has been extremely generous, but [he needs] his business back," Melton says. "I hope that someone steps up and is able to provide a space that [will be a natural fit for the neighborhood]."

Until then, Pride Pantry will continue distributing resources at Barcode. "We're going to keep this going as long as we can," Melton says. "So wear a mask, come stop by, and take what you need."

 For more information about Pride Pantry's hours and location, visit [facebook.com/PridePantryHouston](https://www.facebook.com/PridePantryHouston). To contact the group directly, email [pridepantry@gmail.com](mailto:pridepantry@gmail.com).

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If you have both human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) and hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection, DOVATO can cause serious side effects, including:

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- **Worsening of HBV infection.** If you have HIV-1 and HBV infection, your HBV may get worse (flare-up) if you stop taking DOVATO. A “flare-up” is when your HBV infection suddenly returns in a worse way than before. Worsening liver disease can be serious and may lead to death.
  - Do not run out of DOVATO. Refill your prescription or talk to your healthcare provider before your DOVATO is all gone.
  - **Do not stop DOVATO without first talking to your healthcare provider.** If you stop taking DOVATO, your healthcare provider will need to check your health often and do blood tests regularly for several months to check your liver.

### What is DOVATO?

DOVATO is a prescription medicine that is used without other HIV-1 medicines to treat human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) infection in adults: who have not received HIV-1 medicines in the past, or to replace their current HIV-1 medicines when their healthcare provider determines that they meet certain requirements. HIV-1 is the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). It is not known if DOVATO is safe and effective in children.

### Who should not take DOVATO?

**Do not take DOVATO if you:**

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**Tell your healthcare provider about all of your medical conditions, including if you:**

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  - If you can become pregnant, you should consistently use effective birth control (contraception) during treatment with DOVATO.
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- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. **Do not breastfeed if you take DOVATO.**
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- You can ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for a list of medicines that interact with DOVATO.
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### What are possible side effects of DOVATO?

**DOVATO can cause serious side effects, including:**

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- **Liver problems.** People with a history of hepatitis B or C virus may have an increased risk of developing new or worsening changes in certain liver tests during treatment with DOVATO. Liver problems, including liver failure, have also happened in people without a history of liver disease or other risk factors. Your healthcare provider may do blood tests to check your liver. **Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the following signs or symptoms of liver problems:** your skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow (jaundice); dark or “tea-colored” urine; light-colored stools (bowel movements); nausea or vomiting; loss of appetite; and/or pain, aching, or tenderness on the right side of your stomach area.
- **Too much lactic acid in your blood (lactic acidosis).** Lactic acidosis is a serious medical emergency that can lead to death. **Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the following symptoms that could be signs of lactic acidosis:** feel very weak or tired; unusual (not normal) muscle pain; trouble breathing; stomach pain with nausea and vomiting; feel cold, especially in your arms and legs; feel dizzy or lightheaded; and/or a fast or irregular heartbeat.
- **Lactic acidosis can also lead to severe liver problems,** which can lead to death. Your liver may become large (hepatomegaly) and you may develop fat in your liver (steatosis). **Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get any of the signs or symptoms of liver problems which are listed above under “Liver problems.”** You may be more likely to get lactic acidosis or severe liver problems if you are female or very overweight (obese).
- **Changes in your immune system (Immune Reconstitution Syndrome)** can happen when you start taking HIV-1 medicines. Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections that have been hidden in your body for a long time. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you start having new symptoms after you start taking DOVATO.
- **The most common side effects of DOVATO include:** headache; nausea; diarrhea; trouble sleeping; tiredness; and anxiety.

These are not all the possible side effects of DOVATO. Call your doctor for medical advice about side effects.

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**Where can I find more information?**

- Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist.
- Go to [DOVATO.com](http://DOVATO.com) or call 1-877-844-8872, where you can also get FDA-approved labeling.

August 2020 DVT:4PIL

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# Facing a Long-Term Job Loss?

Here's what you need to do to keep your finances on track.



Over the past several months, millions of people have been laid off—either temporarily or permanently—as a result of COVID-19. Unemployment has hit the

Houston area particularly hard, as there are many who work in the energy industry and for the United Airlines Houston hub.

As the coronavirus crisis continues to impact our daily lives, there are many people who will have no job to go back to, even after a vaccine has been developed.

Losing a job can be a traumatic experience, and not just from a financial standpoint. The loss of a regular paycheck can be just the tip of the iceberg, since many people define themselves in large part by their careers.

For instance, when you leave a job, it could also mean that you will soon lose your health insurance benefits, as well as the ability to continue making contributions into an employer-sponsored retirement plan (such as a 401k) that may include employer matching contributions.

Even worse, if you don't have an emergency fund in place, you may have to start dipping into your savings just to pay your monthly living expenses. So a current job layoff can have quite a negative impact on your future retirement savings and lifestyle.

## Financial and Insurance Options

Stepping away from your employer (whether it's permanently or temporarily) can mean having to make some important financial and insurance-related decisions. These will typi-

cally revolve around income, financial protection, and ongoing expenses.

## Income

Since the loss of a job means losing some or all of your household's incoming cash flow, it is essential to determine where you can access funds to pay your bills until you are gainfully employed again. Possible options for incoming funds include:

- Unemployment benefits
- A severance, if applicable
- Interest or dividends from your investments
- Potential tax-free withdrawal from life insurance cash value
- Your emergency fund (if you have one)
- A loan or withdrawal from your employer-sponsored retirement plan

In all of these cases, it is important for you to understand the trade-offs that might need to be made. For instance, if you withdraw money from a qualified retirement account, you may be required to repay those funds.

Likewise, if you receive money in the form of a withdrawal or income stream from certain types of accounts, you could also owe income or capital-gains taxes on some (or even all) of the amount you receive.

The CARES Act was put in place to offer individuals some relief from taxes and penalties this year, if their withdrawals are due to coronavirus hardships.

## Insurance Coverage

Another area of concern is the financial protection you have in place for health-related

needs. As an example, if you were a participant in an employer-sponsored health insurance plan, you (and your spouse, partner, and/or others who are also on the plan) could face some substantial risks if you go without this coverage.

One possible option here could be to apply for COBRA coverage. This federal Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act allows employees to continue their employer-provided health insurance after they are laid off or fired, or when they otherwise become ineligible for benefits if they quit or have their hours reduced below the employer's minimum to receive benefits.

If you are not eligible for coverage under COBRA, another alternative could be to purchase health insurance protection through your state's health insurance exchange that was established by the Affordable Care Act.

## Expenses and Budgeting

Reducing some of your expenses can also help you to get through a financial crunch more easily. In this case, you need to determine which of your ongoing monthly expenses are needs versus wants.

For instance, most people must continue paying housing expenses such as rent or mortgage and utilities. Likewise, your food, medications, and toiletries would fit into the "needs" category.

But other costs such as entertainment, personal travel, and dining out may have to be cut back (or even eliminated altogether), even if just temporarily. Other ways to reduce your monthly expenses include shopping for

lower-priced auto insurance, canceling various memberships, and sticking to a list while shopping (which can help to eliminate impulse purchases).

### The Job Layoff Checklist

When the regular income stream from your job suddenly stops, it can be difficult to know what you should do first. Therefore, it is beneficial to go through a job layoff checklist to make sure that you don't miss any of the key steps:

#### To-Do Item

- Apply for unemployment benefits
- Apply for COBRA or other health insurance coverage
- Determine ways that you can reduce your monthly living expenses
- Update your household budget to reflect your post-layoff income and expenses
- Check into possible loan options (if necessary) from your employer-sponsored retirement plan
- Visit with a financial planner to discuss whether or not it makes sense for you to leave your employer-sponsored retirement funds, such as a 401(k) or 403(b) account, at your former employer, roll it over to a future employer plan, or roll it over to a personal IRA.
- Update your résumé and begin searching for a new job

### Updating Your Financial Plan

Even if you already have a financial plan in place, the changing economy and the volatile stock market could make that particular strategy—as well as the financial tools you have in it—out of date. This is particularly true if you have also experienced other major life changes such as marriage or divorce, the birth or adoption of a child, or the purchase or sale of a home.

If you haven't yet created a financial plan, now is the perfect time to do so. That way, you'll know what steps you need to take in order to move closer to your short- and long-term financial objectives in our "new normal" economic environment.

Establishing a working relationship with an LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly financial advisor can also help you work toward a plan that makes sense for you and your loved ones.

*Grace S. Yung, CFP® is a Certified Financial Planner practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Yung can be reached at [grace.yung@lpl.com](mailto:grace.yung@lpl.com).*



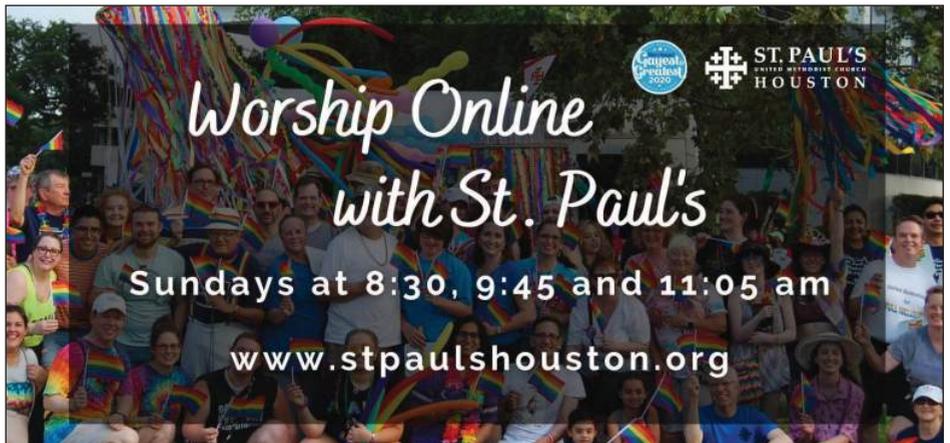
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## Voting Is Essential

Our human rights are on the November 3 ballot.



During my lifetime, there have been presidents I couldn't stand. Nixon was that POTUS for my teenage self. I also despised Ronald Reagan and

his dog-whistle racism.

But Donald Trump is on another level. I despise his racist and transphobic behind to the point that my mission in this 2020 political cycle is to make him a one-term occupant of the White House, and punish at the polls every Republican who has colluded with him.

It also doesn't help that literally everything I care about as a liberal, progressive person is on the ballot. Health care is on the ballot. Women's rights are on the ballot. Police reform is on the ballot. A fairer economy is on the ballot. Human rights are on the ballot.

And yes, TBLGQ rights are on the ballot.

The clock is inexorably ticking toward the 2020 November election. If you're not registered to vote in the Lone Star State, you have until October 5 to do so. Early voting is starting on October 13, unless the reprehensible Steven Hotze's lawsuit to eliminate the extra six days of early voting (added by Governor Abbott back in July) is successful.

Early voting is scheduled to end on October 30. During the early-voting period, seven 24-hour voting locations will also be available from 7 a.m. on October 29 until 7 p.m. on October 30. They are scattered around Harris County at NRG Arena, Kashmere Gardens Multi-Service Center, McGovern Texas Medical Center Commons, East Harris County Activity Center, Tracy Gee Community Center,

Juergen's Hall Community Center, and at the Victory Houston church.

Harris County will also have nine drive-thru voting centers scattered across the area: NRG Arena Blue Lot 16, Toyota Center Parking Garage, Fallbrook Church, Kingdom Builders Center, Houston Food Bank, HCC West Loop, HCC Alief Bissonnet, Humble Civic Center, and Resurrection MCC.

Toyota Center will also be a Harris County voting center for the 2020 election. It will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. October 13-30 and on November 3, and parking in the Toyota Center garage will be free.

Yes, people, this November 3 election is that serious. It is the most important election of not only my 58 years on this planet, but in American history.

Some of you may be upset that Joe Biden ended up being the Democratic nominee instead of the candidate you were supporting. Joe Biden, however, is now the only man standing between the American people and Trump's fascist American dictatorship. You may think that's hyperbole, but those of you who have been paying attention to this misadministration for the last four years know that it isn't.

It's not simply Joe Biden vs. Donald Trump. It's democracy vs. dictatorship. It's the question of whether the United States survives as a democratic republic.

*Monica Roberts is the founding editor of the GLAAD award-winning blog TransGriot.*

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Crofoot MD, Walgreens



Houston's only LGBTQ+ focused health center.

By SUSAN BANKSTON



# The Trump Administration Is Full of Lies

As if you needed more reasons to vote.

Last month, there was a big rumor going around that Donald Trump had gone to the hospital one night, unannounced and with no comment, because he was having a stroke. Of course, that would have marked the first time that Trump had done anything with no comment.

Trump said he was actually just finishing his yearly physical, and then proceeded to describe the mental test that he thought the doctors gave him to confirm his very-stable-genius IQ score. (For those of you following along, it was actually the test they give people who show up in the emergency room thinking they've had a stroke.)

A trustworthy *New York Times* reporter, Michael Schmidt, reports in his new book that when Trump made this unexpected hospital visit, "Word went out in the West Wing for the vice president to be on standby."

So Vice President Mike Pence hides out from reporters for a day or two, and then says that he "doesn't recall" if he was put on standby during Trump's visit to Walter Reed Hospital.

Okay, so do ya think maybe it was Pence who had the stroke?

Anyway, here's how that Pence presidential standby drill could have played out:

A guy in a plain black suit comes to Pence's home at the Naval Observatory one night and says, "Dude, go take off those plaid Bermuda shorts and that *Jesus Loves Me, Only Me* T-shirt. They just took Trump to the hospital, and you may have to take over as president."

You know for a fact that Pence tinkled in those plaid Bermuda shorts while "Mother" (which is what he calls his wife) stripped down to her birthday suit and bounced her boobies all the way up the grand staircase yelling, "Pack your bags, Melania, you shameless gold-digger!"

I'm betting that if you were next in line for the keys to the White House, this is something you would damn sure remember. And I'll place a second bet that there were plenty of eyewitnesses to this crisis.

So instead of lying his butt off, Pence just said, "I don't recall." That's telling a lie where you can't get caught, which is the very worst kind of lie.

So here's my message to our vice president: Mike, since you're one of those New-Improved-Super-Deluxe-Brand Christians, you need to admit that Jesus knows you lied.

And speaking of lies, Bob Woodward's new book, *Rage*, describes Trump's excuse for lying to the American people in March about the deadly coronavirus: "I don't want to jump

up and down and start screaming, 'Death! Death!'"

Think about that for a second, would you please? Darlin', running around hollering "Death! Death!" has been Trump's favorite game for the last three years. He thrives on creating constant panic. This is the man who screams at the top of his lungs about caravans of migrant invaders, Antifa, anarchist football players taking a knee, the end of suburbia, China, and the failing *New York Times*. He wants you to believe that any one of these scourges will kill you dead and eat you for dinner.

And now, suddenly, we're supposed to believe that our president didn't want to worry us and cause a panic?

According to Trump, it's been Zombie Apocalypse every day for three and a half years. Then along comes a worldwide pandemic, and he told us it would disappear when it warmed up in April.

It's true that you don't want to yell fire in a crowded theater. However, it is perfectly appropriate to yell fire in a crowded theater when the damn theater is on fire.

There is some guy on the YouTube

machine—a lifelong Republican who voted for Trump—who won't vote for Trump this time because, after much thought and consideration, he now realizes that Trump is cruel.

Cruel? Really? I think that's become an official tenet of the Republican Party. No more of W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" for them. (Didn't that idea last about three months before W. moved on to something else?)

So what's the moral to this story? Vote. And not just for Joe Biden.

If we Texans want to see economic justice, it is vitally important that we elect four Democratic women to the currently all-Republican Texas Supreme Court. Write these names on a piece of paper and take them with you to the polls: Staci Williams, Amy Clark Meachum, Kathy Cheng, and Gisela Triana. If you forget your piece of paper, just look for the races that say Texas Supreme Court and vote for the women with (D) after their names.

Until next time, I hope your Halloween costumes are scary-adorable.

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 Best LGBTQ Social Media Account  
 Best LGBTQ Website  
 Best Male Eye Doctor - Scott Sawyer, MD  
 Best Male LGBTQ Business Person - Ruston Taylor, PharmD  
 Best Male Mental Health Therapist - Ryan Viviano, LCSW-S, LCDC

Best Male Physician - Mark Levine, MD  
 Best Male Psychiatrist - Pedro Bustamante IV, MD  
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 Best Virtual Healthcare Appointments - Legacy Montrose  
 Favorite HIV/AIDS Support Organization  
 Favorite LGBTQ Benefit of the Year - Mint Julep  
 Favorite LGBTQ Blogger - Barrett White  
 Favorite LGBTQ Philanthropic Organization  
 Leading Female Fundraiser - Chree Boydston  
 Leading Male Fundraiser - Timmy Martinez

# Coming Out about Depression

Mental health issues can continue to impact openly LGBTQ people.

By DARYL SHORTER, MD



**O**ctober 11 marks the celebration of National Coming Out Day, when LGBTQ people across the country pause to reflect on the significance of openly identifying as a member of their community. It's a time to think about how personally meaningful it can be to step more fully into authenticity, and also acknowledge the cultural and political importance of this brave act.

October also marks the observance of World Mental Health Day, which brings awareness to the global impact of mental-health conditions, and aims to encourage nonjudgmental conversations about the importance of diagnosis, treatment, and access to care.

While thinking about these two October observances, it might be easy to imagine that coming out will quickly remove the psychological distress of being in the closet. That's certainly the case for many, but not all coming-out stories have happy endings. In fact, many LGBTQ people continue to struggle with illnesses like depression even after coming out.

When we hear the word "depression," we might think of a person with overwhelming sadness or uncontrollable crying spells. But the effects of depression can vary quite a bit from person to person. Someone you know could be showing much more subtle signs of depression, and they might well benefit from additional support or mental-health assessment and treatment.

## Having Feelings Is Okay

We all experience a variety of emotions in response to past and present life events. Happiness, frustration, surprise, and even sadness are all a part of the range of feelings that human beings have. Emotional ups and downs occur so many times throughout the day that we barely even recognize it. Having a wide range of emotions (including experiences of sadness) doesn't mean you are depressed. It means you are human. It may help to remember that this year has tested our emotional resilience in unprecedented ways as we cope with social unrest and a deadly pandemic.

## It's Not Just 'Sadness'

While people commonly equate depression with simply "feeling sad," the psychiatric condition Major Depressive Disorder or MDD (sometimes referred to as "clinical depression") refers to a specific collection of physical and psychological symptoms that accompany a significant and persistent decline in mood. This dip in a person's mood can be experienced as simply feeling "down," or it might also manifest as being easily irritated, bothered by small things, snapping at people, or becoming impatient.

Although sadness or a change in mood is the primary symptom, it is the associated physical and mental symptoms that lead to a diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder. In MDD, sadness occurs alongside changes in sleep or appetite, diminished ability to concentrate and focus on tasks, low energy, or feeling physically sluggish, run down, or perhaps agitated. Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, or helplessness can overtake the emotional experience and become overwhelming. Hobbies and activities that were once enjoyable may no longer be of interest or as fun as they once were.

For some, feelings of apathy may predominate. In those cases, people may describe their mood as persistently "blah." Although not

always seen in MDD, some people experience persistent thoughts about self-harm or even suicide.

## Am I Depressed?

Everyone experiences one or more of the symptoms listed above from time to time. Who hasn't had a bad night's sleep or eaten too much or too little in response to stress? Some days we just have more energy or focus than others. Guilt is also a natural feeling, and while it may be uncomfortable, it can prompt us to apologize to friends or family we have wronged. Expecting to be happy every moment of every day is not realistic, and can set us up for feelings of disappointment over not being as cheery as the smiling people we see in the media.

All the same, the mood changes that mental-health providers become most concerned about are those that last over extended periods of time. In the case of MDD, that would be at least two weeks. Do your symptoms negatively impact the way you feel about yourself or your ability to function in relationships, at work, or at home? Experiencing these chronic physical and mental symptoms may signal a need to talk with a physician or therapist.

## LGBTQ Depression Issues

LGBTQ people are especially at risk for

experiencing MDD. In fact, studies suggest that adults with same-sex attractions are more than twice as likely to have experienced psychological distress in the past year, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, and transgender individuals are over three times as likely to experience psychological distress.

There are several reasons for this distress and depression among LGBTQ people, despite the greater visibility and acceptance experienced by many members of the community. Exposure to homophobia and transphobia can lead to internalizing negative cultural attitudes about LGBTQ identity. Many struggle with persistent feelings of guilt and shame regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Social stigma, discrimination, and the fear of harassment and violence are everyday occurrences that contribute to stress and trauma.

### Where Can I Go for Help?

If you suspect that you may be suffering from depression, the first thing is to recognize that you are not alone. There is no shame in struggling with this illness or seeking treatment, and the good news is that treatment works. Many people have found that psychotherapy and/or antidepressant medications can help tremendously in lifting their mood and reducing their symptoms of depression.

There are many local and national resources available, both in-person or online. These organizations provide services ranging from a listening ear to extended treatments. Seeking out these services, which can sometimes be done anonymously, can be a sign of strength and commitment to your personal growth. It may well be one of the most important things you ever do. There's no need to wait until a crisis happens. You can begin engaging in mental health and wellness support today.

Finally, if you have struggled with or are currently experiencing suicidal thoughts, consider texting or calling one of the mental health hotlines for a referral to one of the local resources listed below.

### Suicide-Prevention Hotlines

#### LGBT Switchboard Houston

(713) 529-2311

#### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

#### Crisis Text Line

Text "HOME" to 741741

#### Veterans Crisis Line

Confidential crisis chat at VeteransCrisisLine.net, or send a text to 838255

### Local Mental-Health Resources

#### Montrose Center

401 Branard St., Houston. 713-529-0037 or montrosecenter.org

#### Legacy Community Health

832-548-5000 or legacycommunityhealth.org

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### MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT BIKTARVY

**BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:**

- ▶ **Worsening of hepatitis B (HBV) infection.** If you have both HIV-1 and HBV, your HBV may suddenly get worse if you stop taking BIKTARVY. Do not stop taking BIKTARVY without first talking to your healthcare provider, as they will need to check your health regularly for several months.

### ABOUT BIKTARVY

BIKTARVY is a complete, 1-pill, once-a-day prescription medicine used to treat HIV-1 in adults and children who weigh at least 55 pounds. It can either be used in people who have never taken HIV-1 medicines before, or people who are replacing their current HIV-1 medicines and whose healthcare provider determines they meet certain requirements.

**BIKTARVY does not cure HIV-1 or AIDS.** HIV-1 is the virus that causes AIDS.

**Do NOT take BIKTARVY if you also take a medicine that contains:**

- ▶ dofetilide
- ▶ rifampin
- ▶ any other medicines to treat HIV-1

### BEFORE TAKING BIKTARVY

**Tell your healthcare provider if you:**

- ▶ Have or have had any kidney or liver problems, including hepatitis infection.
- ▶ Have any other health problems.
- ▶ Are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. It is not known if BIKTARVY can harm your unborn baby. Tell your healthcare provider if you become pregnant while taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ Are breastfeeding (nursing) or plan to breastfeed. Do not breastfeed. HIV-1 can be passed to the baby in breast milk.

**Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take:**

- ▶ Keep a list that includes all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, antacids, laxatives, vitamins, and herbal supplements, and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist.
- ▶ BIKTARVY and other medicines may affect each other. Ask your healthcare provider and pharmacist about medicines that interact with BIKTARVY, and ask if it is safe to take BIKTARVY with all your other medicines.

### POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF BIKTARVY

**BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:**

- ▶ Those in the “Most Important Information About BIKTARVY” section.
- ▶ **Changes in your immune system.** Your immune system may get stronger and begin to fight infections. Tell your healthcare provider if you have any new symptoms after you start taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ **Kidney problems, including kidney failure.** Your healthcare provider should do blood and urine tests to check your kidneys. If you develop new or worse kidney problems, they may tell you to stop taking BIKTARVY.
- ▶ **Too much lactic acid in your blood (lactic acidosis),** which is a serious but rare medical emergency that can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: weakness or being more tired than usual, unusual muscle pain, being short of breath or fast breathing, stomach pain with nausea and vomiting, cold or blue hands and feet, feel dizzy or lightheaded, or a fast or abnormal heartbeat.
- ▶ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
- ▶ **The most common side effects of BIKTARVY** in clinical studies were diarrhea (6%), nausea (6%), and headache (5%).

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You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit [www.FDA.gov/medwatch](http://www.FDA.gov/medwatch) or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

**Your healthcare provider will need to do tests to monitor your health before and during treatment with BIKTARVY.**

### HOW TO TAKE BIKTARVY

Take BIKTARVY 1 time each day with or without food.

### GET MORE INFORMATION

- ▶ This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to learn more.
- ▶ Go to [BIKTARVY.com](http://BIKTARVY.com) or call 1-800-GILEAD-5
- ▶ If you need help paying for your medicine, visit [BIKTARVY.com](http://BIKTARVY.com) for program information.



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See Hugo's story at [BIKTARVY.com](https://www.gilead.com/BIKTARVY.com).

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Please see Important Facts about BIKTARVY, including important warnings, on the previous page and visit [BIKTARVY.com](https://www.gilead.com/BIKTARVY.com).



# LGBTQ Texans Run for Office

Democrats Elias Diaz, Ann Johnson, Gina Ortiz Jones, and Madeline Eden are among 19 endorsed by the Victory Fund.

By LILLIAN HOANG

**T**he Victory Fund was founded by activists and donors in 1991 to increase the number of openly LGBTQ elected officials. Recently, the group endorsed 19 out Texas politicians for office, including Democratic candidates Elias Diaz, Ann Johnson, Gina Ortiz Jones, and Madeline Eden, who are each running to make history and change the political landscape.

Victory Fund's President and CEO Annise Parker says these elections are significant for many reasons—LGBTQ representation being one. “We have plenty of evidence [that] when we're in the room, the conversation changes,” the out former Houston mayor says. “What is discussed changes, and the way it's discussed changes, [and that's with] just one of us in the room. When there are three or more of us, we can influence legislation.”

To secure Victory Fund's campaigning, fundraising, and communications support, LGBTQ candidates must meet the group's endorsement requirements. Individuals must be openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and “demonstrate community support and a realistic plan to win,” according to the Victory Fund website. The candidates must also support efforts to protect privacy, reproduction freedom, and the advancement of LGBTQ civil rights through legislation or the regulatory process, unless they are judicial endorsements. This year, Victory Fund has endorsed over 300 out candidates across the United States.

 For more information on the Victory Fund, visit [victoryfund.org](http://victoryfund.org).

**E**lias Diaz, a gay Latinx man, has already made a difference in his community by becoming the first openly LGBTQ elected official of Eagle Pass, Texas. The new city councilman defeated opponent Eliza-



Elias Diaz

beth Chisum De La Garza in a runoff election on September 5.

As a newly elected official, Diaz vows to fight for the vulnerable and underserved. He plans to focus on COVID-19 financial recovery and address local health care needs by equipping emergency medical services and firefighters with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). He will also work to improve the community's mental health as suicide rates rise during the pandemic.

Diaz says he ran to revolutionize local politics by galvanizing community members who had given up on voting. “I know what it feels like to be in a town full of barriers, with a lack of resources and a million reasons to stop you. [This is] a town that forces you to deal with letdowns and frustrations on a daily basis, and there's a constant need to reinvent yourself. I felt that it was time to change that.”

Diaz has overcome countless challenges, including economic disadvantage, childhood domestic violence, and sexual abuse. His past experiences motivate him to fight for social justice and equality for others, especially in Eagle Pass.

The blue border town is home to many traditionally conservative residents, some of whom harassed Diaz during his run for office. To get through college in Los Angeles, Diaz starred in adult films. Photos and videos of his sex work circulated on social media and were used against him during his campaign. In spite of these attempts to demoralize him and question his ability to lead, Diaz remained transparent about his past. He used the attacks to connect to voters in his community and inspire them to rise up against injustice and inequality. In the end, he beat De La Garza by 517 votes, according to the *Eagle Pass Business Journal*.

“We don't need a perfect candidate. We need a champion for change,” Diaz emphasizes. “This is our time, and I am determined to fight for it. It's time for all of us to rise up to the challenge in our communities and revolutionize politics at the local, state, and federal level.”

 Learn more about Elias Diaz at [facebook.com/EliasDiazForEagle-PassCityCouncilPlace2](https://www.facebook.com/EliasDiazForEagle-PassCityCouncilPlace2).

**H**ouston native **Ann Johnson** is also vying to create change at the state level by running to unseat Texas House of Representatives District 134 incumbent Sarah Davis in the general election. While the November 3 presidential race is important, Johnson notes that the down-ballot races are equally critical. “In some ways, they are [even] more significant to people's everyday lives.”

Johnson, an openly lesbian Democrat, is running for the same seat for the second time to change Texas politics through fair redistricting, affordable health care, and gun reforms. If elected, she will act on behalf of nearly 174,000 citizens in West Houston, according to the 2010 Census.

Johnson says she will also fight to end the Republican party's racially discriminatory and

unconstitutional gerrymandering by hiring an independent commission as the state prepares for the 2021 redistricting. Reorganizing areas into new legislative and school districts can determine how people are represented in our government.

According to Loyola Law School, redistricting, which happens every decade after the census, determines “which voters vote for which representative” and which bills and resolutions are passed. “This is *the* election cycle of this decade,” Johnson says.

While Johnson and her opponent are both cancer survivors and proponents of pro-choice policies, they differ on several topics, including health care.

Republican incumbent Davis says she believes Texas should expand Medicaid in the next legislative session, but Johnson remembers when Davis opposed the Affordable Care Act (ACA)’s implementation in 2010.

At the time, Johnson was a freelance attorney who offered her services to people who could not afford lawyers, which meant she went without health benefits. Despite surviving breast cancer and having papers from her doctors confirming her good health, Johnson was still denied insurance coverage due to her preexisting condition. These experiences, and Davis’ actions since 2010, motivated Johnson



to campaign once again.

“Davis has proven over this last decade that she will fight the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, so I do not trust her to do anything,” Johnson says, referring to Davis’ support for the anti-Obamacare lawsuit that led to the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2012 decision that made Medicaid expansion optional for states.

The two candidates also differ on gun legislation. Davis received a C rating from the NRA in 2020 and was the only Republican to vote no on a 2019 bill that gave officers the right to carry on school property. She helped pass legislation in 2015 that allowed concealed carry of firearms on college campuses, and in 2013

she supported reducing the required hours of training to get a concealed-handgun license.

Despite her pro-gun record, Johnson received an F from the NRA in 2020 because she supports background checks on gun purchasers. Unlike Davis, she is also backed by Moms Demand Action, a grassroots movement created to protect people from gun violence.

Johnson has spent most of her life serving the vulnerable. As a former human-trafficking prosecutor and criminal justice system attorney, she has helped victims of sexual exploitation achieve justice. According to the Victory Fund, she worked with other Republican officials to create Survivors Acquiring Freedom and Empowerment Court, a program that helps those charged with prostitution between the ages of 17 and 25 “escape the revolving door of criminal justice.”

“I’ve spent my life and career in public service for women and children who have been victims of sexual exploitation, and I would do the same thing in the Texas Legislature,” she says. “I will be a voice for those who have been left behind, those who have been forgotten, those who have not been protected.”

 To learn more about Johnson’s campaign, visit [annjohnson.com](http://annjohnson.com).

CONTINUED ON PAGE 98

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# Recommitting to Protect Marginalized Citizens

DA **Kim Ogg** says she's "expanded her perspective" on issues important to the LGBTQ community.

By RYAN M. LEACH



The 2016 election had traumatic consequences for the country as a whole when Donald Trump was elected president in a surprise win. However, Harris County saw some positive

changes as more progressive candidates were elected locally. The victory of District Attorney Kim Ogg, 61, an out lesbian Democrat who ousted an embattled incumbent, elevated her to the status of the highest-ranking LGBTQ criminal-justice official in the country. Now, as she approaches next month's election asking for a second term, Ogg hopes her plans for the future will earn her the votes she needs to win on November 3.

During the Democratic primary election, Ogg defeated Audia Jones, a former assistant district attorney who ran to the left of Ogg. Jones was able to pick up a few endorsements from groups that had previously supported Ogg, like the Texas Organizing Project and, most notably, the Houston GLBT Political Caucus. That Caucus endorsement resulted from a split vote of 121-95 among Caucus membership, and instantly made headlines as the LGBTQ community, arguably a solid base for Ogg, seemed to be distancing itself from her.

"I would say [losing the Caucus endorsement] gave me a broader perspective about issues of intersectionality that are important to our community," Ogg says. "[During the screening process] I was talking more about what I had done to improve things for the LG-BTQ community, and I should have been talking more about racial justice. I've expanded my perspective now."

Caucus President Jovon Tyler notes that while Ogg had a great deal of support within the organization during the primary endorsement process, "a majority of the members wanted to see more progressive policies from [her] office."

Following her successful Democratic primary race, Ogg has secured the Caucus endorsement for the general election as she faces Republican candidate Mary Nan Huffman, a former Montgomery County prosecutor who currently serves as an attorney for the Houston Police Officers Union.

"The Caucus recognizes that DA Ogg has been the most progressive DA Harris County has had. That bar is low, however," Tyler says. "We also understand that she has to follow the law. Many of the reforms we want to see are governed by state law, or controlled by other officials. We hope the DA will work with us to push others to make the needed changes and be open-minded in exploring the limits of her discretion."

Endorsements aside, Ogg believes that she has worked hard to address many issues impacting the lives of LGBTQ citizens, including constituents of color who encounter harmful policies and treatment much more often than their white counterparts. One of the policy changes that Ogg cites is putting an end to the prosecution of low-level drug offenses like the possession of trace amounts of cocaine and marijuana.

**"LOSING THE CAUCUS  
ENDORSEMENT GAVE ME A  
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MY PERSPECTIVE NOW."**

—Kim Ogg

"Where Black and Brown communities were most disproportionately impacted by arrests was with drug offenses. I wanted to decrease the unnecessary over-policing of communities where drug arrests were often used as an excuse. Drug use is equal in all communities, but you get more enforcement in Black and Brown communities," says Ogg.

Ogg also recently incorporated the Make It Right program into the DA's office. The goal of

the program is to connect people with criminal records to pro bono lawyers to assist them with getting their offenses expunged or put on nondisclosure status. The program also invites employers to connect with individuals who are willing and able to work, but who may have been held back by their record. Programs like this have a positive impact on the lives of the individuals receiving help, as well as the community at large, according to Ogg.

"If we make people more employable by eliminating criminal records that should be expunged or nondisclosed, then we strengthen our workforce and make our community safer. Having a job is the best type of crime prevention," Ogg emphasizes.

Ogg also claims that she has made great strides in diversifying the leadership and professional staff in the DA's office, which includes her attorneys and investigators. A diverse staff can add perspectives that previous Harris County DA offices often lacked.

"We have increased the hiring of African-American lawyers by 95 percent in my first three years, and Latino representation by 125 percent. The LGBTQ population is almost impossible for me to tell you about, but I am proud that we have an open atmosphere, a support group, and an ally group. By having an inclusive and diverse work atmosphere, it makes it more difficult for discrimination by police and others [to occur]. It makes it much less acceptable. This is a step forward in how we finally destroy discrimination," says Ogg.

Diversity in hiring was an intentional effort made by Ogg, who says that she accomplished it through active recruiting at universities like Texas Southern University and in other parts of Texas that had not traditionally been tapped for talent. Ogg says that if you're going to support diversity, you can't just take a superficial stab at it by increasing support staff. Typically, support staff positions are overrepresented by employees of color. Some employers use those support-staff numbers to inflate their diversity and inclusion goals on paper, while in practice they neglect to hire people of color for higher level and executive positions. This scenario also plays out in the hiring of women and LGBTQ employees. →

CONTINUED ON PAGE 45



Kelli Johnson (l-clockwise),  
Hilary Bartlett, and Evan Johnson

# Order in the Court

Judge **Kelli Johnson** is slated to again serve Texas' 178th District Court.

By **SAM BYRD**  
Photo by **EMILY JOHNSON**

**G**rowing up in the small town of Sulphur Springs, Texas, Kelli Johnson used to watch her father litigate in the courtroom against large corporations in an effort to fight for the little guy. Nowadays, as a judge in the 178th Criminal District Court, Johnson is living out her dreams of being a part of the legal process she grew up loving.

"I grew up with a really positive view of the law. My father was a one-man firm who wasn't intimidated by anyone. He raised me to think I could reach the stars," Johnson says. "He made me always appreciate everything we had and the people we represented. I always thought he was the best trial lawyer who ever

lived; I still do."

Her father's sense of duty and his work ethic stayed with Johnson as she left home to attend Texas Christian University, where she graduated with honors. She went on to serve as a White House intern and member of the White House Press Advance Team for two years during the Clinton administration. During her years in Washington, DC, she says, "As a young person, I got to be a part of something bigger than me. I got to be there for the Middle East peace accord. I was the first one in my family to go abroad. It was exciting, and I knew I wanted to pursue law as a part of [my passion for] public service that's always been a part of me."

She eventually returned to Texas to attend

South Texas College of Law, where she ranked in the top ten in the State of Texas Bar Exam. Her next move was to take a position with the Harris County District Attorney's office.

"I love constitutional law. I love puzzles, and this was a great way to fight for victims. I like to think I have a reputation of fighting for both sides," she adds. "I never think it's 'win at all costs.' I really believe you can fight hard to make sure the right results happen. I was one of those prosecutors who fought for rehabilitation for offenders." Her work earned her recognition as Prosecutor of the Year twice.

In the spirit of diving further into her passion, she decided to run for a local judicial office in 2016 and won the second-highest vote count during that election season.

"I really wanted to be a part of the criminal-justice system as a whole. I wanted to live it more than talk about it. A lot of people think being a judge is calling balls and strikes, but it's [also about] how much you want to devote yourself to the policy behind what we do," she says about her decision to run. "When I think about criminal justice, you're more than a judge. You're a role model, a counselor, and a therapist of sorts to people who are before you. You can also be a part of the reform that is so needed in a system that is incarceration-driven."

As a judge, Johnson keeps three key ideas at

the forefront of her actions: restore courtroom fairness, reform criminal justice, and reduce recidivism.

“I think ‘fairness’ is such an easy word that people throw out, but historically there has not been fairness across the board. I’ve been very active in creating the General Order Bond that provides instant relief for people with nonviolent offenses,” she says. “As a judge, I’m leading a part of our system that creates resources to help people be successful.”

Johnson’s commitment to using the legal system to improve the community is also seen in her participation in the Success Through Addiction Recovery (STAR) court. She describes it as “an intensive, holistic approach as a treatment court. It’s aimed at individuals who have experienced substance abuse, along with possible mental-health problems that have plagued them their entire lives. We work together as a staff and get into their whole life. We help them with everything, and it’s one of the most successful courts to transform people’s lives.”

Johnson believes the STAR court is two-thirds more successful than a regular probation court, and she theorizes it’s because defendants see a person in authority tell them, perhaps for the first time, that they can be successful.

“To me, it’s really about acknowledging people who are charged. It’s about giving value equally across the courtroom. It’s been really interesting to look forward and not be defined by the past,” she says. “If you give them the tools and empowerment, it’s amazing what they can do with it.”

Although Johnson is running unopposed, she still emphasizes that people need to take part in the voting process and make their voices heard all the way down the ballot.

“I feel so strongly that every single one of us has to cast a vote. I really wish that everybody believed that casting a vote is an absolute must. It’s so imperative. It’s important that we vote for the people who represent us as individuals, and that we know who we are voting for locally,” she advises. “I wish people felt more active in choosing their local leaders, because they represent everyone here. The local [officials] have more of an effect on our daily lives than nationally elected officials. That’s why people should research all the candidates and make an intelligent decision about who they vote for.”

When she’s not in the courtroom or advocating for justice, Johnson spends time with her fiancée, Hilary Bartlett, and their 10-year-old son, Evan. They live in the Oak Forest neighborhood, where they are active in their community.

 For more information on Kelli Johnson, visit [judgekellijohnson.com](http://judgekellijohnson.com).

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# Advocating for Texas Students

**Michelle Palmer** vies for a seat on the Texas State Board of Education.

By KIM HOGSTROM

**M**ichelle Palmer, a professional educator, is answering a call to higher service by running for the Texas State Board of Education District 6—an enormously important position that has a direct impact on Texas children.

District 6 covers more than half of the Houston metropolitan area, reaching as far north as Tomball and as south to Bellaire, River Oaks, and the Heights. The Texas State Board of Education includes 15 members who are elected for four-year terms, with each member representing about 1.8 million citizens. The Board sets policies and curriculum standards for Texas public schools, which makes them a constant source of controversy. Recent curriculum recommendations have included calls to remove references to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton from history books, to downplay the role of slavery as the cause of the American Civil War, and to include a reference to Moses as an individual whose principles of government informed the creation of America's founding documents.

"I am passionate about Texas state curriculum representing facts based on actual history and science," Palmer states emphatically. "Recently, the State Board changed Texas curriculum to reflect non-factual information. For example, there is nothing in our science curriculum about climate change, but there are references to creationism."

Palmer, who is 50 and identifies as bisexual, has a long history of working in all

sorts of public schools in districts throughout the Houston area. She is especially passionate about teaching history, government, and science classes.

"I spend a lot of time teaching my students critical thinking to help them discern fact from fiction. They need to understand what is true, and the State Board of Education should not be working against that goal," she states.

Palmer has received endorsements from the Houston GLBT Political Caucus, the Victory Fund, Harris County Tejano Democrats, Harris County Young Democrats, Black Lives Matter Houston, and the *Houston Chronicle*. "Palmer's years as a teacher in area schools, including Aldine ISD and Houston ISD, have made her familiar with curriculum issues and will bring a rare perspective to the board: that of an active teacher," the *Chronicle* endorsement noted.

In addition to her willingness to go to bat for Texas students, Palmer has seen exactly where additional school resources are needed. While she is an unrelenting fighter, she also has a comfortable, gracious demeanor—qualities that will serve her well as she "reaches across the aisle" on a matter of deep concern to her: the state's health curriculum.

"Abstinence-only sex education is failing the students of Texas," Palmer states flatly. "Texas ranks seventh in teen pregnancies. We wouldn't [have so many unplanned pregnancies] if we had a comprehensive sex-education program in our schools. When the board votes on the new health curriculum, they must vote for one that includes comprehensive sex

education."

Anne Sung was a highly regarded teacher in the Houston Independent School District before she assumed her position on the HISD Board of Education in 2017. Sung says Texas needs Palmer on the Texas State Board of Education for the sake of our children.

"Michelle Palmer is an outstanding teacher who is passionate about empowering students. She not only teaches them about government, she also shows them how to be civically engaged," Sung explains. "Michelle has dedicated her life to working with the Houston students most at risk of dropping out from high school, and I know her as a steadfast advocate for systems that will help all students succeed. Houston needs her voice at the table on the Texas State Board."

Palmer sums it up: "The students of Texas deserve a better education than Texas has provided them over the last two decades. I know firsthand the potential that our students can achieve if they are properly equipped with the strongest tools that we can give them. As an educator, I know that the curriculum is one of the most powerful tools that we bring into the classroom. I look forward to working closely with my constituents and the Board members to bring accuracy and efficacy back into the hands of our students with an improved curriculum. Only then can Texas graduate the best students possible."



For more information, or to contribute to Michelle Palmer's campaign, go to [palmerfortexased.com](http://palmerfortexased.com).

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# MJ Hegar's Pro-Equality Senate Race

Longtime LGBTQ ally challenges Republican incumbent John Cornyn.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

**W**hile on a rescue mission in Afghanistan, MJ Hegar's helicopter was destroyed by the Taliban. With substantial bodily injuries due to enemy gunfire, she strapped herself to the outside of a rescue aircraft and returned fire as she and others were airlifted to safety. This courageous act earned the Air Force combat veteran the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Flying Cross with Valor for her bravery.

Finding herself grounded and unable to fly, she sued the Air Force and won the 2012 court case that ended their Combat Exclusion Policy, opening the door for women seeking further combat training in the military. Today, Hegar, an enthusiastic ally of the LGBTQ community, faces a different kind of battle as she runs against John Cornyn for his seat in the U.S. Senate.

It's 10:45 a.m. on the Wednesday of the Democratic National Convention, and Hegar has a 15-minute window available in her schedule to chat with **OUTSMART** about her vision for Texas. "We have so much to talk about," Hegar says with the same energy that

originally propelled her to the national stage. Her campaign ad titled "Doors" that aired during her run against Congressman John Carter earned widespread acclaim, but she lost that bid to represent Texas' 31st Congressional District by less than 3 percent. Today, building on that earned momentum, she has her eyes set on Cornyn's Senate seat.

Hegar lays out her top priorities upon entering the Senate: "Healthcare is the number one thing—and that was *before* the pandemic," she explains. "I worked in the healthcare industry, and I know how bad the employer-provided model is for Texans. It's a barrier to small-business creation, and obviously not ideal when you have record unemployment." She emphasizes her support for rapid, affordable COVID testing, noting that Cornyn has only made things more difficult for Texans. "He acknowledged that the Affordable Care Act was a lifeline for people, but he's still trying to dismantle it—without offering anything to replace it with, by the way."

The tough-as-nails veteran recalls working alongside like-minded colleagues in the healthcare field to end discriminatory practices specifically within the transgender population, Hegar notes. "Transgender pa-

tients would come in expecting to get discriminated against, so they wouldn't disclose the hormones that they were on. That could pose a health threat to them or cause complications with other medications." Hegar emphasizes that accessible healthcare should be nondiscriminatory. "Bottom line with healthcare: politicians keep playing politics with our lives, and they need to stop doing that."

Hegar lists the economy as another priority. "I'm concerned that if John Cornyn wins reelection, he'll just continue looking out for the big, wealthy special interests and not for regular hard-working families like mine." Hegar sees the middle class and working families as the backbone of our economy, and she supports a recovery plan that benefits them. "We need transparency and accountability in relief packages. We need to acknowledge the minority businesses that have been left behind, with 95 percent of all minority-owned businesses that applied for PPP loans not getting them." She supports raising wages and making sure corporations are "paying their fair share," pointing to Amazon as a prime example. "I don't want to demonize corporations just for being corporations, but we need to hold them accountable and make sure they are being good actors."

Climate change is the third topic that Hegar wants the Senate to address immediately. “We want to keep the energy industry here in Texas, but we have to make sure we lead in the next chapter, which is clearly renewable energy,” Hegar says.

Shifting her focus to the LGBTQ community, Hegar discusses her time in the military alongside LGBTQ service members. “I think you’ll find that people who want to [keep LGBTQ citizens out] of the military are usually people who haven’t fought and served,” Hegar says bluntly. “People who have fought and served, and have been in the shit with bullets flying, only care whether or not you can do your job. I don’t care what religion you are, what color you are, or who you love. Love who you love, but stand and fight with me.”

Hegar has strong words for discriminatory practices in general: “Not only is it morally repugnant to discriminate against people, but it’s also really strategically ineffective.”

The fierce mom cites her two kids as the inspiration behind her run for the U.S. Senate. “I look at them and I see two amazing souls who I want to grow up and love whoever they want.” She speaks with high praise for the queer members in her own family. “I’ve seen kids come to terms with it in my family, and I’ve seen bullying. The rights of queer kids, as they come to terms with who they are, is something I’m really passionate about.” This lifelong ally of the LGBTQ community has been endorsed by the Human Rights Campaign and the Houston GLBT Political Caucus, among several other groups.

With election day approaching, Hegar lays out what six more years of John Cornyn in the Senate would mean to Texans. “Your civil liberties are never actually safe. Even when you win certain things, there’s always someone waiting for you to let your vigilance down [so they can] take those liberties back from you. Cornyn has continued to roll back civil rights, and has never been an ally to the queer community. Voting rights, access to healthcare—all the things that enable you to live your best life and work hard to put food on the table for your family—he has stood against.”

As her 15-minute window closes, Hegar concludes: “Cornyn has done nothing to address homelessness among queer youth. He has not pushed back on the attacks on our soldiers. He doesn’t stand up for science. John Cornyn is a spineless boot-licker who’s going to do what he’s told by Mitch McConnell as he fights to become Senate majority leader.”

➔ For more information on MJ Hegar, visit [mjfortexas.com](http://mjfortexas.com).

  
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# Making Waves in the Conservative Suburbs

Multilingual public servant **Sri Kulkarni** knows how to reach across the aisle.

By **MARENE GUSTIN**

**Y**ou might recognize Sri Preston Kulkarni as one of the background actors in Billy Bob Thornton's 2004 *The Alamo*. But it's more likely, if you follow politics, that you know him as the Asian American who in 2018 almost single-handedly upset incumbent Republican Congressman Pete Olson and came within less than five percentage points of turning the 22nd Congressional District blue.

And this year, he just might do it.

"When I started running in 2018," Kulkarni says, "I was literally one person working out of my cousin's living room, calling people I knew in the community to see if they were interested in what I had to say. A true grassroots movement grew out of that, and while we

absolutely retain that mentality, we now have a great deal more resources to bring to the fight."

And a lot of those resources come from the national stage. A press release earlier this year from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee stated, "When he ran for this seat in 2018—campaigning in 16 languages across a quickly-diversifying district—Sri expanded the electorate, grew the Asian-American vote, and came within 14,000 votes of defeating Congressman Pete Olson."

The 22nd District encompasses parts of Fort Bend, Harris, and Brazoria counties, and is an open seat this year after Olson announced his retirement. Kulkarni's campaign is considered one of the top-tier red-to-blue races in the country.

The 42-year-old was born in Louisiana,

but his family moved to Houston when he was a toddler. His father, Venkatesh Kulkarni, was an India-born novelist who taught creative writing at Rice University. His mother, Margaret Preston, is related to Sam Houston.

"As an undergraduate at the University of Texas, I studied linguistics, and I also studied abroad in Moscow in 2000, the year Putin came to power," Kulkarni recalls. "I saw firsthand the damage that corrupt leadership could do to society. It inspired me to serve my country, and do so in a way that not only safeguarded our institutions, but also strengthened our global relationships and promoted our values."

After getting a Master of Public Administration degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Kulkarni spent 14 years in the Foreign Service. "While serving our country overseas in the Foreign Service, it was my job to promote American values like free and fair elections, protection for minorities, and gender equality," he notes. "Over the last few years, all of those things have been attacked at home, culminating with our government's response to the deadly Nazi rally in Charlottesville in 2017. That was when I decided that our current government did not represent me, or any of us."

That shameful 2017 episode prompted Kulkarni to return home to Sugar Land and run for Congress in 2018. He's been living off of retirement savings while he focuses on his second race. His mother and sister are helping with the campaign, which is vastly different than his first run because of the pandemic.

“The focus of this campaign shifted immediately to protecting the community,” Kulkarni says. “This means finding and disseminating information on critical topics through virtual town halls and our website, organizing and participating in supply drives for food and personal protective equipment, and setting an example by following science and evidence-based guidelines. We suspended all in-person events and now do everything virtually—phone banks, interacting with voters, wellness checks, town halls, a virtual campaign academy, and more. Our focus is on the health and safety of our community.”

Kulkarni is facing Republican Sheriff Troy Nehls in this race. “Troy Nehls owes the voters of our district a lot of explanations,” Kulkarni says. “He was fired from a previous job as a police officer for numerous citations of misconduct that included destroying evidence, improper arrests, and obstructing another officer. Since being elected sheriff, he has used his power to go after political enemies. In April, he called the face-mask mandates ‘un-American’ and ‘communist,’ attacking public officials who were trying to control the virus. He said then that the worst of the pandemic was past us. He owes voters an explanation for his record, and why he feels it’s appropriate to play political games with Texans’ lives. So far, he has refused every invitation to a debate or public forum. He refuses to answer for his record, and he thinks that he can win this race by hiding from voters.”

Kulkarni’s key issues are jobs and the economy, healthcare, veterans, gun violence, flooding, police accountability, and anti-racism.

And he has a lot to offer the LGBTQ community.

“As a member of Congress, I will continue to raise issues of equal rights, just as I have done in my overseas tours to countries such as Jamaica, which still have sodomy laws,” Kulkarni says. “I will also ensure that my staff is representative of the diversity of my district, including the LGBT community, and that I have an open door to the entire community to discuss issues of equality and discrimination.”

He also vows to speak out against hate crimes and push for more resources to investigate them.

Following the divisive 2016 presidential campaign, Kulkarni and a Republican friend founded Breaking Bread, a program to reduce partisan hostility.

“I want to start Breaking Bread in Congress, because the gridlock and polarization of the past decade can’t continue,” he says. “Taking a step back and relearning how to relate to one another in such a polarized, divided environment is essential to moving forward.”

 For more information on Sri Kulkarni, visit [sri2020.com](http://sri2020.com).



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# An LGBTQ Ally Fighting for Affordable Health Care

**Sima Ladjevardian** seeks to unseat Congressman Dan Crenshaw.

By MARENE GUSTIN

**D**an Crenshaw might have won his Texas 2nd Congressional District seat in 2018 because of an impromptu *Saturday Night Live* appearance. An *SNL* cast member had insulted Crenshaw's military service, and he was invited to appear on the show to accept an apology.

But this year, the pandemic and his stance on health care might just cost him that seat, and Sima Ladjevardian may be just the woman to take it from him.

"I'm running against Crenshaw because we need someone with a record of bringing people together for our community," says the Iran-born attorney-turned-activist. "As an immigrant who fled the political violence of a revolution, this nation and this Hous-

ton community has given me so much. I am living proof of how opportunity in America can lead to safety, prosperity, and happiness. Now it's my obligation to pay it forward for my neighbors. As a lawyer, a mediator, and a community activist, I've been building bridges of compromise between people of all different backgrounds my whole career. I know what it takes to get to a solution, and I don't take no for an answer. In the halls of Congress, I'll do the same for Houston."

Ladjevardian moved to France during the 1978 Iranian Revolution, and then to America in 1980. She speaks four languages and is a wife, mother, and breast-cancer survivor.

"As a cancer survivor, health care is personal," she says. "We need to make sure people have access to quality, affordable health care. We need leaders who understand that

a woman's choice is hers alone. And we need politicians who won't break their promises—like Dan Crenshaw has done time and time again. Crenshaw went all around our district campaigning on lowering drug costs. Instead, he got to Congress and did the opposite. He became a mouthpiece for Donald Trump and started fighting for his own political ambitions instead of our needs. From lying about COVID-19 to spreading voter fraud conspiracy theories and voting against the 2019 Equality Act, Dan Crenshaw has let this community down. We need someone who will stand up for our most vulnerable and lead the fight for our healthcare. That's the congresswoman I'm ready to be."

Indeed, Crenshaw has been skeptical of the COVID-19 pandemic, refusing to wear a face mask and being a prime cheerleader for →

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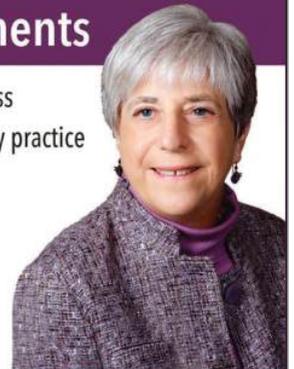
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President Trump's take on the virus. He also wants to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Ladjevardian has been an attorney and a fundraiser for her favorite causes such as The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Texas Children's Hospital; and Baylor College of Medicine. As a political activist, she works to elect candidates up and down the ballot, and because of her political acumen and understanding of the Greater Houston area, she became a senior advisor to Beto O'Rourke during his historic 2018 U.S. Senate race. And because of her belief in his message of equality, she joined his presidential campaign last year during the Democratic primaries. Now her congressional campaign is putting to good use the lessons she learned from O'Rourke.

"More important than anything, I learned that you need to go everywhere and talk to everyone, no matter if they're Democrats or Republicans or Independents," she says. "And in a district as gerrymandered as mine, letting everyone feel [that they are being] heard is critically important."

Due to the pandemic, things have been a little different in this campaign. "We're connecting with voters in a different way by hosting online events, making calls, and getting out in the community in ways where we can ensure safe social distancing," Ladjevardian explains. "We've had a huge number of people who have contacted the campaign asking for information and for ways to help, and we've been working to connect them to organizations and other resources. And while Crenshaw has doubled down on enabling the president and his disinformation, we've been focused on spreading the facts about health and [the emergency] economic support available to our constituents."

Ladjevardian's husband, Masoud, and their two adult children have been very supportive of her run for Congress, and she says they are very proud of her and her beliefs—one of which is equality.

"I've been an ally of the LGBTQ+ community for all my life, and I'm honored to have the support of both the Human Rights Campaign and the Houston GLBT Caucus," she emphasizes. "As this district's first congresswoman, I will never stop fighting for equal protection under the law—and that begins with guaranteeing affordable, accessible healthcare for our LGBTQ+ community and for all Americans."

This ambitious political trailblazer is also a huge *Star Wars* fan. "English is my fourth language, and I actually learned it by listening to American movies," Ladjevardian says. "The first feature-length English film I ever watched was *Star Wars*, and I love it to this day. Just ask my dog, Jedi."

 For more information on Sima Ladjevardian, visit [simafortx.com](http://simafortx.com).



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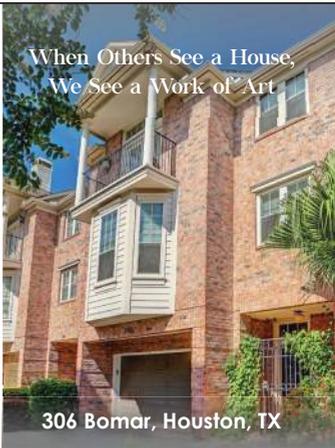
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The transgender community has also felt the brunt of a criminal-justice system that is often stacked against them, and Ogg says she recognizes this injustice.

“Historically, transgender people were disrespected and not given equal credibility in practice by police and prosecutors when they were victims. By implementing an evidence-based filing policy, whether it is a hate crime or any other type of crime, it reduces the analysis of the evidence to objective facts and prevents discrimination, whether it is intentional or unintentional bias. It gives the transgender community equal footing, whether they are victims or arrested.”

Ogg has also instituted implicit-bias training to improve the cultural competence of staff members. That training covers education about the transgender community as well as other marginalized communities. This, paired with an evidence-based approach to casework, has helped create a more equitable environment for victims and those arrested, according to Ogg.

Still, some LGBTQ Harris County residents urge Ogg to do even more to protect people of color, should she be reelected.

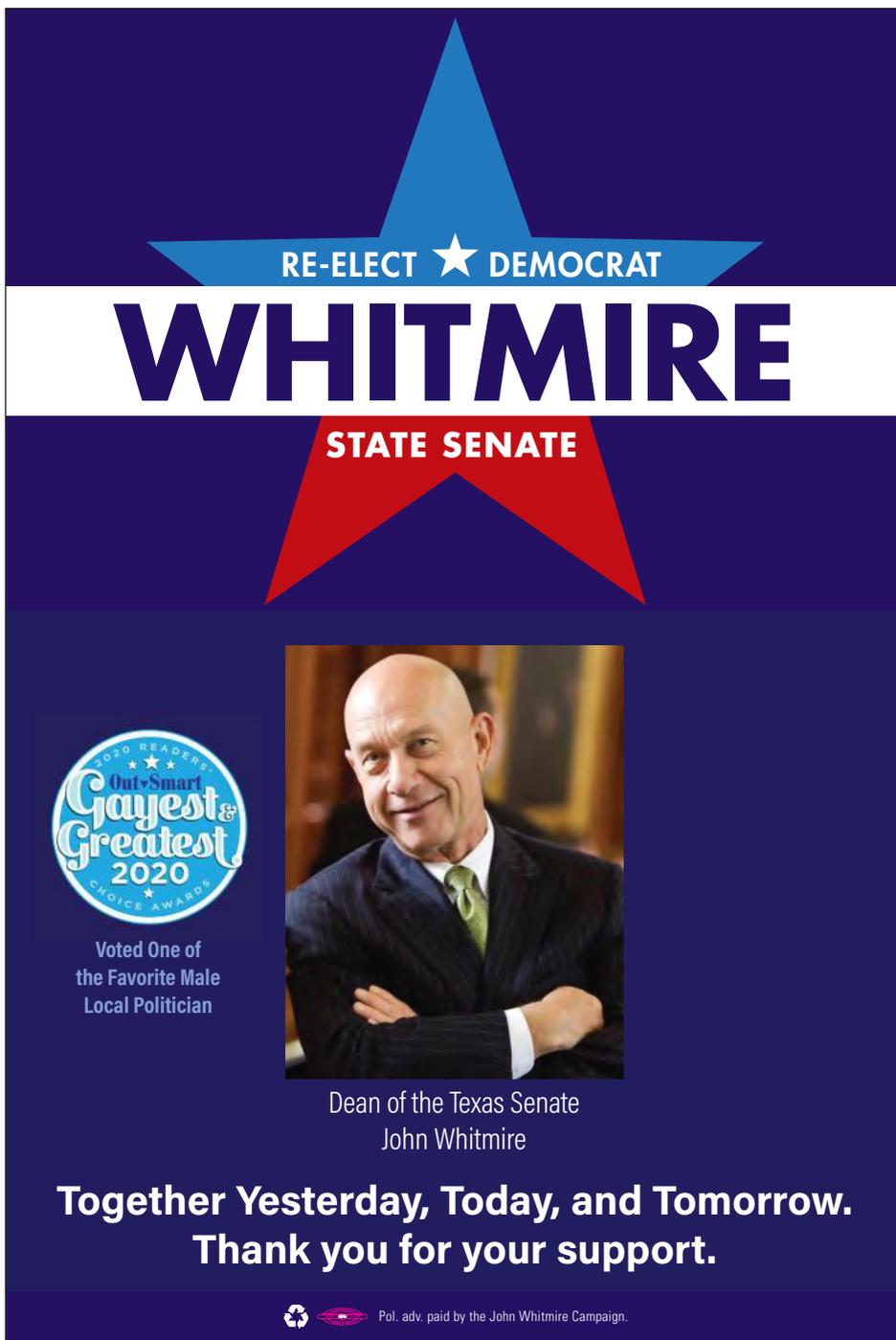
“We have had seven people killed by police this year,” says transgender activist Monica Roberts. “We need DA Ogg to start prosecuting and sending those bad officers to jail.”

Mike Webb, who was president of the Houston GLBT Political Caucus during the primary election endorsement process, notes that “We’ve always advocated for DA Ogg to involve the community more in her policy and implementation decisions, especially as it relates to issues that disproportionately impact communities of color—including LGBTQ+ communities of color, which should be considered LGBTQ+ issues as well.”

District attorneys play a critical role in how a community responds to important issues like police brutality, police reform, racial and social justice, and the equitable treatment of all citizens. Ogg says she takes this responsibility seriously. Although she did not earn the Caucus endorsement for the primary race, she says she has heard what the community is asking for, and is mindful of the trust that they have put in her with the general election endorsement.

“I want to thank my community for placing their confidence and trust in me at a time that is critical, in terms of the way the country is going to go. By bringing the LGBTQ perspective to this level in the fourth-largest city in the country, it gives us the credibility and the gravitas we need to make the changes that so many [smaller American] communities need and want,” says Ogg.

 For more information on Kim Ogg, visit [kim-ogg.com](http://kim-ogg.com).



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## COMMUNITY

# Houston Drag Queens Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month

Latinx performers come together for a special photo shoot.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Photo by COTI PHOTOGRAPHY

**H**ispanic Heritage Month is a time when Latinx folks celebrate the resiliency of their community and the contributions they have made in the realms of culture, history, and the tapestry of an increasingly diverse America. Inspired by that month-long celebration, which occurs September 15 through October 15, local drag performer Aria Crawford adapted to the pandemic and brought 12 Latin queens together for an epic photo shoot to show the strength and fabulousness that resides within their community.

“Growing up American and Latino in the U.S. during the ’90s and 2000s, I wanted to fit in as an American so badly,” Crawford

recalls. “My parents taught me English as my first language to make sure we didn’t have any problems at school, but in the process they forgot to teach me Spanish.” Crawford, a native of Corpus Christi, remembers the overwhelming desire to blend in. “For my last few years in school, I took Spanish and learned a little bit. As an adult, I tried to use what I knew, but wasn’t very good at it.”

Having made a name for herself in the Houston drag scene, Crawford accepted a gig to host a Latin drag show. “I really started to utilize and learn more Spanish as I connected with other Latin queens and developed a love for Spanish music and the culture it represents. It was queens like Laisha LaRue that inspired

me to be proud of my Latin culture and [realize] that I didn’t need to ‘fit in’ as an American. I am Mexican-American, and that is more than enough.”

Crawford explains how the current political climate that demonizes Latinx people makes her mission to represent Hispanic culture all the more important. “When I was growing up in the U.S., the problems we were presented with as Latin Americans weren’t as hard as they are right now. Our people, whether they come from Mexico, El Salvador, or another Latin country, are now often looked at as ‘less than’ because they want to come to this country to make a better life. For them, it’s sometimes the only option.”



Reign LaRue (l-r), Nikki Crawford, Guanders, Adrianna LaRue, Lady B, Kayla Monroe, Edna Anderson, Aria Crawford, Angelina DM Trailz, Gia LaRue, Linda D Crawford, and Laisha LaRue

An emboldened Crawford has started using her voice to call for change in how fellow Latinx people are perceived and treated. “Over the last couple of years, they’ve been treated like monsters and criminals for wanting to have a better life. That made it really important for me to stand proud—to be here in this country and be connected to them, because I know that what I have is what they want. I wish I could give that to all of my people who want to be here.”

Crawford explains that many of the performers that Houstonians know and love are impacted by the rhetoric used to “other-ize” Latinx folks. “Behind the scenes of drag, some of these girls are undocumented, and drag is how they make money to survive,” she says. “I think if people understood that [the performers at these] shows are the same people that so many Americans have talked badly about, they would have a better understanding of who we are as a people. I want to inspire those queens and show them that we are all Latinos and we are all in this together, no matter what your background is.”

Back in February, when a group of Black Houston drag queens put together a Black History Month photo shoot, Crawford first got the idea to pull together some of Houston’s fiercest queens for a photo shoot in September that would display the strength and beauty of

some of her favorite counterparts in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. “I knew some of them because we are part of the same drag family, and others I’ve met from just being a fan. I had the idea for the photo shoot in the pre-COVID days, and I shared the idea with the girls. They all said yes!”

Gia Marie, a Latinx queen, says the opportunity to participate in the photo shoot was a no-brainer. “I fully fell in love with what the photo stood for. It’s important that we are proud of our culture and our community.” The focus on queer pride was also a huge factor for Marie. “There are so many things for us as Latinos to be proud of, including being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. This project [gave us] an overwhelming feeling of pride. I’ll never forget this moment or this experience.”

Fellow queen and photo vixen Laisha LaRue also took pride in celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month with the fierce group. “To me, [participating in the photo shoot] meant the celebration of our culture—the recognition that we are one, no matter what. I love seeing all of our people just enjoying their best life and celebrating our culture!”

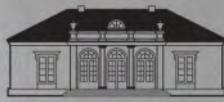
Sensitivity to social distancing requirements was taken into account as Crawford and her fellow queens proceeded with the shoot. “We scheduled everybody in different time slots. They would go, take their picture,

and leave. The photographer then [combined our separate photos] into one picture,” she explains. “We didn’t want to make things worse for [possible COVID exposure], so shooting in small groups was better for everyone, including Coti, the photographer.”

The result of this process was a stunning shot that the queens will be sharing throughout Hispanic Heritage Month on social media. “That’s where everything’s at. I eventually want to have a print made for my apartment, but right now everything revolves around social media. That’s the thing everyone connects to every day. That’s where most people are going to see it.”

Having journeyed on the path of American assimilation before returning to her Latin roots, Crawford highlights the importance of being out, proud, and fabulous at all times, particularly during Hispanic Heritage Month. “This gathering of Latin drag queens I call *reinas* is a celebration of all different paths linked by one culture. Some speak Spanish and some don’t. Some were born here and some weren’t. But at the end of the day, we are all connected by our roots, and that’s what makes it so beautiful.”

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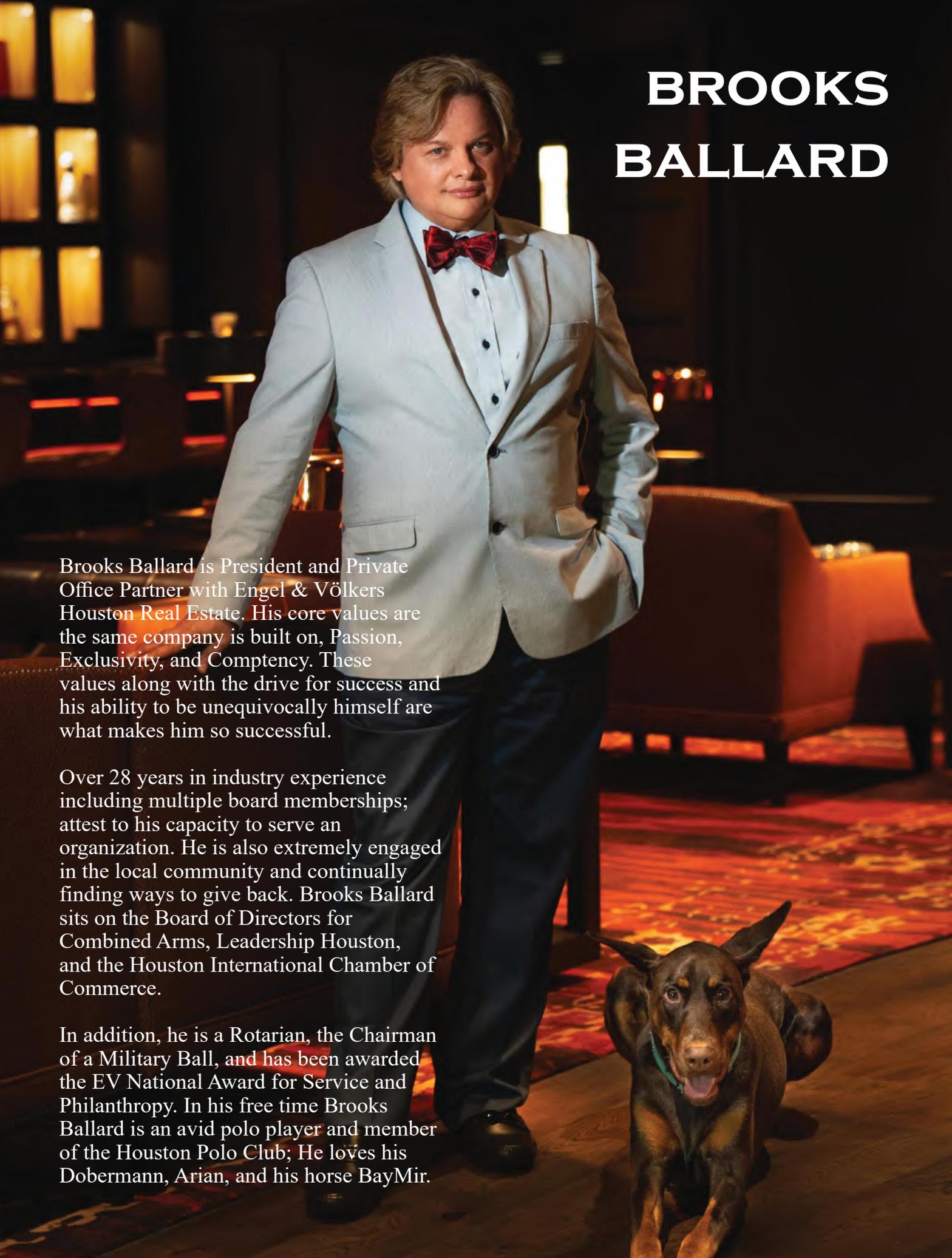


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A full-page photograph of Brooks Ballard, a man with light brown hair, wearing a light blue suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a red bow tie. He is standing in a dimly lit lounge or bar area with warm, ambient lighting. In the foreground, a black and tan Doberman dog is sitting on the floor, looking towards the camera. The background features a patterned rug, a red armchair, and a bar area with stools.

# BROOKS BALLARD

Brooks Ballard is President and Private Office Partner with Engel & Völkers Houston Real Estate. His core values are the same company is built on, Passion, Exclusivity, and Comptency. These values along with the drive for success and his ability to be unequivocally himself are what makes him so successful.

Over 28 years in industry experience including multiple board memberships; attest to his capacity to serve an organization. He is also extremely engaged in the local community and continually finding ways to give back. Brooks Ballard sits on the Board of Directors for Combined Arms, Leadership Houston, and the Houston International Chamber of Commerce.

In addition, he is a Rotarian, the Chairman of a Military Ball, and has been awarded the EV National Award for Service and Philanthropy. In his free time Brooks Ballard is an avid polo player and member of the Houston Polo Club; He loves his Doberman, Arian, and his horse BayMir.

# The 1953 Gay Raid in Waco

In the decades before Stonewall, gay men's lives were routinely destroyed by public shaming.

By BRANDON WOLF



On Saturday, April 11, 1953, nearly 70 gay men packed into a small four-room house at 2117 South 19th Street in Waco, Texas, about 10 blocks from Baylor

University. David Owen, a ministerial student at the Baptist school, had invited the men to attend the gathering, which was billed as an “interstate convention” that would culminate in a mock wedding ceremony for two men, one of whom would dress in drag as the bride.

The guests were watching a floor show while sipping on beer, wine, and champagne. The bride was dressed for the event, and an ordained minister waited to officiate. Suddenly, the doors opened, the windows were blocked, and Waco police officers, assisted by a state trooper, arrested everyone. The men were booked into the city jail for “vagrancy” violations, and each posted a \$25 bond to be released. But the real damage was done during the coming week when the men’s names and addresses were printed on the front pages of Waco’s two newspapers.

This story had mostly been lost from LGBTQ history until 2015, when Houston LGBTQ historian JD Doyle discovered it in a 1988 issue of the gay magazine *This Week in Texas*. At the time, Doyle was putting together a collection of history articles written by the late Phil Johnson of Dallas (whose LGBTQ archives are now a part of the University of North Texas library). One of Johnson’s articles focused on the 35th anniversary of the Waco raid.

Doyle went on to find various bits of information about the raid in the *Waco News-Tribune*, the *Waco Citizen*, *This Week in Texas*, *People Weekly*, *DARE* magazine and the *Berkeley Barb*. Piecing together Doyle’s research, OUTSMART can now present the sobering story of the raid’s aftermath for two of the Waco party guests whose resiliency helped them rebuild their lives.

## Waco's Gay Life in 1953

Phil Johnson described the Waco gay life in 1953 as small groups of closeted gay men. The



c. Empress Shirley, 1971



bathrooms at Waco’s two train stations and the bus depot were active cruising locations. The basement bar at the Raleigh Hotel was where “eager Air Force men came to be picked up.” Baylor students usually went to Dallas to cruise at the 1313 Club (later named Villa Fontana), hoping to avoid running into anyone they knew.

Johnson notes that big gay parties were rare in the early 1950s, so David Owen’s party invitation was eagerly accepted by gay men in Waco, across Texas, out of state, and in the military. On the day of the party, the men, who were mostly in their 20s, were having a wonderful time partying into the early evening.

Acting on a tip (which Johnson reveals likely came from military police at the local James Connally Air Force Base), nearly 20 members of law enforcement descended on the 1,000-square-foot residence. The officers on foot and in patrol cars struck so swiftly that some of the arrests were made in the automobiles of men who were just arriving at the party. Some of the guests resisted, but were soon

restrained.

Several of the men hauled to the police station were wearing formal women’s apparel complete with spring hats and high-heel shoes. As the men posted bond on Sunday morning, a red wig, a blonde wig, several women’s dresses, and falsies were stacked on a table in the police detective’s office. Detective captain Wiley Stem had even found a love letter written by one man to another.

Police had no specific law under which to arrest the men, so they used the common excuse in those days: vagrancy. Johnson explains that vagrancy meant that a person did not have more than \$25 in cash, and was considered to be “a person who wanders from place to place without a fixed home or livelihood and makes a living by begging or stealing; a tramp; a vagabond.” The men arrested did not fit this description, but none of them wished to fight the charge in court.

In a front-page story on April 13, 1953, Stem told the *Waco News Tribune* that it was “regrettable” more serious charges than →

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vagrancy couldn't be filed, but the city was now \$1,500 richer from the bonds which all the men forfeited to avoid appearing in court. The story was later sent out over the Associated Press news wire and reported on by several tabloids.

The *Waco News Tribune* also reported that "law enforcement officers have known for some time that a small cell of homosexuals has been active in Waco," but indicated the Saturday "convention" was the first of its kind ever held in the city. One veteran police officer said that in his 30 years of policing, he had "never seen anything like this."

Included on the front page was a picture of Tommy Gene Brown of Dallas, a gay man in his early twenties, fully attired as the "bride." The story garnered so much attention that a second front-page story was run in the *Waco Citizen* on April 16, 1953.

The newspapers, which published the names and addresses of the arrested men, noted that the men came from all walks of life, and that most of them had prominent jobs and college degrees. It also noted that many of the guests would *now* be looking for new employment.

**One Man's Luck**

In 1983, *This Week in Texas* published an article noting the 30th anniversary of the raid. One man, who asked to remain unnamed, then wrote a letter to the magazine, recounting how he had been one of those arrested at the party.

The man was at the time a ministerial student at Baylor in his final year, and due to graduate in August. He was in love with a medical student from Baylor Medical School in Houston who came to Waco for the party.

But the ministerial student was afraid to

join the party, for fear of being outed. He did, however, agree to drive his boyfriend to the party and then pick him up at a specified time. When he arrived back at the house, the music was so loud that no one answered the doorbell, so he went inside. As he was leaving with his boyfriend, he opened the front door and came face-to-face with a Texas Ranger. "We were treated like the scum of the earth," the man recalled.

The young man was abandoned by his boyfriend, who did not even offer to pay his bail even though the boyfriend was from a rather wealthy family. So the student had to call a friend in his hometown who wired him the money. He never saw his boyfriend again.

When his name appeared in the Waco newspapers, the student was called into the dean's office and asked to withdraw from Baylor. The same fate awaited the student who threw the party and a couple of other students who attended.

"This was one of the darkest days in my life, even to this day. I had to go home and tell my pastor and my mom that I was asked to withdraw from the university because I was in a homosexual raid at school.

"But somehow, God used that incident to give me the courage to go forward. Another Baptist school accepted me. I graduated, going on to a Baptist seminary to earn two degrees and receive an honorary degree.

"Today I am a pastor at a Metropolitan Community Church in Texas, and have been blessed with the work of the Lord that I am doing in the church—which I possibly would never have done if that Waco Police Department witch hunt had not occurred."

**The Bride's Story**

In another 1988 Phil Johnson article in *This Week in Texas*, the story of Tommy Gene Brown, the hapless Waco bride, was told.

Brown was born in Salina, Texas, around 1930. As a young man, he had quite a reputation as a hairstylist and party person, but he achieved his greatest notoriety as the Waco bride.

In an August 1953 issue of the tabloid *Dare*, a picture of Brown with the arresting officer was used with this caption: "Shown here is one of the season's unhappiest brides. A Dallas homosexual was about to be married when police broke in, hauled bride to Waco city jail along with 66 wedding guests. The bride, who looked ravishing in a faultless satin wedding ensemble pegged at \$350, was about to pledge troth to an older degenerate. Real minister presided. The raid netted the largest number of self-admitted sex deviants in Texas history."

In a September 1953 issue of *People Today*, a different picture of the bride was published with this caption: "This man in a pearl-embroidered wedding dress identified himself as Tommy Gene Brown, a Dallas window designer. He was arrested at a homosexuals' "convention" in Waco, Texas, which drew 125 participants (including GIs) from as far as N.Y. Police raid stopped Brown's "wedding."

After the raid, Brown returned to his home in Dallas and still held his head high, going on to live a productive and colorful life. In 1956, Brown met a man named Fred and fell in love. In 1959, they moved to the more gay-friendly San Francisco. Fred worked, and Brown kept up the home.

Brown became involved in one of America's first gay organizations, the Society of Individual Rights (SIR), where he helped with the dances and costumes for gay productions of *The Boy Friend*, *Pal Joey*, *Hello Dolly!*, and *The Wizard of Oz*.

As a child, Brown fantasized about being like Shirley Temple, so his friends called him Shirley and the name stuck. In 1968, Brown won the title of Empress III Shirley of the Imperial Court of San Francisco. He was the first person to campaign for the title. That year, Shirley Temple Black, who had been a child actress, was running for Congress. Brown went to one of her campaign rallies and brought back buttons and matchbooks that read "Shirley" so he could use them in his empress campaign.

Brown and his lover, Fred, were together almost 25 years. Fred died in the late 1970s, and Brown died in May 1988.

 *JD Doyle and his Houston LGBT History website provided invaluable research material for this story.*





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# Gayest & Greatest

## 2020 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS SHAKEN UP HOUSTON, BUT OUR RESILIENT COMMUNITY HAS HELPED THE CITY PUSH THROUGH THIS ONGOING CRISIS. OUTSMART'S 2020 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS HONOR THESE TOP LOCAL INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND BUSINESSES THAT HAVE PERSISTED THROUGHOUT THIS CHALLENGING YEAR, AND THIS OCTOBER ISSUE SPOTLIGHTS 15 OF THE WINNERS WHO HAVE MADE HOUSTON A BETTER PLACE WHILE DOING IT.**

First, meet drag star **Chlöé Crawford Ross** who has kept fans entertained through her show-stopping digital performances. Next, get to know volunteer **Crimson Jordan**, who spends much of his free time volunteering with several LGBTQ community groups. Then, Harris County Judge **Lina Hidalgo** discusses overcoming the challenges facing the Greater Houston region. **Joshua Kornegay** talks about his plant and garden-antiques shop in the Heights, while restaurateurs **Lena Cabrera**, her son **Angel Cabrera**, and Angel's husband **Brian Ponce** debut their new taco shop in Spring Branch. And if you're in need of a socially distanced happy hour, bartender **Reyna Rodriguez** has you covered at Hamburger Mary's Houston. Historian **JD Doyle** shares

his passion for making LGBTQ history accessible through his online archives, and infectious-disease researcher **Maggie White** works on vaccine trials at Crofoot MD. Nurse **Kandice Webber** then shares her emotional experiences treating COVID-19 patients in New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Fund manager **Doug Smith** discusses his success with real-estate investing despite the pandemic, artistic director **Dan Knechtges** prepares for Theatre Under The Stars' upcoming seasons, while designer **Thomas Davis** keeps Houston safe and stylish with his fashionable face masks. Last but not least, **Kirksey Gregg** shares his downtown events venue that's perfect for couples looking to celebrate their big day in style.



Don't forget to join us for a fun evening as we show our 2020 Gayest & Greatest award winners the love during a virtual Facebook Live awards ceremony on **Wednesday, October 21, at 7:30 p.m.**

# An Online Star Is Born

**Chlöé Crawford Ross**  
gets digital.

By **SAM BYRD**  
Photo by **SCOTTY KIRBY**

As a youngster watching *RuPaul's Drag Race's* third season, Chlöé Crawford Ross was enthralled with contestants Raja Gemini and Manila Luzon. She loved their fashion

sense and glamour, and that got her to thinking that this art form might be a future career for her. After all, it would be a natural extension of the interests she was already dabbling in.

"When I was a kid, I would draw silhouette sketches," Ross comments about her budding skills as a fashionista. She would later go on to attend The Art Institute of Houston to earn a bachelor's degree in business with a focus in fashion. "Fashion has always been a part of who I am."

Upon learning the elements of style, stage performance, and makeup, her drag career was born. Now a 10-year veteran of the stage, her commitment to the art of entertainment has earned Ross the 2020 Best Digital Drag Show award.

Before the pandemic, fans could find the performer at Bar Boheme on Sundays, JR's Bar & Grill on Sundays and Tuesdays, and Michael's Outpost on Fridays and Saturdays. Now that local drag performances have moved online, Ross relies on her ingenuity to keep entertaining the masses. She has created *The Chlöé Crawford Ross Show* as her digital showcase that features lip syncing, banter, and all the other trappings of her live appearances. It was something that took a little bit of getting used to, but she eventually found her footing.

"It's definitely a different experience. Normally when you perform live shows, you get energy from the crowd. When you're performing at home, you don't necessarily feel that same energy," she says.

With so many social-media platforms available, Ross tries to cross-promote her show



on several outlets in order to reach her fan base. "Some people are on Facebook. Some are on Instagram. If you're not doing self-promotion on all social media to let [your followers] know, sometimes you miss out on that opportunity [to invite] them to see the show," she adds. But she spreads the word, her followers watch, and they ultimately threw their support behind her in this G&G category.

To create the show, Ross utilizes Jay Clark of Your Videographer for the filming, and the videos are still available on her social-media channels. The response has been positive, and the overall experience of releasing a video series during COVID-19 hearkens to the era of music videos that she recalls from her youth.

"I grew up in the age of the music video. I remember when you'd be excited to see a world-premiere music video on MTV," the performer says. "It was unfortunate that the virus forced us to go in this direction, but once we were put to the test, it was exciting to create."

Now that Ross has seen how people have enjoyed her videos, she wants to continue creating them well after in-person drag shows resume. Stay tuned, because she's already in the planning process for another installment of her show.

 Follow Chlöé Crawford Ross online at [Chloe T. Crawford on Facebook](#) and [chloecrawfordross on Instagram](#).

# ENTERTAINMENT & NIGHTLIFE

## FAVORITE WINE BAR

### Postino Montrose

Finalists: Boheme, Max's Wine Dive

## BEST DRAG-SHOW BAR

### Hamburger Mary's

Finalists: JR's Bar & Grill, Michael's Outpost, Pearl Bar, Rumors Beach Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket

## FAVORITE BAR TO SHOOT POOL

### JR's Bar & Grill

Finalists: BUDDY'S, George Your Country Sports Bar, Pearl Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket

## FAVORITE BAR TO TWO-STEP

### Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon

Finalists: La Granja Disco Y Cantina, Ranch Hill Saloon

## FAVORITE CLUB AFTER 2 A.M.

### La Granja Disco Y Cantina

Finalists: Hamburger Mary's, Neon Boots, Ripcord, Viviana's

## FAVORITE CLUB FOR DANCING

### Houston Eagle

Finalists: Culture@2020htx, Neon Boots, Numbers Night Club, ReBar

## FAVORITE CLUB IF YOU'RE UNDER 21

### Hamburger Mary's

Finalists: Blur Bar, Numbers Night Club

## FAVORITE COMMUNITY BAR

### BUDDY'S

Finalists: George Your Country Sports Bar, Houston Eagle, JR's Bar & Grill, Pearl Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket

## FAVORITE MEN'S BAR

### Houston Eagle

Finalists: BUDDY'S, George Your Country Sports Bar, JR's Bar & Grill, Pearl Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket

## FAVORITE WOMEN'S BAR

### Pearl Bar Houston

Finalists: Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, Ranch Hill Saloon

## FAVORITE STRAIGHT BAR

### Boheme

Finalists: Darwin's Pub, Live Oak, Warren's Inn

## FAVORITE PLACE TO SHOW OFF YOUR LEATHER

### Houston Eagle

Finalists: BUDDY'S, La Granja Disco Y Cantina, Ripcord

## FAVORITE PLACE TO WATCH MALE DANCERS

### Tony's Corner Pocket

Finalists: Barcode, Houston Eagle, JR's Bar & Grill

## FAVORITE LIVE MUSIC VENUE

### House of Blues

Finalists: Numbers, Revention Music Center, White Oak Music Hall

## MOST DIVINE DRAG QUEEN

### Alexye'us Paris

Finalists: Blackberry, Chloe Crawford-Ross, Chloe Knox, Dessie Love-Blake, Tommie Ross →

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### FAVORITE DRAG KING

**Richard Long**

Finalists: Ian Syder-Blake, Hugh Dandy

### FAVORITE DRAG SHOW HOST/EMCEE

**Alexye'us Paris**

Finalists: Blackberri, Kara Dion, Kofi, Dessie Love-Blake, Ian Syder-Blake

### BEST DIGITAL DRAG SHOW

**Chloe Crawford Ross**

Finalists: Angelina DM Trails, H-Town Kings, Chloe Knox

### FAVORITE DIGITAL DRAG SHOW MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

**Blackberri Lizzo Mix**

Finalists: Barbara Coa, Chloe Crawford Ross, Chloe Knox, Violet S'Arbleu: Drama Queen

### FAVORITE LOCAL (NON-DRAG) FEMALE ENTERTAINER

**Wendy Taylor**

Finalists: Morena Roas, Lauren Salazar, Christina Wells

### FAVORITE LOCAL (NON-DRAG) MALE ENTERTAINER

**La'Darius Mirage Jackson**

### FAVORITE LOCAL (NON-DRAG) NONBINARY ENTERTAINER

**Coco**

Finalist: Stoo

### FAVORITE LOCAL BAND/MUSIC PRODUCERS

**Dirty Disco**

Finalists: Attxla, Space Kiddettes, Vodka Redu

### FAVORITE MALE DJ

**JD Arnold**

Finalists: DJ Panda, Mark D, Joe Ross, Jimmy Skinner

### FAVORITE FEMALE DJ

**DJ Athenz**

Finalists: DJ Cee Watts, DJ Krazzy Kris

### FAVORITE DRAG QUEEN DJ

**DJ Aracely**

Finalist: Lady Bunny

### FAVORITE NONBINARY DJ

**DJ Melle Mel**

## PEOPLE

### FAVORITE FEMALE LOCAL POLITICIAN

**Lina Hidalgo**

Finalists: Sylvia Garcia, Abbie Kamin, Kim Ogg

### FAVORITE MALE LOCAL POLITICIAN

**Sylvester Turner**

Finalists: Garnet Coleman, Rodney Ellis, Robert Gallegos, Ed Gonzalez, Alan Rosen, John Whitmire

### BEST FEMALE LGBTQ

**BUSINESS PERSON**

**Julie Mabry**

Finalists: Caryn Craig, Heather J. Taylor, Tammi Wallace

**BEST MALE LGBTQ BUSINESS PERSON**

**Mark DeLange**

Finalists: Christopher Barry, John Donato, Doug Smith, Ruston Taylor, Tony Vacarro

**BEST NONBINARY BUSINESS PERSON**

**Marcus Pontello**

**BEST LGBTQ SOCIAL-MEDIA ACCOUNT**

**Rainbow Community**

Finalists: JD Doyle Facebook, Legacy Community Health, OutSmart Magazine, TransGriot

**FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ BLOGGER**

**Monica Roberts**

Finalists: Joey Guerra, Ian Haddock, Travis Webb, Barrett White

**FAVORITE NATIONAL LGBTQ BLOGGER/VLOGGER**

**Monica Roberts**

**FAVORITE MALE (COMMERCIAL) RADIO PERSONALITY**

**Amir Diamond**

Finalist: Kevin "Special K" England

**FAVORITE FEMALE (COMMERCIAL) RADIO PERSONALITY**

**Sarah Pepper**

Finalists: Carmen Contreras, Kandi Eastman, Karah Leigh

**FAVORITE MALE (COMMUNITY) RADIO PERSONALITY**

**Bryan Hlavinka**

**FAVORITE FEMALE (COMMUNITY) RADIO PERSONALITY**

**Judy Reeves**

**FAVORITE MALE (COMMERCIAL) TV PERSONALITY**

**Frank Billingsley**

Finalists: Eric Barajas, Chauncey Glover, Frank Gonzalez, Blake Matthews, Derrick Shore

**FAVORITE MALE (COMMUNITY) TV PERSONALITY**

**Ernie Manouse**

**FAVORITE FEMALE (COMMERCIAL) TV PERSONALITY**

**Deborah Duncan**

Finalists: Ilona Carson, Pooja Lodhja, Miya Shay, Courtney Zavala

**FAVORITE MALE LGBTQ EDUCATOR/TEACHER**

**Brian Riedel**

Finalists: Joan Cotton, Brandon Hevey, Bryant Johnson-Wood, Sean Saunders

**FAVORITE FEMALE LGBTQ EDUCATOR/TEACHER**

**Pam Straker**

Finalists: Nikki Barrajas, Bianca Honore, Samantha Pisorski-May

**FAVORITE MALE COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHER**

**Dalton DeHart**

Finalists: Julio Eagle, Bris Thompson, Steven Tilotta, Angelo S. Ortiz Vela

CONTINUED ON PAGE 65

# The Masculine Eros

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# Paying It Forward

**Crimson Jordan** gives back to the LGBTQ community through volunteer work.

By **KIM HOGSTROM**

**T**here are many wonderful volunteers in Houston—dedicated people who make the wheels go 'round. But Crimson Jordan, 24, brings an extra dose of energy and talent to the table. OUTSMART readers recognized his tireless commitment to the city's LGBTQ community by voting him Most Valuable Trans Male Volunteer this year.

Whether it's passing out pamphlets, speaking in public, designing a website, or developing a capital campaign, this gracious and intelligent young man has done it, and is happy to do it again.

Jordan has volunteered for a long list of organizations, including the Montrose Center, the Mahogany Project, Impulse Group Houston, the Trans People of Color Coalition, and the Law-Harrington Senior Living Center.

Even with that record, the humble Jordan is surprised that he won. "Surprised? I didn't even know I had been nominated!" he laughs. "Yes, I am surprised and deeply flattered. I am so grateful!"

Jordan's journey to becoming a tireless Black trans activist was not a smooth one. He was only three years old when he realized his body and his mind didn't match. Being the son of a preacher, the youngster's protests were dismissed out of hand.

As he grew, so did his awareness of the discord. "I did not know the name for it, but I knew I was not being who I really was," Jordan explains. "In school, I was living a double life, like something out of a movie. I would leave the house in one set of clothing, and then find a restroom and put on a binder and different clothes [so I could] spend the day as myself.

"At home, the first time I officially announced that I was a boy, I was met with laughter from my parents. The next time, when I was in my teens, my mother told me that 'only



white people do that.' Then she invited me to leave the house," he says, quietly.

The young man became homeless, but desperately wanted to complete his education, so he attended school during the day and slept under a bridge at night. After his best friend's family became concerned and took him in, he lived safely with them for his remaining high school years.

On his journey to becoming his authentic self, Jordan also found help at the Montrose Center and through the welcoming embrace of its Hatch Youth program. "Sometimes they were the only thing that kept me going," he

recalls.

Today, Jordan is a high school English teacher with a degree from the University of Houston. His commitment to our city's LGBTQ community and the organizations that helped him when he so desperately needed it is steadfast.

"I have to give back. I simply would not be here without my friends and the support of our community," he states with a smile. "So far, it's been a pretty wild ride."



Keep up with Crimson Jordan on Instagram at [@crimsonlovescomics](https://www.instagram.com/crimsonlovescomics).

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# Political Activist

Harris County Judge **Lina Hidalgo** uses her position to fight for human rights.

By **LOURDES ZAVALTA**

**L**ina Hidalgo was studying public policy at Harvard University and law at New York University for her master's degree when Donald Trump became president. Prior to that 2016 election, the Colombian-born and Houston-raised activist hadn't considered a career in politics, and instead planned to create change by working in the private sector. But after weighing the negative impacts that Trump and other retrogressive lawmakers would have on marginalized communities, she decided to return to Texas and run for office in 2018.

"I realized that I would have a bigger impact if I worked from the inside of the system," Hidalgo, 29, recalls. "I was at a point where I could put my graduate studies on hold, and I didn't want to regret not having done everything I could to help my community during such a difficult time."

After successfully challenging Republican incumbent Ed Emmett, who served as Harris County's chief executive for over a decade, Hidalgo became the first woman and the first Latina to be elected Harris County judge. She now leads the nation's third-largest county, and oversees a budget of more than \$4 billion.

Hidalgo's time in office hasn't been easy. She's faced several challenges that impact the Greater Houston region, including environmental issues, natural disasters, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. "This is part of the job," she says. "I knew my role was to be an emergency manager. Of course, I didn't expect a global pandemic, but we're learning from all of these crises."



While federal, state, and local officials have all had their missteps in dealing with the pandemic, Hidalgo has remained unwavering in her approach to keeping Harris County safe. And she's doing this well, according to OUTSMART readers, who voted Hidalgo their Favorite Female Politician.

"I appreciate the love," she says. "This was so unexpected and humbling. We still have a lot of work to do, and I hope I can continue to make people proud. [Local politicians] need people holding us and every other elected official accountable. That's how we build a better government."

Hidalgo is a strong supporter of the LGBTQ community, and has worked with Commissioners Rodney Ellis and Adrian Garcia—the two other Democratic members of the Harris County Commissioners Court—to pass historic pro-equality legislation. In 2019, the court added protections for LGBTQ workers and enacted a resolution to recognize the annual

Transgender Day of Remembrance for the first time. This year, the court decided to officially acknowledge June as Pride Month.

These decisions were a no-brainer, Hidalgo says. "Who you love and how you identify shouldn't dictate what health benefits you get, or prevent you from feeling protected at your job. Harris County has so many challenges. We can't afford to alienate an entire segment of the population; we have to recruit the very best people so we can do the best work for our community."

Looking ahead to the November 3 election, Hidalgo urges OUTSMART readers to vote. "No matter what side of the aisle you're on, democracy ultimately depends on our participation," Hidalgo says. "The government works best when people are paying attention. I hope folks choose to make their voices heard."



For more information on Lina Hidalgo, visit [cjo.harriscountytexas.gov](http://cjo.harriscountytexas.gov).

**FAVORITE FEMALE  
COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHER**

**Yvonne Feece**

Finalists: Chanell Escobar, Mirna Fonseca,  
Andrea Simonton

**FAVORITE NONBINARY COMMUNITY  
PHOTOGRAPHER**

**Eric Edward Schell**

**FAVORITE MALE COMMUNITY HERO**

**JD Doyle**

Finalists: Piero Arevalo, Don Gill, Jason Rocha,  
Mykey Whitney, Ashton P. Woods

**FAVORITE TRANS MALE COMMUNITY HERO**

**Emmett Schelling**

Finalists: Logan Knight, Ian Syder-Blake, Lou Weaver

**FAVORITE FEMALE COMMUNITY HERO**

**Debbie Steele**

Finalists: Julie Mabry, Heather J. Taylor,  
Tammi Wallace, Fran Watson, Kandice Webber

**FAVORITE TRANS FEMALE COMMUNITY HERO**

**Atlantis Narcisse**

Finalists: Dina Jacobs, Evie Lavender,  
Monica Roberts, Alexis Nicole Whitney

**FAVORITE NONBINARY COMMUNITY HERO**

**Kelsey Reynolds**

Finalists: Mike Webb, Eric Edward Schell

**LEADING FEMALE FUNDRAISER**

**Sallie Woodell**

Finalists: Chree Boydstun, Angela Tate,  
Linda Rhodes, Carol Wyatt

**LEADING TRANS FEMALE FUNDRAISER**

**Alexis Nicole Whitney**

Finalist: Mya Kori Wesley

**LEADING MALE FUNDRAISER**

**Kennedy Loftin**

Finalists: Derrick Brown, Stephen Duckett,  
Don Gill, Timmy Martinez, Mykey Whitney

**LEADING TRANS MALE FUNDRAISER**

**Ian Syder-Blake**

Finalist: Richard Long

**LEADING FEMALE ENTERTAINER FUNDRAISER**

**Violet S'Arbleu**

Finalists: Ivanna Cupcake, An'Marie Gill,  
Angela Mercy, Alexis Nicole Whitney

**LEADING MALE ENTERTAINER FUNDRAISER**

**Mykey Whitney**

Finalists: Ian Syder-Blake, Travis Webb

**MOST PROMINENT FEMALE ACTIVIST**

**Fran Watson**

Finalists: Julie Mabry, Lo Roberts, Kendra Walker,  
Kandice Webber

**MOST PROMINENT  
TRANS FEMALE ACTIVIST**

**Monica Roberts**

Finalists: Dee Dee Watters, Alexis Nicole Whitney,  
Jessica Zyrle

**MOST PROMINENT MALE ACTIVIST**

**Ashton P. Woods**

Finalists: Antonio Arellano, Piero Arevalo,  
Brad Pritchett

**MOST PROMINENT TRANS MALE ACTIVIST**

**Lou Weaver**

Finalists: Caleb Elijah, Ola Osaze,  
Emmett Schelling, Ian Syder-Blake

**MOST PROMINENT NONBINARY ACTIVIST**

**Kelsey Reynolds**

Finalist: Eric Edward Schell

**MOST VALUABLE FEMALE VOLUNTEER**

**Lo Roberts (tie)**

**Donna Junker (tie)**

Finalists: Ana Sanchez, Heather J. Taylor, Tori Williams

**MOST VALUABLE TRANS FEMALE VOLUNTEER**

**Monica Roberts**

Finalists: Mia Ryan, Alexis Nicole Whitney

**MOST VALUABLE MALE VOLUNTEER**

**Brad Pritchett**

Finalists: Domenic Cusano, Stephen Duckett,  
Don Gill, Tony Martinez, Kevin Nguyen

**MOST VALUABLE TRANS MALE VOLUNTEER**

**Crimson Jordan**

Finalist: Emmett Schelling

**MOST VALUABLE NONBINARY VOLUNTEER**

**Robin Mack**

Finalist: Kelsey Reynolds

## REAL ESTATE

**BEST MALE REAL-ESTATE AGENT**

**Brooks Ballard**

Finalists: George Burch, Gabriel Cardenas,  
Jeremy Fain, Thomas Phillips, Dan Ritche

**BEST FEMALE REAL-ESTATE AGENT**

**Shan Randle**

Finalists: Karen Derr, Debbie Levine, Lynette Lew

**BEST MORTGAGE COMPANY**

**Cody Grizzofi-NRL Mortgage**

Finalists: Amegy Bank Mortgage, John Frels,  
Keith Russell-Republic State Mortgage

**BEST TITLE COMPANY**

**Chicago Title Inner Loop**

Finalists: Alamo Title, Capital Title, Texas American Title

**BEST HOME BUILDER**

**Jose Ocque**

Finalists: Sandcastle Homes, ROC Homes

**BEST HOME REMODELING COMPANY**

**Luria Construction**

Finalists: C House Renovations, Jauncho Jimenez

**FAVORITE RENTAL COMMUNITY**

**Drewery Place Apartments (tie)**

**Elan Memorial Park (tie)**

Finalists: Cabochon at River Oaks, Elan Heights,  
Ellison Heights, Skyhouse Apartments →

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# Flower Power

**Joshua Kornegay's plant shop is blooming in the Heights.**

By JENNY BLOCK

Joshua Kornegay, owner of Joshua's Native Plants and Garden Antiques, Inc. in the Heights, says that many people's first impression of him is that of a doomsday-prepping, gun-loving redneck. "Not that there's anything wrong with that," he laughs. "I think it's because I wear so much camo," a style that stems from his lifelong love of the outdoors,

camping, and bird watching.

In reality, Kornegay is anything but a doomsday prepper and gun toter. He grew up with a rather strict Navy veteran dad and a well-educated, nurturing mom. He describes his childhood as "well-balanced, loving, and 'regular.'" That is, until high school. "As is often the case, I realized I was gay after having a string of girlfriends that never turned

into anything very serious. And nobody needed to know about the guys I'd secretly fool around with occasionally," he recalls. "At the time, I thought, 'Everyone does this, right?'"

But this was not the last time Kornegay made a life-altering discovery.

After earning a forestry degree at Stephen F. Austin State University, he realized that being a park ranger wasn't going to pan out for him. So, in 1993, Kornegay instead decided to open a garden shop. "I already knew a lot about natural science—plants and the like. Plus, I'd always had a knack for making a buck. So, why not?" That was almost 30 years ago, and he says he's loved every year since.

Kornegay's obvious love for nature's greenery earned Joshua's Native Plants and Garden Antiques this year's Best Gardening/Nursery Supply award. The shop specializes in plants native to the Gulf Coast, including many succulents and cacti. "These plants need no special soils, fertilizers, or, for that matter, any skill to grow. Plus, a great many of these are drought tolerant," Kornegay notes. Native plants are also more likely to attract songbirds, butterflies, hummingbirds, and many other wonderful beasts. "That's why many of us garden, right?"

Kornegay actually handpicks many of his plants from farms across Texas, so if this well-stocked store doesn't have something on your garden wish list, Kornegay will get it for you. "We also have a huge selection of old-fashioned garden classics, just like your grandmother had in her garden. Even though we are a small shop with only a handful of employees, we are always available to talk with you about any of your gardening projects."

"Being a native Houstonian myself, I am well aware of our big city's diversity. We cater to everyone—from those who just need a few houseplants in cool pots to those who love being outdoors and [creating the oasis of their dreams.] be it traditional, modern, or downright bizarre," Kornegay says.

As a global importer of pottery, garden art, and architectural artifacts, Kornegay's nursery offers a little bit of everything. "Once, I even acquired a vintage men's room urinal that was set up as a fountain for one of my kinkier customers!" Kornegay recalls.

He loves it when customers say, "I will never shop *anywhere* else, ever again!" And Kornegay admits that he's heard this comment many times and trusts that he will continue to for years to come.

"So drop by, mask-up, and see what unexpected thrill awaits you!"



For more information on Joshua's Native Plants and Garden Antiques, visit [joshuasnativeplants.net](http://joshuasnativeplants.net).

# COMMUNITY

## BEST POLITICAL ADVOCACY GROUP

### Houston GLBT Political Caucus

Finalists: Jolt Action, Transgender Education Network, Victory Fund

## FAVORITE LGBTQ PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATION

### The Montrose Center

Finalists: Bunnies on the Bayou, ERSICSS, Legacy Community Health, Out for Education

## FAVORITE LGBTQ BENEFIT EVENT OF THE YEAR

### Bunnies on the Bayou

Finalists: Houston Leather Pride, Mint Julep, The Montrose Center Gala, World AIDS Day Luncheon

## FAVORITE LGBTQ SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

### Diana Foundation

Finalists: ERSICSS, Executive & Professional Association Houston (EPAH), Krewe of Olympus, Lambda NextGen

## FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

### Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce (tie) PRIDE Houston (tie)

Finalists: ERSICSS, Montrose Center, PWA Holiday Charities, Space City Sisters

## BEST LOCAL CORPORATE LGBTQ DIVERSITY GROUP

### Chevron

Finalists: Amegy Bank, Dow Chemical, ExxonMobil, Shell

## FAVORITE LGBTQ SPORTS CLUB

### Montrose Softball League Association

Finalists: Gay Kickball, Houston Hurricanes, Houston Tennis Club, Lone Star Volleyball

## FAVORITE HIV/AIDS SUPPORT ORGANIZATION

### AIDS Foundation Houston

Finalists: Avenue 360 Health & Wellness, Legacy Community Health, The Montrose Center, PWA Holiday Charities, St. Hope Foundation

## FAVORITE NATIONAL LGBTQ ORGANIZATION

### The Trevor Project

Finalists: Black Trans Advocacy Coalition, National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, Victory Fund

## FAVORITE LOCAL COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

### University of Houston

Finalists: Houston Community College, Rice University, Texas Southern University

## FAVORITE PLACE TO TAKE YOUR OUT-OF-TOWN VISITORS

### Houston Eagle

Finalists: Discovery Green, Houston Galleria, Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo, The Menil Collection, NASA

## FAVORITE PLACE TO WORSHIP

### Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church

Finalists: Bering Memorial UMC, Congregation Or Ami, Kindred, St. Paul's UMC, Unity of Houston →



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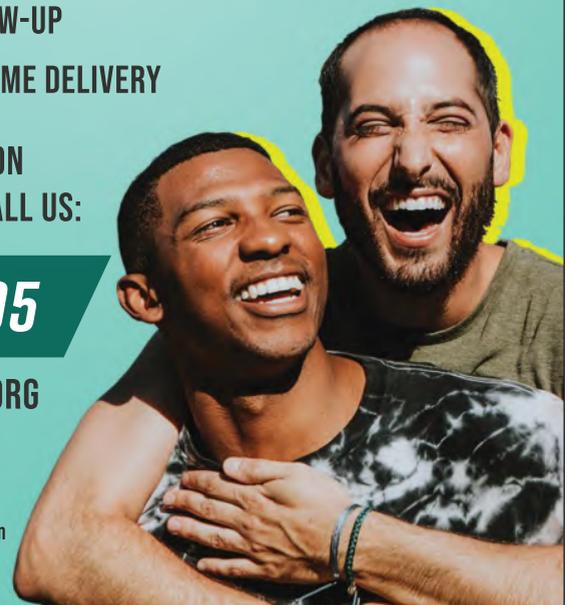
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**FAVORITE PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAM**

**Houston Astros**  
Finalists: Houston Dash, Houston Dynamo, Houston Rockets, Houston SaberCats, Houston Texans

**LOCAL BUSINESS MOST SUPPORTIVE OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY**

**Silver Eagle Distributors**  
Finalists: Amegy Bank, BUDDY'S, Houston Eagle, Pearl Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket

**NATIONAL BUSINESS MOST SUPPORTIVE OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY**

**Target**  
Finalists: Anheuser-Busch, Comcast, MAC Cosmetics, Zions Bancorporation

**BEST LOCAL LGBTQ WEBSITE**

**OutSmart Magazine**  
Finalists: Houstonlgbthistory.org, JD Doyle Archives, LegacyCommunityHealth.org

**BEST NATIONAL LGBTQ WEBSITE**

**JD Doyle Archives**  
Finalists: HuffPost, TransGriot, Towleroad

**DINING OUT**

**BEST NEW RESTAURANT OR FOOD CONCEPT**

**Dumpling Dudez**  
Finalists: Tacos Doña Lena, Tortilla Joe's, Traveler's Table

**BEST CAFE**

**Barnaby's Cafe**  
Finalist: PJ's Coffee of New Orleans

**BEST 24-HOUR RESTAURANT**

**Katz's Deli & Bar**  
Finalists: House of Pies, Whataburger

**BEST BAKERY**

**Dessert Gallery**  
Finalists: Common Bond, Michael's Cookie Jar, Sweets by Tony

**BEST BARBECUE**

**The Pit Room**  
Finalists: Demeris Bar-B-Q, Pinkerton's Barbecue, Truth BBQ

**BEST DELI**

**Katz's Deli**  
Finalists: Kenny & Ziggy's, New York Deli & Coffee Shop

**BEST FOOD TRUCK**

**Stuff'd Wings**  
Finalists: The Waffle Bus, What A Taco

**BEST DUMPLINGS**

**Dumpling Dudez**

**BEST HAMBURGER**

**Hamburger Mary's**  
Finalists: Barnaby's Cafe, Burger Joint, Lankford's Grocery

**BEST HOT DOG**

**Good Dog Houston-Montrose** →



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# A Family Affair

**Lena Cabrera, her son, and his husband serve up authentic Mexican food in Spring Branch.**

By **KIM HOGSTROM**

**W**hen a five-month-old taco shop beats out some of the most well-established institutions in Houston for the Best Mexican Restaurant award, there is something going on that you should know about. Fortunately, OUTSMART readers were willing to share their secret about Tacos Doña Lena, so now the cat is out of the bag.

In a city brimming with Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine, it is hard to stand out. But this little Spring Branch taqueria does it with seductive aromas and a tidy, colorful interior that only hint at the dining experience that awaits. Authenticity is the key to these indulgences, and it's evident from the first bite.

Tucked into an ordinary strip center, the value offered here is remarkable; one wonders how fresh made-from-scratch fare, chock-full of meats and cheeses, can be sold at these prices. Tacos start at \$2, gorditas at \$4, and tortas at \$7, and they're available in plenty of vegan and vegetarian options.

How do they do it? Just ask owners Lena Cabrera, her son Angel Cabrera, and Angel's husband, Brian Ponce. The Houston family has years of experience in selling tacos, a determination to succeed, and a work ethic that is a force of nature.

In 1992, 6-year-old Angel, his two younger sisters, and his mom left Mexico for the promise of a better life in Houston. "Life was very difficult for us in Mexico, and I wanted something better for our children," Lena explains. "We were not sure what to expect when we arrived here. I was very frightened, but as I look



Brian Ponce (l), Angel Cabrera, and Magdalena "Lena" Cabrera



back now, I see that is the very best decision I could have made. We love Houston."

As a former street-taco vendor, Lena used her entrepreneurial spirit when the family arrived to set up a taco stand in their new apartment complex in Spring Branch. After only a few weeks, customers were standing in line.

"My mom sold handmade food from a stand in our complex for 25 years," remembers Angel. "She served the sort of food you would find in a traditional village taco stand in Mexico. She worked extremely hard and was able to save up enough money to send me to college. I am so grateful for the opportunities she gave me."

Angel, 35, and Brian, 34, have been married for two years, and are approaching a decade in their deeply committed, loving relationship. "We worked with one another for years waiting tables at Barnaby's," Brian says, "so we already knew we worked well together before opening our restaurant. We also learned a lot about the business there. Jeff Gale, the owner, is incredible. In fact, nearly everything about Barnaby's serves as a role model for us."

The family signed a lease for a brick-and-mortar location more than a year ago. It took time to open because they chose to self-finance the operation rather than take out a loan. "Loans cause us anxiety," Angel explains with a smile.

Throughout those months, Lena continued to sell her fare full-time at the apartments while her son attended classes at the University of Houston, met with architects, vendors, and inspectors at the restaurant, and even waited tables at Barnaby's every night.

"It was tough, but I knew that's what it would take. So I put my head down and I did it," he says.

Five months ago, the family finally opened Tacos Doña Lena with four employees: Lena, Angel, Brian, and a friend. Today, they have ten employees and continue to grow. Not bad for being in the middle of a pandemic.

"We are so grateful for the response we are getting, and our many return customers. Not only can we continue to grow, it means my mom can look forward to a comfortable retirement in the future," Angel concluded. That's what I want most for her."

 For more information on Tacos Doña Lena, visit [facebook.com/tacosdonalena](https://facebook.com/tacosdonalena).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

**BEST PIZZA**

**Bollo (tie)**  
**Pizza Birra Vino (tie)**  
Finalists: Pepperoni's, Pink's Pizza, Star Pizza

**BEST SEAFOOD**

**Truluck's**  
Finalists: Eugene's, Pappadeaux, The Rouxpour

**BEST STEAK HOUSE**

**B&B Butchers**  
Finalists: Morton's Steak House, Pappas Bros., Perry's Steakhouse

**BEST STEAK NIGHT AT A BAR**

**Free Grillin' at George**  
Finalists: BUDDY'S, Neon Boots, Pearl Bar

**BEST SUSHI**

**AKA Sushi**  
Finalists: Miyako, Oishii, Osaka

**BEST VEGETARIAN/  
VEGAN**

**Verdine**  
Finalists: Korny Vibes, Soul Food Vegan

**BEST BREAKFAST**

**Baby Barnaby's**  
Finalists: Breakfast Klub, Tortilla Joe's, Snooze

**BEST BRUNCH**

**Gloria's Latin Cuisine**  
Finalists: House of Blues, Phil and Derek's, Traveler's Table

**BEST LUNCH SPOT**

**Urban Eats**  
Finalists: Barnaby's Cafe, Jenni's Noodle House, Tacos Doña Lena

**BEST DESSERT**

**Dessert Gallery**  
Finalists: Chocolate Bar, Rita's Italian Ice

**BEST BRITISH**

**Red Lion Pub**

**BEST CAJUN**

**BB's Tex-Orleans**

**BEST CENTRAL/SOUTH AMERICAN**

**Gloria's Latin Cuisine**

**BEST CUBAN**

**El Rey**  
Finalist: Cafe Piquet

**BEST CHINESE**

**Cafe Ginger**  
Finalists: Ginger & Fork, Three Six Nine (3-6-9), The Rice Box

**BEST JAPANESE**

**Uchi**  
Finalists: Oishii, Roka Akor

**BEST THAI**

**Khun Kay Thai**  
Finalists: Morningside Thai, Thai Chef's, Thai Spice

**BEST VIETNAMESE**

**Mai's Restaurant**  
Finalists: Roostar, Thien An

**BEST FRENCH**

**Artisans Restaurant**

**BEST GREEK**

**Niko Niko's**  
Finalist: Just GRK

**BEST INDIAN**

**Tarka Indian Kitchen**  
Finalists: Khyber, Pondicheri

**BEST ITALIAN**

**Giacomo's Cibo e Vino (tie)**  
**Riva's (tie)**  
Finalists: Carrabba's, Maggiano's

**BEST MEDITERRANEAN/  
MIDDLE EASTERN**

**Fadi's**  
Finalists: Aladin, La Fendee

**BEST MEXICAN**

**Tacos Doña Lena**  
Finalists: El Tiempo Cantina, Gloria's Latin Cuisine, Superica

**BEST PLACE FOR A ROMANTIC DATE**

**Rainbow Lodge**  
Finalists: Giacomo's Cibo e Vino, Pappas Bros. Steakhouse, Traveler's Table

**BEST PLACE TO CELEBRATE**

**Hamburger Mary's**  
Finalists: Dumpling Dudez, Present Company

**BEST RESTAURANT  
FOR CHEAP EATS**

**Jenni's Noodle House**  
Finalists: Barnaby's, Raising Cane's, Urban Eats

**BEST RESTAURANT  
FOR ELEGANT DINING**

**Brennan's of Houston**  
Finalists: Perry's Steakhouse, Traveler's Table

CONTINUED ON PAGE 75

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# Reliable Realtor

**Shan Randle** is the property broker you can count on.

By ZACHARY MCKENZIE

Once a teacher, always a teacher. Shan Randle has gone from being a professional educator to a bonafide real-estate agent and financial-literacy tutor. Even though she no longer spends her days in the classroom, Randle schools her clients in the art of snagging the home of their dreams, while simultaneously cultivating the next generation of world-changing youth through her financial literacy program.

"I'm African-American. I guess you would call me a stud. Once you get to know me, though, I'm really girly."

The friendly real estate agent reflects on her professional path: "I taught special-education students for eight years, and was looking for something different." That grueling workload started to have an effect on her type 1 diabetes, so while she was in the process of buying her first home, she paid close attention to the details as she pictured herself teaching others to purchase real estate. "After I closed, I realized I could be a Realtor who really educates people—so I'd still be teaching," Randle recalls. "I did my Realtor training hours that same summer, and took my exam the following school year. It was hard for me, because I didn't want to leave my students. I was working in a low-income district, but I knew I had to focus on my health. January will mark five years of having a license."

The charismatic agent now counts the folks who are purchasing their first home among her favorite students. "I work with first-time home buyers, and I have fun educating them. That's the greatest joy I get from real estate."

As fun as her job is, Randle acknowledges the concern and confusion that can go into making such an important decision, and addresses these worries by assuring her clients that she's got their back every step of the way. "[After we work together, my clients] are so educated that they sometimes get on the lenders' nerves," Randle laughs. "I don't want them



to be confused after the home-buying process. Taxes, escrow accounts, home warranties—if you don't know what those things are, you could waste a lot of money."

The savvy professional knows that her role as an out and proud agent is to show her clients that they are in safe hands. "I want to be there for our community," she emphasizes. "I know there's anxiety about whether a Realtor is an ally or not. I want people to say, 'OK, Shan is gay, so I can ask her whatever questions I want.'"

And when she's not teaching home buyers, Randle and her partner, Shenice, channel their passion for education and financial literacy with their "Tech For Your Future" youth program that sets the next generation up for success. "I put money away every time I close on houses," Randle says in regard to funding this passion project. "Once the kids complete our financial-literacy courses, they receive a

laptop to help them go to college or start their career."

Randle keeps an eye out for kids who may struggle with the program's application process. "I don't want to leave kids who have potential behind just because they may not be able to write an essay. My ultimate goal is to dig even deeper for the kids that fall through those cracks and lift them up with this program."

The busy real-estate agent sums up her passion for the home-buying process saying that educating her clients and financial-literacy students keeps her motivated. "Yes, I'm a lesbian, but I just want to do what's right for everybody, whether you're in the LGBTQ+ community or not."



For more information on Shan Randle, visit [har.com/shanrandle](http://har.com/shanrandle). Tune in to the Shan and Shenice Show online at [shenandshanshow.lgbt](http://shenandshanshow.lgbt).



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# Multitalented Mixologist

**Reyna Rodriguez keeps things shaking at Hamburger Mary's.**

By SAM BYRD

**R**eyna Rodriguez is a woman on the up and up in the Montrose bar scene. Thanks to her friendship with a manager at the former Bayou City bar on Grant Street, she started working the door there during her first two years in the service industry. After that, she made the leap to the other side of that strip center on Grant and began bartending at Hamburger Mary's,

which opened in February 2017. After years of slinging drinks and entertaining customers, Rodriguez has won this year's Favorite Female Bartender award.

She is also the first transgender woman to pick up this award. "It's amazing. I always like to see my sisters doing something positive in the community. It's good to have this honor," she says of her historic achievement.

Hamburger Mary's is a spot known for its

raucous drag shows, tongue-in-cheek names for menu items, and crowd antics. For guests who are looking for a good beverage to partner with the signature burgers, she recommends the Hennessy Margarita.

"It's not too strong, and it's not too sweet. It's a different flavor than the tequila, and people tend to like it more," she says.

Rodriguez likes to take part in the fun at the restaurant, too. She recalls one of her craziest moments on the job when she was horseplaying with a coworker. "I fell, and I brought down a whole shelf of bottles with me to the floor," she admits.

Embarrassing moments aside, her patrons look forward to her hospitality, even during the pandemic when service workers are always shifting roles and responsibilities to accommodate changing safety guidelines.

"I'm a chameleon. I roll with it and go with the flow. Luckily, I have other jobs, so it didn't affect me as much. It is difficult because you don't get that one-on-one time with your clients where you can laugh at the bar. I've had to get comfortable with the mindset of staying away from the people I'm usually physically close to," she adds.

Rodriguez keeps herself perpetually busy when she's not tending bar. She's been employed by the State of Texas for the last nine years, first working with the Texas Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program before transitioning to social services. "I like the stability of the job, and because I'm a people person, it was nice to know I was assisting people who needed help during hard times," she says.

While her state job is a good one, her dreams of entrepreneurship have been emerging lately, and she's felt compelled to dive into a new course as an esthetician. Reyna had her eyes on the future when she recently opened Reyna's Royal Chamber at 6776 Southwest Freeway. Her business is located in a suite with other cosmetologists offering services that complement her own menu of facials, treatments for damaged skin, and microblading services.



Follow Reyna Rodriguez on Instagram  
[@reynasroyal\\_chamber](https://www.instagram.com/reynasroyal_chamber).

**BEST RESTAURANT  
FOR OUTDOOR DINING**  
**Postino Montrose**  
Finalist: Lucille's

**BEST RESTAURANT  
FOR CURBSIDE DINING**  
**Tortilla Joe's**  
Finalist: Hamburger Mary's

**BEST DINING TO-GO**  
**Barnaby's Cafe**  
Finalists: Chili's, Tortilla Joe's

**FAVORITE FOOD DELIVERY**  
**David Alcorta Catering**  
Finalists: Pepperoni's, Tortilla Joe's

**FRIENDLIEST RESTAURANT STAFF**  
**Hamburger Mary's**  
Finalists: Barnaby's, Gloria's Latin Cuisine, Tortilla Joe's

## DRINKS & SPIRITS

**CLUB OR RESTAURANT WITH  
THE BEST HAPPY HOUR**  
**Houston Eagle**  
Finalists: BUDDY'S, JR's Bar & Grill,  
La Granja Disco Y Cantina, Tony's Corner Pocket

**CLUB OR RESTAURANT  
WITH THE BEST MARGARITA**  
**Gloria's Latin Cuisine**  
Finalists: 1308 Annex, Houston Eagle, Tortilla Joe's

**CLUB OR RESTAURANT  
WITH THE BEST MARTINI**  
**Guava Lamp**  
Finalists: BUDDY'S, Hotel ZaZa, Houston Eagle,  
JR's Bar & Grill

**BEST DRINKS TO-GO**  
**Hamburger Mary's**  
Finalists: Pico's, Tortilla Joe's

**FAVORITE FEMALE BARTENDER**  
**Reyna Rodriguez**  
Finalists: Sarah Tompkins Gutierrez, Crystal Murley,  
Kristina Prats, Mya Ross

**FAVORITE MALE BARTENDER**  
**Charles Garibay**  
Finalists: Chris Contello, Colton Gaul,  
Ronnie Thomas, Brian Wade, Travis Webb

**FAVORITE BRAND OF BEER**  
**Bud Light**  
Finalists: Eureka Heights, Karbach Crawford Bock,  
Karbach Love Street, St. Arnold's Lawnmower

**FAVORITE BRAND OF LIQUOR**  
**Tito's Handmade Vodka (tie)**  
**Dripping Springs Vodka (tie)**  
Finalists: Deep Eddy Vodka, Don Anastacio Tequila,  
Jameson's Irish Whiskey, Ketel One →

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# HEALTH & BEAUTY

## BEST CHIROPRACTOR

**Alexia McClerkin**

Finalists: Paula Batterton, Byron Menard

## BEST COSMETIC SKIN CARE CENTER

**The Skin Renewal Center**

Finalists: Skin Renaissance, SkinLab at West Ave.

## BEST MALE AESTHETIC PHYSICIAN

**Patrick McNamara**

## BEST COSMETIC SURGEON

**Forrest S. Roth**

Finalists: Franklin Rose, Angela Sturm

## BEST FEMALE DENTIST

**Cynthia Corral**

Finalist: Daniella Farias

## BEST MALE DENTIST

**Marcus de Guzman**

Finalists: Alex Barrera, Sam Carrell, Austin Faulk, Cory Logan, Randy Mitchmore

## BEST FEMALE EYE DOCTOR

**Michelle Hung**

Finalists: Juliet Farmer, Christine Tyler

## BEST MALE EYE DOCTOR

**Stewart Zuckerbrod**

Finalists: Paul Lovero, Evan Mapes, Scott Sawyer

## BEST FERTILITY CLINIC

**Aspire Fertility**

Finalist: Houston Fertility Institute

## BEST FOOT DOCTOR

**Vanessa Barrow**

## BEST FEMALE PHYSICIAN

**M. Sandra Scurria**

Finalists: Jennifer Feldman, Julia Kovacs, Natalie Vanek

## BEST MALE PHYSICIAN

**Gordon Crofoot**

Finalists: Octavio Barrios, Abel Flores, Mark Levine

## BEST PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT/NURSE PRACTITIONER

**Maggie White**

Finalist: Donnie Harvey

## FAVORITE FEMALE NURSE

**Kandice Webber**

## FAVORITE MALE NURSE

**Derek Smith**

Finalists: Christopher Cox, Akil Jones, AJ Sarabia

## BEST MALE PSYCHIATRIST

**Daniel Garza**

Finalist: Barry Gritz, Chad Lemaire, Jim Simon, Pedro Bustamante

## BEST MALE MENTAL-HEALTH THERAPIST

**Ty David Lerman (tie)**  
**Robert Snellgrove (tie)**

Finalist: Shane Hennesey, Jeffrey Myles, Ryan Viviano

## BEST FEMALE MENTAL-HEALTH THERAPIST

**Denise O'Doherty**

Finalists: Tara Bates, Jessica Eisaman, Tierra Ortiz-Rodriguez, Betsy Vasquez

## BEST MALE MENTAL-HEALTH THERAPIST/PSYCHOLOGIST

**Denis "Woodja" Flanigan**

Finalist: Daniel Garces

## BEST MALE MASSAGE THERAPIST

**Ryan Fugate**

Finalist: Tom Zeppelin

## BEST MALE PHYSICAL THERAPIST

**Roy Rivera Jr.**

## BEST FEMALE PERSONAL TRAINER

**Felicia Sexton**

Finalist: Melissa Serra

## BEST MALE PERSONAL TRAINER

**Kian Alexander**

## BEST VIRTUAL PERSONAL TRAINING SESSIONS

**Tropa Z (Corrie Domingo)**

Finalist: Billy Morquecho

## BEST GYM/PLACE TO WORK OUT

**Body Positive at Legacy Community Health**

Finalists: Club Houston, LA Fitness, Skyline CrossFit

CONTINUED ON PAGE 79

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# Houston's E-Historian

**JD Doyle** makes local LGBTQ history accessible through his online archives.

By ZACHARY MCKENZIE

**N**ow, more than ever, it's imperative that queer folks know their history and learn from the pioneers who paved the way to where we are today. A one-stop shop for LGBTQ Houston and Texas history can be found in the JD Doyle Archives. This impressive catalog of local queer history even includes hundreds of obituaries and 580 hours of archived radio program content. It's clear why Doyle's massive digital platform is the recipient of this year's Best National LGBTQ

Website award.

In January 2000, Doyle was invited to do a radio segment on the history of queer music. What followed was a 15-year gig as the host of *Queer Music Heritage*, a unique LGBTQ music history program. Covering a spectrum of music from gay country to queer hip hop, Doyle decided to digitize his work for future generations of listeners to enjoy. "It wasn't long after the show wrapped that I knew I wanted to put it online, because the history was important enough to be archived and because no one else was doing this kind of show. These indepen-

dent artists were the pioneers, and you can't find them anywhere," he explains.

After putting *Queer Music Heritage* online, Doyle realized he had much more to offer regarding LGBTQ history. "In about 2013, I realized I had things in my personal archives like Pride photos from the 1980s, and I started putting that stuff on my website so people could see it," the out historian explains. "I kept adding more scans of gay publications, which are probably my first love when preserving history."

In 2014, his site dedicated to LGBTQ Texas and Houston history was created. "You can't really find that kind of information in history books."

The final tier of the archives is the Texas Obituary Project, a catalog that memorializes LGBTQ Houstonians and Texans. "I like to include the person's age, and if they left a partner behind," he explains. The site is designed to help the user research based on category. "I have tags on every page: AIDS deaths, Black, Latino, female, deaths by violence. You can search all of these specific things. I hope it's useful for researchers who are studying LGBT deaths over the years."

Doyle explains that while the obituary database is vast, it will never capture every LGBTQ death. "Not everyone had obituaries, and there are probably twice as many deaths due to AIDS than the tag on my website reflects."

Doyle explains that he doesn't monitor website visits or clicks, even now that his entire website collection has been preserved by the U.S. Library of Congress. He understands his mission to be much greater than attracting website traffic. When asked what this history resource would have meant to a younger version of himself, he explains, "I might've come out a lot sooner. When I was younger and coming out, there was no Internet or real visibility of the gay people we could have looked up to as mentors. The people coming out now are so lucky. They don't know how blessed they are. In the '70s, it was seen as a sickness and illegal. You had to watch your back."

As for the future of his archives, Doyle explains he has no intention of slowing down, and even has plans for expansion. "I have found that the history website has gotten a little wider than just Houston. I have whole sections with digitized stuff from Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio, just because I can and because it needs to be available. I want the website to continue to expand to be statewide."



 Find historian JD Doyle's archives online at [houstonlgbthistory.org](http://houstonlgbthistory.org).

**BEST COMMUNITY HEALTH-SERVICES PROVIDER**  
**Legacy Community Health**  
 Finalists: Avenue 360 Health & Wellness, St. Hope Foundation

**BEST MEN'S HEALTH CLINIC**  
**Lago Mar Medical Clinic**

**BEST VIRTUAL HEALTHCARE APPOINTMENTS**  
**Crofoot MD**  
 Finalist: Legacy Community Health Care

**BEST EMERGENCY OR URGENT CARE CENTER**  
**SignatureCare Emergency Center**  
 Finalist: Elite Care 24-Hour Emergency

**BEST PHARMACY**  
**Legacy Pharmacy (tie)**  
**Avita Pharmacy (tie)**  
 Finalists: Walgreens Pharmacy at Crofoot Medical, Walgreens

**BEST COVID-19 TESTING SITE**  
**Crofoot MD**  
 Finalists: City of Houston, Legacy Community Health Care, SignatureCare Emergency Center

**BEST RAPID COVID-19 TESTING SITE**  
**SignatureCare Emergency Center**

**BEST FEMALE HAIR STYLIST**  
**Celina Gonzalez**  
 Finalists: Lana Blake, Yesenia Garcia, Patty Gooch

**BEST MALE HAIR STYLIST**  
**Christopher Michael Stribling**  
 Finalists: Brian Mejia, Reza Nouri, Joel Quinones, Anthony Skoogie

**BEST TATTOO PARLOR**  
**Electric Chair**  
 Finalists: Corazones Tattoo, Red Eye Gallery

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**BEST AIR CONDITIONING & HEATING COMPANY**  
**Village Plumbing & Air**  
 Finalist: Newport Air Conditioning & Heating

**BEST FLORIST**  
**Perfect Petals by Geo**  
 Finalists: Bloom and Box, David Brown Flowers, Michael McCarthy

**BEST FURNITURE STORE**  
**Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams**  
 Finalists: Cantoni, Nadeau

**BEST FURNITURE STORE ON A BUDGET**  
**Alabama Furniture**  
 Finalist: IKEA

**BEST GARDENING/NURSERY SUPPLY**  
**Joshua's Native Plants & Garden Antiques**  
 Finalists: Buchanan's Native Plants, Fountains and Statuary

**BEST INTERIOR DESIGNER**  
**Christopher Charles Interiors**  
 Finalists: Brad Brandt, J Randall Powers

**BEST LANDSCAPING COMPANY**  
**Windswept Landscape Studios**  
 Finalist: Thompson + Hanson Stone

**BEST MOVERS**  
**3 Men Movers**  
 Finalist: All My Sons Movers

**BEST PEST CONTROL COMPANY**  
**Natural Care Pest Control**

**BEST PLUMBER**  
**Village Plumbing & Air**

**BEST POOL COMPANY**  
**Venture Pool Co.**  
 Finalist: Houston Cool Pools

**BEST HOME SECURITY COMPANY**  
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 BOOKKEEPER**  
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 Finalists: Maria Ngo, Wendy Langford

**BEST MALE ACCOUNTANT/  
 BOOKKEEPER**  
**Gary Gritz**  
 Finalists: Bryan Polk, Joseph Werle

**BEST FEMALE ATTORNEY**  
**Deborah Lawson**  
 Finalists: Lena Laurenzo, Dawn Renken,  
 Fran Watson

**BEST MALE ATTORNEY**  
**Raed Gonzalez (tie)**  
**Mitchell Katine (tie)**  
 Finalists: Heath DeJean, Charles Hunter,  
 John Nechman, Dwane Todd

**BEST FEMALE FINANCIAL  
 PLANNER/ADVISOR**  
**Grace Yung**  
 Finalist: Christyna Lewis

**BEST MALE FINANCIAL  
 PLANNER/ADVISOR**  
**Richard Dickson**  
 Finalists: Elias Contreras,  
 Steven Miranda, Shane Theriot

**BEST LGBTQ  
 FUND MANAGER**  
**Doug Smith/  
 Hawthorne Funds**

**BEST FEMALE  
 INSURANCE AGENT**  
**Shenice Brown**  
 Finalist: Jennifer Majors Baca

**BEST MALE  
 INSURANCE AGENT**  
**Lane Lewis (tie)**  
**Patrick Torma (tie)**  
 Finalists: Dustin Harwell, Jason Rocha

## PETS

**BEST FEMALE  
 VETERINARIAN**  
**Kristy Kyle (tie)**  
**Danielle Rosser (tie)**  
 Finalists: Christie Cornelius,  
 Brittany Marvel

**BEST MALE  
 VETERINARIAN**  
**Eric Cagle**  
 Finalists: Richard Clive,  
 Doug Hendrix, Larry White

**BEST PLACE TO ADOPT A PET**  
**BARC Animal Shelter  
 and Adoptions**  
 Finalists: Friends For Life,  
 Houston Humane Society

**BEST DOGGIE DAY CARE**  
**Yale Street Dog House**  
 Finalists: The Dog House Pet Salon,  
 Wag'n World

**BEST PET EMERGENCY CARE  
 CENTER**  
**Gulf Coast Veterinary  
 Specialists**  
 Finalists: Urban Animal Veterinary Hospital,  
 Vergi 24/7

**BEST PET GROOMING SERVICE**  
**Pure Pets**  
 Finalists: Aussie Pet Mobile River Oaks,  
 Natural Pawz, Wag'n World,  
 Yale Street Dog House

**BEST PET WALKING AND  
 PET SITTING SERVICE**  
**My Dog Butler**  
 Finalist: Robert Carrasco

**BEST PET FOOD AND TREATS**  
**NULO**  
 Finalist: Baked Bones

**BEST PLACE TO BUY PET SUPPLIES**  
**NaturalPawz**  
 Finalists: PetSmart,  
 Quality Feed & Garden

## ARTS

**BEST ART GALLERY/PLACE  
 TO BUY ARTWORK**  
**Archway Gallery**  
 Finalists: Hardy & Nance Studios,  
 John Palmer Art Space Montrose

**BEST REGIONAL THEATER**  
**Alley Theatre (tie)**  
**Theatre Under The Stars (tie)**

**BEST COMMUNITY THEATER**  
**Catastrophic Theatre**  
 Finalist: Ensemble Theatre

**BEST LOCAL EQUITY THEATER**  
**Stages Repertory Theatre**

**BEST PERFORMING ARTS  
 COMPANY**  
**Houston Grand Opera**  
 Finalists: Bayou City Performing Arts,  
 Pilot Dance Project →

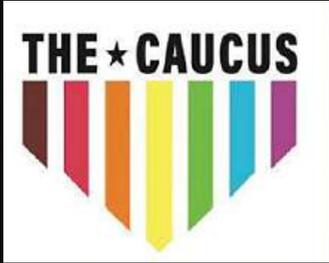
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# Devoted Researcher

LGBTQ ally **Maggie White** studies infectious diseases at Crofoot MD.

By **MARTIN GIRON**

**A**fter one of Maggie White's best friends tested positive for HIV, he was confronted and shamed by another friend who was staying at his apartment. The incident influenced White's decision to become an infectious-disease researcher.

"Even though that confrontation happened over 15 years ago, it was so backwards for my friend to be treated that way for being HIV positive," White says. "It kind of pushed me over the edge to go into HIV research."

White, a nurse practitioner and clinician at Crofoot MD, was no stranger to the world of medicine while growing up. Her mother, who held a Ph.D. in nursing, had mentored her from an early age and influenced her compassion for those living with HIV and AIDS.

"I recently found an article in the religion section of the *Houston Chronicle* from 1987 that showed my mom volunteering with AIDS patients by providing home hospice care," White notes. "She believed that God loved everyone, and that [those living with HIV/AIDS] deserved to be loved and taken care of just like everybody else."

Born and raised in Houston, White attained a bachelor's degree in nursing from UT Austin and two master's degrees in nursing and public health from the UT Health Science Center in Houston. She began working in HIV research at the Baylor College of Medicine before shifting to providing more interactive clinical care at Crofoot MD.



In addition to being one of Houston's primary providers of PrEP HIV-prevention medication, Crofoot MD is one of the largest HIV clinical-research sites in the country, with 15 to 20 clinical trials going on at any given time.

Their focus on infectious disease has also allowed the clinic to participate in some of the upcoming COVID-19 vaccine trials. They have tested over 1,000 Houstonians for COVID-19 since March.

"The way I'm treating my patients with COVID-19 today is different than in April, or even June, because the knowledge is evolving so rapidly," White says. "The good thing is that we haven't seen an increased risk or worse outcomes for COVID-19 among patients with HIV."

White says that while Crofoot MD has historically treated many Houstonians living with HIV, the practice has adopted a primary-care model to cater to the LGBTQ community's holistic health needs beyond HIV prevention and treatment. "When I started six years ago, about 70 percent of our patients were HIV-pos-

itive, but now [that ratio] is about 50 percent," White says.

Crofoot MD's staff, many of whom are queer, stress the importance of creating an environment where LGBTQ folk can feel comfortable with their healthcare providers, White says. "You can't treat and prevent HIV or any other illness in a vacuum by just looking at blood work and prescribing medication—so much of it is education and empowering patients to participate in their own health care."

Commenting on her win for Best Nurse Practitioner, as well as Crofoot MD's wins for Best COVID-19 Testing Site and Best Virtual Healthcare Appointments, White's compassionate nature shines through. "All I can be is a good ally and help. If I'm able to do that, and give hope to people with HIV, I'm happy. To be honored by the community you serve, there's nothing better than that."

 To learn more or schedule an appointment at Crofoot MD, visit [crofootmd.com](http://crofootmd.com) or call 713-526-0005.

### FAVORITE HOUSTON MUSEUM

**Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (tie)**

#### Menil Collection (tie)

Finalists: Holocaust Museum, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston Museum of Natural Science

### FAVORITE LOCAL FEMALE ACTOR

#### Tamarie Cooper

Finalists: Lydia Meadows, Holland Vavra, Pamela Vogel

### FAVORITE LOCAL MALE ACTOR

#### Dylan Godwin

Finalists: Mark Ivy, Charles Swan, Wesley Whitson

### FAVORITE LOCAL FEMALE FINE ARTIST

#### Crystal Murley

Finalists: Letitia Garcia, Janavi Mahimtura Folmsbee

### FAVORITE LOCAL MALE FINE ARTIST

#### Hugo Perez

Finalists: Robin Baker, Edgar Medina, Wes Holloway

### FAVORITE LOCAL NONBINARY FINE ARTIST

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##### The Eye Gallery (tie)

##### Montrose Eye Care (tie)

Finalists: Eye Impact, Eye to Eye, Spectacles,

#### BEST FACE MASK DESIGNS

##### Masks by Thomas

Finalists: East End Masks, Alan Gonzalez, Hunttees.com, MexicAnita

#### BEST SPECIALTY FOOD STORE

##### Phoenicia Specialty Foods

Finalist: Central Market

#### BEST GROCERY STORE

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Finalists: Kroger, Trader Joe's

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##### H-E-B

Finalist: Kroger

#### BEST JEWELRY STORE

##### Silverlust (tie)

##### Tenenbaum Jewelers (tie)

Finalist: Zadok Jewelers

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Finalist: Total Wine & More

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Finalist: Black Sheep Agency, Kwirx Creative, Refuge Marketing

#### BEST MANAGED IT SERVICES

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Finalist: Egis Cyber Solutions

CONTINUED ON PAGE 90

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# Out on the Front Lines

Nurse **Kandice Webber** has worked tirelessly to heal COVID-19 patients.

By **ZACHARY MCKENZIE**



**T**here has always been a consensus about how courageous nurses are. Throw a pandemic into the equation, and suddenly the world comes to a halt as we all watch footage of these heroes on the front lines of a global health crisis. Nurses like Kandice Webber, this year's Favorite Female Nurse, are now sacrificing more than they ever imagined when they took the Hippocratic Oath.

"I have been a nurse for almost 20 years. I've never seen a disease like COVID," Webber says. "It is brutal and unrelenting. It is unpredictable, and it kills." This sentiment is telling, given that Webber is a critical-care nurse specializing in medical intensive care. "The patients I care for have a multitude of disease processes that culminate in life-threatening illnesses."

Webber understands that her choice to become a nurse comes with a particular amount of emotional challenges and sacrifices. "I've cared for nurses who contracted COVID [while] working in the same hospital I work in, and I have had to watch some of them die," the selfless medical professional says. "I know that I could be one of those frontline health-care workers who dies caring for strangers. That is a sobering feeling."

The toll that the pandemic has had on nurses like Webber is clear, both professionally and personally. "I am separated from my family because of the dangers of spreading this virus to them. I miss my wife and children," she says. "My youngest child is only 18 months old. I've been away from her for a third of her life."

Through technology, she is able to keep in touch with them. "My wife sends me videos and pictures every day. We FaceTime a lot. One of my greatest fears was that my baby wouldn't feel a bond between us because I've been away from her for so long."

The lead organizer of Black Lives Matter Houston recognizes how important it is to be an out nurse. "Representation matters. Most people who die of COVID die alone. Their families can't be with them, and the last thing they need is to have some nurse or doctor [prohibit an LGBTQ partner from contacting them via] calls or video chats."

Webber remembers a gay patient who was dying of the disease, and his partner kept trying to get information about his prognosis, to no avail. "The doctors kept blowing him off," she recalls. She had to fight for his partner and explain that he has loved the patient for almost 30 years. "I reminded them that we provide care. We don't not pass judgment about our

patients' families or who they share love with."

Webber took the initiative and contacted the patient's partner. "I let him use my phone to FaceTime. He died three days after that call. I sat in his room and held his hand as he transitioned, and then I called his partner to let him know that he had passed, but he wasn't alone. I was there with him. I will never forget them."

Having worked in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Texas during the pandemic, this brave and compassionate nurse continues to face danger and uncertainty every day while providing top-notch care to her patients, all while maintaining a semblance of family life when she isn't in her surgical scrubs. "I'm incredibly grateful for my wife, because she prioritizes my communication with our little one. Those of us on the front lines are making unbelievable sacrifices."



For more information on Black Lives Matter Houston, visit [blmhouston.com](http://blmhouston.com).

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# Money Maker

Hawthorne Funds'  
**Doug Smith** empowers  
his investors.

By **JENNY BLOCK**  
Photo by **GARY BLAKE**

ExxonMobil here in Houston, right out of college. “That job led to me saving up some money and launching my career as an entrepreneur and businessperson. And here I am today. So apparently my [success can all be traced] back to me being a runt!”

However, he did not remain at ExxonMobil for long. After learning that most millionaires made their fortunes in real estate, he decided that real-estate investing was his next move. So, Smith bought his first house and then went on to buy 41 more over the next five years. The rest, as they say, is real-estate investment history.

Smith used to be a regular on the Montrose Softball League Association and says he met some of the closest friends he has today on the softball field. These days, he’s more focused on the Executive and Professional Association of Houston (EPAH) organization and tends to support causes EPAH is involved with. Other organizations that he’s recently supported include the Montrose Center, the UH Graduate College of Social Work, and AIDS Walk Houston.

Smith says that investing is vital to individuals, society at large, and to the LGBTQ+ community specifically. “It allows us to take control of our own finances, and by extension, our own lives. People who invest properly are generally able to retire or scale back much sooner. Just imagine what the LGBTQ+ community could do with the [generous support of many] individuals who had invested properly over the long term.”

 For more information on Doug Smith, visit [hawthornefunds.com](http://hawthornefunds.com) or send him an email at [doug@hawthornefunds.com](mailto:doug@hawthornefunds.com).

**D**oug Smith, CEO of Hawthorne Funds, grew up on a cotton farm just south of Lubbock, Texas. Hawthorne Funds is a private equity firm that aggregates investors’ funds to purchase, subdivide, and sell large rural tracts of land in Texas. “Many investors are members of the Houston LGBTQ+ community,” he says.

Smith’s ability to take good care of his investors has earned him the Best LGBTQ Fund Manager award.

Despite COVID-19 and all of the hardship it has caused, Smith says things have been going surprisingly well at Hawthorne Funds these days. “I’m grateful that it has been mostly ‘business as usual’ for us. The main thing that has helped us is that we buy and sell rural land. We’re seeing an increased desire by many to flee the city for wide-open spaces.”

Smith has been interested in doing business and making money since he was a kid. “It may have started with the Monopoly board

game. It continued with my small business in junior high, selling bracelets and necklaces. Then it was on to buying and selling baseball cards online, handling the email marketing for businesses (right as email became a thing), and eventually selling study guides to math students during college.”

People are often surprised to discover that Smith was quite an athletic youngster who dreamed of becoming a baseball or football star. “But as the other kids grew, I didn’t. It felt like I became tinier and tinier in comparison,” he says, noting his disappointment over not excelling in high school sports. “As a way to feel good about myself and to feel less invisible, I focused my efforts on making good grades and winning awards.”

When it was time to head off for college, choosing a school wasn’t a tough choice for Smith. “My dad said that I could attend any college I wanted—as long as it was Texas Tech.” He decided to pursue a major in business administration with a minor in Spanish.

His academic path, he says, brought him to



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# The Show Must Go On

Despite COVID-19, the future of Theatre Under The Stars is bright.

By MARENE GUSTIN  
Photo by JENN DUNCAN



Dan Knechtges

**T**he curtain will rise again! That's the motto for Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS) right now as the venerable musical theater organization postpones its season, reduces staffing and salaries, and deals with a \$17 million budget shortfall.

But in spite of the trauma, OUTSMART readers still gave TUTS the Best Local Equity Theater award this year.

"It is an incredible honor because Houston's other theaters also have a devotion to their craft that is incredible," says TUTS Artistic Director Dan Knechtges. "I personally try to go see everything [at the other theaters], so it's humbling to be singled out."

And while the theater is currently dark, the future of TUTS' upcoming season appears bright.

"Plans for 2022-23 are in full swing," Knechtges says. "We've got a full list of shows that got canceled or delayed, along with new producers wanting to bring shows here. It's going to be exciting!"

Although TUTS' prospects are looking up, the theater needs to get through the rest of this year and 2021 to carry out its plans for 2022-23, and that remains uncertain.

"Trying to predict what will happen in the pandemic is very difficult, and it changes daily," Knechtges admits. "However, we do know the protocols for the show starting in May will be dictated by the tour producers of

*Come From Away.*"

According to Knechtges, the producers will have stringent protocols in regard to the actors and musicians. For instance, to keep audiences safe while they are in the building, shows will no longer feature intermissions, and proper social distancing and masks will be required. But should things improve, Knechtges says the theater organization will evaluate what it will do next.

"Our first self-produced show in the Hobby Center is *Rock of Ages* next August, and I'm hopeful we will be closer to normal at that time," he says. "Should we still need more safety procedures in August, we will take what we learned from *Come From Away* and put that into place for *Rock of Ages.*"

While the TUTS stages are bare at the moment, that doesn't mean the 52-year-old theater company isn't still producing art.

"I think Winston Churchill once said, 'Never let a good crisis go to waste,'" Knechtges notes.

TUTS just launched a podcast and a webcast based on its popular Spotlight Series, an originally free in-person event that gave audi-

ences the chance to meet the cast and creative teams responsible for TUTS' productions. The podcast and webcast offer fans the chance to go behind the scenes and connect with musical theater in a more meaningful way. Knechtges recently hosted a Spotlight webcast in which he spoke with other performing-arts leaders about the current state of affairs and how they're staying connected to the community during this unprecedented era. The Spotlight podcast also explores cast albums, from well-known hits to the really obscure.

"[The podcast and webcast are] both great ways for musical-theater fans to stay plugged in to the community while we are unable to gather," Knechtges says.

Like its Spotlight Series, TUTS could not host a production at the Miller Outdoor Theatre this year, due to the pandemic. So, the theater organization is working to continue both its schools and in-community programming for its Public Works Houston program online. As they say, the show must go on.



For more information on TUTS, visit [tuts.com](http://tuts.com).

# THE EYE GALLERY

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**Out of the Closet**  
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## WEDDINGS & EVENTS

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**Eleanor Tinsley Park**  
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**Al's Formal Wear**  
 Finalist: Men's Wearhouse

**BEST WEDDING OFFICIANT**  
**Johnny Peden**  
 Finalists: Kirksey Gregg Productions, Billy Whitaker  
**BEST WEDDING**

**CAKE BAKERY**  
**David Alcorta Catering & Custom Bakery**  
 Finalists: Cake Fine Pastry, Sweet Nation, Who Made The Cake!

**BEST WEDDING/EVENT CATERING FIRM**  
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 Finalist: Devour Houston Catering

**BEST WEDDING/EVENT DJ**  
**Darker Side DJs & Karaoke**  
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**BEST WEDDING/EVENT FLORIST**  
**Rexberry Luxury Events**  
 Finalist: Perfect Petals by Geo

**BEST WEDDING/EVENT LIVE MUSIC/STRING QUARTETS & BANDS**  
**Harmony Strings**  
 Finalist: Divisi Strings

**BEST WEDDING/EVENT PHOTOGRAPHER**  
**Yvonne Tran**  
 Finalists: David Troung, D Jones Photography, Kirk Surber Photography

**BEST WEDDING/ EVENT PLANNER**  
**Lauren Burnham/ EventSmith**  
 Finalists: A Day to Remember, Rexberry Luxury Weddings, Wedding Bliss Events

**BEST WEDDING/ EVENT VENUE**  
**The Ballroom at Bayou Place**  
 Finalists: Crystal Ballroom at the Rice Hotel, Madera Estates, The Parador

**BEST WEDDING/EVENT VIDEOGRAPHER**  
**J&D Productions**  
 Finalists: Jay Clarke Films, Kirk Surber Photography

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# Fashionable Face Masks

**Thomas Davis'** designs keep Houston safe and stylish during the pandemic.

By ALYSSA JORDAN

**D**uring times of crisis, there are always those who step up and use their skills for the greater good. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Thomas Davis, 32, uses his sewing skills to create fashionable and comfortable face masks for sale online. His masks have proven to be a hit, as he won the Gayest & Greatest Best Face Mask Designs award this year.

Davis was born in Port Arthur and currently lives in Beaumont with his husband, Joshua. They have been married for nearly four years, but they've been together for over a decade. Davis originally learned to sew when he began doing drag. "I'm a drag queen, and when I first started, I learned how to sew my own outfits," he says. Davis, also known as Sara Cha (pronounced like the hot sauce sriracha), performs in Beaumont drag shows most of the time, but he also performs occasionally in Houston.

When Texas closed down earlier this year due to the pandemic, Davis' full-time job at a bakery was put on hold. That's when he took it upon himself to use his sewing expertise to make extra income making masks. Since masks are a fairly easy pattern and are now in high demand, it was no surprise that he and his husband decided to open their Masks by Thomas shop on Etsy.com. "It's just me and my husband doing it. I sew all of the masks, and he does all of the paperwork and all of the shipping. It is just a team of two."

Now that Texas is opening up again, Davis has gone back to working full-time at his



bakery during the week—in addition to keeping Masks by Thomas operating. Davis and his husband are still working hard to supply people with stylish, affordable, and comfortable face masks. They currently offer over 300 fun and creative designs, and Davis adds new designs often. "I'm always at the fabric store, buying new patterns, and adding to the shop."

Davis prides himself on the craftsmanship of his masks, and works incredibly hard on making sure every mask is perfect, including the adjustable ear straps that make them es-

pecially comfortable. His masks range in price from approximately \$8 to \$17.

And if you're having trouble finding LGBTQ mask designs, Masks by Thomas comes to the rescue. "As far as LGBTQ+ themed masks, I have over 50 designs for that. We are fairly big on supporting the community, especially in Beaumont."

 Check out Masks by Thomas at [etsy.com/shop/MasksByThomas](https://www.etsy.com/shop/MasksByThomas) or on Facebook at [facebook.com/masksbythomas](https://www.facebook.com/masksbythomas).



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# Wedding Wonderland

**Kirksey Gregg's** downtown venue is the picture-perfect spot for a couple's big day.

By MARENE GUSTIN

**K**irksey Gregg, 59, was born in Crane, Texas, a dusty little town known more for its oil than its gardens. Although he grew up around arid lands and little rainfall, Gregg fell in love with flowers, and his family was more than willing to support his passion.

"I've always loved flowers," Gregg admits. "When I was 15, my grandfather bought me a flower shop." And while he was quite content in West Texas, he wanted to move to Houston to manage a friend's flower shop. Today, he co-owns The Ballroom at Bayou Place in Downtown Houston as well as Kirksey Gregg Productions, a full-service special events company he operates with his husband, Shay Calhoun-Gregg.

"We opened The Ballroom in 2016," says Gregg, who has two partners in the venue. "At 15,000 square feet, it is the largest privately owned event space in downtown." On the second floor of the Bayou Place entertainment complex, The Ballroom overlooks the Theater District through its floor-to-ceiling windows and from its gorgeous balconies. Conventions, galas, and private parties are typically held there, and it's also a popular wedding venue. Even the Greggs were married here.

"[We had our wedding at The Ballroom] the week after Harvey," Gregg says, referring to the 2017 hurricane that wrecked Texas. "We had 500 guests and a full sit-down dinner. It was fabulous. We did all the flowers; it was quite the floral scene! We had these huge screens with impressionist paintings that changed for each course."

Gregg loves weddings as much as he loves flowers, and he has seen plenty of both during his 22 years in the events business. "I love giving joy to other people," he explains. "If I can't make a bride and her mother cry tears of joy, then I haven't done my job."

But things are different this year. Almost all big events have been canceled due to the pandemic. Even the Houston Ballet is taking its annual Nutcracker Market fundraiser online this year—a blow to Gregg, who loves the



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA

ballet and has done design work for the event for 17 years.

"It's a shame," he says, "because Houston Ballet really needs that money."

Like the Houston Ballet, The Ballroom is also suffering.

"We are coded as a restaurant, so we could hold an event for 2,000 people right now," he says. But nobody's throwing parties like that during the pandemic, and the dip in business has affected those working both the front and back of house. "You don't realize all the people

behind the scenes who are needed to put on a special event," Gregg explains. "And we're all banding together to get through this."

However, as bookings for 2021 skyrocket, he's optimistic that the Ballroom will overcome and remain a beacon for many. "People are ready to get out! After the trauma is over, people want to get out and celebrate."

 For more information on The Ballroom at Bayou Place, visit [theballroomatbayouplace.com](http://theballroomatbayouplace.com).

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Johnson is not the only out candidate running for the same seat for a second time. **Gina Ortiz Jones** wants to represent Texas' 23rd Congressional District in the general election, and she could become the first openly LGBTQ Texan elected to the U.S. Congress.

In 2018, Jones, a Filipina American lesbian, lost her election to Congressman Will Hurd by only 926 votes. The TX-23 seat represents about 710,000 constituents between El Paso and San Antonio, and Jones says she's ready to run against her new Republican opponent, Tony Gonzales.

As someone who relied on reduced-cost school lunches and subsidized housing while growing up, Jones is again campaigning to help the working families in her district who have been severely impacted by COVID-19. She's also running to change the face of leadership.

"We need leaders who are going to fight for an inclusive economic recovery that prioritizes working families and small businesses, and that starts with listening to medical experts who are telling us that we need more testing, contact tracing, and adequate supplies of PPE so that we can get this crisis under control and safely get Texans back to work and our kids back to the classroom," Jones says.

As a congresswoman, Jones will act on behalf of many rural counties in South and West



Gina Ortiz Jones

Texas. Her desire to lead and give back to her district comes from her mother, who came to the U.S. as a domestic worker after graduating from the number-one university in the Philippines, according to Jones' website.

"Growing up in San Antonio, my mom reminded [my sister and me] every day that we were lucky to be born in the United States, and that we had to give back to the country that had given us so much," Jones says.

Her mother's example also pushed Jones to serve in the Air Force and in the White House, where she worked under George W. Bush and Barack Obama before resigning in 2017 during President Trump's administration.

"The type of people that [Trump] brought in to be public servants were interested in neither the public nor the service," Jones told Huff Post. "That, to me, was a sign that I'm go-

ing to have to serve in a different way."

She still wants to lead her community, especially when it comes to health care. According to Jones, access to health care is the biggest issue her district faces. Unlike Gonzales, who supports the elimination of the ACA, Jones says she will work to ensure that her constituents have access to quality, affordable health care.

She is running for Congress to fight for everyone's right to grow up healthy, get an education, and serve our country. "Every family in this district deserves the same opportunities my family had," she says.



Learn more about Jones and her positions at [ginaortizjones.com](http://ginaortizjones.com).

Like Jones, **Madeline Eden** is campaigning to make history. She is running for a seat in the Texas House of Representatives next month, when she could become the first openly transgender member of the Texas Legislature.

And like the other candidates, Eden has her eyes on the 2021 redistricting process. According to Eden, if voters don't flip the Texas House, Republicans would have free rein to gerrymander the state for another decade. But she has hope, since the likelihood of turning the Texas House blue is high and could result

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in both a new governor and fairer statewide representation.

Her views on gerrymandering stem from her desire to end voter suppression. In 2018, she founded register2vote.org, a Texas non-profit that has successfully registered over one million voters nationwide. The deputy voter registration law, which charges those who are not officially deputized as voter registrars with a felony for helping others register to vote, was one of the reasons she created the site.

“Voter suppression [is] death by a thousand cuts,” she says, referring to the deputy voter registration law, along with statewide efforts to both cut back on polling locations in minority areas and prevent those convicted of a felony crime from voting. “We can fix our government to make it more representative of its people, and the first step is facilitating everyone’s right to vote.”

In the Texas House of Representatives, Eden will fight to pass voting-rights legislation and implement online voter registration, same-day voter registration, and automatic



Madeline Eden

registration, guaranteeing everyone’s right to participate equally in our government.

“There are people who want to participate in a democracy, and they’re unable to,” she says. “When everything is said and done, I know there are more progressively minded people out there. When we have a democracy that’s representative of the people, our state [legislators] will reflect that. But the first step in [making] that happen is [making sure] everyone can participate without being hindered.”

By securing everyone’s ability to vote, Eden says the U.S. could end the two-party system and the Electoral College. The country could also have a more representative government by imposing term limits and by appointing enough Supreme Court justices to prevent corruption from partisan politics.

“Our system of government has been around for hundreds of years, and it was originally designed as a system that [could be] modified to make it more representative,” she says. “That’s what the framers of the Constitution wanted, and we haven’t taken that far enough.”

She encourages folks to go out and convince others to register to vote before October 5 and then vote against the poor leadership that has led to our current state of affairs.

“Cut through the propaganda and disinformation, and vote,” she says. “That would make a huge difference.”



For more information on Madeline Eden, visit [edenfortexas.com](http://edenfortexas.com).

**The Victory Fund has endorsed 15 other openly LGBTQ Texas candidates, including:**

**Kim Ogg** for Harris County District Attorney, **Kelli Johnson** for Harris County Criminal Court, District 178, **Selena Alvarenga** for Travis County District Court Judge, **Michelle Palmer** for Texas State Board of Education, District 6, **Paty Baca** for Judge of Texas’ District Court 346, **Jimmy Flannigan** for Austin City Council, District 6, **Wesley Lawrence** for El Paso City Council, District 4, **Jessica Gonzalez** for Texas House of Representatives, District 104, **Mary Gonzalez** for Texas House of Representatives, District 32, **Eric Holguin** for Texas House of Representatives, District 32, **Celia Israel** for Texas House of Representatives, District 50, **Julie Johnson** for Texas House of Representatives, District 115, **Eliz Markowitz** for Texas House of Representatives, District 28, **Lorenzo Sanchez** for Texas House of Representatives, District 67, and **Erin Zwiener** for Texas House of Representatives, District 45.

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# WEDDING GUIDE

By JENNY BLOCK | Photos by EDER ACEVEDO



Samuel Carrell (l)  
and Austin Faulk



## Acci-Dentally In Love

Austin Faulk and Samuel Carrell met in dental school and married just before the pandemic.



It sounds like the opening of a joke: What do you call two dentists in love? But there's no punch line here. Just a super-sweet story of two guys who met in dental school, fell in love, and made it legal just before a pandemic swept the world.

Austin Thomas Faulk, 28, and Samuel Afton Carrell, 32, are both dentists at Montrose DDS, a practice that Sam owns. Austin, a native of Lafayette, Louisiana, is a graduate of Texas A&M University, while Sam, a native Houstonian, studied at the University of Texas at Austin. Both attended dental school at the University of Texas School of Dentistry in

Houston, where they met. The couple currently lives in the Midtown/Montrose area.

When the couple was first introduced, Austin was just starting dental school and Sam was graduating. "We met through dental-school friends. Sam messaged me and asked me to go on a date, and the rest is history," Austin says. Their first date was the day before Valentine's Day in 2015.

But it was when Austin brought Sam to Louisiana for a family Thanksgiving in 2015 that he knew Sam was the one. "He meshed so well with the family, and we had a delightful trip. That was when I realized he could easily become a part of my family."

For Sam, it was more gradual. "There

wasn't one specific moment in time when I realized Austin was someone I could spend the rest of my life with. As we spent weeks and then months together, any doubts I had about a future together disappeared."

Austin proposed to Sam on November 2, 2018, when they were in New York City on vacation. "I toyed with the idea of a grand proposal at one of New York's famous landmarks, but opted for a more private proposal at a nice dinner. I think Sam appreciated an intimate proposal more than a public one."

Sam was more than surprised, since he had begun planning how he would propose on that very same trip, but of course didn't have the chance to carry out his plans. "He surprised →

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me at a wonderful dinner at Dirty French in Manhattan, and I was ecstatic to say yes.”

The happy couple was married on January 4, 2020, at the Hotel Playa Fiesta in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, with 45 guests in attendance. The couple had visited the resort multiple times in the past, so they decided that would be the perfect place to have their ceremony. Austin’s best friend from college, Selena Richey, officiated the wedding. “It was her wedding in Cancún the year before that prompted us to have a destination wedding. We had such a nice trip at her wedding, and we wanted to emulate it. The experience was absolutely perfect in every aspect,” Austin says.

Both Sam and Austin are incredibly grateful that their wedding was before the pandemic reached the Americas. “We are so happy to have the memories of our trip before this year went crazy. We were able to enjoy early 2020 with an awesome wedding before COVID changed everyone’s plans for the year,” Sam says.

The event was not without its bumps, though. On the day of their wedding in Puerto Vallarta, two of their guests injured them-

selves and had to be taken to the hospital. “Thankfully, the injuries were minor and both guests returned in time for the ceremony, so they were able to enjoy the reception festivities,” Austin says.

Their ceremony was a traditional one, but without any religious aspects. “By having a great friend officiate our wedding, the ceremony felt very personalized for us and our guests,” Austin explains. And using LGBTQ-friendly vendors was important to them. “Hotel Playa Fiesta took care of the wedding planning, and they are very open-minded and host many LGBTQ weddings each year,” Sam says.

Hosting a destination wedding was not without its challenges, of course. It required a lot of coordination between guests and the hotel, Austin says. They ended up spending hours trying to ensure every guest was fully informed about all of the details. “Sam made a fabulous wedding website full of every detail you could imagine, but some people still missed the necessary details. Thankfully, everyone arrived safely at the hotel without any hiccups.”

Austin and Sam had planned to honeymoon in Europe this fall, “but the pandemic has put that plan on hold. We hope that in 2021 it is safe for us to travel abroad to enjoy a much-desired honeymoon,” Sam says.

The pair is smitten with each other in so many ways. Austin loves that Sam loves to make Indian food and is a master of curries. Sam loves that Austin, always the comedian, knows how to make him smile when he’s feeling down.

One thing’s for sure: with such a clear and immediate connection, this is one relationship that literally has some teeth in it. ▼



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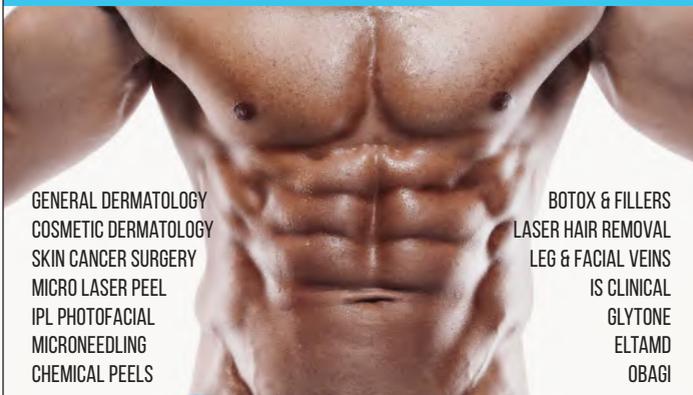
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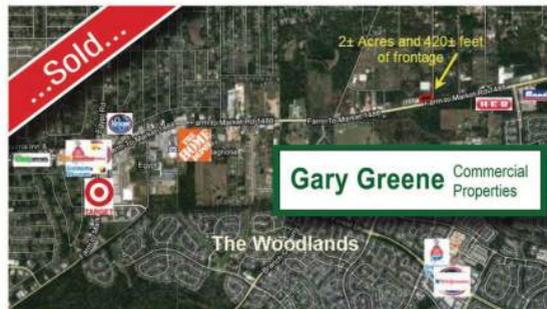


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# The Turmoil Continues



As most of you can tell, the alignment of the planets has been very harsh this year. The anxiety level will remain strong right through January 2021. Joining in the turmoil this month is Mercury, which goes retrograde on October 8 along with Mars, which is currently retrograde. Retrogrades indicate that we can't move forward until we deal with the past. Mercury will be direct by November 8. The latter part of the month will provide some relief from the intensity, but tensions will rise again as we enter November. Put your seat belts on!

The sun begins the month in Libra, but enters Scorpio on the 22nd. Mercury retrograde will be impacting the fixed signs of Scorpio, Taurus, Leo, and Aquarius. With Mercury retrograde, we get the opportunity to review our past actions and make corrections if necessary. Days of ease and flow are October 7, 10, 11, 12, and 21. Days to be extra flexible are October 9, 13, 15, 18, 19, 25, and 31. The pace of change will accelerate, so be prepared!

**ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)** You are focused on past issues and problems this month, seeking resolution and taking things more personally than usual. Romantic and business relationships are your primary concern, so you'll want to make sure those connections are solid. You will also focus more on having a better relationship with yourself. This is a much better month to resolve old grievances. Career activity is very stressful this month. You may be on the verge of having to deal with the changes brought on by the pandemic. For some, this is a time to look for a whole new direction, while others may be cutting back and focusing on what they can do with their current resources. You may feel you have to act immediately, but step back and give yourself some extra space this month.

**TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)** You are dealing with a changing work environment this month, as well as your need to reinvent yourself to connect more closely with your passions. You have kept your options open, but this month you begin to narrow down some of those choices. Career activity will be more demanding, and you will have to set your boundaries with bosses and co-workers. You are wanting more freedom of choice in your life, especially with your career. You will be making more plans for the future, including solidifying your relationships with a new sense of direction. With Mercury retrograde, you will be exploring your old relationship patterns as you try to avoid the same old mistakes. The same applies to your work environment. You are ready to compromise toward the end of the month.

**GEMINI (May 21–June 21)** You are stepping back this month and seeking the path of least resistance. This is a much better month for creative activities, spending time with your children, and looking for the joys that life can bring. Friendships are a big topic this month. You are hearing from old friends from your past. You may have to clear up some old matters before you seek a compromise that both of you can benefit from. Your ruling planet, Mercury, goes retrograde on the 8th and direct on November 10. This is an indication that

**LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)** Happy Birthday to the Librans. This is your month to celebrate your yearly trip around the sun as you reflect on the past year prior to your birthday and then respond to the new themes in your life after your birthday. With Mars and Mercury retrograde, this internal review process is going to be more intense than usual. Relationships are very active, so this is an important time to pay attention to your partner since avoiding that only creates more problems. You will want to open lines of communication and make sure everything is okay. You are still working on creating a better sense of emotional and financial security. You may present a peaceful exterior, but your inner self is very unstable. This could be the time to remodel, relocate, or deal with a family crisis. You are looking for more freedom of choice in your life.

you need to step back and review your actions and decisions in order to make sure you are happy with the results. Career options are still on hold as you explore different options, but you'll be making some decisions starting in December.

**CANCER (June 22–July 22)** Your career area is very active as you look at different options to respond to the economic challenges brought on by the pandemic. You are taking things much more personally, and it's easy to be offended this month. Make sure you choose good advisors before you listen to their advice and criticism. Relationships are also going through a big change. This is a crucial time to make sure that you and your partner are on the same path. This month can be a great time to renew those bonds and remember why you are together. By the end of the month, you are looking for some relief and fun. That is a much better time to be creative and reconnect with old friends. You will be ready to put your ideas into action in December.

**LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)** You are in a period of change and reinvention. This is a time of big decisions that have to do with your work, where you live, your relationships, and your possible retirement or relocation. There are ongoing changes in your work environment as everyone adjusts to the effects of the pandemic. Some of these changes are not necessarily what you would choose to do. Career activity is stronger in the latter part of the month. For some of you, this is the time to start a whole new career path. For others, you may be retiring or going off the grid to have more control over how you manage your resources. Home and family also come into play at the end of the month. You will hear from family members that you haven't seen in a while. Keep your options open until December, when it will be the right time to move forward.

**VRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)** Your ruling planet, Mercury, goes retrograde on the 8th, and she will be retrograde until November 10. You will be looking back into your own past and correcting errors that you may not have known you even made! You will want to improve the way you use your resources. Time and money come together this month. You will reexamine your commitments and decide how effective they are at keeping you safe and secure. This is a great month

to connect with old friends, clients, and others from your past. At the beginning of the month you are more concerned about money and resources, but in the latter part of the month you are shifting more to writing, teaching, and embracing the new wave of online communications. This is a good month to try things out, but it's better to wait until December 2020 to commit to your new ideas.

**SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)** As the month begins, you are in a time of rest and retreat. With Mercury, our communicator, going retrograde in your sign on October 8 through November 10, that retreat will be even stronger! Old friends from your past may show up. You are still working to adjust your schedule to the "new normal." Although change is not usually easy for Scorpions, you are more open to new forms of technology that make change a lot easier. You are also paying more attention to self-care and how your work habits might impact you negatively. Relationships still need lots of space and options as you take a new look at them. This is a great month to renew your exercise and health programs to relieve the tension and fears about current political and economic conditions. Big decisions are coming at the end of the year, so be ready!

**SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)** You are focused on making your life run more efficiently. As you consider going in new directions, you'll find that some projects are no longer important. You have been relieved of a lot of family responsibilities and obligations, so you have more free time to consider where you want to go! You are also having to step up your skills with new forms of technology, even if you feel you aren't ready. This is all part of your new working environment brought on by the crazy times we are in. This is a good month to spend time with your partner and reconfirm those emotional bonds. This is not a good time to be looking for new partnerships, but it may be a great time to relink with someone from your past. By the end of the month, you will need more time for yourself.

**CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)** This month, and for the rest of the year, you are looking at long-term choices that affect all the important areas of your life. With your career, you are ready to adapt to the changes even though you want to be

clearer about what the right choices are. This will become more pronounced as we move through October. It's still best to wait until December before you make that commitment. You are looking at maintaining what you have, starting a new career direction, or retiring to find some peace. Home and family will also need your attention, since there's a lot of grumbling and not getting along. You have to set your boundaries and do what's best for you—not just what's best for them. That way, you won't resent your choices and decisions. Connecting with friends from your past can be very helpful, and they can provide support and alternatives. You continue to be busy through the end of the year.

**AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)** Space and freedom of choice continue to be major themes for you this month. You want to be heard this month, and you may have to raise your voice to make sure that people are listening. You are standing up for your ideals and sharing them with the people you interact with. You are reviewing the whole idea of what your role in a relationship is! You want to free yourself from old obligations so that no one but you can demand things. Toward the end of the month, your career and long-term security becomes more important. With Mercury retrograde in your career area, you will be rethinking your current position and what you can do to improve it. If there are problems there, this is the month to fix them. New ideas need to be put on hold until December, which is the best time to implement them.

**PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20)** Finances are an important topic this month, and you want more freedom in that area. This can be a good month to work with a budget, pay off bills, and find better ways to use your existing resources. You are more inclined to satisfy yourself first, which is not usually like you. You are also intensifying your spiritual quest as you look to find more meaning in your life and in the activities you engage in. This may create more time for yourself. Relationships are also on the menu this month. This would be a perfect month to spend time reconnecting with your partner or with old friends. You want to share your ideas about how to make life work better. You could do that through community work, writing, or using social media. Life needs to have more meaning for you personally, and not just in theory! Your spiritual path widens as we get to the end of the year.

 For more astro-insight, log on to [lillyroddy.com](http://lillyroddy.com).

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# Death Becomes Her

Luna of the Lilies is Houston's horror queen.



It's close to midnight, and something evil is lurking in the dark. No, it's not Michael Jackson's moonwalking ghost, it's

Houston's horror queen Luna of the Lilies. This ghoul relishes in the dark arts and everything stemming from the underworld, which makes October her month-long playground. Despite her self-described "harsh crustacean exterior," she's really a goofball with a heart of gold.

#### Hometown?

Houston

#### Drag Birthday?

March and April of 2016 at Meteor, for their So You Think You Can Drag contest.

#### Preferred Pronouns?

Anything, with respect.

#### Inner avatar?

A mix between a street pigeon and a Flamin' Hot Cheetos Puff.

#### Favorite scary movie?

I've been a huge horror-movie fan since I was 11. I was given a year's subscription to *Fangoria* magazine as a Christmas present one year. At this moment, it's a five-way tie between *Heredity*, *Evil Dead II*, *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, *Ginger Snaps*, and *May*.

#### Story behind your name?

"Luna" comes from my favorite show as a child, *Sailor Moon*. "Of the Lilies" didn't come into the picture until I was looking through prayer cards when I was a funeral director. I came across this painting of the Virgin Mary called Madonna of the Lilies. I liked the ring of Luna of the Lilies and thought it would fit, since lilies are the most common funeral flower.

#### Describe your drag persona.

Luna is a sewer goblin torn straight from the pages of the high-fashion avant-garde magazines they sell in hell.

#### Favorite Halloween candy?

Eyeball Gumballs

#### Thoughts on celebrating

#### Día de los Muertos?

I absolutely love Día de los Muertos. It has always made me proud of my Mexican heritage, as a lover of anything spooky and odd. My family here in the States never really celebrates the holiday as much as my family in Mexico does. Also, I love the Mexican commemora-



By SAM BYRD

Photo by CHRISTELYN NASH

tions of those that have passed on, unlike the very distant and capitalistic mourning customs here in the U.S.

#### Favorite Halloween tradition?

Haunted houses, for sure. I have always been wowed by the talent that goes into making and working at a scare attraction. Shout-out to the Houston team at Phobia Haunted Houses!

#### What do people not know about you that would be interesting?

I am a licensed Texas funeral director and embalmer. I worked as a full-time mortician for two years at a Montrose- and Cypress-based funeral home. I gained my skills and my love for makeup through mortuary cosmetics.

#### Which celebrities would you love to put in drag?

Danny DeVito and Wendy Williams.

#### If you could be reincarnated as anyone, who would it be?

Selena. And I would choke-slam Yolanda.

#### When you're not busy scaring your fans, what do you do in your free time?

I currently have a YouTube series called *Rigor Morris*, where my best friend and I talk about our mortuary stories in a funny way. I'm also in the midst of creating a film, and I'm a full-time "guncle".

#### Tell me your thoughts on Houston's alt drag scene.

It's definitely booming, and has come a long way since I first started drag. However, the scene will not grow if you don't personally create the shows and events. The Houston drag scene is overflowing with willing and talented artists. If you can make it in Houston, you can make it in any city.

#### When we're not practicing social distancing, where can people see Luna of the Lilies perform?

Twice a month on Thursdays for Smoke Break at Guava Lamp, and at your other local queer bars. ▼

Keep up with Luna of the Lilies on Instagram @lunaofthelilies



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