

INSIDE: JONATHAN VAN NESS, CHELSEA HANDLER, SARAH BRIGHTMAN, AND MORE!

DEC. '21

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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Pg.56

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JOYOUS VOICES

Pride Chorus Houston decks the halls for a seasonal performance.

Matt Leslie (bottom left, clockwise), Matthew Jones, Ronnie Williams, Casey Strickland, Michelle Jackson, Lena Lowe, Miguel Bitanga, and Nick Germanotta (center).



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It's "the most wonderful time of the year" in Houston, with everything sparkling and more

time to spend with our loved ones. This year's holiday season feels extra festive as we venture out to safely participate in group festivities once again. There's lots to do, so let this December **OUTSMART** issue be your guide to all the merry and gay local events.

Writer Sam Byrd introduces you to our cover stars, the members of Pride Chorus Houston who will perform their annual holiday concert at Lambert Hall on December 11. Meanwhile, writer Olivia Flores Alvarez finds out how American Indian activist Anna Farris is giving back to her community, and writer Lillian

Hoang chats with bakery owner Brian Duong about his tasty and charitable confections. Then writer Jenny Block speaks to designer Eliot Perez about his holiday decorating services.

The latest slew of streaming LGBTQ holiday rom-coms should also get you in the holiday spirit. Greg Shapiro interviews Netflix's *Single All the Way* star Brandon Urie, while Jenny Block talks to Krysta Rodriguez, Ginger Minj, and Andy Ridings about the fun they had starring in VH1's drag-queen extravaganza *The Bitch Who Stole Christmas*.

Several international stars are visiting Houston this month. Writer Zach McKenzie talks to iconic TV personalities Chelsea Handler and Jonathan Van Ness about their comedy tours, while

Sam Byrd talks to Broadway legend Sarah Brightman about her upcoming concert. Be sure to check out our Queer Things to Do calendar for more holiday happenings.

Elsewhere in this issue, we fill you in on queer Houstonians who are making a positive impact in the community. Writer Ryan Leach chats with Clay Allen, the NBA's highest-ranking openly LGBTQ executive, while writer Connor Behrens introduces you to Byron Canady and Sharmane Fury, the out owners of a new and inclusive comic-book shop. Lillian Hoang speaks to Lorraine Schroeder, the dedicated founding director of the University of Houston's LGBTQ resource center who is retiring after over a decade of service.

Finally, those planning ahead for 2022 will want a copy of Lupe Salas and Piero Arevalo's Houston drag-themed wall calendar. Ryan Leach chats with the duo about their campy charity calendar that will be on sale at ReBar on December 15. And to help with your New Year's Resolutions, don't miss Leach's annual Things to Leave in 2021 and Keep for 2022 list.

See you next year!

Lourdes Zavaleta
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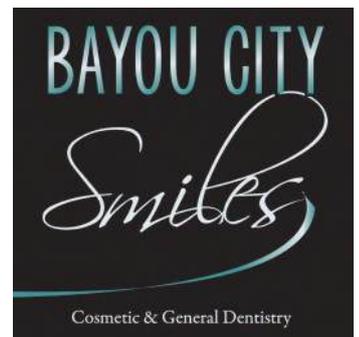




PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL LGBTQ TASK FORCE

Creating Change in 2022

ALOK keynotes the National LGBTQ Task Force's New Orleans conference.

By **LILLIAN HOANG**



The National LGBTQ Task Force will host the 34th Creating Change Conference January 12–16, 2022.

For over three decades, the nonprofit organization has given activists, advocates, and allies the opportunity to network and learn new skills they can use in the fight for LGBTQ rights.

“As always, Creating Change will be a space where we share skills and knowledge, fill our hearts with love and joy, and deepen our commitment to freedom, justice, and equity for all LGBTQ+ people,” Creating Change Conference Director Danny Linden said in a press release.

The conference will occur in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside. People must register for the event ahead

of time, provide proof of COVID-19 vaccination when they arrive and check in, and wear a mask in all shared spaces unless they are eating or drinking.

The organization's Director of Communications Cathy Renna urges Texans to attend the event. Not only is it a short drive to New Orleans, but the conference is also a phenomenal way to start the year as an activist, advocate, and member of the LGBTQ community.

“It's a conference and experience like no other,” says Renna, who has been to all but two conferences.

The five-day program will kick off on Wednesday, January 12, with an opening ceremony in the morning and a keynote speech by Beverly Littlethunder, a Native American advocate.

On Thursday, January 13, attendees can interact with a variety of institutions dedicated to topics like aging in the queer community and Latinx issues. Additionally, about a dozen identity-based caucuses will appear, giving like-minded participants the chance to gather and connect. Thursday night, the event will hold a welcoming reception.

The conference will host all-day workshops on the following Friday, January 14. Some workshops focus on identity by letting participants share their experiences and find community. Other workshops prioritize skills and movement-building by teaching attendees how to raise money, write grants, work with the media, organize, and more.

“You wanna learn how somebody managed to pass a nondiscrimination ordinance in →

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their hometown? There will be a workshop with folks who have done that. You want to learn how to raise money for your local LGBTQ center in creative ways? We've got tons of those. The different workshops offer something really for everyone," Renna says.

Friday evening, National LGBTQ Task Force Executive Director Kierra Johnson and Deputy Executive Director Mayra Hidalgo Salazar will discuss the state of the movement, which Renna describes as "the queer version of the State of the Union." The speech will also mark the launch of the organization's "Queer the Vote" campaign to elect pro-LGBTQ politicians during the upcoming midterm elections.

The event wants to show activists how they can help people become well-informed registered voters and turn states like Texas more purple in the fight for LGBTQ rights.

"There is a movement in this country to attack queer rights. It's not an understatement to say that our lives are on the line," Renna says. "If you care about the world you live in, the people around you, and yourself, it's important to be engaged. And the first step is being part of the process."



National LGBTQ Task Force communications director Cathy Renna (l) with activists John Selig and Portia Cantrell.

After the speech, attendees can participate in film screenings, a game night, and a house ball.

Keynote speaker ALOK, a nonbinary writer, performer, and activist, will kick-start the full day of workshops on Saturday, January 15. In the evening, participants can join film screenings, another game night, and a talent-variety show.

On Sunday, January 16, the conference will hold an interfaith service, allowing folks of all religions to gather. The event will end with a closing celebration called Bubbles and Beig-

nets, featuring alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and the iconic New Orleans deep-fried pastry.

The conference has changed throughout the years. It was originally held in November in Washington, but now kicks off in January and occurs in cities throughout the country. However, some things never change. "It continues to be one of the most diverse spaces you can be in as a queer activist," Renna says.



For more information, visit thetaskforce.org.

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Texas' Latest Culture War

Politicians seize on a queer coming-of-age memoir with explicit oral-sex illustrations.

By BRIAN LOPEZ and CASSANDRA POLLOCK, THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Kathy May was getting her four kids ready for another day at school in late October when she got an urgent voicemail from a friend. “OMG, OMG, this book,” her friend said, alerting May to a book found by another parent in the library catalogue of Keller Independent School District, where their kids go, called *Gender Queer: A Memoir*, by Maia Kobabe.

“I felt sick and disgusted,” May said, recalling text messages her friend sent her showing sexually explicit illustrations from the book. She was angry that any kid could access that kind of book in a public high school without their parents’ knowledge.

The 239-page graphic novel depicts Kobabe’s journey of gender identity and sexual orientation. Kobabe, who is nonbinary, said it was written to help others who are struggling with gender identity to feel less alone. The book also explores questions around pronouns and hormone-blocking therapies.

“I can absolutely understand the desire of a parent to protect their child from sensitive material. I’m sympathetic to people who have the best interest of young people at heart,” Kobabe, the 32-year-old author based in California, said in an interview with the Texas Tribune. “I also want to have the best interest of young people at heart. There are queer youth at every high school — and those students, that’s [who] I’m thinking about—the queer student who is getting left behind.”

May didn’t read the book, but what she saw — a few pages of explicit illustrations depicting oral sex — was disturbing to her. It took less than a day for May and other parents to get the book removed from the district. May tweeted that same day that after school officials had been notified, the book was removed from a student’s hands.

Gender Queer has become a lightning rod both nationwide and in Texas among some parents and Republican officials who say they’re worried public schools are trying to radicalize students with progressive teachings and literature.

Most recently, Gov. Greg Abbott and another GOP lawmaker have questioned the book’s



presence in schools. Abbott has called for investigations into whether students have access to what he described as “pornographic books” in Texas public schools. And last month, state Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth, sent a list of some 850 books about race and sexuality — including Kobabe’s — to school districts asking for information about how many are available on their campuses.

Across the state, books that tackle racial issues such as *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez and *New Kid* by Jerry Craft have been pulled from shelves after parental complaints. Leander ISD removed six books in the spring, including *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, which depicts an abusive same-sex relationship with descriptions of sex. Groups of Texas parents, often sharing information on Facebook groups, have mobilized to find books they deem inappropriate and have them banned from the schools.

The drama has unfolded against the backdrop of a national debate over critical race theory, an academic discipline that holds that racism is embedded in the country’s legal and structural systems. However, the label has been used by some Republicans to target a broader concern that kids are being indoctrinated by progressive teachings in schools.

Texas lawmakers passed two laws this year that they labeled anti-critical race theory, to crack down on how teachers can talk about race in the classroom. And the issue has been in play up and down the ballot — and outside of Texas, producing a GOP victory for the next Virginia governor, who campaigned on a pledge to ban the teaching of critical race theory.

“We have a problem and need help. Our district has a ton of leftist teachers, librarians, and counselors who push this plus SEL/CRT. It’s literally a district run wild,” May wrote in a tweet thread, where she shared the sexually explicit illustrations from Kobabe’s book. SEL is short for social and emotional learning, and CRT is short for critical race theory.

“Please help us make parents aware of the danger of the cultural changes our society is making, when people say they’re going after our kids, you need to listen, because they are,” she said in her tweet.



Read an extended version of this story at outsmartmagazine.com.

This article originally appeared in *The Texas Tribune* at texastribune.org/2021/11/12/gender-queer-texas-books-investigation.




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By Adriana Salazar

QUEER THINGS to DO



For a weekly roundup of LGBTQ happenings, visit www.OutSmartMagazine.com

COMMUNITY
December 11

Montrose Grace Place Gingerbread House Competition

The holiday season is meant for giving and sharing, and that is exactly what Montrose Grace Place (MGP) strives to do. This nonprofit specializes in helping vulnerable homeless youth of all sexualities and gender identities by providing basic essentials, support, and a safe space to drop in on Monday and Thursday nights.

MGP hosts various fundraising events all year round to support their participants. In early December, the group is hosting their sixth annual gingerbread house-making contest, where a team of three can participate by donating \$40 to the organization. A basic gingerbread house and decorating tools will be provided, and competitors can also bring additional decorations. In 2019, the competition had 25 teams

as well as local drag performers who served on the judging panel.

Activities like these gingerbread house competitions boost morale for the at-risk youth at MGP. Even during last year's pandemic restrictions, the competition continued with participants sending in pictures of their gingerbread houses and receiving awards during a virtual Zoom ceremony.

"Just like everybody else, even with COVID we're still working really hard for our youth," says MGP Executive Director Courtney Sellers. "Our fundraiser and donations help us brighten our youth's holiday season."

Visit montrosegaceplace.org to donate, volunteer, or register for the competition.

tinyurl.com/3x96wk6m

STAGE

December 3

IT'S A JOHN WATERS CHRISTMAS

The Heights Theater presents *It's a John Waters Christmas*, the outrageously gay filmmaker's one-man show. This event requires proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test. Purchase tickets through the theater's website.

tinyurl.com/yrtjmapw



COMMUNITY

December 3

OUT FOR GOOD

The Montrose Center presents Out for Good at The Ballroom at Bayou Place. Houston's premier LGBTQ annual gala features dinner and a program honoring Dina Jacobs, a legendary drag performer for 55 years. Purchase tickets at the Montrose Center's "Give Lively" page.

tinyurl.com/bs3zvrvy



STAGE

December 3-4

URBAN NUTCRACKER

The Stafford Centre presents *Urban Nutcracker*, an exciting twist on the holiday classic choreographed by openly gay Houston dancer and activist Harrison Guy. Tickets at houstonurban-nutcracker.org.

tinyurl.com/3emwcn3

COMMUNITY

December 5

MISS AND MISTER TRANS OLTT

Organización Latina de Trans en Texas (OLTT) is hosting its annual Miss and Mister Trans OLTT competition at Club Crystal. Participants compete in four categories for \$1,000 prizes. Admission to the event is \$10.

tinyurl.com/437j28kj



STAGE

December 10

CHELSEA HANDLER: VACCINATED AND HORNY TOUR

Comedian Chelsea Handler brings her *Vaccinated and Horny Tour* to downtown's brand-new 713 Music Hall. Handler shares her experience being single and childless in a global pandemic.

Tickets available on Ticketmaster. tinyurl.com/3ydzz6yv

COMMUNITY

December 10

2021 CHAMBER HOLIDAY FOOD DRIVE

The Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce Holiday Food Drive will help LGBTQ seniors at the Montrose Center keep their panties stocked during the holiday season. Drop-off locations are Signature Care ER on T.C. Jester (8 a.m. – noon) and Eureka Heights Brewery on W. 18th St. (3–7 p.m.)

tinyurl.com/a98357tj

NIGHTLIFE

December 10

ISLAND GODDESS

Head down to Robert's LaFitte for the annual Island Goddess drag competition featuring categories in presentation, gown, Q&A, and talent. A cash prize, sash, crown, and trophies are awarded each year.

tinyurl.com/rcux7der



MUSIC

December 11

HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

Pride Chorus Houston presents its annual Holiday Traditions concert at Lambert Hall, featuring holiday classics and new music.

tinyurl.com/4t6a3tp2

STAGE

December 11

DRAGGED ALIVE

MATCH (Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston) presents *Dragged Alive*, a celebration of the best Houston drag hosted by Carmina Vavra. Twenty of Houston's best entertainers come together for one night of beauty and diversity with dancing, live vocals, and a band.

Tickets at matchhouston.org. tinyurl.com/5sznduyv

COMMUNITY

December 12

PWA HOLIDAY CHARITIES ANNUAL CHRISTMAS SHOW

PWA Holiday Charities presents their 33rd annual Christmas show at Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon. The afternoon Tinsel Town T-Dance extravaganza kicks off with cocktails and snacks at 2 p.m. followed by star-studded shows at 3 p.m.

tinyurl.com/mmvewxan

COMMUNITY

December 12

LIGHTS OF LOVE

The HIV & Aging Coalition presents *Lights of Love* at the Montrose Center to remember those who have died from HIV/AIDS. Each honoree will have a personalized ornament on the *Lights of Love* tree, as well as their name in the printed program and on commemorative shirts.

tinyurl.com/48kr27pn

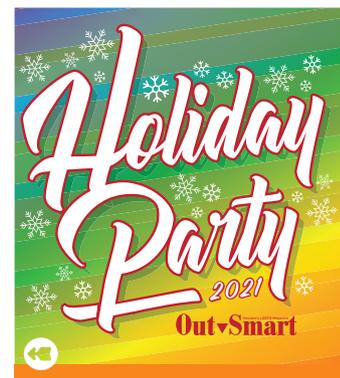
SOCIAL

December 15

OUTSMART MAGAZINE'S HOLIDAY PARTY

OUTSMART's annual Holiday Party at the Alley Theatre includes performances, door prizes, and lite bites from David Alcorta, with beverages provided by OUTSMART. Donations will be accepted for Montrose Grace Place, an LGBTQ-affirming drop-in shelter for homeless youth.

tinyurl.com/u4tdp383



NIGHTLIFE

December 17

BUDDY'S INK

Get tattooed at BUDDY'S Houston during this BUDDY'S Ink event. Artist Megan Medina offers her tattooing services ranging in price from \$80 to \$150. Food provided by Tacos Orlando.

tinyurl.com/6nvrba3c



STAGE

Through December 24

THE NUTCRACKER

The Houston Ballet presents their annual *Nutcracker* show at the Wortham Theater Center. Ballet lovers of all ages can see openly gay soloist Harper Waters as the *Nutcracker Prince* on specific dates. Tickets at houstonballet.org.

tinyurl.com/kw34e4sk

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The National LGBTQ Task Force presents their annual Creating Change conference in New Orleans. Several panel discussions will span three days, with a keynote speech from nonbinary writer, performer, and public speaker ALOK. Register at thetaskforce.org.tinyurl.com/3s25bhmw



STAGE

January 21
FORTUNE FEIMSTER

Head over to the UH Cullen Performance Hall to see openly lesbian comedian Fortune Feimster in her 2 Sweet 2 Salty show. Tickets at uh.edu/cullen-performance-hall.tinyurl.com/3xkzx555



STAGE

January 21-23
MATTEO LANE

Matteo Lane, an openly gay comedian, is coming to Houston Improv with his new comedy show. Tickets at impovtx.com.tinyurl.com/2ynnurd4

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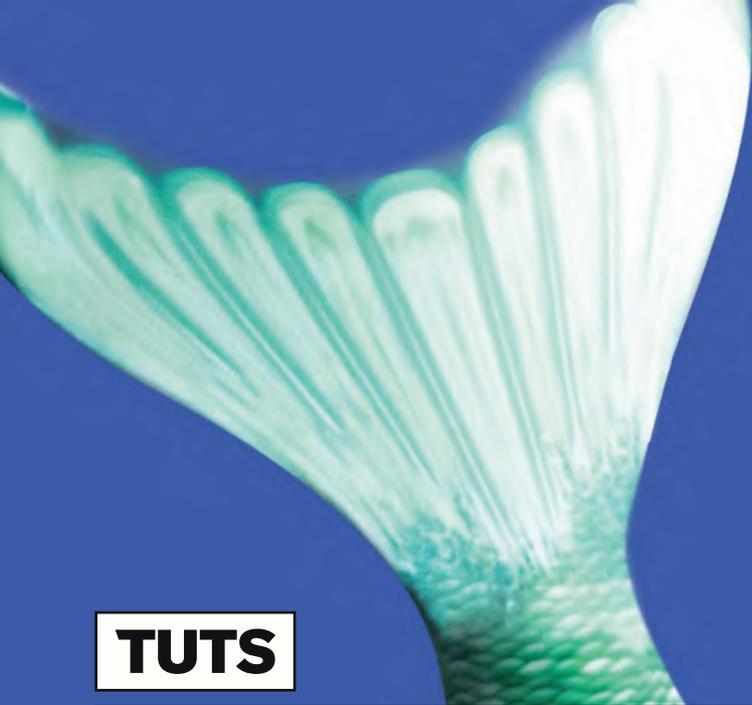


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Ruffled Feathers

Ted Cruz goes head-to-head with Big Bird while Beto O'Rourke challenges Greg Abbott for Texas governor.



Ted Cruz got into a fight with Big Bird. I dunno 'bout you, but I have a hunch that when a United States senator instigates a political fight with a fictional children's character, the apocalypse can't be far behind.

If you want to help get rid of Ted Cruz by displaying a "Big Bird for Senator" yard sign like the one you see here, go to MaxeyMemes.com—where they have all manner of Christmas gifts guaranteed to piss off your MAGA relatives. The profits go toward helping Democrats get elected.

At the risk of exceeding my allotment of Muppet vs. Puppet jokes, we've learned that Ted Cruz can't tell you how to get to Sesame Street, but he can tell you how to fly to Cancun during a statewide weather emergency. Yep, both Big Bird and Ted Cruz fly south for the winter. Cartoonist Clay Jones titled Cruz's latest scuffle *Big Turd Attacks Big Bird*. And of course, they both have bird brains. (Ya know, I could do this all day!)



But on to the bigger political news in Texas: Beto O'Rourke is going to run for governor against Greg Abbott. Abbott has pretty much been the worst governor in Texas history—and sweetie, that takes some doing. My friend Thelma claims that Abbott's middle name is Fooking, but I think she read that on Iffy-pedia, which is just one step above Fox News.

Abbott has blundered, fumbled, and botched the past six years. He tried to finish Trump's border wall and make us Texans pay for it all by ourselves. He was COVID's best friend by supporting the notion that seniors would gladly die of COVID in order to keep the Texas economy running. He even vetoed a bipartisan bill to fight animal cruelty by saying that government should not micro-manage people's behavior. You know, unless they are women with a uterus.

Here are my questions for Governor Abbott:

Texas ranks next-to-last in education. Do you think we should challenge last-place Mississippi to a spelling bee, since there's a slim chance we could whip their butts?

Texas ranks 46th in average hourly earn-

ings. Are 80-hour work weeks the solution you propose for people living on the edge?

We are dead-ass last in the percentage of our population with health insurance. Could that be why so many Texans end up ass-dead?

We are 45th in home ownership rates, so could we improve our ranking if we counted the occupied refrigerator boxes under a bridge in San Angelo as homes?

Hey, but here are some things we're damn good at!...

We're first in executions, and fifth in overall crime rates. We're second in hunger statistics, and also second in the Most Insane Governor Sweepstakes (ya gotta give Florida their due).



I can't send you home without talking about critical race theory, and why in the fool tarnation so many Texas right-wingers are invading school-board meetings to yell about it when they don't even know what it means. (They just call it "CRT" because spelling is hard for them, so I guess we should forget about challenging Mississippi to that

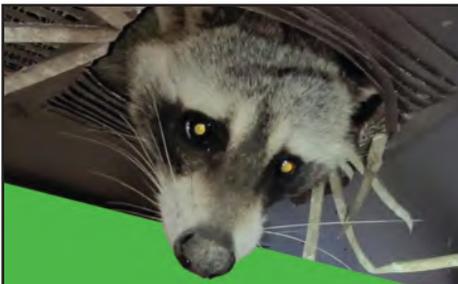
spelling bee.)

Here's the bottom line on critical race theory: The people who threw rocks at Ruby Bridges, the sweet Black youngster who was just trying to walk to school in 1960, are now upset that their grandchildren might learn about who was throwing those rocks.



And finally, two quick things: My friend Ben Chou, who is running for Harris County Commissioner in Precinct 4, is the man you should thank for making 24-hour and drive-thru voting possible in 2020. The County election is a few months off, but please take a minute to check him out at benchoutx.com—because he's smart and gay and qualified, and I adore him.

Chocolate is God's way of telling us he likes to see people a little bit chubby. But don't be a yule hog! I hope your holidays are merry and bright, and don't even talk to me about New Year's resolutions—I see people my age going mountain-climbing, while I'm just happy I can still get my legs through my undies without losing my balance.



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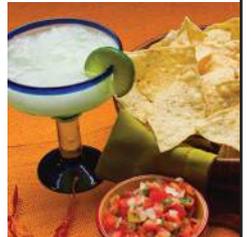


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Thank you readers!



Retirement Plan Withdrawal Requirements

Understanding your IRA's Required Minimum Distribution rules.



As we approach the end of the year, it is a good time to review the updated rules surrounding withdrawals from your retirement plans. The SECURE Act, which took effect in 2020,

made changes to the Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) rules. It is important for us to review these rules in order to satisfy the requirements and avoid having Uncle Sam become the biggest beneficiary of your retirement savings.

Who Must Take Required Minimum Distributions?

Anyone who has a retirement account (or an inherited retirement account) must take distributions at some point. Prior to the passage of the SECURE (Setting Every Community Up for Retirement Enhancement) Act, the age to begin required minimum distributions was 70. The SECURE act raised the RMD age to 72, allowing account holders to continue tax-deferred growth and contributions a little while longer. This also allows them to delay paying tax on withdrawals, assuming they do not need that retirement income prior to age 72.

You must start receiving distributions from traditional IRAs (Individual Retirement Accounts) and other qualified plans (such as a traditional 401k) by April 1 of the year following the year in which you turn age 72, and by December 31 in subsequent years.

Traditional accounts are those that defer your contributions from income taxation (depending on whether you qualify), and the funds grow tax-deferred while invested in the account. Upon withdrawal, though, the tax-deductible portions of your contribution and any earnings will be taxable as ordinary income.

These plans differ from Roth IRAs and retirement accounts, where contributions go in after being taxed and the withdrawals are tax-free. There are also no required minimum distributions on Roth accounts until after the



death of the owner, so your money can continue to grow tax-free over time—even after you turn 72. (However, note that employer-sponsored Roth accounts *do* have required minimum distributions).

How Required Minimum Distributions Work

The amount of the withdrawals you must make is based on an IRS formula that takes into account certain factors, including the balance in the account, your age, and your anticipated life expectancy.

For example, to determine your annual required minimum withdrawal, you would divide the prior December 31 balance in the IRA and/or retirement plan by your life-expectancy figure that is set by the IRS in IRS Publication 590-B, Distributions from Individual Retirement Arrangements. Publication 590-B can be accessed by going to irs.gov/publications/p590b.

Because of this IRS formula, the amount of your distribution won't necessarily be the same every year. In addition, the life-expectancy table you use can be based on different situations, depending on your particular objectives and whether you plan to be the sole recipient

of the funds in the account or instead plan to leave the remaining funds with a beneficiary. These IRS life-expectancy tables include the following options:

- Joint and Last Survivor Table – This table is used if the sole beneficiary of the account is your spouse and he or she is more than 10 years younger than you.
- Uniform Lifetime Table – This table is used if your spouse is not your sole beneficiary, or if he or she is not more than 10 years younger.
- Single Life Expectancy Table – Use this table if you are the recipient of an inherited IRA.

It is essential that you follow the RMD rules and take out your required distribution before the deadline each year. Failing to do so, or taking out less than the full amount that is required, can result in a penalty of 50 percent of the required amount that isn't withdrawn.

Because there can be so many “moving parts” when it comes to required minimum distributions, it is recommended that you first discuss your situation with a financial professional before accessing any IRA or retirement-plan funds. →

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Withdrawals from an Inherited Account

If you are the beneficiary of a traditional IRA and/or retirement plan account, the withdrawal rules can differ, based on whether or not you are the spouse of the deceased. For instance, if you inherit a traditional IRA from your spouse, there are typically a couple of choices you have: treat it as your own by “rolling” the money into your own current IRA, or keep the money in a Beneficiary IRA.

For non-spouse beneficiaries, though, the distribution rules now require that you must have all of the funds withdrawn from the account within ten years. While you do not have to take out a certain amount on an annual basis, at the end of the ten-year period, the inherited account must be fully depleted.

This differs from previous rules about inherited IRA and retirement-plan withdrawals. Before the SECURE Act, beneficiaries were allowed to stretch out withdrawals and, in turn, space out the taxes that were due each year.

In addition, non-spouse beneficiaries are not allowed to treat an inherited IRA as their own. This means that no direct contributions may be made into the account, nor can funds be rolled into the IRA from other accounts. (You can, however, make a trustee-to-trustee transfer, provided that the IRA receiving the funds is set up and maintained in the name of the deceased IRA owner for your benefit as the beneficiary.)

Taking the Next Step with Distributions

Everyone’s financial, retirement, and legacy goals—as well as their risk tolerance and time frames—are all different. So even though there are some set IRS rules dictating what you can and can’t do with IRAs and retirement accounts, there isn’t just one single strategy that is right for all investors and retirees across the board. Thanks to the SECURE Act, unmarried LGBTQ folks who have partners should weigh the advantages of rolling over one’s own IRA into a spouse’s account.

With that in mind, it is best to discuss your specific situation, along with your short- and long-term objectives, with a financial professional who is well-versed in LGBTQ financial planning in order to help you design the plan and the timeline that works for you.

Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER practitioner with experience in helping LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances since 1994. She is the managing director at Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Yung can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com. Visit letsmakeaplan.org or midtownfg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.

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Navigating Substance Abuse

Pandemic stress has sparked a worrying increase in alcohol and drug use.



To say the last couple of years have been a lot is an understatement. During times of stress, health behaviors are often negatively impacted.

Eating nutritious meals, getting regular exercise, and maintaining good sleep habits can be particularly challenging in moments such as these. Disrupted patterns of behavior can also extend to changes in one's relationship to alcohol or drugs, creating new problems or worsening old ones.

As one might expect, the COVID pandemic has had a big impact on alcohol and substance use. In one preliminary study, while 13 percent of participants reported drinking less during the pandemic, 60 percent reported an increase in drinking. Perhaps just as concerning, roughly one-third of participants reported binge drinking, which is defined as having 4 (for females) or 5 (for males) or more drinks in one sitting at least once over the past 30 days.

While consuming that amount of alcohol might seem innocuous, binge drinking has been associated with an increased risk of driving while intoxicated, or the development of alcohol-use disorder and other psychiatric conditions.

Just as alcohol use has increased, the negative consequences of drug use have also skyrocketed. Most alarming is the substantial increase in accidental drug-overdose deaths last year, which reached an all-time high of more than 93,000 in 2020. While opioid-related overdose deaths represent a majority of these unfortunate cases, the impact of other substances like alcohol—or psychostimulants such as cocaine and methamphetamine—cannot be understated.

There are many reasons why the COVID pandemic led to an increase in alcohol and drug use. The restricted access to group-activity spaces left many people without easy ways to entertain themselves. Boredom represents a risk for some, since alcohol and drugs can serve as an easy distraction.

For some, increased isolation and loneliness likely contributed to negative moods that individuals try to “medicate” with substances.



Others may have experienced significant stress related to job loss, personal or familial illness, or relationship challenges. These factors all contribute to the increased use of substances as a means of coping.

LGBTQ individuals are particularly vulnerable to developing substance-use disorders. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, LGBTQ folks have higher rates of tobacco, alcohol, and drug use in comparison to their cis-het counterparts.

There are a number of factors that contribute to this elevated risk. Homophobic cultural attitudes are often internalized by LGBTQ individuals, resulting in lower self-esteem. Also, in an effort to cope with being shamed regarding identity or health status, alcohol and drug use may be increased. Further, the use of substances among LGBTQ individuals can increase comfort with sexual activities that society has deemed “unnatural” or “sinful.” These psychological underpinnings can complicate LGBTQ people's relationship with alcohol and drugs.

Not all factors are rooted in emotional or

psychological distress, however. Increased alcohol and drug use is observed in many cultural groups where stigma, discrimination, and oppression are part of the fabric of everyday existence.

When evaluating whether or not alcohol or drug use has become problematic, these three questions are helpful:

- In the past year, have you consumed more than 4 drinks (for women) or 5 drinks (for men)? (Unfortunately, this question does not acknowledge transgender or nonbinary identities, and is based on the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Quick Screen.)
- Have I made certain rules for myself about alcohol or drug use such as only drinking on weekends, but find that I have difficulty following them?
- Has my alcohol or drug use resulted in relationship problems, impacted my ability to work, or contributed to health challenges?

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If you answered yes to any of these questions, this may suggest issues to explore more fully with a healthcare provider.

If the holidays are particularly challenging, start by establishing reasonable goals. What changes do you want to make regarding your alcohol or drug use? Are there people or support strategies you can turn to that will increase your chances of success?

If you're interested in becoming abstinent, consider attending a mutual-help group like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Not only are there LGBTQ-focused in-person AA meetings in Houston, but you can also attend virtual meetings from the comfort of your own home that offer LGBTQ people a safe space. In addition to providing guidance about how to stay sober, programs like AA offer communities of people who are all trying to establish or maintain sobriety. And during the holidays, there are also alcohol-free activities that serve as an alternative to bars and house parties that serve alcohol.

If you've already tried a 12-Step recovery program and it wasn't a good fit for you, there are other programs that can provide support. For example, Self-Management and Recovery Training, or SMART Recovery, takes the approach that you can change your relationship to alcohol or drugs by figuring out your specific triggers and managing the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that contribute to substance use. Alternatively, Refuge Recovery operates from a Buddhist perspective and features meditation as a cornerstone practice to reduce use. Again, online and in-person meetings are offered.

Ultimately, because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to finding the right self-help program, it's important to approach the challenge with curiosity and an open mind. Also, planning sober activities with friends—particularly those who do not drink or use substances—can help provide structure and promote healthy behaviors. If additional assistance is needed, consider scheduling an appointment with a physician or mental-health clinician to further explore the many treatment options.

Daryl Shorter, MD, is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and is board certified in both general and addiction psychiatry. His clinical practice focuses on veteran care, and he lectures widely on LGBTQ mental health.

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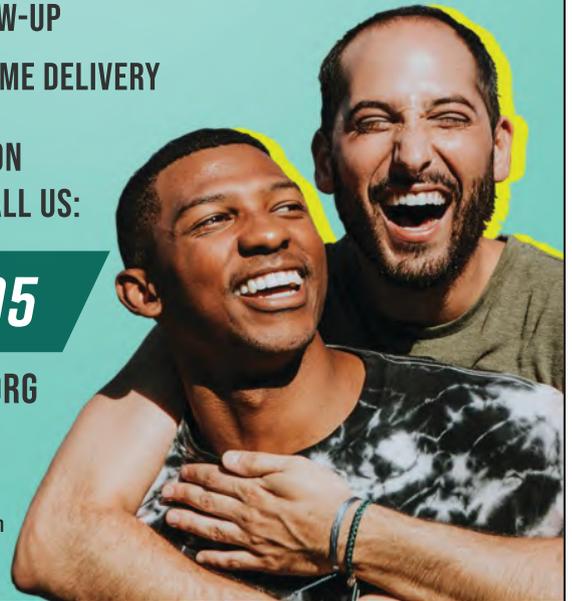
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This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY and does not replace talking to your healthcare provider about your condition and your treatment.

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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
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- ▶ 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.

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- ▶ 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 or call 1-800-FDA-1088.

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HOW TO TAKE BIKTARVY

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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 or call 1-800-GILEAD-5
- ▶ If you need help paying for your medicine, visit BIKTARVY.com for program information.



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See Dimitri's story at BIKTARVY.com.

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Please see Important Facts about BIKTARVY, including important warnings, on the previous page and visit BIKTARVY.com.



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By LOURDES ZAVALA

Tell me about your journey to becoming the president and CEO of Avenue 360.

I am trained in adult and pediatric medicine and infectious diseases. I have always been committed to ending the HIV epidemic by advancing HIV preventative care. Initially, I did that by providing HIV treatment to people living with HIV. When pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was coming to the forefront, I did research on how to advance [this HIV-prevention drug] into underserved and marginalized communities. I wanted to see how to do that on a larger scale and moved here from New England (where I studied and trained) because Texas has the highest rate of uninsured people in the country, and I wanted to be someplace where I had the opportunity to make an impact. I joined the faculty at Baylor College of Medicine and was serving at their flagship clinic at Thomas Street Health Center. I later moved on to become the associate chief medical officer at another federally qualified health center in Houston. Then I was tapped to become the president and CEO of Avenue 360. This was a really exciting opportunity for me because it allows me not only to care for my patients, but also to transform the way we think about providing care.

You began your role in January 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic began. How did the virus impact Avenue 360's work?

I truly believe that everything happens for a reason, and that we are each placed at the right spot at the right time in our lives. I think it was so fortuitous for me to join the agency at that time. What better pairing for this agency—to have a leader that is an infectious-disease provider when they were going to be hit with an international infectious-disease crisis. Coming in during that season was motivating because it blended all of the things that I get jazzed about. A lot of people see a crisis and run away, but I'm more of a run-toward-the-crisis type of person. It was an opportunity for us to thoughtfully think about how we were going to prepare for the pandemic.

What were some of the ways that you



COURTESY

“HEALTH IS ABOUT NOT JUST PHYSICAL WELLNESS OR THE ABSENCE OF DISEASE, BUT ABOUT MENTAL WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL WELLNESS. SO WE REALLY HAVE TO TRANSFORM THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT HEALTH—A LITTLE BIT MORE HOLISTICALLY.”

—Dr. Charlene Flash

prepared?

We used the challenges that COVID created as an opportunity to look at our processes and become as efficient as possible. Sometimes people react much more quickly in a crisis than they would when everything is business as usual. We found that we were able to do things in weeks that in another season might have

taken months or years, like launching telemedicine. People had been talking about that well before I got here. And then I said, “Hey, we have two weeks to launch this, because we have to.” People still need care, and some patients were scared to come in during the height of the COVID pandemic, so we wanted to make sure that our care was accessible for them.

Now that there are fewer pandemic restrictions in Houston, how is Avenue 360 functioning?

Some of the things that emerged from the pandemic we continue to do. For example, we still have telemedicine available to patients, which has helped with transportation issues. In Houston, if there's the opportunity to use your phone or computer to get the help that you need without driving across the city, that's a benefit for our patients. We also started working with some of our housing partners to place clinical services in proximity to [their clients]. Another service that we ramped up was behavioral and mental health. Whether you have a mental illness or not, the pandemic impacted everyone's mental health. We've made sure to have [more] psychiatry, therapy, and substance-use resources available to help stabilize the community.

What are your day-to-day functions at Avenue 360?

That's a hard question, because every day is so different. I will say that I wake up every day excited to come to work. I have not had a single boring day since the day I walked into this agency. I spend a lot of time meeting with my team and staff members. I truly believe that people are the secret sauce. I make it my business to hear from the very front lines. I take the time to really talk with all of our team members, whether it's medical assistants, billing clerks, or front-desk positions. I try to make my presence known within the agency and let the team know that I want to hear from them, and that I'm here to try and make things work as well as possible for them so that together we can provide important services to the community. And then it's strategic planning, responding to my own patient inquiries, writ-

ing prescriptions, handling budgets, and giving talks in the community about HIV, healthcare disparities, and racism in health care.

What advice would you give to our LGBTQ readers who have questions or concerns about living with HIV?

First, it's important that those individuals know that the rates and the risk of HIV are somewhat higher in their communities, and that they can access things like HIV testing and HIV PrEP. There are often ways to access those resources at low or no cost. Then, for people who are living with HIV, particularly from communities that are so often pushed to the margins, I want them to know that just because others try to push them to the margins, they don't have to stay there. It's important for their voices to be heard, and that they have affirming places to access care.

Tell me about the new Avenue 360 location in Midtown, and the kinds of services you offer there.

I'm super excited about our new location in Midtown at 2920 Fannin. It provides dental services, HIV primary care, and behavioral-health services. On the second floor, our adult day-activities program features a fabulous new

commercial kitchen and occupational-therapy services as well. We also have HIV testing, and a service linking workers and medical case managers to help people walk through the other elements of life that impact their ability to be successful. We care for people living with HIV and those without the diagnosis, but our focus at the Midtown location is really on the LGBTQ community and those living with HIV.

Outside of work, what are some of your hobbies?

I'm married with three children, so they take over my life. I also love to work out. I actually like to lift weights. I was a little nervous about it at first, but now I think I'm somewhat addicted. I also love to read books and I love to watch [natural hair] YouTube videos.

What are some of your favorite spots around town?

Hermann Park and the bike trail along Allen Parkway are my two favorite spots. One of the things I love about living in Houston is that it's sunny all the time. I love to be outside, I love the sunshine, and I love looking at the beauty of creation.

If you have any, what are your plans for

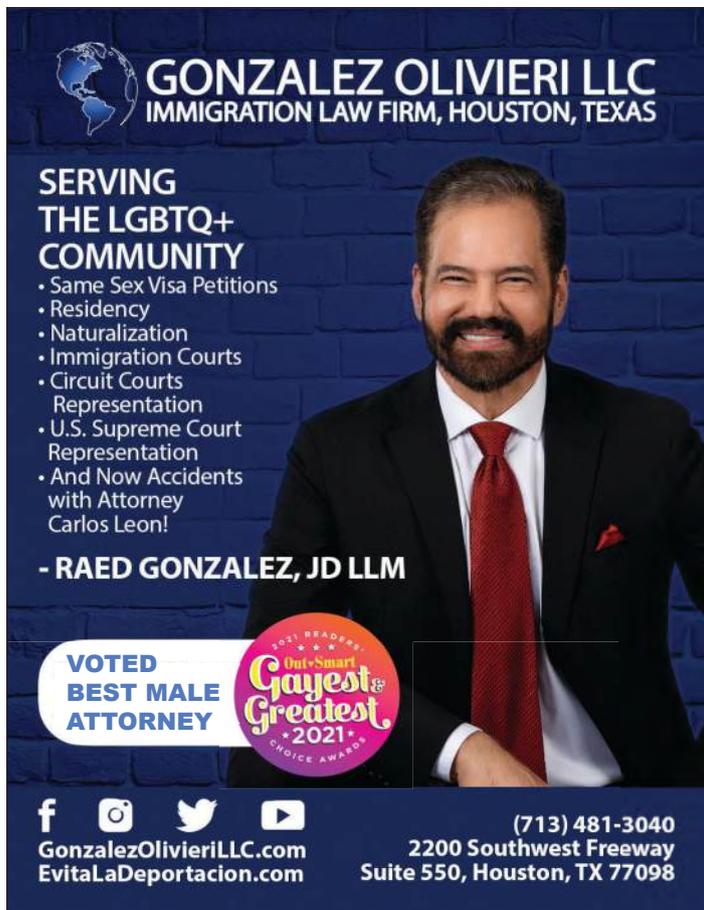
the winter holidays?

I tend to stay local for Christmas. It's one of my favorite holidays. For me, it's a time for joy and being with your loved ones—low stress, just being grateful—so I try not to do much traveling so I can keep it peaceful and steady.

Anything else you'd like to share with our readers?

As someone who has committed her life to caring for people with HIV and serving those who are placed on the margins (whether that's because of their race, culture, or gender identity), I recognize that I have a white coat. I don't have a black gown like a judge, because I am not here to judge people. [As a doctor], we're not supposed to make it harder for people to access care. Our roles are to support, help, and get people to the space where they can have health not for just themselves, but for the community. And that doesn't just mean having an undetectable viral load. Health is about not just physical wellness or the absence of disease, but about mental well-being and social wellness. So we really have to transform the way we think about health—a little bit more holistically.

 For more info, visit avenue360.org.



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THINGS TO LEAVE IN 2021 AND KEEP FOR 2022

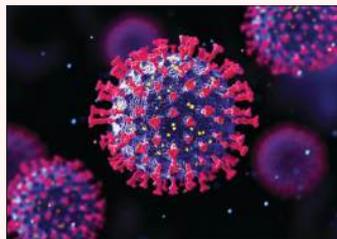
2021 has been wild, y'all! One could argue that it has been better than last year in a lot of ways. Then again, after a year like 2020, the only way was up.

Houston had some especially high-highs and low-lows—and by low-lows, I mean temperatures. So bundle up and join me on my seventh annual list of things we'll want to keep for the new year and things we need to leave in 2021. *By RYAN M. LEACH*



television: winter wonderlands, sledding down a hill, making snowpeople (shout-out to ending the gender binary for people made of snow). Instead, all I ever got was humid Decembers and maybe one cold day in January when you could wear a sweater comfortably. Then 2021 came with the twist, Henny. For days, the entire state of Texas endured freezing temperatures heretofore unheard of. Snow and ice took everyone by surprise, and then things went from winter to worse when the power went out. Pipes froze. Homes froze. People froze. Texas' independence from the national power grid put the state in a dangerous position. Global warming may have caused the storm, but Texas' inaction to protect its power grid exacerbated the problem. Despite lawmakers being in Austin for a legislative session at the time, little was done to fix what went terribly wrong. But hey, at least they prevented trans kids from playing sports in school. You know, *priority* issues.

LEAVE IN 2021:



1. LEAVE THE VARIANTS

The last thing I need right now is another damn COVID variant! Remember when it was June 2021 and the CDC was all, “Yay! Take off your masks if you're vaccinated!”

And we were all like, “Yay! Let's burn 'em!”

And then the CDC was all, “Just kidding, Delta is here, put

'em back on!”

And we were all, “Who's Delta? The airline? Delta Burke? Delta Downs Racetrack, Resort & Casino?”

And the CDC was like, “No. She's a variant, and she's pissed.”

This back-and-forth with masks was enough to give a girl whiplash. It was the last thing I needed after losing (some) of my COVID weight in preparation for a sexy summer. Delta Downs? More like Delta Downer. So if there are any Charlene or Julia Sugarbaker variants out there, then no thank you! Please leave, OK? Byeeeee.

2. LEAVE THE WINTER STORMS

I remember growing up in Houston and praying for snow during the winter. I wanted to experience what I saw on

3.

LEAVE THE PRIDE HOUSTON DRAMA



I am not sure what it is about the Pride Houston organization that attracts drama. Every few years, some issue seems to come up with the leadership that plays out like the newest season of *The Real Housewives*. People are fired or resign, or both. Accusations of wrongdoing are tossed about. Lawsuits are filed. Countersuits are filed. Then they are withdrawn...and refiled. What is going on over there? This year was especially tumultuous for the organization. After having a rocky 2020 due to COVID-19, things seemed to be on track for a 2021 Pride celebration. Then, unexpectedly, the organization fired its executive director and saw a cascade of resignations from its board. The 2021 parade was moved from summer to fall, and then canceled altogether. Although that decision was reportedly based on the advice of “several elected officials, health agencies, and others,” the City of Houston, which permitted the event, said they had no idea that the parade was going to be canceled. Whatever the reason, we just want a parade, y’all. Get it together.

4. LEAVE GREG ABBOTT

It’s interesting that Greg Abbott has never really made it onto my past lists of things to leave behind. But of course, when you’re right beside men like Trump ass-licker Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, or our indicted Attorney

General Ken Paxton, or the crown jewel of terrible humans, Senator Turd Cruz, it is pretty easy to be terrible and still fly under the radar. Heck, it’s how Greg Abbott won re-election in 2018 by double digits while Turd came dangerously close to losing his seat. And yet, somehow, Abbott finally surpassed all of these other terrible men, even in a year where Turd flew to Cancún while Texas flew over.



Abbott’s move to the far, far right was on full display in 2021. Banning trans kids from playing sports in school was so high on his list of priorities that he actually called a *third* special session in order to make sure that law got passed. He also was able to further restrict access to voting in the state, and he has tried (unsuccessfully) to ban any sort of COVID-19 mandates that promote public health and safety. Perhaps worst of all, he signed a bill into law that effectively put an end to abortion access. The law allows private citizens to sue individuals who assist a woman in attaining an abortion after six weeks—a time frame often too short for a woman to even realize she may be pregnant. Congrats, governor, you’re now a bigger turd than Turd Cruz. Vote Abbott out in 2022.

5. LEAVE YOUR “RESEARCH”

Perhaps you are one of the many people out there who cannot or will not get a vaccine to protect you against COVID-19. For example, Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers comes to mind. But please spare everyone your impromptu TED Talk about the COVID-19 “research”



you’ve conducted. If you are not a medical doctor or, more specifically, an epidemiologist with a specialization in public health, you can just take a seat. Also, let’s talk about what the word “research” means. Research is when you collect information from several legitimate and reliable sources to form a thesis about a specific subject. Research does not include listening to a podcast hosted by Joe Rogan, accepting everything he says at face value, and then regurgitating that on anyone who will listen. For example, Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers comes to mind. Whether or not you take the vaccine, stop saying you’ve done all this “research” when you don’t even know what the word means.

THINGS TO KEEP FOR 2022:

6. KEEP GETTING VACCINATED

Once upon a time, Americans everywhere eagerly rolled up their sleeves to get shots that would protect them against deadly disease. They welcomed them, in fact. I guess back in the day, the thought of ending up in an iron lung was enough of a deterrent to convince people to protect themselves and others from polio. Alas, in 2021 this was not the case. The fact is, vaccines prevent severe infection with COVID-19. The numbers don’t lie. The vast majority of the people getting COVID, going to the hospital, and dying are unvaccinated. Vaccinations also help protect those who cannot get vaccinated

because they are too young or are immunocompromised. Life is never going to be normal again, but the fastest way to get back to some semblance of normal is to get vaccinated if you are eligible.

7. KEEP SIMONE BILES

Houstonian Simone Biles (technically from Spring, but we’ll claim her) has given us everything. She is, without a doubt, the greatest gymnast of all time. She has won countless gold medals for herself, for her team, and for her country. She owes us absolutely nothing. She never did owe us anything, even before her standout performances. Then she gave us something we didn’t know we needed when she and her coaches made the call to sit out the majority of her events at the Tokyo Olympics. Biles got a case off the “twisties,” as she referred to it—a relatively common occurrence where gymnasts lose their sense of where they are in the air during their routines. This can be dangerous and result in serious injury. When she bravely showed the world that her health and safety was a priority, she received backlash from a culture that expects athletes to perform at all costs—even injury or death. Biles didn’t bend to the intense societal pressure, and in doing so she gave the most inspiring performance of her career.

8. KEEP OUR TOP CHEFS

Houston is finally getting a top in 2022—a Top Chef, that is. It was announced this year that Houston would be the featured city on Bravo’s newest season of *Top Chef*. The hit cooking-competition



show has featured other foodie cities over its eighteen seasons, and in its ninth season highlighted Texas as a whole (and specifically San Antonio). Now Houston is finally getting the star treatment it deserves. Houstonians have known for some time that this is a food city, and we aren't just talking about barbecue and tacos (although we do those exceptionally well). Our diverse population fuels the foodie flames with offerings

from around the globe. There isn't a cuisine you can't find in Houston. The real question is, what took the *Top Chef* producers so dang long? Filming is already underway, and the season will premiere in the spring of 2022.

9. KEEP HELPING

Mr. Rogers once said that when he was a boy and he saw scary things in the news, his mother told him to look for the helpers because there will always be someone helping. In a scary state like Texas lately, it is important that we look for the helpers. There are people and organizations that showed up in Austin to fight Abbott's heinous agenda, day after day, session after session. They were there when the political storms hit women. They were there when the political storms hit trans kids and their

families. They were there when the political storms hit voters. They were there when the literal winter storm hit in February. Groups like Equality Texas, the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus, Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas, the Lilith Fund, the Texas Equal Access Fund, and the Transgender Education Network of Texas are a few of our helpers. Helping and hoping is sometimes all we can do. Keep helping in 2022.

10. KEEP IT TOGETHER

The world is getting more bizarre. This pandemic has been hard. These floods and snowstorms are hard. Listening to our crazy relatives is hard. Mask/No mask. Vax/No vax. Boosters?! Who even knows what the right answer is any more. We are all trying our

best—except for Turd Cruz. He is going to Cancún. Life is cuckoo-banana-crackers right now, so try to keep it together. Do some self-care. Do some self-love. Do some self-love with a consenting adult friend. Eat a taco. Try to go to therapy. If you can't afford therapy, eat another taco. Just try to keep it together. I don't know what the future has in store for any of us. If you would have asked me on January 5, 2021, if I thought there would be an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, I would have said no. These days, who knows what the hell is going on. As we move into 2022, just try to keep it together as best you can. Also, go vote—while you still can.

(Throughout this article, the first name of Texas Senator Cruz auto-corrected to "Turd." Unfortunately, we were unable to correct this error in time for publication.)

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 Impower-024



Longtime UH Advocate Retires

Resource Center Director **Lorraine Schroeder** has empowered LGBTQ young adults for over a decade.

By LILLIAN HOANG

Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Lorraine Schroeder was a quiet child. “I don’t even remember talking before 7. I started coming out of my shell around the age of 8,” she recalls. But she eventually found her voice, and for the past 11 years she’s been helping hundreds of others in the LGBTQ community find their voices as the director of University of Houston’s LGBTQ Resource Center.

As the Center’s founding director, Schroeder has helped institute many LGBTQ-friendly policies at UH. When she started her role in 2010, there were few designated gender-neutral bathrooms on campus, and it was much harder for trans and gender-nonconforming students to correct their names and photos on their UH school IDs. Today, new or renovated buildings must feature at least one gender-neutral bathroom, and gender identity and expression are included in UH’s anti-discrimination policy.

Now, after nearly 12 years of empowering LGBTQ students and educating allies, Schroeder will retire this month.

Karina Hernandez, a UH sophomore and LGBTQ Resource Center student employee, says she will miss Schroeder’s welcoming presence. Hernandez says that Schroeder would often walk out of her office and talk to people who were at the Center by themselves. “She has this motherly energy to her, so for those of us in the community who don’t have accepting families, she fills that void.”

Jamie Gonzales, the Center’s former program manager, agrees with Hernandez. When a full-time student who had been struggling

with mental illness and financial troubles came to the Center for assistance, Schroeder connected the student to campus and community resources. She also bought several bags of groceries for them the next day. “She always prioritized students’ needs on campus before administrative tasks, because she understood the urgency associated with housing insecurity, food insecurity, holistic well-being, and safety for our students,” Gonzales says.

**“MY HOPE IS THAT
THE LGBTQ RESOURCE
CENTER MOVES
FORWARD WITH THINGS
THAT WILL MAKE THE
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
MORE INCLUSIVE FOR
LGBTQ PEOPLE.”**

—Lorraine Schroeder

In addition to helping LGBTQ students, Schroeder has facilitated UH’s Cougar Ally Training, a judgment-free workshop designed to educate participants on LGBTQ issues. “We’ll correct you, but we don’t shame you or judge you, and many people have appreciated that environment,” she says.

After a training session last month, an attendee wrote on an anonymous evaluation form, “I felt very comfortable to ask questions without fear of being shamed or judged for lack of knowledge.”

The Center has evolved quite a bit since it first opened. “The biggest change was making me full-time,” says Schroeder, who could only work part-time during her first three years as director due to budget constraints.

When she started in her role, the LGBTQ Resource Center shared a tiny building with the Women’s Resource Center (now known as the Women and Gender Resource Center, or WGRC). The space was so small that the Center had to host Cougar Ally Training sessions in a separate building.

The two centers now share a much larger building that features a lounge and study area, computer stations, a kitchenette, and a library where students can borrow books and DVDs.

When the Center began receiving more funding from UH, Schroeder was able to hire a graduate assistant and create a mentoring program that pairs struggling LGBTQ students with supportive LGBTQ peer mentors. She was later able to hire a sexuality and gender education program manager and launch the Sexuality and Gender Acceptance (SAGA) Squad. SAGA Squad gives students the chance to develop leadership skills, plan outreach initiatives and events for the Center, and spread awareness on LGBTQ issues.

Despite the impact Schroeder has made at UH, she admits she wasn’t interested in the position at first. “I’m a more complex person, and I don’t necessarily want my whole life focused on LGBTQ matters,” she explains. →



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Important Facts About DOVATO

This is only a brief summary of important information about DOVATO and does not replace talking to your healthcare provider about your condition and treatment.

What is the most important information I should know about DOVATO?

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

- **Resistant HBV.** Your healthcare provider will test you for HBV infection before you start treatment with DOVATO. If you have HIV-1 and hepatitis B, the HBV can change (mutate) during your treatment with DOVATO and become harder to treat (resistant). It is not known if DOVATO is safe and effective in people who have HIV-1 and HBV infection.
- **Worsening of HBV infection.** If you have HBV infection and take DOVATO, 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.
 - 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 function and monitor your HBV infection. It may be necessary to give you a medicine to treat hepatitis B. Tell your healthcare provider about any new or unusual symptoms you may have after you stop taking DOVATO.

For more information about side effects, see “What are possible side effects of DOVATO?”

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:

- have ever had an allergic reaction to a medicine that contains dolutegravir or lamivudine.
- take dofetilide. Taking DOVATO and dofetilide can cause side effects that may be serious or life-threatening.

What should I tell my healthcare provider before using DOVATO?

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

- have or have had liver problems, including hepatitis B or C infection.
- have kidney problems.
- are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. One of the medicines in DOVATO (dolutegravir) may harm your unborn baby.
 - Your healthcare provider may prescribe a different medicine than DOVATO if you are planning to become pregnant or if pregnancy is confirmed during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.
 - If you can become pregnant, your healthcare provider may perform a pregnancy test before you start treatment with DOVATO.
 - If you can become pregnant, you and your healthcare provider should talk about the use of effective birth control (contraception) during treatment with DOVATO.
 - Tell your healthcare provider right away if you are planning to become pregnant, you become pregnant, or think you may be pregnant during treatment with DOVATO.

- are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed. **Do not breastfeed if you take DOVATO.**
 - You should not breastfeed if you have HIV-1 because of the risk of passing HIV-1 to your baby.
 - One of the medicines in DOVATO (lamivudine) passes into your breastmilk.
 - Talk with your healthcare provider about the best way to feed your baby.

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take, including prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements.

Some medicines interact with DOVATO. Keep a list of your medicines and show it to your healthcare provider and pharmacist when you get a new medicine.

- You can ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist for a list of medicines that interact with DOVATO.
- **Do not start taking a new medicine without telling your healthcare provider.** Your healthcare provider can tell you if it is safe to take DOVATO with other medicines.

What are possible side effects of DOVATO?

DOVATO can cause serious side effects, including:

- See “What is the most important information I should know about DOVATO?”
- **Allergic reactions. Call your healthcare provider right away if you develop a rash with DOVATO. Stop taking DOVATO and get medical help right away if you develop a rash with any of the following signs or symptoms:** fever; generally ill feeling; tiredness; muscle or joint aches; blisters or sores in mouth; blisters or peeling of the skin; redness or swelling of the eyes; swelling of the mouth, face, lips, or tongue; problems breathing.
- **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). Too much lactic acid 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.

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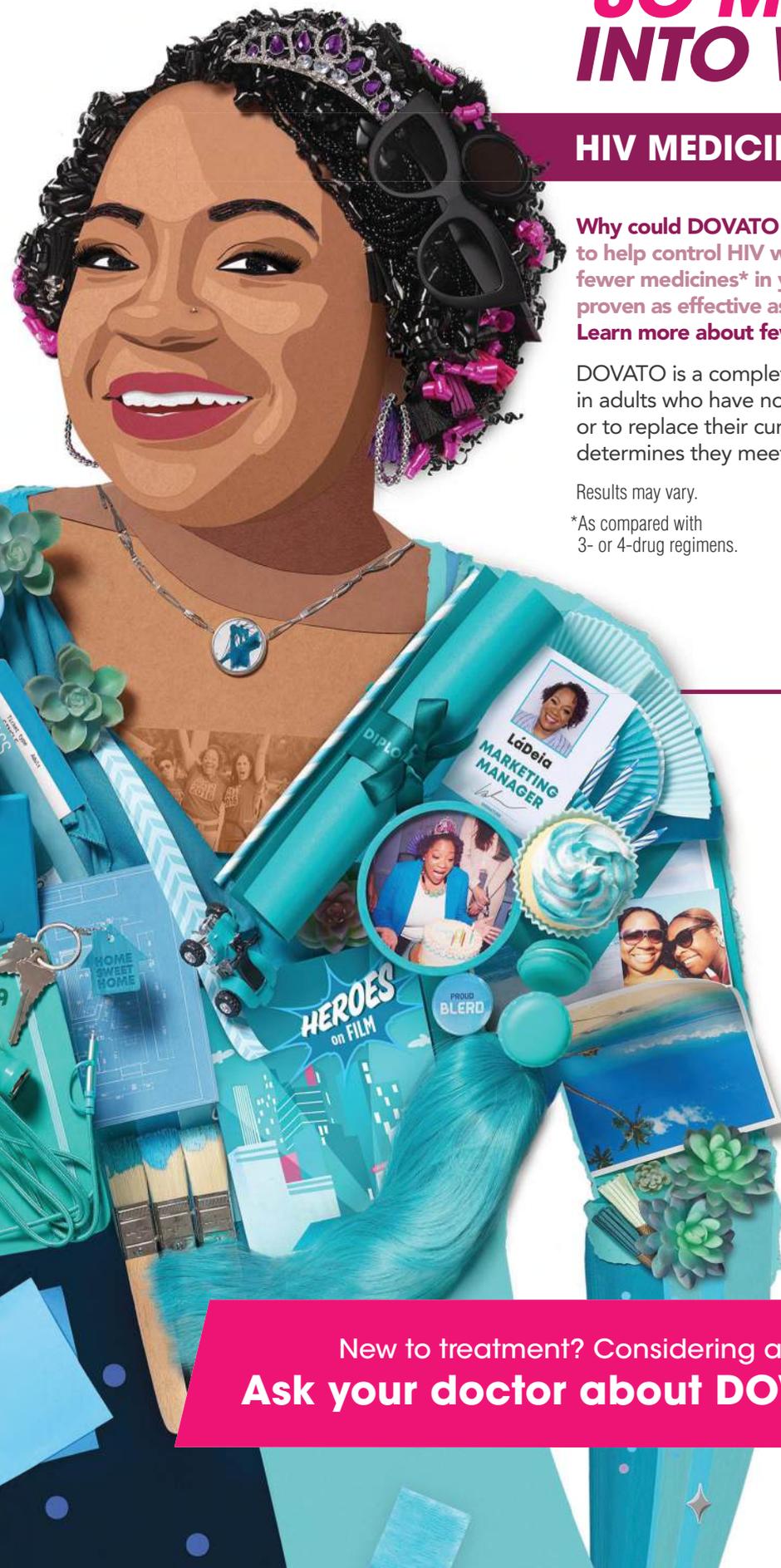
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But she couldn't stop thinking about possible programs the Center could start to help LGBTQ students. Ultimately, she applied. "I'm really glad I did it. It's one of the most fulfilling jobs a person could have."

Schroeder has always had a passion for helping others. In her previous engineering job in Santa Barbara, California, she heard about a university psychology program that a friend of hers was a part of. Fascinated, Schroeder applied for the program the next day. The program accepted her, and she graduated in 1995 with a master's degree in clinical psychology from Antioch University.

"I like learning about what makes people behave the way they do," Schroeder says. "I also enjoy helping people and guiding them into a healthier state."

Schroeder identifies as a bisexual lesbian, someone who is attracted to multiple genders and feels most connected to the lesbian community. Her sexuality journey started later in life. She thought heterosexuality was her only option until she kissed a girl for the first time at age 24, and "her whole life fell together."

She later came out to a friend, who dismissed her by saying she was so insecure that she would go out with anybody who was

interested in her. That response devastated Schroeder, and she didn't come out to anyone else for another year.

Her background in counseling, psychology, and education, as well as her experiences as a member of the LGBTQ community, prepared her for her time at UH's LGBTQ Resource

"SHE HAS THIS MOTHERLY ENERGY TO HER, SO FOR THOSE OF US IN THE COMMUNITY WHO DON'T HAVE ACCEPTING FAMILIES, SHE FILLS THAT VOID."

—Karina Hernandez, UH student

Center. As the director, she has helped bring students together because she understands the importance of community and visibility.

For making UH a more LGBTQ-friendly campus, she won the Val DuMontier New Professional Award from the ACPA Stand-

ing Committee for LGBT Awareness in 2013. In 2015, she received an award from the NASPA GLBT Knowledge Community for developing the UH Pride Partners Program, which celebrates UH departments that have demonstrated their commitment to creating a welcoming, LGBTQ-friendly environment.

Schroeder is now looking to slow down in retirement. She wants to visit her family in Wisconsin more often and become more involved in the lives of her nieces and nephews. She plans on going on a trip with her mother to New York City to see several Broadway shows. She also wants to make more jewelry and become both a certified nutritionist and a small-dog owner.

She says she's grateful to have had the chance to work with resilient faculty, staff, and students, and hopes the Center continues to meet the students' needs.

"My hope is that the LGBTQ Resource Center advisory board moves forward with things that will make the University of Houston more inclusive for LGBTQ people, especially trans and nonbinary students."

 For more information on the UH LGBTQ Resource Center, visit uh.edu/lgbtq.

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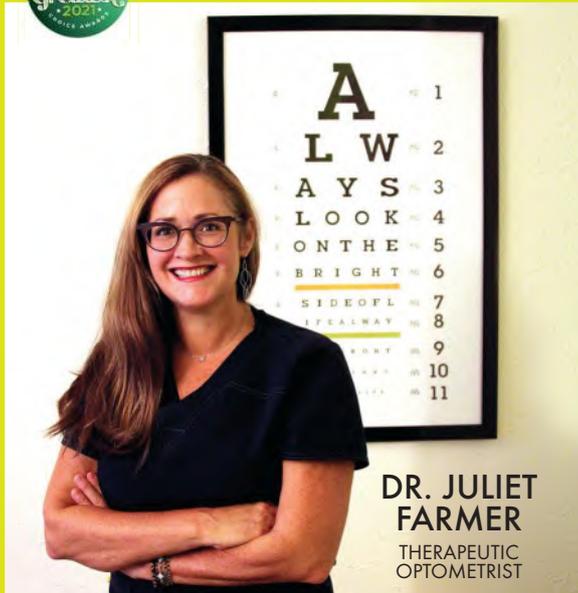
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Representation at the Rockets

Attorney **Clay Allen** breaks barriers for LGBTQ sports professionals.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Openly gay attorney Clay Allen, 42, was recently named general counsel for the Houston Rockets and Toyota Center. In that role, he serves as the highest-ranking openly LGBTQ executive in the organization. He is hoping that his presence will inspire and influence others—including professional basketball players—to live openly and authentically.

Allen's journey with the Rockets started 20 years ago when he became a part-time marketing associate in 2001. His support of the Rockets as a fan goes back even further than that.

"One year in high school, a friend of mine and I heard on the radio on the way to school that they were holding a banner contest in front of The Summit to win free playoff tickets," recalls Allen. "As soon as school let out, we ran home and made a banner. We didn't have time to let the paint dry on the banner before the contest started, so we couldn't roll the banner up to carry it. We walked the unfurled 10-foot banner from my house, over the Edloe bridge at 59, to The Summit, and tried to keep the wind from ripping it. The banner made it in one piece, and we won suite tickets to the game that night! It was the first time I had ever been in a suite for a sporting event."

Allen found quick success working for the Rockets after graduating from Trinity University in 2001. After six months working part-time, he was promoted to a full-time role as the team's events and promotions coordinator. He stayed in that job until 2007, but there was something about marketing that just didn't seem like the right fit for him professionally.

"After working in marketing for a few years, I started to realize that I was in the wrong field. I had worked with our team lawyers a few times over the years on simple projects like sweepstakes rules and executing sponsorship agreements. I thought writing contracts sounded interesting, so I decided to go to law school and started studying for the LSAT. While I guess most people would describe me as a sports lawyer, I'm a transactional attorney by trade. Most of my work involves drafting, reviewing, and analyzing contracts," says Allen.

"THE ROCKETS AND TOYOTA CENTER IS AN OPEN AND INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE. WHILE WE DON'T HAVE AN OPENLY GAY PLAYER—THERE CURRENTLY AREN'T ANY IN THE NBA—I BELIEVE THAT A GAY PLAYER WILL FEEL WELCOMED AND LOVED AS PART OF THE TEAM."

—Clay Allen

He graduated from Baylor Law School in 2010 with a concentration in business transactions. "When I graduated from law school, I got a job at a big corporate law firm in downtown Houston. I thought that would be my career. However, after a few years I heard that the Rockets needed a new lawyer, and I immediately made a few calls to get an interview. I was hired as associate general counsel in 2013."

Having worked with the Rockets previously, Allen already knew most of the people within the organization as well as the sports business in general—experience that was immediately beneficial when he was tasked with drafting his first sponsorship agreement and needed to describe the elements a new sponsor would receive. His knowledge of the business side of the organization, combined with his legal experience, allowed him to bring a unique perspective to his work and gain the trust of his co-workers.

"As general counsel, I am responsible for overseeing legal and policy matters for both the team and the arena, including areas relating to sponsorship agreements, arena use agreements, intellectual property matters, human resources matters, risk management, and compliance with NBA rules," explains Allen.

He doesn't take his professional good fortune for granted, though. "Our offices are located inside Toyota Center. Even now, after being with the team for over 14 years, I walk past the empty court in the mornings and can't believe I'm lucky enough to get to work here."

Allen also brings his identity as a gay man to the organization. He says he has received overwhelming support from the organization. His presence also serves as an example to other queer people who may have an interest in an organization like the Rockets, whether they be a fan, an employee, or perhaps one day, a player.

"The Rockets and Toyota Center is an open and inclusive workplace. While we don't have an openly gay player—there currently aren't any in the NBA—I believe that a gay player will feel welcomed and loved as part of the team.

"It's important to me that I bring my authentic self to the workplace. When I was struggling to come out, I didn't see a role model in the sports world that I could relate to. Perhaps if a gay staff member or player sees an openly gay executive working for a professional sports team, they'll feel comfortable enough to be their true self as well," says Allen.

The Rockets are making progress in other ways. In the spring of 2020 before the pandemic, the Rockets had planned to host their first Pride Night in conjunction with the Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce. Allen served on the planning committee. COVID-19 had other plans, of course, and the event was postponed to 2021. Allen notes that the organization looks forward to celebrating Pride every season.

"As part of the inaugural Pride Night, I sat on a panel with several other sports professionals to discuss LGBTQ+ inclusion in the workplace. In the summer of 2020, our organization developed a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, which I sit on. While our initial focus was the support of our Black employees in the wake of the death of George Floyd, we have broadened our scope and actively work to promote a workplace in which people of all genders, races, nationalities, and sexual orientations and identities are valued and supported," he says.

But there is still room for progress in an industry where LGBTQ representation is mostly invisible. Allen continues to find new ways to change that.

"The LGBTQ+ community is still vastly underrepresented in American professional team sports—on both the business and the team side. I serve as an advisor to the board of HomeField Alliance, the first nationwide networking group for LGBTQ+ professionals in sports," says Allen. "It is one of the organizations working to fight that and change it."



For more info, visit nba.com/rockets.

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Comics for the Community

Byron Canady and Sharmane Fury open a new inclusive comic-book store.

By **CONNOR BEHRENS**

Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's the latest comic-book store in Houston!

Gulf Coast Cosmos Comicbook Company is a new e-commerce retailer for major and indie comic books, graphic novels, fan art, apparel, and more. The Houston store, located at 2306 Stuart Street near Emancipation Park, is owned by LGBTQ community members Byron Canady and Sharmane Fury, who both wanted to open a shop that would celebrate underrepresented groups within Houston's comic-book communities.

"I wanted to have my own comic-book shop that could be a service to those in the Black and brown community," co-owner Fury says. "Byron and I both had a mission to create a safe space for nerds of all kinds, with a particular goal to show that Black and brown people can be nerdy without shame or judgment. We don't have a lot of places where we can be at peace with our interests."

The chance to open a store was a childhood dream for co-owner Canady, who checked off all the geek boxes as a child. "I grew up during the '70s and '80s when pop culture was transitioning from disco to hip hop, and I was into every single minute," he says. "I remember watching all the Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman cartoons on Saturday morning. I actually didn't get into comic books until my dad brought them home. I've been reading and collecting them ever since."

The dynamic duo says they feel lucky to have their own shop in the heart of the Third Ward, with hopes of providing other geeks and pop-culture enthusiasts the chance to express themselves in a space built solely for them.



Byron Canady and Sharmane Fury in front of their Gulf Coast Cosmos Comicbook Co.

"Expectations that come with stereotypes often prevent us from being able to enjoy things. [They can] remind us that we aren't the intended audience. But things are changing, and we are finding that our stories are becoming more available," Fury says. "We get to see ourselves being represented in all aspects of geekdom. That's really exciting."

Fury has seen people become incredibly excited when they step into the shop, and that makes her feel proud of what the store is doing for the local community.

"I get so emotional seeing people walk in the store and become overwhelmed by the posters of predominantly Black and brown characters on the wall—or their surprise at finding comic stories that feature LGBTQ+

characters," she says. "We often hear people say that this must be what straight white people experience everywhere when they see themselves represented. That was what I had been missing my whole life, and to be able to provide that to the people of my community is amazing. Our customers get to see that they can find themselves in comics and graphic novels—not to mention it's all happening at a place where the owners are from their community, too!"

Those kinds of emotional reactions from LGBTQ people in the local geek scene have not surprised the shop's co-owners. As Canady sees it, the queer community is inherently drawn to pop culture and comic books because they are creative.

“The gay community’s general aesthetic is creativity [sparked by] a vast array of races, ethnicities, and identities who individually and collectively ‘flavor’ the world we live in,” Canady says. “It’s been my experience that regardless of whether it’s film, television, or comic books, minority groups strongly influence pop culture as a whole.”

So far, the response to the store has been positive, and the two plan to expand their presence in Houston.

“BYRON AND I BOTH HAD A MISSION TO CREATE A SAFE SPACE FOR NERDS OF ALL KINDS, WITH A PARTICULAR GOAL TO SHOW THAT BLACK AND BROWN PEOPLE CAN BE NERDY WITHOUT SHAME OR JUDGMENT.”

—Sharmane Fury

“Sharmane and I have a very unique identity as comic-book store owners,” Canady says. “We are the only Black/Blasian/queer-owned shop in Houston, and that is our superpower. Our responsibility going forward is to provide an expanded view of the pop-culture narrative with community programming and various store events.”

The pair is constantly updating their collection of merchandise and books, curating them for their specific Black and brown audience.

“Our back stock and manga offerings are smaller, yet we continue to select and add items based on our repeat customers’ demand,” Canady says.

Comic-book stores have always existed as a way for people to escape, regardless of age or race—something many people are looking for after the last two years of COVID-19.

“These kinds of comics stores can be friendly and welcoming places,” Canady says. “Depending on who you talk to, those of us who aren’t straight, white, or male have often felt ‘othered’ and unsafe. Gulf Coast Cosmos Comics is a safe and welcoming space for all to enjoy.”

 For more information, go to gulfcoastcosmos.com.



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A Great Spirit

American Indian activist **Anna Farris** continues giving back to her communities.

By OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ

Being born as her mother's 13th child on a Friday the 13th might be seen as an omen of bad luck for Anna Farris. But this lesbian American Indian from the Tunica/Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana is the kind of person who makes her own luck.

Now an elder on the Inter-Tribal Council of Louisiana, Farris is the area program manager of the Senior Community Service Employment Program at the American Indian Center of Houston.

It's the culmination of a lifetime of service.

Farris grew up in Magnolia, a Mexican-American neighborhood in Houston's East End. Everyone thought she was Hispanic. They also assumed that this pretty and popular cheerleader was straight.

Although Farris never lived on a reservation, and she was born after the most severe erasure of American Indian culture, she did suffer from racial oppression.

The last name on her birth certificate was originally Farias. When the document was misplaced several years later, her mother applied for a new one. It was returned with her last name changed to Farris. The same thing happened to several of her cousins.

"They just erased our name," she explains.

Farris had the first of her two sons at age 17. In her early twenties, she came out as lesbian. Compared to her older brother Charlie Farias, who was openly gay, she had a relatively easy time of it.

Farias, an effeminate man who would sometimes dress in drag, had been severely bullied in school. His immediate family was much more accepting.

"When my brother came out, my mom just said, 'Okay, as long as Anna isn't,'" Farris recalls. "When I told her I was lesbian a few years later, she wasn't very happy but later she accepted it."

But Farris' friends from school were un-

ruffled. "My friends from Magnolia responded with open arms—every one of them. I didn't have any problem with anyone from the neighborhood. And I'm still friends with all of them."

Farris has lived through worldwide crises from AIDS to COVID, and every financial, natural, and human-made disaster in between. Each time, she responded by reaching out to those in need and speaking out on their behalf.

"I'm a loudmouth," she laughs. "When I see somebody doing something wrong, I've just got to say something. My family says it's like I have road rage when I see something wrong."

In 1989, Farris became aware of Gay and Lesbian Hispanics Unidos (GLHU). The nonprofit raised money for various LGBTQ causes and hosted Baile, an annual gala that closed out Houston's Pride celebration.

By then, her brother had contracted AIDS. Farris was already doing shows as an Anita Baker illusionist and donating the tips to various causes such as AIDS and homeless LGBTQ youth.

GLHU members approached Farris to run for Miss Baile. There was no organization for LGBTQ American Indians in Houston, and since she had grown up with Hispanic neighbors, she felt comfortable joining the organization.

"I joined GLHU because I wanted to have a voice. There were not that many women organizers. All the organizations were mostly men."

It was her experiences with GLHU that prompted her to publicly identify as an American Indian.

"They called me a coconut," Farris says. That's a derogatory term for a Hispanic who is brown on the outside and white on the inside.

"They thought I just didn't want to speak Spanish. When I told them I was an American Indian, they would go 'Woo Woo!' That pissed me off."

"When I won the Miss Baile title in 1990,

I had to do the welcome speech to Baile in Spanish. I tried to do it, but every time I would practice saying *Bienvenidos damas y caballeros* (Welcome, ladies and gentlemen), I would say *Bienvenidos damas y camarones* (Welcome, ladies and shrimp)."

The next year, Farris became vice-president of GLHU and over several years worked to raise thousands of dollars for AIDS groups, Amigos Volunteers in Education and Services (AVES), Stone Soup, and other local LGBTQ groups.

In 1991, Farris married Diane Escamilla. "We had a holy union in 1991. We got legally married in 2015. And then we got remarried on our 25th anniversary in 2016.

"She loves my children. I met her when my oldest son Gilbert was three. And I got together with her when my youngest son Patrick was three. So she's been there for their whole lives."

Farris admits her relationship with Escamilla, while happy, has taken lots of work over the years. "It takes a lot of compromise. She's a leader. I'm a leader. She's always right. I'm always right. We just had to figure out how to take those two rights and put them together."

Farris' oldest son, Gilbert, was 16 when he became a father, making Anna a grandmother at just 33.

She became a great-grandmother at 56. Now at 65, she has eight grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren, with another one on the way.

"I enjoy it. They're able to know me. When I was young, I didn't know any of my grandparents."

After working full-time for a plumbing supply company for 30 years and volunteering nonstop for various nonprofit organizations, Farris' family made her quit. "It was a lot of work—a lot of time away from home and away from them."

But Farris, being the determined woman she is, didn't retire. Instead, she started a painting company, DAP Painting, with her



family. The name comes from the initials for Diane, Anna, and Patrick, Anna's son who originally worked with the company.

She also turned her attention to the Inter-Tribal Council of Louisiana, where she serves as an openly lesbian member. Farris says she has never had a negative reaction from any members of her tribe.

"When our painting company started working with the Paragon Casino and Resort (my tribe's casino), people knew it was my company. Diane would show up, and people would call her Anna. So I had to explain, 'This is my spouse, Diane. She does the actual work.' I never got a single comment or negative reaction."

Farris now runs the elder employment

**"I'M A VERY KIND PERSON,
BUT I HOPE PEOPLE
UNDERSTAND THAT
I STAND UP FOR MYSELF
AND I STAND UP
FOR MY FAMILY
AND COMMUNITY.
I HAVE TO."**

—Anna Farris

program at the American Indian Center of Houston. She's currently organizing a food bank and clothes closet for the hundreds of tribal members in Harris and Polk county.

For the holidays, the Inter-Tribal Council is having a toy drive as well as organizing Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets for members.

Some people would see it as ironic that an American Indian organization would celebrate Thanksgiving, given the horrendous treatment of tribes that followed that first communal meal in 1621 when Wampanoag Indians and settlers celebrated together. Immediately after that, white settlers set about systematically killing American Indians by the thousands and seizing their lands.

There's no irony, according to Farris. "We celebrate because we have a lot to be thankful for. The fact that we've survived this long, for one. They wanted to wipe us out, to take away our culture, and it didn't happen. We're still here."

Since she's worked as a community advocate since her early twenties, you might expect Farris to be tired of constantly struggling to better her community. Especially since the LGBTQ and American Indian communities still face significant struggles.

"Actually, it makes me want to do more and work even harder. I'm a very kind person, but I hope people understand that I stand up for myself and I stand up for my family and community. I have to."

Asked if she has a 'warrior' mentality, Farris laughs. "Yes! And it comes out quite a bit!"

Farris wasn't given a traditional Indian name, but it's something she thinks about. "If I could choose a name, I think it would be Woman With Great Spirit. I try to live with a good spirit."



To contribute to the American Indian Center of Houston's holiday toy and food drive, contact anna.farris@itcla.com.



Confections for a Cause

Brian Duong uses his delicious desserts to give back to those in need.

By LILLIAN HOANG

Brian Duong has always had a passion for food. But he only started cooking after his mother refused to buy him fried macaroni and cheese bites at a Burger King drive-thru when he was 11 years old. “I got so mad, because I really wanted those,” he recalls. “So I decided, ‘You know what? Lemme start cooking for myself.’”

While spite kick-started his culinary career, his sweet tooth inspired him to open a bakery, and his love for the word *bitchin’* pushed him to name his business Brian’s Bitchin’ Bakery.

Duong’s pop-up Houston treats shop offers unique, Asian-inspired desserts like boba and Vietnamese coffee and chocolate-flavored cookies, light and creamy Thai tea tiramisu, Ube coconut rolls, and more. Ten percent of his proceeds go to The Trevor Project, a national 24-hour suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth.

Just in time for the holidays, he is expanding his offerings by collaborating with other local bakers. “I hope to collaborate with other small businesses, continue to pop up at markets and local events in Houston (and possibly

Austin and Dallas), and begin to ship my goods nationwide!”

Baking is important to Duong for many reasons. Not only does it fulfill his creative instincts, but it has also helped him get through difficult times in his life. As a freshman at the University of Houston in 2014, Duong was depressed because he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do with his life.

“I was surrounded by driven, independent individuals who already knew what they wanted to be. I just told people I wanted to be an optometrist to get [them] off my back, but internally it was killing me,” he admits.

He was also dealing with anxiety related to his sexuality. Although he was ready to come out to his family as bisexual, he feared they would reject him. “I know they love me, but I just hear stories of people coming out, and it doesn’t always turn out for the best.”

So Duong turned to baking as a way to relieve stress. “Just having that moment to myself where there’s nothing in the world going on but me and my stand mixer, it’s just really relaxing and peaceful.”

Everything worked out in the end for

Duong. When he came out, his family accepted him and apologized for making him feel like he had to live in fear, because they only wished for his happiness. He also found some career direction after a veterinarian saved his dog, a tiny Bichon Frise named Kipper, when it was attacked by a massive Dalmatian in 2014. After Kipper came home from the successful surgery, Duong remembers looking his dog in the eye and saying, “I wanna do what she did for you and for me.”

Duong joined the UH Pre-Vet Student Association in 2016 and became the organization’s president in 2017. He later got a job as a vet technician and was accepted into the Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine on his first try in January 2020.

Adding to his list of achievements, Duong opened his bakery in November 2020 after his friends and coworkers told him how delicious his homemade cookies were.

“My family always said, ‘Oh my God, whenever you open the café, I’ll be the first customer!’ It wasn’t until my friends and co-workers tried it and liked it that I considered opening a bakery.” →

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Brian's Bitchin' Bakery also became a way for Duong to give back to the community. In addition to the proceeds he's donated to The Trevor Project, he's also funded The Beacon, a nonprofit in downtown Houston that helps homeless people. When hate crimes against the AAPI community skyrocketed after the Atlanta spa shooting, he donated 10 percent of his proceeds to relief funds for the victims' families. "Having the opportunity to create and share my passion for baking was such a privilege that it was only right for me to give back," he shared in an Instagram post.

Duong says managing a small business has been stressful but invigorating. He and his mother once stayed up till 5 a.m. to package over 100 cookies for his first pop-up sale at Plant Market Sunday, which opened that morning at 9 a.m. "It was definitely a rough beginning, but exciting enough to continue. It's interesting to look back and see how much has changed and how much I've learned since then," Duong says.

Indeed, much has changed since he opened Brian's Bitchin' Bakery. Before he left for vet school in late May, Duong sold over 2,500 cookies across four markets, two events, a wedding, and a pop-up. A returning customer once



adjusted their work schedule to get a cookie, another came in early to buy one of everything, and one patron came back a few minutes after purchasing cookies to buy more because she ate the ones she meant to share.

His desserts have impressed many people, including other local confectioners. "Brian definitely takes the time to create flavors that are unique," says Karen DeGuzman, the owner of Butter Baby Bakery. "Try his desserts, and I'm sure you'll find a favorite!"

Duong left the vet school he was attending because it failed to support him educationally and mentally. He hopes a program in Texas will accept him and provide him with better academic opportunities.

When he's not working as a full-time vet technician at VCA Lexington Boulevard

Animal Hospital, he is preparing to sell at markets by going to several grocery stores in search of ingredients. He's already planning his 2022 menu.

People can support Duong by sharing his social-media posts, buying his desserts, and offering feedback after they've tried his cookies.

Vivian Tran, a long-time friend of Duong, encourages people to support him for many reasons. "You're buying from the real deal—he's part of what makes Houston so great, and he's a succinct example of our city's raw talent and indomitable spirit."

➔ For more info, visit briansbitchinbakery.com or follow Brian on Instagram @briansbitchinbakeryofficial and on Facebook at @briansbtchinbakery.

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Designer **Eliot Perez** heads into another busy season after a tough battle with COVID.

By JENNY BLOCK



You wouldn't be wrong to call native Houstonian Eliot Perez a modern Renaissance man. "I am a fitness enthusiast teaching group exercise for the YMCA, and have been doing that for 20-plus years.

I am also a licensed Realtor with Blue Willow Properties, and I have been doing seasonal design and decorating for years," he says. He's also a man who "just happens to be gay."

For more than ten years, Perez has worked predominantly with the over-65 crowd as an exercise class instructor. In 2015, he began working at SilverSneakers, a national community fitness program for senior citizens. He was known to teach more than five SilverSneakers classes a week at YMCAs throughout Houston, with anywhere from 75 to 100 participants per class.

And, in 2020, SilverSneakers named him their Instructor of the Year.

When it comes to his design work, Perez says he's not your traditional type of designer. In fact, he's not even sure how it became his "thing." "I just like color and balance on clothing, in rooms, or just anything," he says.

Perez designs parties and decorates homes for the holidays. "Whatever the occasion, my designs add some 'Eliot spice' to everything I do. I make everything *extra*," he adds, describing those special touches that make his work stand out.

Perez began creating displays when he was in retail for 13 years. "Sailboats out of 12-packs of beer, Christmas trees out of Coke cans with Sprite in the center, and window displays in clothing stores when I worked in the malls." He then started doing Christmas-tree designs when a friend asked him to decorate her Christmas tree. He's been busy with seasonal design work for 14 years, getting most of his clients through his fitness classes.

His talents are not limited to home or holiday decor. "I design costumes with originality, detail, and flair." He considers theme-wrapped packages to be a must when heading to parties or weddings. "Why not have your gift stand out from all the rest?"

According to his friends, Perez doesn't

know what "simple" means. "My mom always says, 'If you are going to do something, do it right.' I literally took that to heart and built my reputation around it. I never want to do something half-assed," he emphasizes.

When you work with Perez, you should know that you are going to get something creative. "That's why I call my new business Eliot's Creative Designs. I can turn a bedroom into a masterpiece on a tight budget, or create a baby's room complete with a painted mural or theme. There are no limits when it comes to creativity."

"I DESIGN WREATHS FOR ALL OCCASIONS—CHRISTMAS, EASTER, MARDI GRAS, INDEPENDENCE DAY, BABY THEMES, SPRING, SUMMER, HALLOWEEN, AND MORE."

—Eliot Perez

As to what he's up to now that the holidays are upon us, Perez has been busy decorating clients' homes and "creating sparkled trees with some Eliot spice." He's been creating wreaths since last December, and he also has a tent every month at the Montrose Makers Market. "Then I will be designing at the M.D. Anderson Family YMCA Posada evening event, and volunteering my talent at my church as an offering to thank God for saving my life when I had COVID."

Perez didn't just have COVID. It nearly had him after he contracted it in July 2020. He began getting weaker by the day, and his breathing became more and more difficult. A nurse friend urged him to go to the hospital, where he wasn't even able to walk in under his own power. He was put on oxygen and developed lung, kidney, and liver failure with blood clots throughout his body, as well as rhabdomyolysis.

After three weeks, Perez was finally released from the hospital. He had lost twenty pounds of muscle so he refused to stay in bed at home, knowing that he would never recover if he didn't get moving.

Still, just over a week later, he landed back in the ER for several more days with a blood clot in his leg. Once released, he began getting around with a walker—a far cry from teaching five fitness classes a day.

But he kept moving, and he started using a spirometer to improve his lung strength. Every week he pushed himself a little further. By August, he could do one push-up. Two months later, he could do twenty. Finally, he was back to his old self, and in some ways mentally and physically stronger than ever.

After his recovery, with no income from teaching classes, Perez was inspired by his near-death experience to start his design business. "My eyes were opened to using my talents to make money. I started designing wreaths for quick cash. Now I design wreaths for all occasions—Christmas, Easter, Mardi Gras, Independence Day, baby themes, spring, summer, Halloween, and more."

Perez says he finds the holidays particularly inspiring. "The thought of bringing peace and joy to others with glitter, sparkle, and bling. Sometimes it's the simple things that give us that peace and joy," he says.

Giving back has always been a big part of Perez's life. For 13 years, he volunteered for the AIDS Foundation's AIDS Walk as an entertainer and team captain, as well as teaching fitness classes for teens living with HIV. He also volunteered for local churches that have LGBTQ congregants. "Several years ago, I started volunteering at JR's serving Thanksgiving dinner so that their staff could be off." He would recruit others to volunteer, as well.

With so many sparkly surprises when it comes to this jack-of-all-trades, we had to ask Perez if he had any other surprises to share with readers. "They should know how much the comic-book character Wonder Woman influenced me in being who I am—and to live in truth."



For more info, visit tinyurl.com/9jc3kw.



Eliot Perez with some of his holiday wreath designs.

QUEER CAROLING

Pride Chorus Houston offers something for everyone this season.

By **SAM BYRD**

Photo by **DALTON DEHART**



As Judy Garland once sang, “Let the yuletide be gay.” Pride Chorus Houston will be heeding her advice during its always-popular holiday concert on December 11 in the Heights.

“This is our holiday show, and we’re trying to balance expectations for a traditional holiday with some gestures toward other holiday traditions. We’re going to LGBTQ+ it up with a drag surprise and a little choreography. It’s going to be a good show—a mix of serious and fun, campy stuff,” says Interim Artistic Director Matthew Jones.

The “Holiday Traditions” themed concert promises to help everyone get into the spirit of the season with beautiful new selections, holiday classics and, of course, that Pride Chorus Houston cheer. Jones highlighted some of the standout numbers. “We are performing a really fun ‘Santa Baby’ that starts out with disco and ends with a jazz-hands Broadway moment. There’s a piece for the solstice and some secular, wintery pieces. There’s a small group singing ‘California Dreamin’ by The Mamas & the Papas, and a beautiful piece named ‘Am I Welcome Here?’ about a gay man walking by a church on Christmas Eve and wondering if he is welcome to come in and celebrate. We’ve

got a great a capella version of The Carpenters’ ‘Merry Christmas, Darling,’ and a wonderful wintery piece called ‘Stars I Shall Find.’”

Whispers around the rehearsal hall also allude to a song performed by a whistle-range singer who is ubiquitous this time of year.

Jones recognizes that the holidays can be a difficult time for some. “I’m of two minds about the holidays. On one hand, it’s the most wonderful time of year for some people, and on the other hand, it’s not. Particularly for LGBTQ people, this time of year can be very complicated—negotiating family or the religious aspects that emerge this time of year. What I had in mind when I was putting this concert together



Members of Pride Chorus Houston performing at their fall 2021 concert.

“PRIDE CHORUS HOUSTON IS A PLACE WHERE THE CHORUS AND OUR AUDIENCE MEMBERS CAN FEEL INCLUDED, CAN FEEL COMMUNITY, CAN FEEL LOVE, AND CAN FEEL CELEBRATION, REGARDLESS OF WHAT ELSE MIGHT BE GOING ON.”

—Matthew Jones

is that Pride Chorus Houston is a place where the chorus and our audience members can feel included, can feel community, can feel love, and can feel celebration, regardless of what else might be going on.”

Overall, Jones feels that both this concert and future ones will communicate that message to everyone. “I want [both the choir members and our audiences] to see themselves represented on the stage, hear themselves represented in the music, and know this is a musical home for our various tribes and communities,” he adds.

The audience can also enjoy a reception both before and after the show, when they can

bid in a silent auction for decorative wreaths made by chorus members and friends.

This concert will have approximately 45 singers on the stage, but the organization is always welcoming new members to the fold—in both singing and non-singing roles.

“We think the future is wide open for us. We’re approaching this season with a sense of flexibility. I have high hopes for the organization. We know how big the organization was at one point, and what is possible for gay choruses in Houston,” says board president Matt Leslie, recalling the days when 100 singers performed downtown at Jones Hall.

Pride Chorus Houston has been entertaining audiences for over 40 years, making it one of the oldest LGBTQ choruses in the United States. “I don’t see why we can’t be that big again. We’re a world-class city. We deserve to have a world-class gay choral organization. We have the people and the talent. Now, with our rebranding and new staff and leadership, it’s the perfect time to figure out what the community needs and provide it for them,” Leslie adds.

Leslie moved to Houston four years ago without knowing many people, and found Pride Chorus Houston to be a place he could call his second home. “I was looking to get involved in the community. I’ve been a musician and performed a lot of musical theater in the past. It’s become such an important part of my life in Houston. That’s why I joined the board and am devoting a lot of time to rebuild this organization into something we can all be proud of.

“Pride Chorus Houston offers a way to meet creative and talented people in the LGBTQ community. We love giving people the opportunity to express themselves, to practice their music, and to learn in a safe and welcoming environment,” he says.

Jones encourages everyone to check out the chorus and not to be afraid of the singers’ audition process, as the organization has a “no one is turned away” policy.

“We’ll have open auditions in January for the spring and summer shows. We welcome everyone. You can be an experienced singer who can sight-read flawlessly, or this can be your first time in a chorus. The audition process is only about placing you in the right section of the choir. We meet people where they are and build them into better singers and help them find community and family.”

What: Pride Chorus Houston’s Holiday Traditions concert

When: December 11 at 8 p.m.

Where: Lambert Hall, 1703 Heights Boulevard

Tickets: From \$10 to \$20, available at pridechorus.org



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The Voices of Pride Chorus Houston

Members of the community choir spoke to OutSmart about what the group means to them.

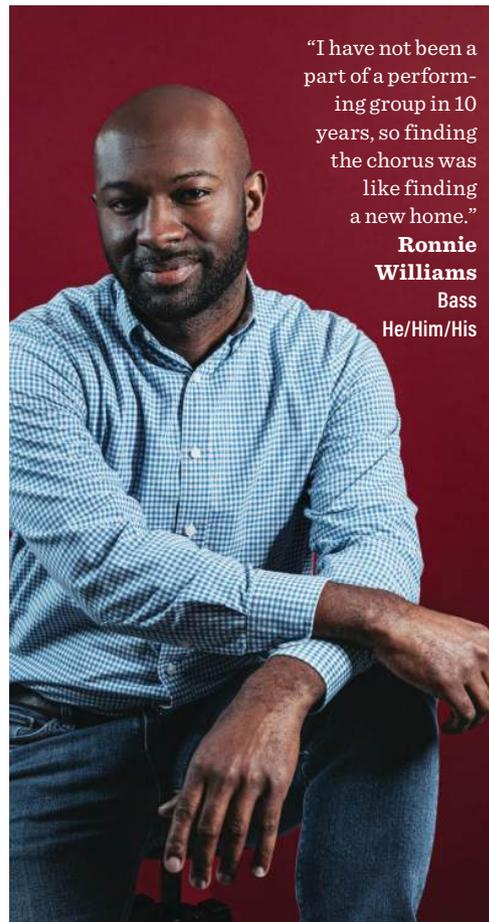
Founded in 1979, Pride Chorus Houston is one of the oldest LGBTQ music organizations in the United States. Formerly known as the Gay Men's Chorus of Houston and the Bayou City Women's Chorus (under the umbrella of Bayou City Performing Arts), the choir has gone through several evolutions to reflect its commitment to inclusivity. According to the group's website, "every person, no matter their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, creed, age, or ethnicity, has a place in our chorus so long as they want to sing with Pride."

Photos by VICTOR CONTRERAS



"The chorus is home to me. It's a space where I get to escape from the chaos of the week and make music with some really great people. When I first moved to Houston from El Paso, it helped me make new friends. I am a Chicana and a proud chorus member. I serve on the board of directors as the development chair."

Sarah Marin,
Alto 1 or Soprano 2
She/They



"I have not been a part of a performing group in 10 years, so finding the chorus was like finding a new home."

Ronnie Williams
Bass
He/Him/His



"Being in Pride Chorus Houston has allowed me to get back into what I love, and being back in a family. Singing and being with this chorus has helped me find myself again with people who are always supportive."

Michelle Jackson
Tenor
She/Her/Hers



"I want both the choir members and our audiences to see themselves represented on the stage, hear themselves represented in the music, and know this is a musical home for our various tribes and communities."

Matthew Jones
Interim Artistic Director,
He/Him/His



“Pride Chorus Houston offers a way to meet creative and talented people in the LGBTQ community. We love giving people the opportunity to express themselves, to practice their music, and to learn in a safe and welcoming environment.”

Matt Leslie,
Board President - He/Him/His



“I feel immersed and enveloped by voices, music, connectedness, and magic in Pride Chorus Houston. I love being a part of this community. The music and community helped me heal through a rough time in my life, and I feel renewed and stronger than ever.”

Miguel Bitanga
Baritone - He/Him/His



“I joined the chorus in January before the lockdown, so last year we had to rehearse and perform virtually. It’s been so much fun this year to rehearse and perform in person and get to know the other members. Everyone is super supportive and hardworking, but we laugh a lot, too. Rehearsals are one of the highlights of my week.”

Fran Guilfoyle
Alto - She/Her/Hers



“I believe our music can affirm and change lives. I know that it has changed mine since I joined in 1993. [I’d also like to share that] the journey to equality is far from over, so we’ll keep on singing until we are heard!”

David Gebo
Tenor 1 - He/Him/His

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On October 30, 2021, Pride Sports Houston's fall 2021 Kickball Awards presentation was held at Buddy's. Pictured is the winning team, the "Houston Assbros."



The Empire of the Royal Sovereign Imperial Court of the Single Star presented "The Yellow Brick Road of Moz" benefiting its charities at Buddy's on October 30, 2021. Pictured are cast members.

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Juan Querol and Mike Holloman made their formal engagement announcement at their home on November 13, 2021.



On November 14, 2021, Lazarus House presented Brunch and Bubbles at the Hilton Houston Plaza Medical Center. Pictured are **Danielle Sampey**, **Rachelle Welch**, **Nancy Galarza**, **Ralais Harper**, and **Douglas Springfield**.



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'The Bitch Who Stole Christmas'

Stars **Krysta Rodriguez, Ginger Minj, and Andy Ridings** preview their new holiday film.

By **JENNY BLOCK**

Brace yourself. *The Bitch Who Stole Christmas* is about to turn the classic holiday rom-com on its head. Think Hallmark movie drenched in glitter. The protagonist is a workaholic big-city fashion journalist sent on assignment to a small town that is obsessed with Christmas. In a snap, she's at the center of a high-stakes winter ball competition with cut-throat housewives and a sinister plot that could destroy Christmas *for-ev-ahh!*

Airing on VH1 December 2, the film features a broad cast with a plethora of drag queens and the ever-fabulous RuPaul. *OUTSMART* had six minutes with cast members Krysta Rodriguez, Ginger Minj, and Andy Ridings, who fill us in on this tinsel-soaked romantic romp.

Rodriguez, who recently starred as Liza Minnelli in *Halston* on Netflix, is a Broadway veteran with credits including *The Addams Family*, *In the Heights*, and a revival of *A Chorus Line*—not to mention appearances in *Smash*, *Quantico*, and *Gossip Girl*.

You may have caught Andy Ridings on *All My Children*, *Dan Is Missing*, and *The Shells*. He's also appeared in *The Rookie*, *The Other Two*, and the *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

Drag Race alumna Ginger Minj has toured the world performing—including a network-television appearance for Broadway royalty. Her album releases include *Sweet Tea*, *Gummy Bear*, and *Double Wide Diva*. And she starred in *Dumplin'* on Netflix.

Jenny Block: What would your 10-year-old self think of the fact that you're getting to do a Christmas film right now?

Krysta Rodriguez: I've always been a big fan of Christmas movies—and *irreverent* Christ-

mas movies—so I think 10-year-old me would be really excited that I'm getting to do one. Christmas movies, in particular, have such a longevity. They're something you always want to bring out every year. There's something that brings up nostalgia, and so it's really exciting to be part of something that might live on in somebody's memories of a very special time every year.

Ginger Minj: When I was growing up, I knew that Christmas was always going to be warm and cozy and fun, even if my life throughout the rest of the year wasn't that great. My favorite part of Christmas was always turning on the TV and watching *Prancer* and all of the Lifetime Christmas movies, before the Hallmark ones were coming out. I'm very excited to kind of live that fantasy for myself.

Andy Ridings: The thing about Christmas movies for me is that it's all about nostalgia. And being a part of something that I think is going to be around for however long is just really exciting. And my kids watching this movie, or their kids—it's really exciting.

What was the most surprising thing about shooting this film?

KR: Every day we had a brand-new cameo of an iconic drag queen coming in to work. You didn't know who was going to show up, and what they were going to get to do. That was really fun to just have a new moment every day. We had our core cast, but we kept bringing in people all the time. I hadn't met any of them before, so it was a really exciting experience to get to know everybody and see the queens (who all know each other) interact. They're friends, they work together, and they've known each other. It's a really beautiful community that I got to look at

and be a part of.

GM: Krysta, you're definitely a part of it now. You're definitely part of it. I would say for me, I didn't expect Andy to be as funny as he was. I mean, just to be real, the role is written for a stereotypical hunky Christmas man who comes in to save the woman. It's written in such a way that I think if anyone else in the world had done it, it wouldn't have worked. He's so funny, and so understated. We just sat there and laughed and laughed and laughed at him every single take, because they were so consistent but so different. I thought that was really nice to see. And again, I think it kind of turns everything else on its head.

AR: The thing that was always surprising was that every time I would go on set, everybody was just so hilarious and at the top of their game. I thought I was funny until I did this movie, and I realized that just trying to keep it together every day was very difficult.

Why should people see this movie?

KR: You're going to feel something, you're going to laugh, and you can play a drinking game with every time one of your favorite queens walks in. GM: Every single trope of every Christmas movie is in there, so you're going to get exactly what you want [that you remember from your favorite] Christmas movies. But it's going to be new, it's going to be fresh, and it's going to be funnier than ever before.

AR: [Think of] that feeling you get when you watch a Christmas movie that you love, and after it's finished you're just like, "Oh yeah." I think that this film has that in spades, and so much more.



VH1's *The Bitch Who Stole Christmas* airs on December 2.

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Some of us first fell in love with Houston native Michael Urie when he played the lead character in Brian Sloan's movie adaptation of his play *WTC View*, about a gay man's search for a roommate in the wake of 9/11. Many others first laid eyes on him in the popular ABC sitcom *Ugly Betty* in which he played Marc, the put-upon assistant to fashion magazine creative director Wilhelmina (Vanessa Williams).

More recently, Urie could be seen on Broadway in the *Torch Song Trilogy* revival, as well as alongside Udo Kier in gay filmmaker Todd Stephens' acclaimed 2021 movie *Swan Song*. In December, Urie stars as Peter, the romantic lead in Netflix's entry in the LGBTQ holiday-movie scene, *Single All the Way*. Michael was gracious enough to answer a few questions about the movie before its premiere.

Gregg Shapiro: I'd like to begin by apologizing for asking the most obvious question first, but what was it about Peter that made you want to play him in *Single All the Way*?

Michael Urie: As soon as I read the script, I was completely charmed and delighted by it. I'm a big fan of Christmas movies, and I actually

Single Sensation

Michael Urie stars in Netflix's new LGBTQ holiday film.

By GREGG SHAPIRO

knew the writer, Chad Hodge, a little bit. I'd seen his TV shows, and we knew each other socially. So I was excited to read it, and then I found it so charming, really funny, and also very romantic. Every time I read it, I would get choked up and laugh out loud. But I think specifically the role of Peter was really enticing to me because his problem was not being gay. It wasn't about coming out. It wasn't about any kind of shame or any kind of trauma or any kind of homophobia. His problem was the same kind of problem that straight people have in Christmas movies. And I really liked that, I really appreciated that, because it's still extremely gay, [laughs] and as somebody who plays a lot of gay characters and is in a lot of gay

projects, it was really meaningful to me to be in a project where the joy and the love and the comedy came not out of overcoming anything or hiding from anything, but from other normal ways. His conflicts are not unlike the conflicts of any old straight person.

As far as his family was concerned, their issue with him was that he was single, not that he was gay.

Exactly! He's not single because he's gay, he's single because he's single. He's lousy at dating, and that is a completely normal thing for a gay person to be. I was really charmed by the fact that this was going to be the first time Netflix went out with a story like this. →

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You are playing a romantic leading man. What are the rewards and challenges of such a part, aside from the reward of having Philemon Chambers and Luke Macfarlane as your love interests?

Playing the romantic leading man is great because you have most of the lines [laughs], and you're the guy with the problem. What's also great about playing the romantic lead is that when you're prepping a movie, you can really get a sense of the whole thing. I read the whole script—I wouldn't just jump around to my scenes, because I was in almost every scene. So, I got a real sense of the arc, and it made shooting it so much easier, actually. I haven't done that many movies that I'm in all the way through, and if you're a supporting character you only come in and out. [But in *Single All the Way*], I was able to really know my lines from reading it so many times all the way through, and studying. We could jump around in the schedule, and I would know where Peter was in the story because I was so familiar with the whole thing. I would know what happened before and what was happening after. It really helped, as an actor, to know where I was.

You mentioned the fact that Netflix is joining the fray of gay-themed holiday



movies. What do you think of this trend of streaming networks creating queer holiday movies such as *Single All the Way* and 2020's *Happiest Season*?

I think it's good and it's important. I think romance is not isolated to heterosexual relationships, and neither is Christmas. The gays love Christmas, and the gays love Christmas movies. So throwing them some, I think, is going to be really good. Because they're so popular, I think providing a movie like this, or like *Happiest Season*, to the cross-section of people who will watch any Christmas movie is only going to broaden people's ideas and give people a real sense of how we're all ultimately the same. The movie is not about how we're

different. It's about the ways in which we are alike. Christmas, romance—we can [agree] on a lot of things, queer people and straight people. I think it's exciting and inspiring to be part of that.

Finally, Michael, are there any upcoming projects you'd like to mention?

I'm in the movie of *Jersey Boys*, the musical about Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons, which played Broadway forever. We put the show up this summer and filmed it for a streaming service. Nick Jonas played Frankie Valli, and he was so good. It was a lot of fun. That's going to be out sometime, but I don't know when.

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Hot and Unbothered

Chelsea Handler previews her hilarious post-pandemic comedy tour.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

She's vaccinated, she's horny, and she's heading to H-Town. Chelsea Handler, the fabulous comedian and longtime LGBTQ ally who is known for her brutal takes on hot topics, love, and life, is getting back to basics with her *Vaccinated* and *Horny Tour*, which lands at the 713 Music Hall on Friday, December 10. Over a year after the pandemic hit the U.S., Handler is ready to read everyone for filth, so no one—specifically straight white men—is safe.

Handler's new set is packed with topical content. "[I'm covering] all the idiotic behavior we participated in during COVID, like Windex-ing our take-out food. Instead of getting COVID, we all probably gave ourselves cancer," the former late-night talk-show host jests. "My sister invaded my house for three months with her three adult children, which was something I've worked very hard in my life to avoid. So I promptly sold my house as soon as they left and downsized to a house where that will never, ever happen again."

Handler shares a few politically incorrect details about how she kept romance alive during the pandemic. "I had at-home COVID tests at my house, which meant I could test potential penetrators. When things were getting dicey and I realized it might be a long time before we were let out again, I wanted to make sure I kept my juices flowing. I would run the tests in my backyard and the results took about 30 minutes

to come in. Within that 30 minutes, if they said anything annoying or I saw a pinky ring (it's offensive, and people should know that), I would come back out and tell them they had COVID."

On the heels of her October 2020 HBO Max special, *Chelsea Handler: Evolution*, Handler plans to keep this show light with her signature snark and wit. "This is back to the O.G. Chelsea. I'm going off on the state of the world," she says. "I'm getting back to my stand-up roots and tearing into people, letting everyone know what my opinions are, supporting women and marginalized groups. We're all in this together, and there's a conversation that's being prolonged longer than it needs to be because of straight white men's resistance to this movement. Instead of just saying, 'Hey, we're so sorry, let's move on and make everybody equal,' they keep arguing about it."

This comedic force of nature has entered a new personal and professional era, thanks to her open heart, open mind, and therapy. "It's been a total round-robin for me. All the therapy and personal growth I've done has taken me right back where I belong," she says, referencing her relationship with fellow comedian Jo Koy, who was a regular on her talk show's dais. "Being with Jo is a reminder of who I am and all the things that make me unique. I'm standing in my strength and being reminded that I have a strong, powerful voice. I wanna make sure I use it in the right way, and make sure people know they can rely on me for that."

Her new lease on life elicits familiar feel-

ings. "I've always shared my truth—what's going on with me and my life. Seeing everyone's response to Jo and me being together inspires me to [explore my *Chelsea Lately* show again, and maybe] doing a *Chelsea Later*. A few years ago I never would have been open to that," she admits. "I've been a bit of a late bloomer in life [with] my emotional maturity and acceptance of everything. I looked back at *Chelsea Lately* for such a long time as being so stupid, but then I realized how many peoples' careers it started and the influence it had. I now look at it in a more serious way and see that it was a meaningful show."

Handler is continuing to make space for up-and-coming comedians. "I have a bunch of comics opening for me. In Houston, it's Vanessa Gonzalez, who is this awesome, hilarious Latina comedian," she says. "Bringing these people on the road and giving them access to these huge audiences has been a great reminder [of who I am]."

When asked about her loyal LGBTQ fans who have backed her since the beginning of her career, Handler considers why her message lands so strongly with the queer community. "I love my LGBTQ fans so much," she notes. "All the things I've talked about—like being outrageous and feeling like you're the only one, or you don't fit in—all those themes resonate because we all feel that way. I think the LGBTQ community specifically has always felt like they didn't fit in. So hearing me, someone who looks like they fit in, but doesn't feel like they

ever fit in, is probably one of the reasons.”

The politically engaged entertainer empathizes with her fans who feel disheartened by the state of the world. “I think it’s so important to remain activated. Disengaging is the least amount of impact we can have,” she stresses. “When you’re feeling disillusioned, match that with action in your community about voting and galvanizing people to vote. It’s the only way to make a difference. Keep spreading information and educating people about how to vote in all the elections, not just the big ones, because that’s where we get screwed up. I know it sounds boring and unsexy. But you know what’s boring and unsexy? Republicans in charge.”

“THIS IS BACK TO THE O.G. CHELSEA. I’M GOING OFF ON THE STATE OF THE WORLD” SHE SAYS. “I’M GETTING BACK TO MY STAND-UP ROOTS AND TEARING INTO PEOPLE, LETTING EVERYONE KNOW WHAT MY OPINIONS ARE, SUPPORTING WOMEN AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS.”

—Chelsea Handler

More than a year since the onset of the pandemic, Handler is thrilled to be back in front of live audiences, bringing the laughs and the fans together. “I love being a reason why people are coming back together, sometimes for the very first time. It gives me a lot of joy, and it’s kind of my responsibility as an entertainer to bring laughter and togetherness, and give that to humanity. In my opinion, there’s no better way to do that than to sit in an audience filled with people laughing together.”

What: Chelsea Handler’s Vaccinated and Horny Tour

When: December 10 at 7 p.m.

Where: 713 Music Hall,
401 Franklin St. Suite 1600

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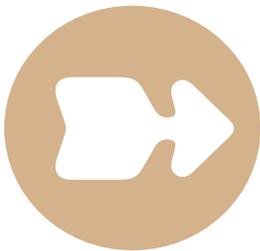
COURTESY



The Angel of Music

Sarah Brightman comes to Houston for a Christmas show.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **OLIVER SOMMERS**



Symphony, to the Houston area this holiday season. The music megastar, who has appeared in both Broadway and West End productions, is perhaps best remembered for originating *Phantom of the Opera*'s Christine Daaé. She inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber, who named her his “angel of music,” and she has sung in two Olympic Games ceremonies.

Ahead of her December 18 appearance at Smart Financial Centre, Brightman eked out time from her jet-setting schedule to speak with OUTSMART about the concert and her career.

Sam Byrd: What can people expect from this concert?

Sarah Brightman: Last Christmas, when ev-

erything started to get really locked up because of COVID-19, I wanted to do something for my fans and for the musicians who were out of work. I devised a Christmas show that could be streamed. I found a wonderful old church in London, and we put together the show. It was quite hard to put together in the time we had, but we did it. We had an overwhelming response, because I love Christmas and I thought it would cheer everybody up. It was so successful that I thought I'd love to do it in a bigger way in theaters when we could get back onstage again. It's lovely because it ticks all the boxes on the kinds of songs that all different types might like to hear for the holiday season. It has a wonderful set and lighting design, and beautiful costumes.

ence; some people just want to hear the choir and the orchestra. Some people have a difficult time at Christmas, and might want to listen to some beautiful music which might be solemn in a way. That was tricky to do. Luckily, I had time to do it. I also had to work out what is best for my voice, for what I'm singing.

What songs might people recognize?
I did a mixture for my fans. They always love to hear a few pieces from *Phantom of the Opera*, so I picked a couple of pieces there that I felt would fit well with the Christmas spirit. There's a time in the concert when I have to say goodbye, so I sing “Time to Say Goodbye.” For the Christmas and spiritual songs, I have a very traditional “Silent Night,” I've got a gospel piece named “Better Is One Day.” And the orchestra plays pieces from *The Nutcracker Suite*. There's lots there.

Do you have any favorite holiday traditions?
We do. I come from a very big family. I've got five siblings. In England, on our Christmas Eve, we have a gathering where everyone

How have you prepared for this next venture in your career?

Just in the usual ways I do. When you put on these types of shows—especially a Christmas show—the repertoire is huge, so you have to be careful about how you pick the music. Obviously, some people who come want fun Christmas songs; some want a religious, spiritual experi-



It was amazing. What a lovely thing to receive—and from America! I'm a British girl who was brought up in a market town outside of London. It's a joy! I feel so lucky that I've been received in America in this way. I feel very privileged.

What's next for you?

I've got quite a few unusual things that I can't talk about yet. They're different [projects that involve] storytelling, and I think people will enjoy it. That's one of the good things to come out of what we went through in the last two years. [It gave us] time to think about what could come next, and what we could do to move forward.

Do you have a message you'd like to share with your LGBTQ fans?

I want to shower love on you all, and [remind everyone] to be happy, be fulfilled, and follow your dreams, because anything is possible.

We always hear about people who are so inspired by Sarah Brightman. But who inspires you?

I think we're all instruments of God, however you want to think of God—as a force, or a huge, natural wholeness. That's what inspires me. You know, you can get up one morning and have a wonderful idea, and you can do something about it. That's an amazing thing. We're born into this world and we have this wonderment all around us. We can do wonderful things. We can suffer hardships and get through it, and still be imaginative.

After your shift to more of a solo career, would you like to originate another role or perform again on Broadway or the West End?

I haven't done theater for a very long time because my career took a different route. But never say never. There might be something that comes up that I would be suited to. Going back to eight shows a week is a way of performing that I'm not completely used to, and it would take me a while to get my head around that. At the end of the day, I do hundreds of performances and concerts, so it's not very different. But I'd be open to that idea. I feel lucky that I was the inspiration for *Phantom of the Opera*, and was a muse.

Talk about your relationship with Andrew Lloyd Webber.

We have a really sweet relationship. We live only a few streets away from each other. It was nice during COVID-19 because we both have dogs. We would go to the local park and walk our dogs and have a coffee and talk about things. He's been very good about helping to

push forward the idea of theaters reopening, and helping performers [who have been unemployed].

Do you have any words of encouragement or advice for Broadway's newest Christine?

What's lovely for me is seeing newer and younger performers play the part when I occasionally go to see *Phantom of the Opera*. They're doing all the moves that were created when I was Christine, but they're bringing their own spirit to it. It's a jewel, that musical. It's wonderful.

If you could go back in time to experience a live performance from someone who has passed on, who would it be?

Luciano Pavarotti.

Any favorite memories from your Hot Gossip dance troupe?

Behind the scenes, we used to go from a gig to different venues. Having danced all day and done a TV show, we'd then dance on the bus while heading to a club to keep going. It's amazing the energy you have at that age. The outfits were very shiny and glittery, but they were very itchy on the legs.

Do you consider yourself to be a classical, pop, or a true crossover artist?

I don't know. I just love music. I'm conceptual. I don't do anything if there isn't a good reason for it to be there. I'm not a fan of things happening on stage if there's not a reason for it. There's a huge subtext to what I do. I trained classically and still do, because I think it's the basis for everything. It was the same thing when I was a dancer. Whatever inspires me musically and I think I can fit into, I do. But I never tackle a song from the past if I can't bring anything new to it.

What do you do in your downtime?

I love my family. I'm very close to them. I have a lovely partner, and I like spending time with him. I have two dachshunds that I adore. I'm actually quite ordinary in my private life. I'm not into fancy foods or doing anything extraordinary. I feel lucky that I'm satisfied with not requiring a lot. I have so much in my working life; it's sometimes really over the top. For me to have a personal life that is ordinary is very important.

What: Sarah Brightman:

A Christmas Symphony

When: December 18 at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Smart Financial Centre,

18111 Lexington Boulevard in Sugar Land

Tickets: smartfinancialcentre.net

brings food and nice drinks. Some people might want to go to Midnight Mass after that. The following day is pure family—a table with a Christmas turkey and all the things Americans have, as well.

How has this last year and a half transpired for you?

As an artist, you have to be useful to yourself and others as much as possible. For me, I cared for my family on the weekends. I would travel to see them, do their shopping, and retrieve any medical supplies. During the week, I went into a bubble with my singing coach. I did a huge amount of retraining on my voice, and that's been useful because normally you don't get to do that when you're always working. I was able to go to France when they unlocked, and do lots of TV shows. But it was so difficult for everyone, because musicians were unemployed and everyone was frightened because no one wanted to get sick. We had to find a way to be useful.

Talk about your reaction to receiving a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



Going for the Gold

Jonathan Van Ness brings their Imaginary Living Room Olympian comedy tour to Sugar Land.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

They're here, they're queer, and they're tumbling (literally) on to the Smart Financial Centre stage with an epic stand-up special that tackles the pandemic, politics, and the perfect gymnastics floor routine.

Jonathan Van Ness quickly became America's sweetheart as one of the Fab Five on Netflix's *Queer Eye*. Van Ness is now hitting the road with a stand-up special, *Imaginary Living Room Olympian*, that comes to Sugar Land on December 17.

"I had done stand-up a handful of times," Van Ness says of their comedy roots. "I did a web series called *Gay of Thrones* before *Queer Eye*. It was nominated for Emmys and definitely had its own following. That's what made me realize, 'I'm like, kind of funny. I think I could do this.' I didn't really start leaning into writing and performing comedy until *Queer Eye*. It became the thing that got me a lot more higher-level opportunities. I love it so much."

Just like JVN broke the mold for what gender expression can look like on a mainstream platform, they're breaking new ground with their latest project. "I don't know if I'm the first person to do this, but I haven't heard of another comedian who has opened their show with a proper, full-blown gymnastics floor routine," they say excitedly. "If you want to see my iconic gymnastics routine, do not be late to the show!" Van Ness is putting it all on the line for audiences. "I'm giving you sparkle, I'm giving you sequins, I'm giving you a USA leotard and a full-air jumpy tumble track. It's hard-core, no holds barred, and I am tumbling for my life. That's why the show is called *Imaginary Living Room Olympian*. In my imagination, I'm going for the gold."

JVN also boasts that the show's opener will have audiences rolling with laughter. "My opening act is a Texas native—my friend Alok, who is an incredible and hilarious performer, comedian, and activist. I do my gymnastics routine, then Alok comes out, and then I do about an hour set. My comedy is very fun and it's very much about coming out of the pandemic, finding joy in these times, learning

to laugh at what we can laugh at, and really just coming together to laugh and processing a very turbulent few years. It's political, a little raunchy, and a little edgy."

The tireless entertainer stays busy in between gigs with political activism. Reflecting on the status quo, JVN offers suggestions on how to remain focused. "I think when we're

**"I'M GIVING YOU SPARKLE,
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LIVING ROOM OLYMPIAN.
IN MY IMAGINATION, I'M
GOING FOR THE GOLD."**

—Jonathan Van Ness

wanting to disengage, it's because we need to rest and take care of ourselves so that we can stay engaged in these fights and conversations. Especially when it comes to our trans and nonbinary community members who have faced unprecedented violence, we have to focus on taking care of ourselves so that we can take care of others. Rest, and get back out there."

Van Ness anticipates the upcoming 2022 elections with optimism. "I think, especially in

Texas, we have an opportunity to turn things around. We have to stay focused on long-term goals and local issues to turn Texas politics around."

The hilarious hair god uses he/she/they pronouns, and encourages anyone exploring their own gender expression to do the work to figure it out on their own terms. "Gender expression is so personal, and for me it's important to understand the roots of where and when our current ideas of gender come from. We hear people saying gender is a construct, and it literally is a construct. The way we think about gender [today] hasn't been around that long," he emphasizes. "Nonbinary and trans people have been around much longer than this very rigid gender binary that we live under."

"There's such a beautiful spectrum of ways in which you can identify in our community—nonbinary, trans, or nonbinary-trans. There are a lot of resources and people out there that support you and will welcome you into the community with open arms. But we have to take the first action, which a lot of times [simply means] asking for help."

Regarding the upcoming season of *Queer Eye* that was filmed in Austin, JVN spills the tea on what to expect. "Austin was an incredible place—not to make our gorgeous Sugar Land people 'jelly,'" he jokes. "We have such a diverse cast, and everyone has such great stories. There's such a range in age, race, occupation, life experience; I think everyone will find [a story they can] relate to. I really do think it's some of our most poignant, special work that we've ever done."

JVN assures readers that Texans who tune in for Season 6 will be delighted with the odes to the Lone Star State that the Fab Five include throughout the season. "There's definitely some line dancing and quintessential Texas realness!"

What: Jonathan Van Ness: Imaginary Living Room Tour

When: 7 p.m. on December 17

Where: Smart Financial Centre,
18111 Lexington Boulevard

Tickets: smartfinancialcentre.net



The drag-themed calendar features performers Hugh Dandy for July, Angelina DM Trailz for January, and Blackberri for February

12 Months of Glamour

New drag-themed wall-calendar project benefits the Montrose Angels.

By RYAN M. LEACH | Photos by VICTOR CONTRERAS



2022 looks like it might be a busy year. Pent-up demand to get out of the house and enjoy in-person gatherings and performances is going to make for a busy social calendar.

And to keep track of that busy schedule, you'll surely want to invest in a colorful wall calendar. The stars of Houston's drag scene have been working hard to bring you just such a calendar—one that will add a little glamour to your office wall and also help support the Montrose Angels charity.

Guadalupe "Lupe" Salas, 27, is a proud gay man known among local entertainers for his sewing circles and as the right hand to drag performer Reign LaRue. Salas can now add "calendar producer" to his credits after he came up with the idea to feature eleven drag queens and one drag king in a 2022 calendar.

"I brainstormed many different ideas to help raise money for the charity. I wanted to do something that was fun, inclusive, and dif-

ferent. A calendar was the perfect project to tackle. I pitched the idea to Montrose Angels, and they were fully on board. We quickly worked out the logistics, and it's finally coming together!"

Piero Arevalo, 30, is the gay bar manager at Ripcord. He was one of the men who started the Montrose Angels charity.

"Travis Webb, Daniel Banda, and I came together to start a community emergency fund to help our fellow bartenders and bar patrons with any unexpected life-emergency expenses. No matter how proactive we all are, life throws us some curveballs that we might not be able to handle ourselves. We want to be able to help the community that supported us," says Arevalo.

The calendar was shot by Victor Contreras (@closeoureyesphoto on Instagram), a Nicaraguan-born photographer who has been working in the LGBTQ community shooting private events and various photo-shoot assignments. Julio Briceño was the project's videographer who helped record the promotional

video. Each of the twelve local drag entertainers in the calendar was asked to put their personal "drag spin" on their chosen month.

"We assigned each month a theme, and allowed the entertainers to choose their own month and execute it creatively on their own. What really makes this calendar special is that everyone volunteered their time to help bring it to life," says Salas.

"These performers are so creative, so we are all excited for the final product. This calendar not only shows Houston's diversity, but also our LGBTQ+ community's diversity. Every month has a different theme and a look that the performers chose," Arevalo adds.

Montrose Angels will be having a calendar-release fundraising event at ReBar on December 15 at 8 p.m. Copies of the calendar will be available to purchase for \$25 each, with proceeds going to both the Angels' community emergency fund and the Montrose Center. There will be performances by some of the drag stars featured in the calendar, and they will be raffling some exciting items.

“These drag artists are simply incredible. They are hard workers and fully dedicated to the art of drag. Houston has gotten to a point where there is a drag show every single day of the week—and amazing shows at that. It’s special because [Houston’s drag scene] is a melting pot of diversity. From alternative to pageant to comedy to Broadway, you will find all types of drag coexisting in the city,” Salas says.

“Every single one of them works so hard to put together a show and a look every week. From the outside looking in, you might think it’s easy. But these performers have spent years perfecting their craft,” Arevalo says.



Houston drag-calendar creator Guadalupe Salas (r) with Montrose Angels co-founder Piero Arevalo.

Choosing just 12 entertainers for the calendar was a nearly impossible task. It was important for Salas to make sure the lineup celebrated the diversity of Houston drag.

“It was hard to choose just twelve. There are so many incredible entertainers in this city. We selected eleven drag queens and one drag king. They are a great representation of the current Houston drag scene,” Salas concludes. “On any given day, you can walk into any LGBTQ+ bar and more than likely see one of these entertainers performing.”



For more info, visit [instagram.com/montroseangels](https://www.instagram.com/montroseangels).

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Color and Comfort

Wood Fancher Anthony's bold artwork is now on display at Urban Eats.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Local artist Wood Fancher Anthony is known for his surreal and imaginative oils that explode with vibrant colors reflecting his Mexican heritage. But his latest exhibit is very different.

“A lot of my oil work is pretty heavy,” says the artist. “But I try to mask some of the horrible stuff with bright colors.”

Anthony’s artist statement reads, “As an artist, I believe that one of the most important responsibilities I have is to observe and interpret the world around me with as much honesty as I am capable of. My artwork is a documentation of the careful observation of my internal world, as it represents the emotional reaction to events and experiences of my external world. I am a self-taught artist, and my work is dramatic, expressive, and bold. The very nature of creation frees my imagination and provides many opportunities for innovative ideas and grace to influence my work.”

Anthony’s more recent works are the result of his painful fibromyalgia condition, and reflect his mental state. Last year, he partnered with fellow gay artist Robin Baker to create Robinwood Art Studio, where the two worked throughout the pandemic lockdown. “I painted all day, every day,” says Anthony. “It got to be

too much.” So he returned to an artform he picks up every few years: abstract florals reminiscent of colorful Mexican patterns.

“I use acrylics mixed with holy water,” Anthony explains. “I’m not a practicing Catholic; the holy water is more about symbolism.” His floral abstracts are easier for people to relate to, and creating them gives him a needed break from his oil work. It also gave him enough inventory to mount his current show at Urban Eats bistro on Washington Avenue.

“I’ve always been so impressed and intrigued with Wood’s work,” says Levi Rollins, owner of the popular Heights-area spot that blends a neighborhood bistro vibe with excellent food, an artisanal grocery shop, a bar with live music, and an art gallery. “I’ve followed him over the past few years and watched his work progress. His work is bright and engaging. It draws the viewer in and holds them there. This is the type of artwork I strive to bring to Urban Eats and our visitors. I hope to bring more attention to Wood’s work by sharing it with the 8,000-plus guests that visit our space each month.”

Rollins is also a fan of Wood’s latest collection. “I’m in love with Wood’s Blooming Collection and his most recent abstract floral

kaleidoscope series,” he says. “These brilliant pieces, filled with color and repetitive, complex patterns, are truly mesmerizing. I’m so grateful to be able to enjoy them every day in our space.”

About 35 of Anthony’s works are currently on display at Urban Eats—florals, as well as a few prints and Anthony and Baker’s collaborative works.

Anthony also views his works as a reflection of Houston and its diversity. “I like that I can eat authentic Asian food here one day and a different ethnic food the next,” he notes.

But controlling his fibromyalgia requires the artist to control the stress in his life, and focusing on his abstract florals collection has helped him with that. “I really need this art to be positive,” Anthony says.

And they are—in a riot of color and comfort that can be enjoyed through the first week in February, and during the bistro’s champagne reception for the artist this month.

What: Wood Fancher Anthony Art Exhibit
When: Through the first week of February (Champagne reception: December 18, 3–5 p.m.)
Where: Urban Eats, 3414 Washington Avenue
Info: woodfancheranthony.com or feasturbaneats.com



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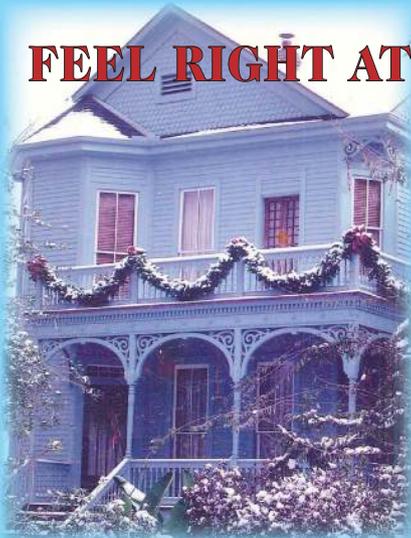


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Tex-Mex Meets BBQ

Candente melds fabulous flavors in Montrose.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Here's what you need to know about the two-year-old Candente restaurant in Montrose. It can get a little noisy at night, and the prices are not what you'd expect from your neighborhood Tex-Mex joint. But your motivation to eat here will be summed up in two words: brisket queso.

You read that right: Candente is where Tex-Mex meets barbeque, and in the most delicious way you'll ever taste.

Yes, it might look like your average Tex-Mex eatery with a cavernous dining room, brightly colored walls, and a Día de los Muertos mural on the back wall. But the first indication you're in for something special is the stacked mesquite beside the front door, and the whiff of that smoke from the wood-burning grill in the kitchen as you enter.

Candente means hot or burning, and that applies both to the menu and the buzz about this spot. Michael Sambrooks' Sambrooks Management Company—the group behind several popular restaurants in Houston, including The Pit Room next door—opened

Candente in November 2019 to rave reviews. The Pit Room was already one of the hottest barbeque spots in a city full of great barbeque, but when Sambrooks announced he was opening a Tex-Mex eatery around the corner, no one really expected it to be a notch above regular Tex-Mex, with a creative melding of the two famous flavors.

And its Montrose location is a perfect fit. “We love the Montrose neighborhood and celebrate its diversity,” says Sambrooks. “We are honored to be featured in *OUTSMART* magazine, and appreciate the support of the LGBTQ+ community as our neighbors and friends of Candente and The Pit Room.”

Choose a table in the main dining room or on the covered patio, a great option this time of year, and start with a top-shelf margarita rimmed in sea salt. Other good choices on the bar menu: the Ranch Water (Topo Chico, lime, and tequila) or the house-made Sangria. A must-try is the aforementioned chili con queso topped with mesquite-grilled brisket. Seriously, it's one of the best in town and a must-try for any die-hard queso fan (aren't we all?). The \$10.50 small size is enough for

three people. You can make a meal just off the appetizer menu: the brisket nachos (\$22) boast a half pound of smokey brisket, and the smoked chicken flautas (\$12) come with a creamy avocado salsa, crema, queso fresco, pico de gallo, and guacamole. The botanas (Mexican sampler plates) are a feast unto themselves and range in price from \$45 to \$80—but they'll feed your whole table and give you a taste of everything.

Need something lighter and less expensive? The ceviches are fresh and delicious, and the smoked campechana comes with mussels, shrimp, and octopus.

Entrées are probably best shared, as the portions are impressive in either the medium or large sizes. Fajitas come with Niman Ranch skirt steak, ribeye, chicken, or shrimp. The pork carnitas melt in your mouth, and it's definitely worth adding the à la carte jalapeño cheddar link or the quail. There are several grilled combo platters—giant feasts of ribs, fajitas, shrimp, and quail with all the fixings—and even a grilled redfish plate and a 9-ounce ribeye with cheese enchiladas.

On the more traditional and less gluttonous side, you can get simple but yummy enchiladas—two or three on a plate with rice and refried beans—or the tacos and burritos. The crispy beef tacos are typical, but the Frito Burrito (\$14) is a divine, soft, house-made tortilla filled with Texas red chili, cheddar cheese, queso and—in a nod to old-school Tex Mex—chopped white onion. It's a surprising item, and actually one of the best things on the menu. Except for the brisket queso. We're not kidding about that queso.



For more info, visit candentehtx.com.

WEDDING GUIDE



Amy Renee Broussard (l)
and Lisa Johnson Pinkham

COZY CELEBRATION

Lisa Johnson Pinkham and Amy Renee Broussard's
intimate wedding ceremony at Menil Park.

By **JENNY BLOCK** | Photos by **ALICIA BABIN**



In 2016, Lisa Johnson Pinkham made herself go to a party she did not want to attend. Little did she know that she'd meet her future wife, Amy Renee Broussard. But it

wasn't exactly smooth sailing that night.

"I was invited to a party. I didn't want to go," Lisa recalls, "but since I didn't really know anyone in Houston other than people I worked with, I thought I should go. I didn't have a good time."

When they met at the party, Lisa mentioned to Amy that she had recently moved to Houston from the San Francisco Bay Area. "Since I had lived there also, I thought Lisa

would want to exchange numbers," Amy says. "Lisa was too unavailable for that."

Amy, who is from Lafayette, Louisiana, attended the University of Houston and San Francisco State University and majored in anthropology and LGBTQ studies. She is a business analyst for AIG and the president of the LGBTQ+ and Allies Employee Resource Group for Houston.

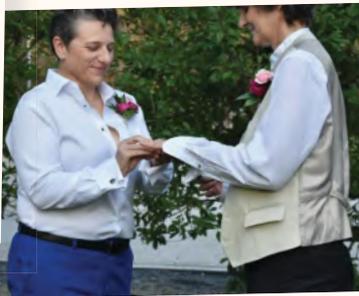
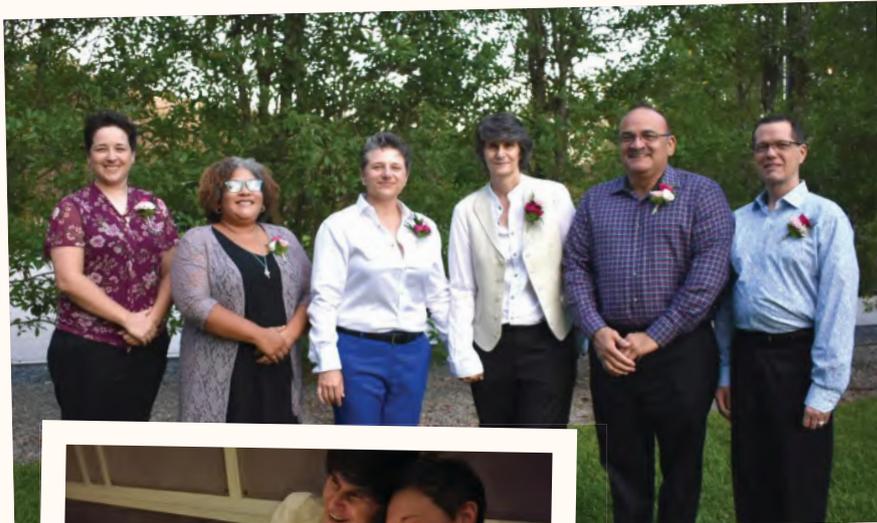
Hailing from Brooklyn and Nyack, New York, Lisa attended Emerson College to major in theatrical design. She is currently the resident lighting designer for the Houston Ballet.

When the two met, Lisa had been single for two years and not really looking. "I wanted a relationship, but I didn't know what to do about it. And I have this belief that whatever I am

looking for is looking for me, too. So I was just waiting."

Then one day in 2019, three years after their first meeting, Lisa found herself in "overlapping groups of friends" with Amy. "I had this feeling and thought, Okay, I'll investigate," Lisa says. She was finally ready to exchange phone numbers.

"We went for coffee, and I started interviewing Lisa, asking her many questions," Amy recalls. "As we were getting to know each other over coffee, discussions with food after movies, and walks, I wasn't convinced Lisa was interested in dating because she did not ask me questions. She would tell stories and then wait for me to tell stories. That really isn't my style. Months later, I told her I wanted to date her.



It was then that she was able to clue me in that she liked me, too.”

As the couple spent the first few months getting to know each other better, Amy asked Lisa what her feelings about marriage were. Lisa admitted that she was open to it. “A few months after we started dating, we started talking about getting married. We didn’t know when, but we knew it would happen.”

Perhaps not surprisingly after such early and straightforward marriage talk, the proposal was not a traditional one. In fact, there wasn’t really one at all. “As we were getting to know each other and creating safe space for sharing intimate truths, marriage was a topic of discussion,” Amy says. They addressed questions like the qualities a partner must have, and how they would know when they were ready to get married. “From there,” Lisa says, “it was never going to be a ‘Who is popping the question?’ situation, but an open, honest conversation along the way.”

The couple was wed on October 21, 2021, in Menil Park. Because of the pandemic, they opted for a small outdoor gathering. “The date was one of the bigger challenges because Mercury wasn’t coming out of retrograde until the 19th, and Amy’s friend told her [she should wait] to sign any contracts. And then, Numerology. We didn’t want a bad number. The 21st made our number a nine, and that is the presence of all numbers, so we got married on a Thursday,” Lisa explains.

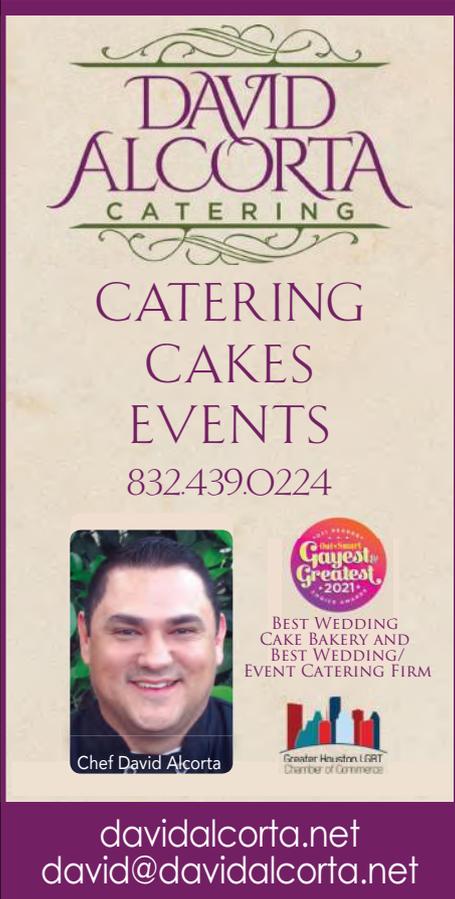
Amy really liked the idea of eloping, but they felt somewhat restricted in terms of travel. “So the idea of a local elopement seemed to be the way to have a small wedding with no guest list,” Amy says.

Using LGBTQ vendors was important to the couple, so they used officiant Jen Dickey, floral designer John Friedman Flowers, transportation from Limo Jackie, dinner arrangements by State of Grace, and rings by Esqueleto in Oakland, California.

Lisa felt that there was a lot of stress, even for a small wedding. “I can’t imagine a big wedding. All we had to do was find rings, have them made, figure out what they should say, pick the date, time, and location, get boutonnieres, get something to wear, get that something altered, get a limo, and make a dinner reservation for seven people. Seriously—cannot imagine a big wedding!”

Despite how it all began, the two could not be any more enamored with one another. Lisa calls Amy the most amazing person she’s ever met. “And I get to spend my life with her!” And Amy says Lisa exceeds anything she had hoped and prayed that the woman she fell in love with would embody. “Lisa is sweeter than ever.”

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Halloween in Montrose October 30, 2021

Hundreds of ghouls and gays flocked to Houston's LGBTQ bars to celebrate **Halloween in Montrose**. From a drag queen's version of *Batman's* Joker to queer cowboys and the 'Kween' of Hearts, this year's spooky festivities were a grand success.



OUT THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



Out@TUTS featuring Sister Act at the Hobby Center November 11, 2021

Following a performance of *Sister Act* by Theatre Under the Stars at the Hobby Center, OutSmart sponsored **Out@TUTS**. Hosted by Regina Blake-DuBois, guests at the after-party mixed and mingled with the cast of the show.

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OUT-THERE

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The Diana Foundation Country Dinner Weekend November 6-7, 2021

The nation's oldest LGBTQ organization, Houston's Diana Foundation, hosted its annual **Diana Country Dinner Weekend** at Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon (a Saturday night dinner and dancing, with tunes by Sam Turner and the Cactus Cats) and at Brennan's for Sunday brunch featuring New Orleans-style cuisine and jazz.

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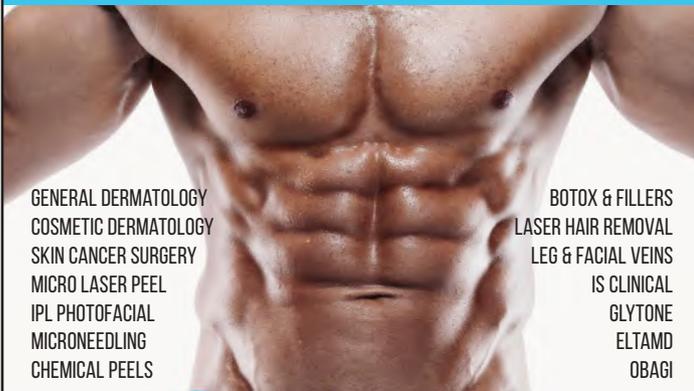
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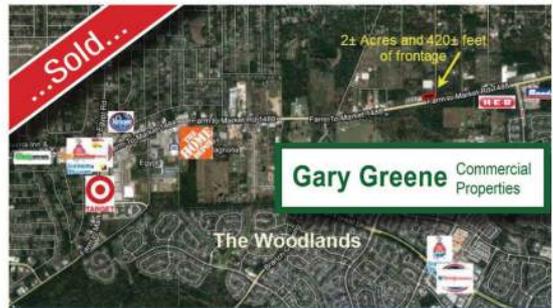


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OUT THERE

Photos by DALTON DEHART & CREW



The Caucus' 12th Annual Equality Brunch October 30, 2021

The Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus hosted its 12th annual Equality Brunch presented by Mayor Sylvester Turner at The Houston Club. Because the pandemic is still ongoing, this year's theme was 'Maskerade' and guests were encouraged to wear outfits with matching masks.



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By LILLY RODDY

A Sluggish Sagittarius Season

Hold off on making any firm decisions during Venus retrograde.



This is certainly going to be an interesting holiday season with Venus, our planet of values and physical senses, going retrograde from December 1 through February 10. This will make people more cautious about how they spend their money amidst uncertainties with the economy. There is also a Mercury retrograde in January and that will keep our holidays sluggish. We have a solar eclipse on December 4 that will impact the mutable signs of Gemini, Sagittarius, Virgo, and Pisces. Energies will feel scattered during that time. The sun enters Capricorn on December 21, the first day of winter. Mercury enters Capricorn, and Mars enters Sagittarius on the 13th. Venus will be traveling through Capricorn for a while as she goes retrograde there. Jupiter enters Pisces on the 28th. (Yes, there's a lot of extra activity this month!) This will keep us on our toes as conditions shift and change directions. We will be more nostalgic during the holidays with Venus retrograde. Our traditions may be more important than we realize.



MILEY CYRUS

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

December is always a busy time of year for you, and this year will be no exception. Your career sector is very active, and it will likely lead you to take on leadership roles at the office and at home. You may be considering changing career directions or going out on your own. You are in an especially upbeat mood in the first half of the month, but you're more no-nonsense in the last half. Partnerships will need some attention during the holidays, even if things are good! Friends and business associates can be very helpful this month, so don't be afraid to reach out. With Venus retrograde in your sign, give yourself plenty of time to think about your decisions. It will be best to wait until after February 10 to make lasting decisions.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

This month, your career energies remain strong as you are working on future plans. There are plenty of opportunities out there, but you may be reluctant to make decisions with Venus, your ruler, retrograde until February 10. It's obvious that you are ready for more personal freedom and choices in your life, especially as it relates to managing your career. You are ready to take a back seat during the holidays and enjoy the season in a more relaxed and celebratory mode. Friends and business-networking groups can be very helpful in supporting your choices. This is an excellent time to be connecting with friends and business associates from the past.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

This is going to be a very active month for the Twins, particularly with the solar eclipse on the 4th. There is going to be a lot of focus on how you manage your partnerships. On the surface, it may feel like you are dealing with the demands of those closest to you. Internally, this is about establishing boundaries and not always trying to make others happy. This may really come to a head by the middle of the month.

You are also very conscious about money and resources this month. This may be a time to update and renegotiate your business, personal, and romantic relationships. Your career arena is about to open up for you, but you may still be indecisive about what the right choices are. As with all the mutable signs, it's best to wait until mid-February before you make a clear commitment.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Work and health are at the top of the menu as December begins. You are more than ready to get your routines updated and back in place. You may be rearranging your office, improving your home-office space and your technology, and getting back into healthier eating and exercise routines. Relationships will be a key topic, as Venus retrograde will be occurring in your relationship sector. If you are in a good relationship, this is a time to enjoy past memories. For difficult partnerships, this energy brings the issues to the surface to be dealt with, one way or the other. You will definitely hear from people from your past. You are continuing to examine your resource base, looking for things to leave behind and new sectors to explore. You continue to work toward ridding yourself of debt. You will be more motivated to get your ideas out into the world. That only gets stronger as we venture into 2022.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

As December begins, you are in an upbeat holiday mood. You are wanting to share your sense of joy with others, and especially with your children and family. This is also a more creative and inventive time for you, both at work and in your community. You have been looking for a new outlet for your career, or possibly to find ways to disconnect from the grid. Your need for independence continues to be very strong. This can bring up some relationship issues as you redefine your personal and shared goals with your partners. After mid-December, you are more concerned about improving your health and dealing with chronic conditions.

This would be an excellent month to restart an improved self-care program, even with the holidays coming up. New avenues for financing will be opening up for you as we enter 2022.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

This is the time of year when your home and family sector is always active. This usually brings you back to your past to help you determine what family means to you. For some, this is about the family members you have freely chosen to support. This could also be a time when you feel the need to move, improve your nest, or just open the windows to let Mother Nature in. The eclipse on the 4th impacts both your family ideals as well as your best public expression of yourself. You will want to be seen as smart, open to new ideas, and able to adapt to every changing condition. This may make others more aware of your presence, and may put you in line for new roles at work. Your creative energies are very strong in the last half of the month. You could easily turn a hobby into a career at this time. This holiday will be an especially good time to spend with your children, or to treat your inner child to the holiday she deserves.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

You are busy connecting with friends and family to get ready for the holidays. Your schedule is busy, and you could easily take on too much by trying to do it all yourself. Your temper will be much shorter through the holiday season, as you are taking life more personally. You will be more nostalgic as you long for the days when life seemed simpler. You may want to invite friends and family to your house for the holidays to recreate that sense of support and comfort. Don't be surprised if you hear from people you haven't heard from in a while. You have been redefining your career goals this year, so you may be looking for new outlets, cutting back, or even retiring. You want to do something that provides inner satisfaction rather than just an income. You will feel more resolution by the middle of February.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

Finances and personal resources are the important topics as the month begins. You will have a tendency to spend money more freely this month to satisfy your needs. This can also be a good time to expand your presence in new markets. You are moving into a more creative time next year that is better for turning your hobby into something that produces income. This is also a better time for improving your skill set, teaching a class, and expanding your presence on the internet. Relationships have been somewhat unsettled this year as you and your partner work to get on the same page. You will find out this month if that has been successful. This is going to be a very nostalgic holiday time for you. Make sure you surround yourself with friends and family who love and support you!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

Happy Birthday to the Sagittarians! This is your personal new year—a time to consider your past goals and decisions, especially with Venus retrograde through the middle of February 2022. Normally you would be exploring your goals for the coming year, but you may have to delay those decisions. You will be much more eager to take on something new after midmonth. Your temper will be shorter, and you may have more on your plate than you are used to dealing with. Relationships will need attention, particularly during the last half of the month. Relationship issues are being activated by the solar eclipse on the 4th, and that continues to be strong through the end of January. You will feel ready to jump into

some decisions, but it's best to wait until mid-February to finalize things. In the latter half of the month, you are paying more attention to your spending during the holidays.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

As the month begins, you are temporarily in a time of retreat. You will be choosing your company carefully, as you are more sensitive to how your environment (and negative people) can really shift your mood! With Venus, our planet of love and money, retrograde in your sign from December 1 through February 10, this will be a time of nostalgia as you remember previous holidays and hear from friends and family from your past. With this strong reflection process going on, you will also be questioning your relationships and your career path. For some, this can be the time to venture into something new, while others may be ready to cut back and find a better balance between their home and work. By the end of the month, it will be easier for you to speak your truth and share your ideas with others.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

You are much more energized from the middle of November through the time right before December 25. Then you'll be ready to take a rest from all the activity and spend some time alone or with a few trusted people. Your spiritual energies are being turned up from the latter part of December through the end of January. You've been reviewing your former beliefs and the evolution that you're experiencing.

You are looking for a spiritual approach that is more inclusive and accepting. Your career energies are getting back on track, and you are ready to focus on establishing better boundaries. In partnerships, you are wanting your partner to take on some of the responsibilities, even though it's hard for you to give up complete control. Pace yourself—you have plenty of time before you have to make a decision to move forward.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

December is always a time when your social and career energies are very active. And even with Venus retrograde through mid-February, you are already making plans to move your career forward by expanding your outreach. Your patience will be much shorter by midmonth. While you normally avoid difficult situations, you will feel more confident about yourself and your ability to be more direct and confrontational. You will hear from old friends this month, and you may be very selective about who you choose to respond to. Toward the end of the month, new opportunities are on the horizon. This can be a time to improve your skills, teach others, travel, and make your life more pleasant. Finances have been holding you back, but that situation improves in 2022. Relationships also improve if you are involved, or if you're single and looking. It's going to be a busy 2022.

 For more astro-insight, log on to lillyroddy.com.



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Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



On October 27, 2021, British Consul-General Richard Hyde invited the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce to meet UK Minister for Exports and Equalities Mike Freer. Pictured are **Jack Berger, Thomas Lopez, Shenice Brown, Tammi Wallace, Minister Mike Freer, Tiffany Tosh, Consul General Richard Hyde, and Jonathan Marrs.**



The Caucus held its 12th Annual Equality Brunch on October 30, 2021. Pictured are **Dalton DeHart, Larry Bagneris, Harrison Homer-Guy, Ray Ramirez, Roxanne Collins, Rep. Ann Johnson, JD Doyle, Katharine Ligon, and U.S. Rep. Al Green.**



The Diana Foundation held its 2021 Country Dinner Weekend November 6-7, 2021. Pictured are past and present Diana presidents **Nathan Wright, Dan Maxwell, Michael Leibbert, Howard Huffstutler, Bill Poplin, Michael Kemper, and Earl Krieger.**



On Nov. 10, 2021, leading LGBTQ legal professionals shared their advice with law students at Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law. Pictured are **Cameron Rivers, Susan Bynum, Kristen Taylor, Fran Watson, Jess Herbst, Mitchell Katine, Phyllis Frye, Chantel Rozier, Rebecca Garza, and David Maly.**



On November 10, 2021, the Houston Bears social group presented checks to Pet Patrol and the HIV & Aging Coalition at La Granja Y Disco. Pictured are Bears officers **Frank Davis, Matt Newton, and Tony Fernandez** with representatives from the beneficiary organizations.



Houston Tennis Club hosted their 40th Annual Tennis Tournament at Lee LeClear Tennis Center November 12-14, 2021. Pictured are **Mark Davis, Chuck Meredith, Kenneth Jones, Franco Roman, Chris Shepard, and Michael Tran.**



On November 12, 2021, Kennedy Loftin was honored by the Association of Fundraising Professionals with their Most Outstanding Fundraising Professional of 2020 award. Pictured are **Armando Ortiz, Stephanie Stutts, Don'L Nicol, Austin Ruiz, Kennedy Loftin, Atlantis Narcisse, David Ramirez, Bryan Cotton, and Dan Cato.**



EPAH presented "The Art of Living" in honor of Terry Hamman at the Archway Gallery on November 12, 2021. Pictured are **Brent Braveman, Cookie Wells, Glenn Dickson, Kathie Hamman, Steve Hamman, Andrea Wilkinson, David Alcorta, Paul Butler, and Bob Burress.**



On November 12, 2021, artist Barry Pitts held a retrospective art show and reception at the Law Harrington Senior Living Center. Pictured are **Donald St. Pierre, Annie Pitts, Barry G. Pitts, Diane Wackerhagen Webb, and Steven Clements.**



John Ross Palmer held his Mentorship Cocktail Gala at the Chrysalis Franklin Gallery on November 13, 2021. Pictured are **Brady Brown, AVM Hawkins, Dr. Elena Sandovici, John Ross Palmer, Hugo Perez, and Scott Williams.**



On November 14, 2021, Katy Caldwell's retirement party (Katy's Sunday Funday) was held at Legacy Community Health-Montrose. Pictured are **Chree Boydston, Katy Caldwell, and Tim Martinez.**



"Reign in Paradise," a Transgender Day of Remembrance memorial event, was held at the Archway Gallery on November 20, 2021. Pictured are **Jovan Tyler, Atlantis Narcisse, Verniss McFarland, Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, Zsa Zsa, and Oliver Yerphase.**



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The Queen Who Cares

By SAM BYRD
Photo by ALEX ROSA

Community involvement is what keeps **An'Marie Gill** motivated.



'Tis the season of giving, and who better to embody that charitable spirit than An'Marie Gill. The values of philanthropy and community were instilled in An'Marie very early by her mother and a few other family members. In fact, she moved to Houston because of its vibrant gay community, with all of the charity work going on that keeps it strong and healthy. Get to know more about the generous heart that beats inside this seasoned performer.

Home town?

I was born in Hobbs, New Mexico. We moved a lot, and I attended eight schools before college. I graduated high school in Midland, Texas, but San Angelo was probably the closest thing to a "home town," as the family tended to gravitate back there.

Drag birthday?

October 2004 at Keys West, where I was working as a bartender. We had a Turn-A-Bout Show benefiting PWA Holiday Charities. That's when An'Marie was born.

How did you get into performing?

I lay that at Don Gill's feet. Before my debut at Keys West I had become a member of PWA Holiday Charities and had been helping Don with office work for the organization. Don was at the Turn-A-Bout show, and as soon as I was finished performing, he grabbed my hand and said, "Darling, if you want to help the charity out, I need to move you from the back to the front. You are a stage presence and a money maker, not an office whore!" True to his word, he pulled An'Marie into his charity shows and started spotlighting me for special performances, and it snowballed from there.

Inner avatar?

Mary Ann from *Gilligan's Island*. A little wholesome, a little naive, kinda sexy (for the day), not glamorous, but very nice and everyone's best friend.

#TeamCountry or #TeamRock-n-Roll?

Yes. I am a little bit country due to my roots, but I



would consider myself a whole lot more rock-n-roll.

Favorite artists to perform?

I love a distinctive voice with a harder edge. Top of my list would be P!nk and Anastacia, but throw in some Sia, Dua Lipa, and Tina Turner.

How long are those legs?

My legs go as far as your imagination will take them. I guess I have good genes to thank for them, or dance and gymnastics classes from my early youth.

What items must always be in your purse?

The two drag items I always carry in my purse are lipstick and eyelash glue.

Any nicknames?

No nicknames really, although they do reference me at work as the HBIC—Head Bitch In Charge.

What's on your bucket list?

That would be all about travel. I try to take a major trip around my birthday every other year, and in the off years I take a smaller trip. The ultimate goal would be to go to Europe, and specifically Spain.

Holiday traditions?

Tamales on Christmas Eve, black-eyed peas on New Year's Day, a vacation around my birthday, and usually a party at my house for the show staff around Christmas.

Any New Year's resolutions?

Giving up abstinence.

How do you spend your down time?

I find shopping very therapeutic. Working in the yard is a pleasure, playing solitaire passes the time, and I read gay romance novels to escape.

Where can people see you perform?

Catch me at Tony's Corner Pocket on West Dallas Street on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays. Also, I try to be present at all PWA Holiday Charities events, as well as the First Family of Montrose events when I can.

 Follow An'Marie Gill at facebook.com/an.marie.gill

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