

WRITTEN IN THE STARS: LILLY RODDY'S 2022 ASTROCAST Pg.54

JAN. '22

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

Out & Smart

THE
HEALTH &
WELLNESS
ISSUE

FITNESS GURUS

Jose Portillo,
Julie Phommasak,
Renato Guerrieri,
and More!

Pg.42

MEDICAL MILESTONE

FDA APPROVES THE FIRST
INJECTABLE PrEP TREATMENT

UTHealth's **JONATAN GIOIA** helped research
the HIV prevention technology in Houston

Pg.34

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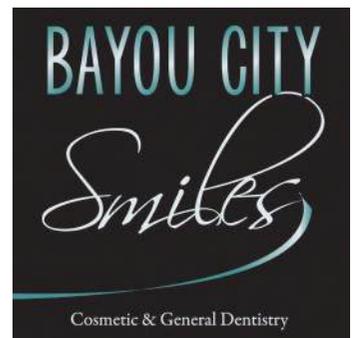
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OS FEATURES

JANUARY 2022

34 COVER STORY HIV PREVENTION MILESTONE

Local researcher helps pave the way for a new injectable PrEP medication

44 PILLAR OF STRENGTH

Felicia Lee-Sexton changes lives with fitness training that inspires confidence

50 CYCLING IN COMMUNITY

Three local spin instructors build community with their classes

66 COMEDY QUEEN

Fortune Feimster brings her latest tour to Houston

32 26.2 MILES TO GREATNESS

Kristina Nungaray's marathon run raises funds for the Montrose Center

46 INNER PEACE THROUGH YOGA

Jose Portillo promotes yoga for its mental and emotional benefits

54 ASTROCAST 2022

Lilly Roddy looks at this year's planetary alignments, and what it means for you

68 MAKING 'EM LAUGH

Matteo Lane's comedy act comes to the Houston Improv

42 A COACH YOU CAN COUNT ON

Julie Phommasak helps clients achieve their fitness goals

48 EFFECTIVE EXERCISING

Renato Guerrieri's motivational tips can get you off the couch

62 DYNAMIC DESIGNER

Travis Shirley creates immersive stage designs for the music industry

80 WIGGING OUT

Kara and Tara Dion are Houston's drag duo





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DEPARTMENTS

NEWS & COMMENT

12 NEWS

Katy ISD's internet server continues to block most LGBTQ websites

20 LEFT OUT

22 SMART HEALTH

26 MONEY SMART

30 PRIDE IN THE MEDIA

Local 'Faith from the Margins' podcast provides a platform for queer and BIPOC people of faith

37 COMMUNITY

Gardening guru Dean Sowell reinvents himself by opening a new landscaping service;

Montrose Grace Place's Chaunteion Hall thrives in her new role working with homeless youth;

The Alley Theatre tackles teen romance (p. 65)

53 HEALTH & WELLNESS

FrontRunners, a local LGBTQ joggers club, keeps its members active and engaged

OUT & ABOUT

16 CALENDAR

70 WEDDING GUIDE

72 OUT THERE

78 SIGN OUT

82 SCENE OUT

ADVERTISERS INDEX

74 ADVERTISERS

76 CLASSIFIEDS MARKETPLACE



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Photography by Victor Contreras Instagram: @closeyoureyesphoto Hair by Fabian Espinoza Instagram: @fabianandhair

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Keynote
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Thank you to our underwriters, host committee, and everyone who joined us for making this year's World AIDS Day commemoration a wonderful evening celebrating the work AIDS Foundation Houston is doing to end the HIV Epidemic in the greater Houston area

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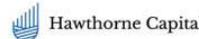
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Just as OUTSMART was wrapping up production on this January issue, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced a milestone decision that will further the efforts to end the HIV epidemic. The organization on December 20 approved the world's first long-acting injectable form of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). That HIV-prevention treatment, which is currently available only as a pill that must be taken daily, will now be available as an injection given every two months.

Out UT Health researcher Jonatan Gioia has been working locally for over four years on the international study that confirmed the effectiveness of

this injectable PrEP treatment, and he's kept OUTSMART readers informed about his work since my first interview with him in June 2019. I've had the pleasure of writing about Gioia a handful of times since then, including for this month's cover story. I hope you enjoy reading my piece on Gioia and his contributions to HIV-prevention research.

This January health-and-wellness issue also features six stories on local LGBTQ fitness gurus that should motivate you to keep those New Year's resolutions for a healthier 2022. And mental-health columnist Daryl Shorter reminds us this month that it's also important to practice self-acceptance, regardless of our shape and size.

January 15 marks the 50th an-

nual Chevron Houston Marathon, and athletes from around the world plan to use the 26.2-mile run to raise money for some good causes. Writer Sam Byrd introduces you to one of these generous athletes—out lesbian and Houston native Kristina Nungaray, who plans on giving back to the Montrose Center.

Byrd also kicks off his third year of giving us the scoop on local drag performers in his Wiggling Out column. While that monthly feature usually appears on the last page of each print edition, Byrd gives us a double dose of fun this month with a two-page spread featuring identical-twin drag queens Tara and Kara Dion. Don't miss his interview on page 80.

We also feature astrology columnist Lilly Roddy's annual over-

view of what's in store for the new year. Roddy's Zodiac insights are complemented this year by artist Sebastian Gomez de la Torre's illustrations depicting queer literary, visual, and performing-arts personalities.

Finally, the OUTSMART team is thrilled to commence its 29th year in publishing. We appreciate your continued support, and hope you stick around for more exciting queer content throughout 2022.

Lourdes Zavaleta
Managing Editor



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Wishing you the Best in 2022!**

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Katy ISD Continues to Block Most LGBTQ Websites

Student **Cameron Samuels** is working with the district to evaluate banned resources.

By STAFF REPORTERS

Katy ISD student Cameron Samuels has had trouble accessing LGBTQ resources from the district's internet server for years. "My freshman year, I attempted to visit advocate.com to conduct research for a school project in my Digital Art & Animation class," Samuels, who uses they/them pronouns, remembers. "*The Advocate's* website redirected to a block page that told me it was not accessible because the content fit the category of 'Alternative Sexual Lifestyles (GLBT).'"

Samuels was shocked to see the LGBTQ news website blocked and labeled as 'alternative' by the school's filtering technology. Other queer resources such as the suicide-prevention site The Trevor Project, the Human Rights Campaign, and OUTSMART magazine were also blocked. Meanwhile, anti-LGBTQ sites such as InfoWars were still accessible.

Now a senior in high school, Samuels is fighting back against the district policy by gathering like-minded students to launch an online petition titled Katy ISD: Protect Your LGBTQ+ Students. That petition has garnered over 1,000 signatures so far.

"The fact that this filter category even existed shows the deep prejudices within Katy ISD administration. To declare all LGBTQ+ content as inherently inappropriate is discriminatory, and this behavior is unacceptable," the petition reads.

Samuels has also been making their voice heard at Katy ISD board meetings. On December 13, they called for the district to unblock LGBTQ "lifesaving resources."

Suicide is the leading cause of death for children and adolescents ages 13 to 19, according to a 2019 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Studies also show that LGBTQ youth are four times more likely than their straight and cisgender counterparts to →

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attempt suicide due to internalized stigma, discrimination, and rejection.

LGBTQ kids living in the South are at twice the risk of suicide compared to those living in the Northeast, the Trevor Project reports. The study attributes this to a lack of LGBTQ acceptance and access to affirming spaces. Almost half of Southern LGBTQ youth say that their school is not an affirming environment.

“When a student is on the verge of committing suicide, having access to resources and a suicide-prevention lifeline like The Trevor Project is a matter of life or death,” Samuels told the Katy ISD board. “The same applies to resources like the Montrose Center, and it is undoubtedly discriminatory that an internet filter category like this had existed in the first place.”

Samuels tells OUTSMART they are now working with the district to resolve the issue. Just prior to the district’s winter break, Samuels received and filled out a “student support ticket” form that officials will use to evaluate a few of the blocked LGBTQ sites.

At press time, Samuels reported that the Montrose Center’s website was unblocked on the school’s server, while The Trevor Project and all other sites are still blocked.



Cameron Samuels

While Katy ISD has not responded to questions about the origins of the filters or whether it plans to address the situation, the district did publish a statement on the controversy:

The District provides a variety of communications and technology resources that are consistent with its educational goals and align

with the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA). Because there are billions of websites housed on the world wide web, content that is made available to students during the instructional day is reviewed and filtered by a third-party school-based platform that ensures CIPA compliance. The filtering process accounts for all material that may be found on a website, including hyperlinks to external content such as electronic mail, chat rooms and other forms of direct electronic communication—spaces often occupied by both minors and adults, and discouraged by CIPA.

Moving forward, Samuels and other advocates hope to push Katy ISD to broaden its nondiscrimination policies.

“Katy ISD does not have a policy to protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity,” Samuels emphasizes. “The Katy ISD legacy should be one of compassion, not one of discrimination, whether it be intentionally or even unintentionally.”



For more info on Katy ISD, visit katyisd.org. Keep up with Cameron Samuels on Twitter @cameronjsamuels.

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By Adriana Salazar

QUEER THINGS to DO



COMMUNITY

January 8

Krewe of Olympus

Houston's Krewe of Olympus, once again set to celebrate Mardi Gras, will hold its 52nd-anniversary ball this month at Central Houston Cadillac. The event features cocktails, hor d'oeuvres, a parade of mini floats, and the Krewe's campy camaraderie.

Well-known for their rhinestones, sequins, and feathers, the LGBTQ krewe was born in New Orleans in 1970 and moved to Houston in 1992. Every year since its launch, the group has hosted an annual black-tie ball.

Mardi Gras, also known as "Fat Tuesday," marks the end of the festival season that begins on Epiphany (the twelfth night after Christmas) and ends on Fat Tuesday, the night before the beginning of the somber Lenten season. In the Latin nations, Mardi Gras evolved into a multi-day "last chance to party" celebration known as Carnival. In 1857, a

krewe of New Orleanians held the first Mardi Gras ball. These balls soon became a tradition as dozens of krewes began to pop up.

During the 1950s in New Orleans, Shrove Tuesday was the only day of the year that gay men could publicly dress in drag without getting arrested. Many took advantage of the holiday by wearing feminine costumes to parties—until a brutal gay-bashing in 1958 stunned the community. These men decided that it was safer to celebrate Mardi Gras in private, and the first gay krewe was born the following year.

By 1970, seven New Orleans LGBTQ krewes—including the Krewe of Olympus—had been formed. The group's mission has remained the same over five decades: to give back to the LGBTQ community through fundraisers and fabulous balls.

tinyurl.com/ycknabk8



COMMUNITY

January 29

JOJO SIWA'S D.R.E.A.M. - THE TOUR

The Toyota Center presents pansexual pop star JoJo Siwa's D.R.E.A.M. tour. After coming out earlier this year, Siwa became the first person on *Dancing with the Stars* to have a same-sex dance partner.

tinyurl.com/2p983twf

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



COMMUNITY

January 9

TWISTED LEATHER

Numbers Nightclub and Megawoof present Twisted Leather, a day and night event featuring leather, kink, and dancing. A portion of the proceeds benefits the PWA Holiday Charities. Tickets on Megawoof's Eventbrite page.

tinyurl.com/npmwtfz8

COMMUNITY

January 4

PRIDE HOUSTON MONTHLY BOARD MEETING

Join Pride Houston for their monthly board meeting that is open to the public. They will discuss the organization's goals and create strategic short- and long-term plans.

tinyurl.com/2sbx3wum

COMMUNITY

January 7

FRIDAY MEET & EAT

At noon, BUDDY'S hosts their monthly Meet and Eat for the Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce. The event is open to all who are interested in networking and learning more about the Chamber.

tinyurl.com/5477eac3

COMMUNITY

January 14

BEARADISE

At 10 p.m., Bears with beards will take over BUDDY'S for a night of go-go dancers and drink specials. The event is free, and includes free parking.

tinyurl.com/2p9f2aam

COMMUNITY

January 16

SNOW BUNNIES

Bunnies on the Bayou presents Snow Bunnies at ReBar, featuring DJ Danny Verde. Tickets start at \$10, and all proceeds support the LGBTQ nonprofit.

tinyurl.com/mr2mvp2y



COMMUNITY

January 16

SUNDAY FUNDAY BREAKFAST MIXER

Go to Koffeteria for the University of Houston LGBTQ Alumni Association's Sunday Funday Breakfast Mixer. All queer folks and allies are welcome to come and enjoy some coffee and pastries by out chef Vanarin Kuch.

tinyurl.com/mpbdyzzf



COMMUNITY

January 18

JANUARY HANDHELD CONNECT

The Houston Gaymers hosts their January Handheld Connect at Fu Belly Asian Cuisine & Bubble Tea Bar. The event will allow participants to play Nintendo Switch and other console games.

tinyurl.com/2p863ecu



STAGE

January 21

2 SWEET 2 SALTY

Head over to the UH Cullen Performance Hall to see 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 AT HOUSTON IMPROV

Matteo Lane, an openly gay comedian, comes to the Houston Improv with his hilarious new comedy show.

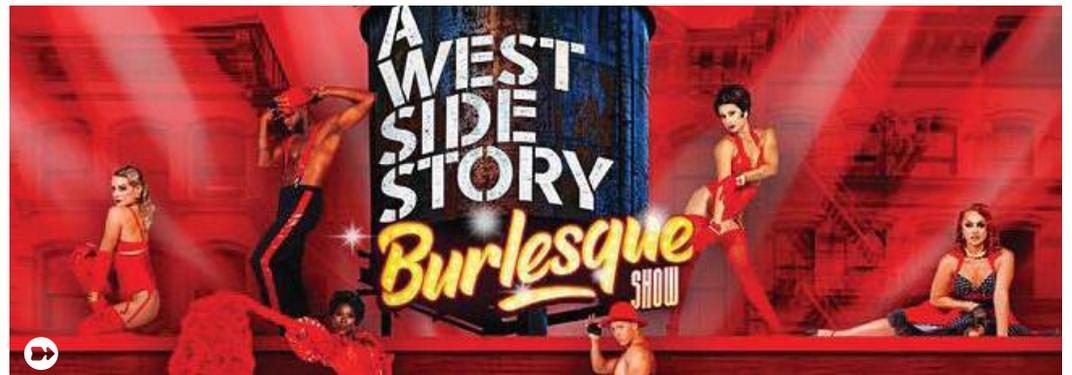
Tickets at improvtx.com. tinyurl.com/2ynnurd4

COMMUNITY

January 30

A WEST SIDE STORY BURLESQUE SHOW

AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) is celebrating International Condom Day with a raunchy burlesque twist on the classic Broadway love story. The free show features powerhouse performers who will wow you with their wit and dance numbers, all while promoting a good cause. tinyurl.com/2p83fa5p



More QUEER THINGS TO DO →

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COMMUNITY

February 19

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tinyurl.com/52fsya63



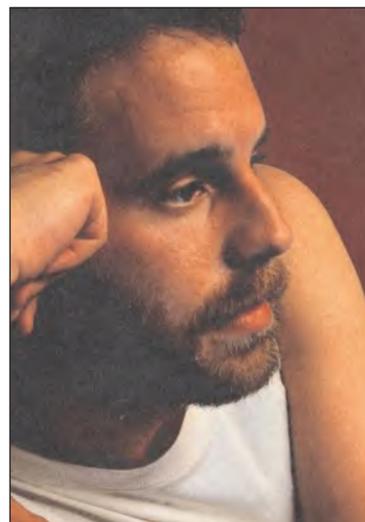
STAGE

March 2

MIZ CRACKER STARS IN SHE'S A WOMAN

The Heights Theatre presents drag performer Miz Cracker's one-woman comedy and music show, She's a Woman.

tinyurl.com/2p845jc9



STAGE

March 24

THE REVERIE TOUR

Openly gay stage, screen, and recording artist Ben Platt is supporting the release of his new album *Reverie* with a spring concert tour coming to Sugar Land's Smart Financial Centre.

tinyurl.com/pxded824

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Candidates, Start Your Engines

A no-nonsense guide to picking our politicians.

 Okay, so all the candidates have now filed their papers for the November 2022 election, so if you want to run for office you gotta campaign for almost a full year. Them's the rules, Clem.

I think this is why people hate politics—having candidates scream at you and stick out their hands begging for money for a full year is only slightly less annoying than inviting a teeth-grinder to a campout.

When I am Queen of the World (or the superhero “Screwdriver” with the superpower to fix things) I’m going to make candidates file in July, have the primary election two months later, and get the whole damn circus outta town by November 6. But that’s just me, speaking as someone who values mental health.

So if you’re about to spend the next year of your life sorting through candidates, here’s some things you need to look out for.

Top Ten Signs Your Candidate May Not Be the Best for Texas

1. He promises to improve relations with the native Hawaiian government-in-exile.
2. She runs attack ads targeting the Julia Louis-Dreyfus character on *Veep*.
3. His #1 staff choice is “that Rudy Giuliani guy.”
4. She keeps complaining that her outstanding record on the Rhode Island statehouse’s subcommittee on poppyseed production has been largely ignored by the national press.
5. Whenever anyone mentions Washington, he asks “The state, or that DC thingy?”
6. She replies to every debate question with “Wouldn’t *you* like to know!”
7. He refers to his opponent as Ms. Smarty Dungarees.
8. She displays a handwritten note from *The Avengers* as proof that she is The Bling, and her superpower is twinkling all day long.
9. He says the Pledge of Allegiance as quickly as possible, and then yells “I win!”
10. He’s running Facebook ads for Genuine Buffalo Bayou Craft Water as a cure for COVID tonsillitis.



 And now to the most important list for January: New Year’s Resolutions. (Actually, I call them Casual Promises That I Am Under No Obligation to Fulfill. Before I agree to 2022 I need to see some terms and conditions, because I’m not getting tipsy and blowing little horns if it’s going to be a gawd-awful year.)

- Keep it to myself during job interviews that I have trouble with authority.
- Get really into essential oils, and then bring up the fact that I am really into essential oils in every conversation I have until the end of time.
- Deal with my debilitating case of nomophobia (the fear of losing my cell phone by dropping it into a toilet).
- Stop using hashtags before every word on job applications and IRS forms.
- Live my best life by only buying pants without buttons or zippers.
- Turn all my high-heeled shoes into flats.
- Purchase basic woodworking tools: a saw, a hammer, and a big ol’ tub of Crazy Glue.

- Tattoo “New Year, New Me (JK)” on my arm.
- Never take for granted my shopping trips to HomeGoods, ever again. Linger in the aisles and touch things.
- Keep kicking ass and taking names, because detailed record-keeping is important.
- Eat more tacos, just because. (Honey, if you need a reason, you ain’t in Texas.)
- Stop drinking orange juice after I’ve brushed my teeth.
- Get waxed without feeling obligated to make awkward small talk.
- Lose weight by hiding it somewhere you’ll never find it.

Welcome to the brave new frontier of 2022. Stay well, my lovelies, because one day we could get COVID under control if enough people get vaccinated.

Susan Bankston lives in Richmond, Texas, where she writes about her hairdresser at The World’s Most Dangerous Beauty Salon, Inc., at juanitajeans.com.

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By DARYL SHORTER, MD

Loving Your Queer Body

Ditch the toxic societal norms on your journey to self-acceptance.



With the coming of each new year, we make countless pledges to radically shift our behaviors regarding diet and exercise. From “Dry January” to the enticing deals on new

gym memberships and workout equipment, we are bombarded with messaging about the best way to get in shape for the new year.

On one hand, this is not an entirely bad thing. Proper nutrition, exercise, and adequate sleep are widely recognized as important parts of our mental-health and wellness practices.

And while there’s nothing wrong with examining our lifestyles and making changes to improve our health, it is just as important to better understand and develop a relationship with our inner selves that promotes self-acceptance, regardless of our size and shape.

Queer Body-Shaming

We all know “the rules.” Gay men are supposed to be not only fit, but ripped and masculine. Lesbians should be thin and not too butch. For trans folks, there is pressure to conform to society’s rigid male-female binary, coupled with a destructive hyper-focus on transitioning.

To make things worse, these rules seem to apply only to young and able-bodied LGBTQ folks. Those living with a disability (or who are past a certain age) experience a kind of erasure from the sociocultural landscape. Ageism and ableism both stem, in part, from our deep-seated fears about the body’s physical limitations and mortality. We actively avoid being reminded of these limitations by avoiding people who are living with them.

Unfortunately, this toxic LGBTQ focus on the body is not new. It represents a very specific way in which patriarchal norms and societal expectations negatively impact self-acceptance among queer folks. Understanding the origins of this toxic focus can help us break these patterns of thinking.

Fitting In to Survive

For many, the pressure to become hyper-focused on the body and gender expression began during early childhood. It may have been important to adhere to rigid, stereotypical ideas about masculinity or femininity. Perhaps



it was necessary to look and behave a certain way at school or with our families in order to avoid being labeled “queer.” Presenting ourselves in a particular manner could reduce the likelihood of being targeted and bullied, and ensure that friends and caregivers would remain supportive.

Other early struggles with our queer identities may have resulted in trying to overcompensate by developing an obsession with perfection, achievement, and appearance. When our financial livelihood depends on appearing heterosexual or gender-conforming, we may naturally present in a manner that ‘reads’ as straight.

The ‘Perfect’ Body

It is important to acknowledge that we live in a world that overtly defines the ‘right’ kind of body as one that is white, thin, and fit. Queer folks, who are more likely to have a heightened focus on the body, are especially susceptible to this message. As a result, LGBTQ individuals may be more vulnerable to negative thinking about the body, or develop an inability to see or experience their bodies favorably. LGBTQ youth are especially vulnerable, as evidenced

by the increase in eating disorders among youth—and across the entire sexual and gender spectrum in the age of COVID.

A recent study found that roughly one-third of gay men report body dissatisfaction, compared to just 24 percent of cis-het men. (But 38 percent of cis-het women report body dissatisfaction, the highest percentage of any group.)

While this research shows few differences in body dissatisfaction among all women, regardless of sexual orientation, lesbians had slightly less concern about their bodies during sexual activity. Recent studies also suggest higher rates of body-weight dissatisfaction among bisexual women. Ultimately, the extent to which an individual feels subject to the male gaze may be a factor in determining body satisfaction.

There is also a racialized component to our collective body obsession. Thin, white, and non-disabled bodies are almost universally represented as the standard in society and the media. This bias extends beyond outward appearance to include our understanding of what constitutes optimal physical health.

For example, the Body Mass Index (BMI) →

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is a measure of body fat based on height and weight, and serves as a means of predicting our risk for developing all kinds of illnesses, including life-threatening conditions such as diabetes or hypertension. Importantly, medical constructs such as BMI have recently come under fire for their roots in prejudice and racism, since the original BMI research failed to include a full cross-section of body types in order to justify racism and misogyny.

The take-home message is this: in the same way that entire communities can be marginalized, our bodies can also be marginalized, particularly if they do not adhere to rigid standards that are rooted in racism, misogyny, and ableism. Stepping away from these constructs and challenging them is an important part of LGBTQ activism.

A 2022 Good-Health Resolution

People everywhere are struggling with self-acceptance, thanks to the destructive encoded messages we hear regarding our attractiveness and our health practices. But perhaps the message we're *not* hearing is that the work of taking care of our bodies begins on the inside.

This year, work on creating goals that focus on your *overall* health, rather than just getting your weight down to a certain number or developing a certain part of your body. Question the notion that you'll be happier by simply becoming slimmer.

It is so easy to pick out your imperfections—a crooked nose, a gap-toothed smile, or love handles. Can you learn to *love* those things, rather than simply live with, tolerate, or accept them? What would it look like to radically accept yourself? Extending self-love to include the love and acceptance of your body is a powerful and radical act.

Practicing affirmation and gratitude can be powerful tools in jumpstarting your path to body positivity. Erasing old tapes about body expectations and rewiring your thinking (by literally creating new neural pathways) can be the key to self-acceptance. In the same way we learn new skills or behaviors at work or around the house, we have the capacity to learn new ways of thinking about ourselves.

Perhaps instead of focusing on restrictive dieting behaviors or impractical exercise and workout goals in the new year, you could try exercising the mental muscles that lead to radical self-acceptance.

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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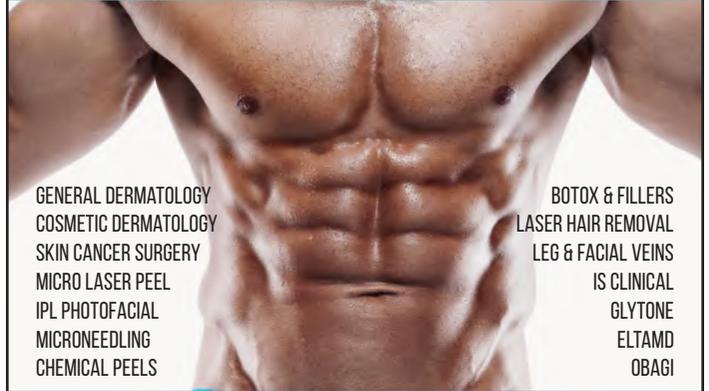
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Working On Your Own

Be aware of the financial challenges facing LGBTQ gig workers.



While the COVID-19 pandemic brought about some significant changes in the workplace—most notably the shift to working from home or a remote location—there are many in the

LGBTQ community who have been “solo-pre-neurs” or part of the “gig” economy since long before the health crisis hit.

According to Upwork’s *Freelance Forward: 2020* study of the nation’s independent workforce, roughly 59 million Americans performed freelance work between September 2019 and 2020, representing 36 percent of U.S. workers.

Because many LGBTQ workers report high rates of discrimination, either when looking for work or while on the job (including lower pay, which leads to a diminished sense of well-being), many enter the gig economy to supplement their income or even generate a full-time living.

Even though freelancing offers the opportunity to increase earning potential—especially in a tough job market—there are some distinct trade-offs that must be accounted for when it comes to current and future financial security.

The New Gig Economy

The gig economy is defined as “a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs.” Some examples of gig workers can include:

- Hair stylists
- Graphic designers and web designers
- Massage therapists
- Drivers for companies like Uber or Lyft

While some individuals choose this independent career path, others may have been forced into it following the loss of a more “traditional” job. In either case, it is important to make sure that you have all of your financial ducks in a row so you’re in a better position to



deal with short- and long-term financial emergencies and objectives.

Challenges for Gig Workers

Although having your own business can provide you with a number of nice perks, such as more control over your work schedule and the ability to set your own pay rate, there are also some areas where gig workers can face financial hurdles such as the lack of health insurance, disability coverage, and an employer-sponsored retirement plan.

In general, LGBTQ individuals are less likely to have health insurance. This same group more frequently rates their health as poor, and also reports more chronic conditions. This is particularly the case for the transgender community, where surgeries and/or hormone therapy can increase expenses.

Those without health insurance coverage are also less likely to fill prescription medications, and are more likely to delay getting the care they need. Unfortunately, this problem

is compounded by healthcare providers who discriminate against LGBTQ patients or even refuse to provide services.

A large percentage of freelance and independent workers also lack disability insurance. This type of coverage will pay out a preset income if an insured is deemed unable to work due to a covered illness or injury. Without disability insurance, you run the risk of depleting savings and/or paying for basic living expenses with a high-interest credit card, which can have a negative impact on your savings and retirement funds.

In addition to the lack of insurance coverage, gig-economy workers are less likely to have access to an employer-sponsored retirement plan such as a 401(k). Because of that, they can miss out on key benefits such as tax-deferred savings (pre-tax contributions that can lower income tax in the years when deposits are made) and employer matching contributions (which are oftentimes thought of as “free money.”)

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Because the financial and legal system has not always offered same-sex spouses and partners the same rights as opposite-sex married couples, estate planning has been—and in many ways, still is—an essential component of financial planning for LGBTQ individuals, particularly those who are in the gig economy and may not have adequate life insurance or other financial plans with beneficiary designations.

A good, solid estate plan could provide you with a number of benefits, such as allowing your partner the right to make decisions for you in case you are no longer able to do so, and ensuring that your assets end up with individuals that you intend, as opposed to having the State of Texas choose your recipients for you.

Many people are under the misconception that estate planning is only for the ultra-wealthy, but this is certainly not the case. In fact, estate planning can be even more important for those with fewer assets, as their survivors could experience a great deal of financial hardship if the unexpected were to occur.

Are All of Your Bases Covered?

Working in the gig economy can have both advantages and drawbacks. The freedom to choose your own hours and pay rate can oftentimes come at the cost of inadequate healthcare coverage and fewer options to save for retirement.

It is a good idea to work with a qualified financial planner to put together a financial plan that is suited for you. The process of finding the proper strategy can differ from one person to the next, so it's important to discuss your specific situation with a financial professional who can help you identify the gaps in your current plan.

Working with a professional who is familiar with the LGBTQ community can also help in reviewing and updating your plan, if needed. As adverse legislation or other challenging situations come about, relying on a well-versed professional could make a big difference in the success of your strategy going forward.

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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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.

(bik-TAR-vee)

MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT BIKTARVY

BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:

- ▶ **Worsening of hepatitis B (HBV) infection.** Your healthcare provider will test you for HBV. 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, and may give you HBV medicine.

ABOUT BIKTARVY

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

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

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

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

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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 that may have been hidden in your body. 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%).

These are not all the possible side effects of BIKTARVY. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you have any new symptoms while taking BIKTARVY.

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

Take BIKTARVY 1 time each day with or without food.

GET MORE INFORMATION

- ▶ This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to learn more.
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Exploring Intersectional Christianity

Ademian Pinder and Andrés Herrera provide a platform for queer and BIPOC people of faith.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Grappaling with the intersectionality of the queer community and Christianity can be a challenge that most people aren't willing to face. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church began to take on that challenge decades ago, and is now a Montrose haven where Christians of all sexualities and gender identities can proudly profess their faith.

Through their new podcast *Faith from the Margins*, church members Ademian Pinder and Andrés Herrera are using their voices and personal experiences to bring queer faith leaders and allies to the airwaves and prove that there's plenty of room at the table for all. They envision the show as a platform for those who

are so often silenced.

"*Faith from the Margins* is a podcast about the intersection of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation with Christianity," Herrera, an out transgender man, explains. "We want to create a space for LGBTQ+ and BIPOC Christians to share their stories. The fact that we get to tell our stories and not have someone else speak for us is huge."

Show co-host Pinder, who is an out gay man, explains why the podcasting process has been a mutually beneficial experience. "[The show has] been an opportunity for honest conversation to take place," he says. "It has given me, as a co-host, the opportunity to engage and reflect on my own life while being enlightened by what guests have to share. And it hopefully

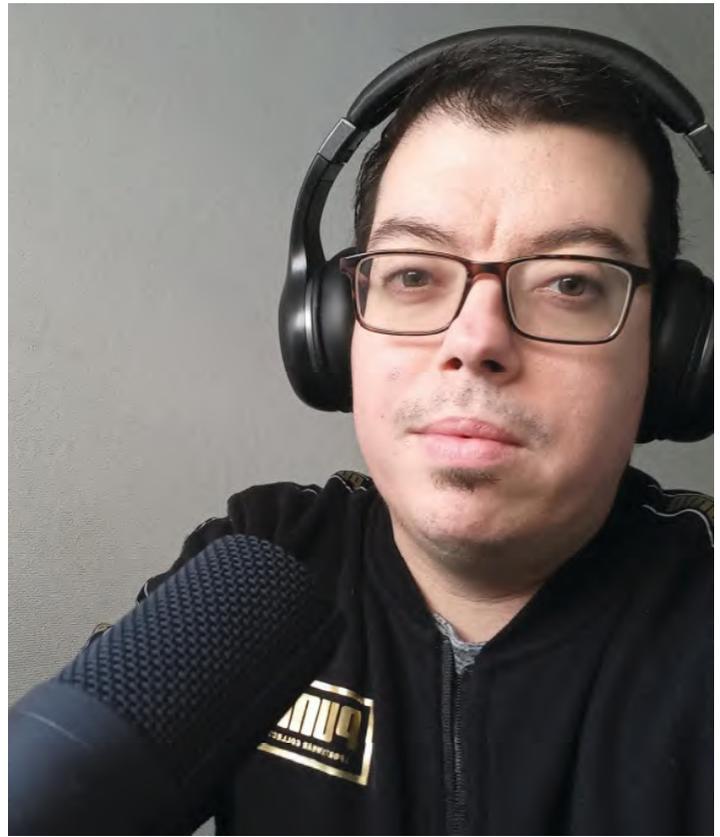
gives listeners [a few] nuggets for their journey.

With a background in journalism, Herrera brings his broadcast expertise and unique life experiences to the pod to encourage those who need it most. "[I'm able to] share my experiences as a person of faith, and my journey in the Episcopal Church," he explains. "I grew up in Latin America and transitioned there, so I am able to share the challenges I have experienced in evangelical churches in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Chile."

It's no wonder why the duo felt emboldened to create a St. Stephen's-sponsored podcast, considering their parish's illustrious background in supporting the LGBTQ community. "St. Stephen's has always been a church that welcomes everyone and gives them a seat at



Ademian Pinder



Andrés Herrera

the table. [We called] the first woman priest to serve as a rector in Texas in 1981, [and soon became] one of the only local churches to bury folks during the AIDS pandemic. And we were the first Episcopal church in Houston to celebrate a gay wedding,” Herrera says proudly.

“We want to create a safe space for LGBTQ+ and/or BIPOC folks to share their stories and experiences of faith,” he adds. “There is so much energy and creativity in these intersections of identity and spirituality. *Faith from the Margins* is an effort to spark and nurture those impulses.”

With quite a few episodes under their belts, now is the perfect time to binge the pod. “Some of the topics we have covered so far are the experiences of LGBTQ+ BIPOC people who are ordained, nonbinary visibility, anti-racism work, and being a Latinx woman in the Episcopal Church,” Herrera notes. “In the future, our focus will be to go deeper into these topics, such as talking about what it means to be a marginalized community in a predominantly white institution. Another one of our efforts will be to explore the stories of other LGBTQ+ and/or BIPOC folks outside of the Episcopal Church. We want people to know that there’s a community who will accept them and will love

“MY HOPE IS THAT PEOPLE WILL SEE THAT WE ARE FOSTERING A FORUM FOR THE LGBTQ+ BIPOC COMMUNITY TO TELL THEIR STORIES ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A PERSON OF FAITH.”

—Andrés Herrera

and nurture their spiritual life.”

The duo has received promising feedback about the podcast, both from their congregation and other listeners near and far. “The reception has definitely been a positive one,” Pinder says. “Our content is genuinely breaking new ground [with our discussions about] where people of faith are, and are en route to. Their support signifies an inner growth and yearning for something divinely new.”

With a global following, Herrera is emboldened to enter into conversations that are typically silenced in Christian communities. “The [positive feedback] encourages us to continue tackling topics that are usually not covered by other Christian podcasts.”

Looking ahead, the hosts hope to convince skeptics—whether they’re queer-identifying or not—to just give the pod a chance. “My hope is that people will see that we are fostering a forum for the LGBTQ+ BIPOC community to tell their stories about what it means to be a person of faith,” Herrera says.

“We understand why others can be skeptical of Christianity, since Christians have caused so much harm to our communities,” Pinder adds. “However, the teachings of Jesus and the spiritual practices cultivated in his name are life-giving. Be willing to hear what you may have never heard before, and see where the Spirit leads you! The LGBTQIA+ community seeks to be heard, seen, and thus valued. This podcast is doing that work with intentionality and love. This is how we find solace.”

 For more on St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, visit church.ststephenshouston.org.



Kristina Nungaray (l) and her running partner Jules Bursee.

26.2 Miles to Greatness

Athlete **Kristina Nungaray's** Houston Marathon run will raise funds for the Montrose Center.

By **SAM BYRD**

Photo by **FWEE CARTER**



The new year is often the time to make resolutions and work toward self-improvement. That's a familiar journey for Kristina Nungaray, who has been honing her athletic abilities for years. As a demonstration of that, she'll kick off 2022 by taking part in the 50th annual Chevron Houston Marathon this month.

Nungaray grew up with fitness as a part of her lifestyle, but she admittedly faced challenges keeping that dedication as she matured.

"I swam and played water polo from a pretty young age. Then in college, I rode the struggle bus of working many jobs and trying to survive. Any aspect of fitness or team sports fell by the wayside," she says.

After growing up in the Houston area and graduating from Sam Houston State University, Nungaray started eying other places to live. She moved to New York City in 2014, which inspired her to come out as lesbian and start finding the people who supported her lifestyle—both in terms of sexuality and fitness. That was the start of a rebirth in her adult life.

"My journeys with fitness and building communities specifically from an LGBTQ perspective go hand in hand," she emphasizes. "The bar scene wasn't necessarily for me. There were different avenues where I would try to meet friends, and I was striking out left and right. I was homesick for Southern hospitality. I considered moving back home a couple of times. And then I started looking at LGBTQ-inclusive sports teams."

That's where she found her groove.

"Somebody suggested that I go back to my roots, which was swimming and water polo. That's when I found Team New York Aquatics, a large LGBT master swim team," she says.

Nungaray hadn't been involved in competitive activity for a while, but the team's synchronized-swimming program ultimately proved too attractive to pass up. Before long, she had dipped her toe in the proverbial waters and started making her own waves.

"I met the best humans on the planet. That idea of community and chosen family hit fast and hard. I'm really grateful to be on a team of people with whom I'm freakishly close," she says. "Whenever you have a good group of people, that makes it easy to succeed. It also makes it easier for you to try new things without fear of failure because they're there to catch you, no matter what."

Because of that support, she decided to look for other physical challenges where she could push her limits. Running seemed like the next logical place to turn her attention.

"I did a couple of races and realized that I enjoyed it. But it was hard, and I had a lot of fabulous missteps. I never ran with a running belt, and I would shove my phone in my bra. One time during a race, my boobs dialed 911," she laughs.

Nungaray's newfound stamina—as well as for her newfound family—inspired her to enter her first marathon. Due to COVID-19, the traditional TCS New York City Marathon was canceled, but contestants still ran a few makeshift routes.

"About a week after I signed up for the marathon, I received a text message from my brother late at night. Our father had been taken from his house via ambulance because he was positive for COVID-19. It was an emotional several weeks," she says.

COVID-19 robbed her of far more than the full TCS New York City Marathon experience. Her father did not survive his COVID-19 illness, and after his passing she dedicated the makeshift marathon run to his memory.

"Fitness is so much more than a physical journey. The athletes I work with always talk about how fitness brings mental toughness. I was able to find mental peace and sanity while my father was sick in the hospital," she adds.

That mental fortitude is what has sustained her in her athletic pursuits as well as in coming to terms with her sexuality. "I've always shoehorned myself into spaces where I

didn't think I belonged or fit in," she explains. "Being a member of the LGBTQ community juxtaposes with sports, in the sense that I am a runner with a larger body. I've always tried to compete, even though I [didn't always get the message] that I belonged. Sometimes people speak to you a little bit differently when you have a larger body."

Still, Nungaray has persisted over the years, and she now has a race scheduled every month during 2022.

Always ready to add another conquest to her growing list, Nungaray's return to Houston for her second marathon is fitting. She's even been training her roommate, Jules Bursee, who will compete in the half marathon on the same day. The two have big ideas about how they're going to inspire others.

Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the highly competitive Chevron Houston Marathon doubles as a philanthropic endeavor. Nungaray and Bursee are using this opportunity to raise money for the Montrose Center.

"I want to use movement as a vehicle to build community and to give a voice to marginalized populations," Nungaray says. "Everything is community-based, in my mind. I am so pumped to return to Houston and raise funds for the Montrose Center. I have friends who have utilized their services and are now living great lives because of assistance they received from the Center."

While it feels nice to give back, it will feel even better to cross the finish line on January 15. As someone who discovered how to thrive with a chosen family in LGBTQ-inclusive sports teams, Nungaray is already a champion at using athletics as a springboard for community-building.



More info on the Chevron Houston Marathon and Aramco Half Marathon is at chevronhoustonmarathon.com. Donate to Nungaray's and Bursee's fundraising efforts at tinyurl.com/2p8dpmrr.

A New Milestone for HIV Prevention

Jonatan Gioia's research work at UTHealth helped inform the FDA's decision to approve the first injectable PrEP treatment.

By LOURDES ZAVALETA

When Buenos Aires native Jonatan Gioia moved to Houston for a medical research position in January 2017, he spent most of his time raising awareness for a new HIV-prevention technology that seemed almost unimaginable at the time.

The queer medical professional, who uses he/they pronouns, conducted several weeks of outreach at Houston's LGBTQ bars and community centers, telling as many people as he could about his new job as a study coordinator for the Houston AIDS Research Team (HART) at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth Houston. His mission was to build trust and recruit cisgender men and transgender women who have sex with men into his research team's HIV Prevention Trials Network (HPTN) 083 study—an international effort that would test a new Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) treatment that could be injected once every two months. The two HIV-prevention combination drugs, Truvada and Descovy, are currently available as a single pill that must be taken daily.

Working with researcher Roberto C. Arduino, MD, an infectious-disease professor and the HPTN 083 study's principal investigator at the local HART Clinical Research Site, Gioia coordinated the logistics for the Houston study.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has now approved the first injectable treatment for HIV prevention. On December 20, the U.S. became the first country to authorize the use of this groundbreaking technology that promises to become “the next important tool in the effort to end the HIV epidemic,” according to FDA officials.

“This injection, given every two months, will be critical to addressing the HIV epidemic

in the U.S., including helping high-risk individuals and certain groups where adherence to daily medication has been a major challenge or not a realistic option,” said Debra Birnkrant, MD, director of the Division of Antivirals in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research.

Gioia is excited about the FDA's approval of this groundbreaking treatment that his study participants have been testing. “It's a leap of faith when you start research and try to find answers to new questions. The fact that I helped contribute to this huge milestone in HIV-prevention history feels amazing,” he says. “I'm also thankful for all of the volunteers who were there from the get-go. They trusted us and helped recruit other participants. All of their time and effort paid off. This is their success, too.”



Quentin Jones is a participant in the local HPTN 083 PrEP study.

The Only Trial in Texas

HPTN 083 launched in December 2016 with 43 sites in seven countries—Argentina, Brazil, Peru, South Africa, Thailand, the U.S., and Vietnam. Of the 27 study locations in the U.S., UT's research team had the only site based in Texas, according to the study's website.

The study enrolled 4,570 participants across the globe. Sixty of those volunteers were based in Houston, and Gioia played a key role in getting those folks involved. Recruiting volunteers was a busy job that consisted of leaving informational flyers at Houston's most popular LGBTQ spots, engaging with potential participants in person, and asking community organizations to help spread the word. “It was always so exciting when we'd get a new call from someone saying, ‘Hey, I saw your flyer. How can I get involved?’” he says.

Gioia explains that all of the communities most impacted by HIV were required to be represented in the clinical trials. In the U.S., those most at risk of acquiring HIV are Black and Latino men who have sex with men, and transgender women of color, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent HIV Surveillance Report.

“In the U.S., 50 percent of participants had to be Black, and 10 percent had to be transgender. We absolutely nailed that target across the nation and in Houston. Our participants really represented Houston's diversity,” Gioia says. “We also had a lot of monolingual Spanish-speaking people, and all materials are available in Spanish. Undocumented people could also participate. We really wanted to be able to stop all of the barriers to getting to health care, and we're really happy we were able to achieve that.”

The HART study began HPTN 083 trials in mid-2017. In the double-blind study, half of the participants received Apretude (cabotegravir



COURTESY

Jonatan Gioia in the lab at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth Houston

extended-release injectable suspension) every two months, along with a placebo regimen of daily oral tablets. The other half received a placebo injection and an actual PrEP prescription of once-daily Truvada tablets.

In May 2020, the independent data and safety monitoring board overseeing HPTN 083 revealed that the new PrEP treatment taken via injection was even more effective than the oral tablets. “According to the CDC, Truvada is already 99 percent effective,” Gioia says, “and the study found that there were even fewer transmissions within the Apretude group.”

Following this news, the Houston HPTN 083 participants were informed which trial group they were in, and were given the option to continue their PrEP treatment through Apretude injections or Truvada oral tablets, or to leave the study.

A Local Look at HPTN 083

Quentin Jones, a Black gay man who moved to Houston in 2005, is a participant in the local HPTN 083 study. After several of his friends tested positive for HIV, he began to realize he needed to take precautions for his own sexual health. When a friend shared information

about receiving free PrEP through HART’s clinical study, Jones filled out a volunteer application form. Learning that he got in “was honestly a relief. It felt like a golden ticket,” he says.

Jones says he felt comfortable participating in the study, which was based at Thomas Street Health Center, the first freestanding HIV/AIDS clinic in the country. He went to the clinic every two months to receive PrEP via injections and take-home oral tablets. “The clinic was close to home. I could text my doctor, and even talk to him about *Drag Race*,” he laughs. “It’s how I’d like all professional medical places to be.”

After a few years of volunteering in the local PrEP study, Jones found out he was in the group receiving the real Truvada pills along with a placebo injection. He decided he wanted to move forward with the study by switching to the Apretude injections. “I love the shot—I can’t say it enough!” Jones says. “It’s so much easier. Instead of remembering something you have to do every day, it’s just once every two months.”

Participating in the study has empowered Jones to help raise awareness about HIV is-

sues. He now uses his Instagram account (@mr.bevicious) to share his experiences during visits with his HPTN 083 doctors. “Just like when I post gym selfies or pictures of food, I want people to see that [promoting sexual health] is normal so others do the same.”

He urges anyone who is hesitant about getting tested for HIV to reach out to him. “As a Black gay male, I know it’s an uneasy feeling to not know your status. But your status doesn’t define you. If you need someone to go with you to get tested, or want information about PrEP, hit me up.”

The Research Continues

UT Health’s Houston AIDS Research Team has expanded to oversee a variety of other projects. HPTN 091 is an intervention that tries to enhance health care for transgender women by proving that it’s better to provide diverse healthcare services (such as gender-affirming hormone therapy and HIV-prevention medicine) in one place, rather than having those services scattered around the city. The intervention also connects trans women to peer navigators who are also trans women, and who can help them get linked to any resources they might need for employment, housing, and mental health.

HPTN 094 is a study that aims to help people who inject drugs, and specifically opiates. Gioia’s researchers provide these folks with HIV prevention and treatment services, plus treatment for Opioid Use Disorder, in the setting of a mobile research unit that goes into “hot spots” throughout the city where opiate overdoses are common. The study provides participants with free treatment and linkage to care.

“We’re not only looking into new medications for PrEP, but we’re also looking for new prevention strategies,” Gioia says. “We need to think about how to reach underserved communities. One of the most important things I’ve learned is that no one is hard to reach—you just have to find creative ways to reach people.”

In the coming months, Gioia’s team plans to embark on a trial for yet another long-acting PrEP option that only needs to be injected every two months. “Maybe in another five years, you’ll read about another version of PrEP that only needs to be taken twice a year,” Gioia says. “This is how we plan to move forward in the fight to end HIV.”

 For more info on UTHealth, visit med.uth.edu. Keep up with Jonatan Gioia on Instagram @jonatangio or email him at Jonatan.E.Gioia@uth.tmc.edu.



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REINVENTING LIFE AFTER A COVID LAYOFF

Gardening guru **Dean Sowell** finds his true passion after a rough 2020.

By MARENE GUSTIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA FOR OUTSMART

Montrose resident Dean Sowell is a Renaissance man of many talents. He grew up in Tomball, the son of a single mother whose grandmother instilled in him a love of the land and growing everything from flowers to vegetables. After working his way through Sam Houston State University and receiving a degree in psychology, he started his own company, Graffixology Graphic & Web Design.

Then last September, his biggest client told him they wouldn't be renewing his five-year

contract due to COVID-19 layoffs. While he was struggling to find more design work, he also found time to return to his childhood love of gardening—not an easy feat, as he lives in an apartment with no yard.

“After growing up in the countryside and living in the Caribbean for a while,” the 53-year-old says, “I missed the foliage and the color. I didn't like looking out from my apartment at concrete. So I just started to put a few pots of flowers outside my window.”

A few pots turned into several, and then even more as his plants stretched around the building. As a member of the Native Plant Society of Texas, Sowell knew how to mix local plants with everything from roses to

plumeria, ferns, elephant ears, and birds of paradise—along with a few statues and holiday decorations.

“My grandmother loved gardening back in Tomball,” Sowell recalls. “She could take a clipping and plant it and it would grow. She had a green thumb, and I guess I have the same gift.”

The neighbors started to notice Sowell's Garden of Eden that had emerged from the barren concrete driveway.

“People stopped me to say they had changed their walking route so they could come by every day,” Sowell recalls. “They said it makes them smile. Some residents said they moved into the building because of the garden.” →

Then one morning, a sign turned up in his potted garden announcing that it was selected as the First Montrose Commons Civic Association's Yard of the Month. The sign stayed there for three months, at which point people started asking Sowell if he could do that to their yards. One neighbor admitted that her husband had been trying to win the civic club's Yard of the Month award for years. She became one of his first clients.

And so Landscapology was born—a new business venture that gave Sowell joy. He designed a logo and a website, put up a sign, and people came.

"I decided to go all in on the business," he says. "It was basically sink or swim. I thought if I was ever going to do this professionally, the time was now. I know it's going to succeed. I have several jobs in the pipeline for December, even though it's not the best month for gardening." Sowell has been in a relationship with his boyfriend for a year now, and the two work together on the gardening jobs whenever they can.

Besides Sowell's impressive landscaping skills, he enjoys painting furniture and making jewelry. "Basically, anything artsy," he says.



Dean Sowell at his home garden in Montrose.

From graphic design to landscaping, his eye for beauty and his intrinsic ability to create is the key to his success. He also loves Cajun food, baking, mixology, working out at the gym, and perfecting his tiramisu recipe along with a winter version of an Old Fashioned.

Stroll by the verdant and surprisingly whimsical driveway garden on Colquitt Street,

and you'll see his Landscapology sign amidst the foliage—in addition to a smaller sign he is adding. "My grandmother passed away and I want to honor her, so I'm making a sign in her honor," Sowell says. It's a fitting tribute to the woman who inspired his new business.



For more info, visit landscapology.biz.



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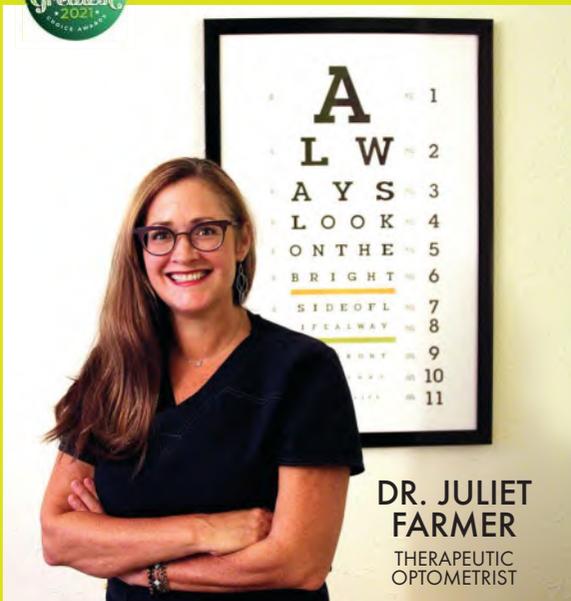
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Empowering Underserved Youth

Program director
Chaunteion Hall is
Montrose Grace Place's
newest staff member.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Twenty-four-year-old Chaunteion Hall is the newest—and only the second—staff member at Montrose Grace Place (MGP).

“I did my internship at Montrose Grace Place,” she says. “I had no idea about it before that. It seemed like such a really chill place; I felt right at home.”

Montrose Grace Place was founded by members of the former Grace Lutheran Church (now known as Kindred Montrose) in 2009 to provide a haven for homeless youth of any sexual orientation or gender identity. It became a separate nonprofit in 2011, and today holds youth nights twice weekly at 6 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays. Youth between 13 and 24 can enjoy a family-style dinner, group activities, nonjudgmental peer discussion groups, and access to clothing, toiletries, and other needed supplies.

Hall is a native of New Orleans who graduated from Dillard University with a bachelor's degree in social work. She came to Houston to get her master's degree.

“Coming from New Orleans, I wanted a city with culture and places I could explore,” Hall says. “And the University of Houston had an excellent master's plan focusing on social work.”

After graduating, she started her work at Montrose Grace Place last August and has found her work as the nonprofit's program director very fulfilling.

“I feel like I'm just hanging out—maybe because the youth are so close to me in age,” she says. “Basically, I facilitate youth nights and help connect them to other resources in Houston. And I lead the Youth Voices and Power meetings on Thursdays. The youth are passionate about LGBTQ+ rights and child advocacy. Plus, it's given me the chance to

partner with other agencies in Montrose to advocate for youth.”

Hall is passionate about empowering youth at MGP to live their most authentic lives and gain access to resources that they have been denied because of homelessness, homophobia, or transphobia.

Besides her work, she also loves discovering the city.

“Houston gives me a lot to explore,” Hall says. “I love the Montrose area because it has so much personality, and I love being outside in the parks and taking pictures wherever I go. There is so much green space, and yet you're in the heart of the city.

“I also love going to poetry nights, artist pop-up shows, and food and cultural festivals. I just went to an African cultural festival that was wonderful.”

She's also discovered Houston's Black-owned restaurants and the soul-food scene here. But there's one food that has particularly

caught her heart.

“I loved the street tacos in New Orleans,” she admits, “but the taco trucks here are amazing. I go to taco trucks all around town. Restaurant tacos just can't compare to tacos from a taco truck.”

Currently single (and enjoying it), Hall lives with her black-and-white Shih Tzu, Mia. They've practically grown up together, and Hall says she still has a lot of attitude for a dog who is over ten years old.

Hall is happily exploring her new city while she continues working at Montrose Grace Place. “I want to continue to learn about the LGBTQ+ youth and their issues,” she says. “Every youth night at Montrose Grace Place is a melting pot of people and experiences. It's always a different vibe. I love that I don't know what each night will bring.”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX ROSA FOR OUTSMART



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Personal trainer
Julie Phommasak helps clients
achieve their fitness goals.

By **KIM HOGSTROM**
Photo by **DANH PHAN**





At this point in each New Year, many Americans seek assistance in recovering from holidays packed with the pleasures of food and parties. Add in two years of COVID-induced isolation, and more than a few of us have gone a little, um, “soft.”

If your fresh start for 2022 includes searching for a good personal trainer, one candidate who warrants a look is Julie Phommasak. In addition to her avid participation in GoRuck challenges and Strongman competitions (even qualifying for the national round in 2017), Phommasak is a highly successful National Personal Training Institute-certified instructor, as well as a licensed massage therapist.

Not only do her professional credentials

stand out, but her clients speak of her as a patient, gracious, considerate, and deeply knowledgeable person. That client roster includes people from all walks of life—students, medical professionals, stroke survivors, athletes, LGBTQ community members and allies alike. The fact that she is a proud member of Houston’s LGBTQ community (as well as a dog lover) is simply icing on the cake.

Still, how has she managed to stand out in such a competitive field? This personal trainer thrives on assisting others to arrive at the pinnacle of their fitness potential. “I have always enjoyed learning, and I treasure a physical or mental challenge,” she explains. “I stay on top of the latest [scientific] advances in the pursuit of fitness. I’ve found that my own desire to grow has a direct impact on my clients’ achievements. It is very rewarding me, but it

works really well for them, too.”

Experts in the field of fitness agree that it’s critical for trainers stay on top of the research, and that education should never stop with certification because the industry is always evolving as technology and science provide ever-greater awareness and answers.

Longtime client Lydia Smith was a high-school teacher who did not like the direction her body was going when she sought the help of Phommasak in 2018. “Before I started with Julie, I noticed my arms were getting really thick,” Smith admits, laughing. “After working with her, I gained strength and endurance, my posture and balance improved, and I even lost some weight!”

Most people who seek the help of a personal trainer anticipate heavy-handed attempts at motivation to “whip them into shape.” And while Phommasak is a woman of considerable physical strength, her demeanor is that of a gentle and considerate teacher or healer. She motivates through her dedication to results, not by inducing misery.

“One of Julie’s gifts is her endless patience,” adds Smith. “She is always there encouraging and motivating me, and her knowledge of the human body is amazing. She really understands the relationship and interaction between muscle, tissue, and bone, and how one impacts another. That helps target and solve problems. She has astonishing insight.”

After two years of COVID running rampant across the nation, the personal-training industry is finally recovering from a near-fatal blow. “When the epidemic first appeared, it was very hard on my profession. Gyms closed and people stayed home. At one time, I lost almost all my clients. But as things got better, they all came back. I have not lost one of them,” she notes with a smile.

Personal training was not Phommasak’s first professional venture. Originally from Amarillo, she had always enjoyed working with her hands and spent five years studying and working as a mechanical engineer. While financially rewarding for a young woman, it was far from a dream career for a natural-born teacher and athlete.

“One morning I woke up and started crying. I could not stop,” Phommasak recalls. “I just could not go back to work as an engineer, so I took a chance and sold my house and my car, and I started advanced studies in health and fitness. Today, I know it was the best move I ever made. But it sure was frightening for a while,” she says with a gleam in her eye.

“I’VE FOUND THAT MY OWN DESIRE TO GROW HAS A DIRECT IMPACT ON MY CLIENTS’ ACHIEVEMENTS. IT IS VERY REWARDING ME, BUT IT WORKS REALLY WELL FOR THEM, TOO.”

—Julie Phommask



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Pillar of Strength

Trainer **Felicia Lee-Sexton** changes lives at Women's Health and Fitness Center and at Legacy Community Health.

By LILLIAN HOANG

Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, Felicia Lee-Sexton came to Houston to reconnect with her sister—or so she told friends and loved ones. She actually came to Houston to get away from a man she had stolen drugs from.

One of five children, Lee-Sexton was raised in a two-parent home. Her father was a construction worker, and her mother was a nurse. Growing up, she attended church gatherings and sang in the church choir.

She had been living a drug-free life until she ran into what she describes as “the wrong crowd.” They drove fancy cars, wore nice clothes, and freely waved around cash, so she wanted to be a part of their world. “It sounds crazy, but I was nosy. There is no other way to put it,” Lee-Sexton admits.

Before long, she was introduced to and became addicted to cocaine around age 20. She snorted and smoked the drug for the next 11 years until she escaped to Houston and moved in with her sister, a nurse who worked in a methadone clinic. Her sister immediately took Lee-Sexton to that clinic and forced her to take a drug test. After she dropped to the floor, kicking and protesting loudly, her sister shot her a disappointed look—one their mother gave them growing up. “Mama’s not here, and I’m supposed to take care of you. So, get your butt up, we’re going to treatment,” she demanded.

Her sister's sobering words forced Lee-Sexton back onto her feet, and she began treatment on June 16, 1993. As a reminder of the last day she ever used cocaine, she tattooed the date on her arm—between the words *God* and *Dante*, who is her son. “Without God, I cannot stay clean, and without staying clean, I cannot have my family,” she explains.

Now a recovering addict of nearly 30 years, Lee-Sexton will be turning 60 in February. “My journey had its highs and lows,” she says. “It’s not what we’ve been through, it’s where we are today. We are not responsible for our disease—our addiction—but we *are* responsible for our recovery.”

As a fitness trainer, Lee-Sexton shares this lesson with her clients. She accepts them as they are and works to create individual fitness plans that address their physical, mental, and spiritual needs.

“Because I combine my recovery with fitness, my disease of addiction has allowed me to accept people just the way they are, no matter what they’ve been through or where they are at the moment. Some of us are ‘real raggedy,’ as Mom calls it, and it’s OK to not be perfect, to have been through some things, and to *still* be going through some things,” Lee-Sexton says with a laugh.

She enjoys the power and control that comes with working out. “Exercise became my refuge—my safe place—and it allowed me to really get in tune with my body,” she says.

She decided to get her trainer’s certification around age 45 and created the Women’s Health and Fitness Center in 2013 to help other women experience that same power. The Center offers personal training, group training, boxing, step class, an exercise pro-

gram for children called Kid Fit, Bible study, a psychotherapist, a massage therapist, a lash bar, and other services tailored to a female clientele.

She also wanted to give women a safe place to exercise, because co-ed gyms can be dangerous for women. “No offense to larger co-ed gyms, but women don’t get an opportunity to relax [on their own], without spouses or children,” she explains. “It was important that I had this place for us.”

Lee-Sexton had once trained a victim of domestic violence who gained weight in order to cope with the abuse she suffered at home. The gym gave her the opportunity to work through her trauma and get to where she wanted to be, mentally and physically.

An LGBTQ ally, Lee-Sexton has also been empowering clients at Legacy Community Health for the last decade as head of the clinic’s fitness program.

“IN THE GYM, WHEN YOU GET CONFIDENCE IN ONE AREA, IT SPILLS OVER TO THE OTHER AREAS, AND YOU BECOME THE PERSON YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN ALL THE TIME.”

—Felicia Lee-Sexton

“I’m so overprotective of my clients and the people I come across, and I think that’s because when you really look at the disease of addiction and look at the LGBTQ community, we can be discriminated against,” she says. “You can’t help but come together in one accord.”

At Legacy, Lee-Sexton once trained a 300-pound patient who had suffered from strokes and other health challenges. Lee-Sexton tailored a fitness program for the patient that included weight-lifting exercises like curls, triceps, and back workouts. With the Legacy dietician’s help, the patient was able to lose around 110 pounds.

Throughout the years, Lee-Sexton has had countless moving moments with her Legacy clients. “Legacy allows me to be who I am without explanation, definition, or apology, and that allows me to have an amazing relationship with my patients,” she says. “A patient will say, ‘I’m here for another appointment, but I stopped in to see you.’ You can’t put a price on that.”

Lee-Sexton has big plans for the new year. The Women’s Health and Fitness Center will be opening its second location in 2022, and she predicts continued growth in the years ahead.

She’s also excited about next month’s release of her second book, *Sixty, Sexy, & Sane—Face It with Fe Fe’s 30 Day Feism*. It’s based on the words of encouragement she shares with clients, including “Get your butt off my floor!” (which means people should quit dragging through life, take initiative, and stop letting other people weigh them down) and “Next level, *next level!*”

“I always believe everybody has a ‘next level’—if you’re willing to get out of the box long enough to get to that next level.”

Lee-Sexton has a few tips for people looking to be healthier and fitter in 2022. She encourages people to be honest about what they’re willing to do, because having unrealistic goals will stop them from making progress. People should also focus on their training. “I tell people all the time: don’t look to the left, don’t look to the right, don’t compare your body to anybody else,” she says. “That’s the best way to get messed up.”

She invites people to join her at the Women’s Health and Fitness Center or at Legacy if they need a supportive trainer and want to improve all areas of their life. “In the gym, when you get confidence in one area, it spills over to the other areas, and you become the person you should have been all the time.”



 For more information, visit thewhfcenter.com.

Strike a Pose

Yoga instructor **Jose Portillo** uses the ancient practice to find inner peace.

By **ZACH MCKENZIE**

Photo by **BETHANY BREWSTER**



After experiencing a romantic heartbreak while simultaneously confronting trauma from his past, yoga instructor Jose Portillo began down a path of destructive coping mechanisms. Then a good friend suggested finding a healthier outlet, and he agreed to accompany her to a yoga class. Today, Portillo is happy and healthy as an instructor at the very studio that he credits with saving him.

“About four years ago, a good friend of mine dragged me into Black Swan Yoga after hitting an all-time low,” Portillo recalls. “I was fresh out of my first real heartbreak and getting into some toxic, destructive behavior. She told me I really needed to do something to get me centered.”

In addition to the pain he felt after his breakup, Portillo was grappling with his conservative religious upbringing. “I was somewhat freshly out, and still dealing with unresolved trauma from being raised Southern Baptist.”

He still recalls his amazement at the first Black Swan Yoga class he took. “I fully died and came back to life! I started making it a weekly date with [my friend], and eventually ventured out on my own and tried different classes. At that time, Black Swan had a program where you got a free membership if you volunteered at the front desk for a certain number of hours. That led me to connect with other teachers and the community, where I found a lot of healing.”

It’s this community that Portillo credits with getting him to where he is today. “In connecting with teachers, I found out how to become a teacher myself. I decided to train to become one just seven months after beginning my practice. It’s been one hell of a ride ever since, and I’m very happy to report that I’m in a really great place and I truly love what I do.”

Portillo, who also teaches spin classes at Life Time GreenStreet, offers some insights on stepping into the world of yoga. “Search for

yoga studios close to you, and see what kind of style they have to offer. Classes can range from meditation and yin (which involves longer held stretch postures where you’re not sweating or moving too much) up to intense heated flow or power classes where you move to the cadence of your breath and work difficult postures such as arm balances and inversions. I definitely recommend trying a beginner class first. Not all studios call their beginner classes ‘beginner,’ so definitely ask what’s the most comparable.”

Portillo emphasizes that once you get into the flow of going to regular classes, the results are life-changing. “Several studies have shown that yoga offers tremendous physical and mental benefits,” he says. “From coming into postures that are meant to lengthen our muscles, to sweating out all the toxins in the body, to connecting to your breath in ways that calm and nourish the nervous system, yoga offers a great deal of benefits. I’ve had tons of students come to me because their physical therapists or psychiatrists have recommended they begin a yoga practice.”

For anyone nervous about trying yoga for the first time, the yogi explains that the range of abilities among his students is vast, so being inexperienced shouldn’t deter anyone from trying. “There is no being ‘bad’ at yoga,” he stresses. “As in any movement practice, [you begin by learning] what the postures look and feel like in the body. From there, [you develop]

a deeper understanding and body awareness, and you begin to see results.”

Portillo empathizes with the perfectionists in his classes. “Personally, I can still not gracefully come into the splits, and I may never in this lifetime. I promise you, I will still live a good and happy life.”

Discovering yoga offered hope and restoration to Portillo, and he’s inspired to offer the same gifts to his students. “There was a lot of healing that took place in my body and soul [as I dealt with] things that still weighed me down,” he explains. “I was able to find a community of like-minded individuals who supported each other’s growth and honored all walks of life. I’ve been able to truly find my voice, my sense of purpose, and a lot of light in all of this. I like to end my classes with this mantra that I created, which sums up what the practice of yoga means to me: ‘May you be committed to love brilliantly and to bask in the joys of every relationship you find yourself in. But above all, be committed to fully express and appreciate exactly who you are so you may in turn share that magic with the rest of the world.’”



Keep up with Jose Portillo on Instagram @all.in.jose



“FROM COMING INTO POSTURES THAT ARE MEANT TO LENGTHEN OUR MUSCLES, TO SWEATING OUT ALL THE TOXINS IN THE BODY, TO CONNECTING TO YOUR BREATH IN WAYS THAT CALM AND NOURISH THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, YOGA OFFERS A GREAT DEAL OF BENEFITS.”

—Jose Portillo



Effective Exercising

Fitness expert **Renato Guerrieri** shares his tips for staying motivated to get in shape.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



A new year means new goals. But while many Americans pick weight loss as a top New Year's resolution, it can be difficult to stick to a diet and exercise plan.

Spin instructor Renato Guerrieri believes that remaining patient and creating realistic, flexible goals can help you stay motivated year-round. "It's about committing to work out in a way that keeps you motivated. You just have to create challenges you can work toward. Once you have structure, you have a way to measure your progress."

Guerrieri, who also teaches studio strength classes and small-group training sessions at Life Time, knows that when it comes to exercising, you have to find what works best for you and your physical abilities.

"Living in Houston, it's so miserable and hot outside most of the year, so I found I wasn't able to motivate myself to really exercise outdoors," he admits. "Consistent exercise didn't really happen until I discovered indoor cycling and going to spin classes. I joined a local studio and got on one of their memberships, and eventually, after a year of riding with them, I became comfortable auditioning and launching as an instructor with them."

Spin classes can appeal to a wide variety of people because you work as a team with those around you to create camaraderie. "What appeals to many people is an environment where you're moving together, pushing yourselves together, and working out together in one place," he says. "It's all about matching the rhythm and tempo."

In fact, Guerrieri sees music as a great way for people to stay motivated while working out. "It's really about the music driving the workout. That's why spin workouts appeal to me. You can pick any genre of music so you can change the level of intensity to drive the work-

out. That's how I got into spin, specifically."

He also discovered that out of all the different exercise plans, spin classes were the most comfortable for his legs and joints. "It's pretty low-impact on your joints. Just running on dirt paths is really hard on the knee and ankle joints. You don't have to worry about that kind of impact from a spin class. Spin is a great way to increase your endurance and your speed."

"IT'S ABOUT COMMITTING TO WORK OUT IN A WAY THAT KEEPS YOU MOTIVATED. YOU JUST HAVE TO CREATE CHALLENGES YOU CAN WORK TOWARD. ONCE YOU HAVE STRUCTURE, YOU HAVE A WAY TO MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS."

—Renato Guerrieri

While it's hard to stick to a workout plan and maintain it on a daily basis, Guerrieri encourages people to approach exercise as less of a chore and more of a mental relaxation technique. "That's one major component. I find it allows me to focus on something other than work for a while. As a spin instructor, it gives me a physical, mental, and creative outlet."

For those who have never regularly worked out before, Guerrieri suggests starting a regular exercise plan and creating tangible ways to measure your fitness goals. "My friend told me about this concept of '50 days of fitness.' That worked for me. It's all about keeping that commitment to staying fit and exercising. I found it was a way for me to become more intentional in scheduling my workouts. I thought it was a really neat way to stay fit. That's the sort of structure that allows you to have something to work toward. You have your day zero and your day 50."

Guerrieri sees people focusing on the wrong aspects of dieting when they decide to get in shape and start working out. "For dieting, it's not so much about cutting back on any foods. It's about being more intentional about the foods you fuel yourself with. I would instead suggest doing a food diary for one week every month so you can learn more about the fuel you're putting in your body. It allows you to check in with yourself once a month to see if you're getting enough of the right nutrition."

While there are days when Guerrieri finds himself lacking motivation, staying on track is more about pushing through and realizing that the end result is worth it. "As Nike says, just do it. If you exercise, you will feel better afterwards."

Anyone can get more fit and lose weight, but you have to try different techniques to find which workout is best for you, Guerrieri emphasizes. "Just try out different classes. As popular as spin classes have become, there are many who despise it. Just try out all different kinds of workouts. You will eventually find something that works for you. Once you find what you love, it's much easier to make it into a routine."



Keep up with Renato Guerrieri on Instagram @renato_guerrieri

Cycling in Community

Instructors **Zach West, Tyler May, and Sergio Moreno** keep things spinning at for the people.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Photo by SWEEN SHOTS STUDIOS



At first glance, the Mon-trose spin studio named “for the people.” seems fairly conventional. Seconds after stepping into the space off West Gray, however, the sense of com-

munity and inclusivity becomes palpable.

for the people. (ftp.) launched last January with a fitness team that truly embodies what it means to be inclusive, diverse, and passionate about creating community. Out instructor Zach West is also a co-owner, along with Tyler May and Mel Valez.

The studio’s instructors are all committed to empowering one another and everyone who signs up for their classes. With a mission to create a safe, inviting space for people to check their problems at the door and ride with a community that wants them to succeed, the entire ftp. team is looking forward to another successful year.

OUTSMART spoke with three of ftp.’s LGBTQ team members about how their fitness studio has become such a welcoming community space.

ZACH WEST

Co-founder and owner

Zach West explains that his journey to becoming a spin instructor was borne out of repetition. “I gained about 100 pounds in college while triple-majoring at Texas Tech University,” he recalls. “Once I graduated, I worked out as a way to lose a few pounds and meet new friends. None of the workouts sparked an interest in me, and I left being mostly frustrated with my ability.”

Then a chance invitation changed the course of West’s life. “I was getting to a point where I wanted to give up on the two small goals I had set. After months of a dear friend asking me to try a spin class, I finally said yes. From my first class, I was immediately hooked.” West went on to lose 70 pounds and

discovered the impact that community-based workouts can have. “I decided I was ready to make the transition from the front row to the stage, and I’ve been in heaven ever since. Having my own weight-loss transformation makes being an instructor so much more special to me.”

The gay instructor speaks to why ftp. is unlike other studios. “[The other instructors] and I joke all the time that we don’t know if we are a spin studio, a retail brand, or an events company, but what we do know is that we stand behind the brand.” The team’s mission is rooted in its name. “We wanted to make sure our name represented what we were truly trying to create—a safe, inclusive place that is for the people. *All* the people. We don’t consider ourselves just a spin studio. Yes, we ride bikes, but what is happening at ftp. is so much more. It’s a place where we strive to provide delight every single time you walk into our space.”

So, what about the workout itself? “You can expect all the jams, all the Beyoncé, and all the fun,” West assures us. “My classes are high-energy with the right amount of sass. For me, fitness has to be fun. That’s what allowed me to make my own transformation, and I take that aspect into every class. I love my classes to be interactive, so expect the occasional dance moment and sing-along.”

Simply showing up is West’s biggest fitness tip for the new year. “Fitness is something that requires work and discipline, so the more regular you are, the more results you will see,” he stresses. “Properly plan your workouts and make them a priority so that you maintain that consistency. One way to hold yourself accountable is to not do it alone. The beauty about the ftp. community is that you have a built-in accountability partner through the friendships you build from the moment you walk through our doors.”

At the end of the day, West and his team want their customers to get the most out of their workouts in the most authentic way possible. “However you show up to the space, just

know it is welcoming and we are delighted to have you. Our community has honestly been a large part of our success. They are proud of the brand and have been the best ambassadors we could have asked for. If you want a place to work out and feel seen and supported, ftp. is that place. I’m willing to bet my all on it.”

TYLER MAY

Co-founder and owner

With nine years of cycling under his belt, Tyler May invites readers to check out his classes. “I am a firm believer that you should find a class that makes you excited to attend and be a part of,” he says. “I learned the importance of movement and breath work in my time as a yoga teacher. I try to be mindful in my classes, and genuinely hope that people leave feeling better in their bodies.”

May is quick to note that if his class isn’t for you, there are definitely other options available at ftp. “You can get a variety of amazing classes, and all of us bring our own special touch to our time on the bike.”

May’s early introduction to the importance of music guides him when he’s crafting playlists for each of his classes. “My love for music began on car rides with my dad, who taught me the importance of knowing and loving the ‘classics.’ My love for pop divas was developed during my time in New York City during walks to work or dance parties in his shoebox flat,” he recalls. “In my classes, you can expect a considered combination of oldies-but-goodies mixed with fresh takes on all of your favorites.”

His biggest fitness tip for 2022 is to find your space, your community, and commit to the grind. “I am constantly hearing how much people have missed being in a fitness space where they feel welcomed as part of the community,” the gay instructor notes. “I encourage people to find a home where they feel like they belong. It makes it much easier to stay committed to the 5:00 a.m. alarm clock or the stop after work.” →



Out instructors Tyler May (l), Zach West, and Sergio Moreno give back to their community by creating a welcoming spin environment.

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SERGIO MORENO

Instructor

Sergio Moreno, a self-proclaimed “gay(yyyyy)” instructor is one of the newest staff members at ftp. “My role in our community is as an instructor. I’m also a regular rider, so when I’m taking someone else’s class, I play the role of front-row screamer,” Moreno says. He brings every ounce of himself to his classes to offer the same experience he had early on in his ftp. journey. “Sweat dates have always been a special part of my relationship with my best friend. She was visiting Houston earlier this year and was absolutely relentless about building ftp. into our weekend schedule—and I’m so glad we did,” he says.

“I fell in love with the space and the community immediately, and sweating with my best friend made my heart full. The ftp. community welcomed me with open arms, and week after week I came back to sweat with people that also became friends. A few months later when I chatted with Zach and Tyler about my interest in starting instructor training, the ‘imposter syndrome’ immediately set in. Zach and Tyler, like a magical pair of fairy godmothers, gracefully smashed my apprehensions and I completed instructor training as their first

new instructor. I’m so happy to be learning and growing in such a safe, fun, inclusive space.”

Moreno takes his role as a gay fitness instructor seriously. “I’m very proud to be gay, in general, and I’m particularly proud to be a gay spin/fitness instructor. When the spotlight is on and I’m on the mic, the entire room is locked in to what I’m saying. Over the loud music and fancy lighting, we get to influence the riding experience using our own actions and words. The expectation that our founders have set is that we always prioritize creating an experience that is inclusive, sweaty, and filled with delight. I’m so proud to be a gay spin instructor at ftp., where we celebrate inclusion and use it to build stronger, more authentic connections. Honestly, nobody in our community has time for anything that gets in the way of that.”

Moreno sums up what sets ftp. apart from the rest of Houston’s fitness scene. “I’m sure most places will say their community is the best part of their business. We agree, [but we also strive] to provide delight and connection, even outside the four walls of the spin studio. I think that’s the biggest differentiator. Plus, the merch makes me drool, honey!”



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Going the Extra Mile

FrontRunners Houston is an all-inclusive space for LGBTQ joggers.

By MARENE GUSTIN | Photo by ANDREW KIM



No matter your endurance level, the local LGBTQ walking and running group FrontRunners Houston invites you to participate, get in shape for the New Year, and have some fun.

“We have a wide range—from walkers and novice recreational runners to competitive marathoners,” according to members Rick Potter and Daisey Vega. “All are welcome. We have plenty of experienced runners with lots of free advice. Usually someone can go from their couch to a 5K (3.1 miles) in a couple of months.”

Walkers usually walk for 30 minutes to an hour, while runners generally go three to four miles at meets. You can walk or run solo, or team up with another member.

It’s free to join, so just ask to join the Houston chapter’s Facebook page. You’ll answer a few questions, agree to the club rules, and then just show up. You’ll get a free FrontRunners Houston T-shirt after one month of participation.

The club is part of the nonprofit International Front Runners, an affiliation of local FrontRunners clubs. The first one started in 1974 in San Francisco when a group of gay activists published a newspaper called *Lavender U*, which offered free classes for the community. Jack Baker and Gardner Pond took out an ad

offering a free “learn to jog” class, and they held their first run in January of 1974 in Golden Gate Park. In 1980 a chapter opened in New York, and from there it just exploded. There are clubs in more than 20 countries around the globe today, including the three Texas groups in Houston, Dallas, and Austin.

FrontRunners Houston was formed in 1984, and is the city’s oldest LGBTQ run/walk social group that invites all community members to join their meets.

So what happens at a typical meetup? There are usually between 5 and 17 people, and there might be members from other clubs dropping in. To help members get to know each other, Potter and Vega always start with a “Question of the Day” submitted by a team member via Facebook. Announcements are then made for any upcoming social events or races, such as a 5K, a marathon, or a Pride Race.

The group also has a club dinner every Thursday, and holds a Happy Hour once a week. Various holiday parties are planned throughout the year. This month, several members will be running in the Chevron Marathon and the Aramco Half Marathon while other FrontRunners offer their support along the route.

Even if you don’t aspire to run competitive marathons, walking or running is a great

way to start the New Year. Besides the social aspects of the group, members note the physiological benefits of the walks and runs such as improved cardiovascular fitness, aerobic capacity, stamina, and the release of endorphins that make you feel good.

Other members have their own reasons for running—everything from wanting to shed a few pounds to taking on a new challenge, managing physical and mental health, or simply because a friend dragged them into the group.

Whatever your reason is, you’ll enjoy the comradery and fresh air, with the only cost being your investment in a good pair of walking or running shoes.

FrontRunners Houston’s group runs are held at:

- 6:30 p.m. on Tuesdays in Hermann Park. Meetup location is to the left of the McGovern Centennial Gardens entrance.
- 6:30 p.m. on Thursdays in Memorial Park. Meetup location is across the street from the stretching area. (A post-run dinner is held at a predesignated venue.)
- 8:30 a.m. on Saturday in Memorial Park. Meetup location is across the street from the stretching area.



For more info, visit fronrunners.org and facebook.com/groups/52680174080.

ASTROCAST 2022 OVERVIEW



Our New Year starts off slowly

with Venus and Mercury retrograde until February 10, making New Year's resolutions more difficult to implement. Spring and summer are active times this year.

The cardinal signs (Aries, Libra, Cancer, and Capricorn) are completing old projects and exploring new avenues and opportunities in the summer and early fall. There is more social activity and more fun. The fixed signs (Taurus, Leo, Aquarius, and Scorpio) are looking for inspiration and a way to make plans happen. Security is a big focus for them. The mutable signs (Pisces, Virgo, Sagittarius, and Gemini) are very busy this year with expanding their education, relocating, and traveling more.

Fixed signs get the most activity, with two planets affecting them directly. Plus, the eclipses occur in Scorpio and Taurus, also impacting the fixed signs. Eclipses are at the end of April, mid-May, the end of October, and early November. This will create options that affect career goals.

by **LILLY RODDY**

Illustrations by
**SEBASTIAN GOMEZ
DE LA TORRE**

Mercury, planet of communication and travel, will be retrograde four times this year.

When Mercury is retrograde, take care of what you have on your plate and don't add more. Our first Mercury retrograde is January 9 through February 14, followed by one in May through mid-June, another in September through mid-October, and another at the end of December through January 2023.

We also have a Mars retrograde from this October 13 through February 18, 2023. Mars is our planet of action and survival. When he is retrograde, we are more cautious about risk-taking and making commitments to ourselves. The retrogrades at the end of the year can make things more sluggish.

The structure of society, business, and government continues to be purged and exposed. This adds to concerns about the government and our representative democracy, a cycle likely to continue for the next four years. You *can* do something to improve the conditions: don't let your fear stop you from acting.



Willi Ninja

ARIES MARCH 21–APRIL 29

Aries have been going through an enormous period of change since 2008. Your views, your sense of social responsibility, and the way you function at work have all been challenged during this long period. You are at the end of that process this year. You have been cleaning up your life and getting clear on who you are. You have about one year left to make sure you didn't miss any spots.

Summer holds a lot of promise with expanded social contacts and better job opportunities. This is a better time for travel, meeting new people, and promoting yourself or your services. Your relationship energies are also more positive, improving your existing partnerships and opening you up to new people. If you are single, the summer is a much better time for connecting with potential new partners. You may also want to explore expanding your education or going back to school and changing directions altogether.

Groups and organizations are important this year as places to network and expand potential resources. You are very selective about where you want to spend your time because you want a return on the energy you invest.

With your career, you are looking for something that you can feel passionate about. What previously fed your drive to succeed has been fading away. It's a better time for changing jobs as early as the spring. Friends can be especially supportive in this area, providing connections and emotional support.

Your ruler, Mars, goes retrograde from mid-October through mid-February. This will be a time of rethinking your actions, your choices, and getting people to hear what you have to say. Life will feel much more personal. Make sure you surround yourself with happy and supportive people!



John Waters

TAURUS APRIL 20–MAY 20

This is a very active and demanding year for the Taureans. Career demands are especially strong, along with a need to find something that you are passionate about and are drawn to.

The eclipses occur in either your sign or your opposite sign, Scorpio, on April 30, May 16, October 25, and November 8. This eclipse cycle repeats approximately every 18½ years. You can look back and see how you fared then. The eclipses should provide work opportunities and possibly new relationships—business, personal, or both.

You are focused on improving your career and increasing your ability to feel more secure. You want to move up the ladder in your career, possibly start something on your own, or look for ways to get off the grid to have more control over your life. This is the time to step up and take control of your career. You are establishing your credibility and showing what you can do, and you are expecting your boss to step up and be a better manager. If they don't, you may be taking over their job.

You are also more clear about what you will and won't do. You are going through a downsizing where you are determining the future worth of people and things in your life. People need to grow up, or they may not have your support.

Relationships need new energy or new blood. This is an excellent year to renew those bonds that may have been ignored in the past. If you are having a difficult time, these same energies will push you toward some resolution. If you are single, you will be attracting new people into your life, particularly in the spring and late fall with the eclipses.

This is a good year to pay more attention to your health, get more exercise, and improve your diet. You will want to be free of excess weight, both physically and emotionally!



Lana and Lilly Wachowski

GEMINI MAY 21–JUNE 21

This year offers numerous opportunities for growth, fun, travel, and making good use of your time and energy. You have not been clear about the career direction you want to pursue, but you now find that decision-making process much easier, especially through early summer. You have been wanting to connect to work that really fulfills an inner aspect within yourself, and now there are new opportunities that will show you're on the way.

You are still working to clear yourself of financial burdens that have held you back, and you simply won't tolerate such burdens this year. Loans may be easier to get, which should help you out. This is also a good time to consider long-term investing. You may be able to get involved in start-up companies that promise a good return in the future.

You are very open to new ideas, points of view, and different cultural perspectives. This is an excellent year to improve your skills, continue your education, or become a teacher. This is also an exceptional year to improve your presence on social media through the ever-growing list of platforms. If you have writing ambitions, this is the year to get your work published or distributed on social media to generate a greater response.

If you are single, this is a year to connect with potential partners. Your magnetism is stronger than usual. If you are involved, this year should see an improved bond and more fun! This can be a very good time to take on a business partner.

Spiritually, you are open to new ideas that free you from the limitations of past beliefs. You're looking for something with more inclusive views.

Mercury, your ruler, will be retrograde four times this year. The dates that impact you directly are May 3 through June 11 and September 1 through October 9. Those are times to look back and take care of projects you have ignored. →



Frida Kahlo

CANCER JUNE 22–JULY 22

You Moon Kids continue to deal with finances, mortgages, creating a more stable resource base, and developing more intimacy in personal relationships. You also seek to expand your social outreach and media presence.

This is going to be a busy career time, with summer being an exceptionally busy time, although you feel the positive push from this energy as early as spring. This can be a time when you get a promotion or take on a new position within the same company. This is also a better time to travel. You will have more of a public presence, so it's a great year to promote your services, start a podcast, or get some of your work published. You are likely to be busy through the middle of 2023.

You are looking for more trust and closeness this year. You are more than willing to look at yourself and see how you have been aloof at times when you needed to be emotionally connected. At the same time, some business and personal relationships are coming to an end, and you are ready to be done with them.

You are still working on improving your financial situation by getting rid of debt and living within your means, but money won't be a real problem. However, you still carry that concern about money, which makes you question every purchase and its real value and need.

As the year begins, Venus, the planet of love and money, is retrograde in the relationship area of your horoscope. This has you rethinking past relationships and wanting to ensure a loving bond with your current partner. This is very strong through February 10. You will want to take some time to make sure your relationship is healthy.

You are more socially active, but you are still picky about the company you keep.



James Baldwin

LEO JULY 23–AUGUST 22

This continues to be a busy time of making long-term plans, letting go of past accomplishments, and exploring inventive ways to express your passion for living.

Partnerships, both business and personal, are going through a time of renewed plans and goals. In current relationships, you are exploring new directions to bring in some fresh energy. For newer relationships, you may be looking into marriage or living together. With difficult relationships, this can be a make-or-break time. You will work hard to keep it together before you might need to let it go.

Personal boundaries are also getting stronger, and you are expecting more from the people in your life, particularly family and close friends. You won't be as tolerant of their self-induced problems. This can also be a time of downsizing, cleaning out storerooms, and creating more personal time.

Your career area continues to be active as you look for just the right thing to draw you in. This can show up as a time when you are looking to start something on your own, take on a leadership role in your current situation, or focus on the things that bring you real joy in life.

This year, the eclipses will occur in the career and home sectors of your horoscope. Those eclipses will occur in late April, mid-May, late October, and early November. This will only add more energy to your need to be your own person. You may have to step up and be a strong person for your family. You could be buying a house or expanding your family.

Finances improve notably in the spring and summer. This is a good time for refinancing, investments, raising your fees, or getting a raise from your current place of employment. This is a year of decision-making.



Freddie Mercury

VIRGO AUGUST 23–SEPTEMBER 22

You Virgoans are finally pulling yourselves out of lockdown and getting ready to re-enter the world. You are certainly going to be busier and more social. In addition to having more opportunities for career and job improvement, you have improved interactions in partnerships and will enjoy life more.

You will want to get back on track with health and exercise regimens and take an overall better approach to health care and self care. Your chronic health issues may need to be addressed, rather than dealing with new conditions.

You've missed your routines, and you do your best to put a schedule in place that addresses the changes that your business has been through over the last two years. You probably work smarter rather than longer, which makes your time and effort more fruitful.

Relationships seem to flow more easily this year. If you are single, this can be a very good year to date or open yourself up to new partners. If you are involved, this positive energy helps to smooth out the rough parts, and allows you to just enjoy the companionship instead of trying to improve the relationship.

Your creative energies remain strong, and you are definitely thinking outside the box. You are seeing the connectivity of many different pieces, and how they fit together in the larger scheme. This can be a great year to make social media work for you via a podcast, blogs, or YouTube. You are also more open to publishing your work and gaining a larger global audience.

Your ruler, Mercury, goes retrograde four times this year: January through mid-February, early May through mid-June, September through mid-October, and late December through late January 2023. These are great times for looking back and correcting or improving decisions from the past.



Oscar Wilde

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23–OCTOBER 23

Finances, intimacy, personal creativity, children, and improving your work environment are all on the menu this year.

With finances, you are looking for alternative investments, new ways to make better use of what you have, and getting yourself out of debt. If you are dealing with debt, this energy can really make you feel trapped and somewhat depressed, as it motivates you to do something about your situation. In a more positive vein, this can be a great time to find a life coach or something that ignites your passion for living.

You are wanting to be more open about how you feel, and develop a greater sense of truth between you and your relationships. This can be a great time for therapy or going on a couples retreat. You are looking for that lost passion that makes your partnerships click. If you are single, you are looking for a different type of partner than the people you've been attracted to in the past. If there are problems in your associations, you will want to root them out.

Your creative energies are being stimulated this year. This could be the year to take your hobby to another level. You are wanting your work to be more satisfying, even if you stick with your current employment. You are expecting your children to be more like adults, and you could see them testing your boundaries. This is a good time to give them more responsibility to make the right choices.

With all the changes occurring in how we do business, this is a great year to improve your work space. Since many of you started working from home, you may not have been as prepared with a work space that is as comfortable as you need. You will do something about that this year. This area of your life will be very busy, so be careful not to take on too much.



RuPaul

SCORPIO OCTOBER 24–NOVEMBER 21

This is the year of home and family, relationships, personal freedom, self-expression, and connecting to a more playful side of yourself.

You have been in a period of reassessment since last year, but you weren't ready to make decisions to move forward until this year. You work hard to achieve stability and safety in your life. You could be remodeling or even relocating your home. You have had to take a very realistic look at your family, and you are moving away from the drama so you can have a more honest environment that allows you to be yourself. If those conditions aren't met, you may decide to have less contact with your family. You are no longer trapped in your youth.

You want your relationships to have more freedom as well. Restrictive or overly demanding relationships will irritate you. This can be a good year to address these issues, but that will require all parties to be involved. It is easier to find a partner who is more open and less judgmental, as you are looking for a more open and playful relationship. This area will be very active as the eclipses this year activate this area of your horoscope. The eclipses are in your sign (or in your opposite sign of Taurus) at the end of April, mid-May, the end of October, and in early November.

With your work and career life, you are focused on creating more stability. You may be at a low ebb with your career in general, as you want to be appreciated for your skills instead of having to repeatedly prove yourself. You may consider retiring or cutting back to bring more balance into your life.

And finally, you are ready for some fun. Travel, put some energy into your hobbies, or find a great spa to visit!



Emily Dickinson

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22–DECEMBER 21

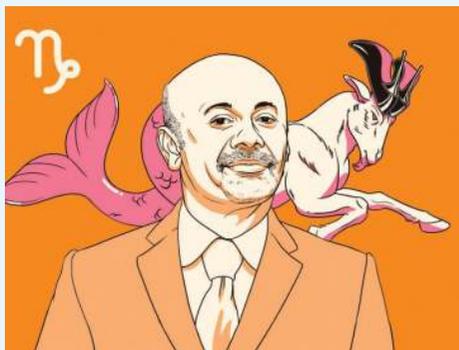
New ways of dealing with business, having better personal boundaries, exploring new work opportunities, and improving relationships with your family are all part of your upcoming year.

Over the last several years, you have been investigating ways to supplement your income through investments and different business opportunities, and now you are ready to move forward. With your business, you may be increasing your fees or looking for better compensation for the work you do. You are much clearer about what you will and won't do, and you're much less willing to give away your skills without pay.

The need to set boundaries in your life and your daily choices is going to be very strong. You will not have time for people who take advantage of your good nature. You will be expecting more from people, and you will be leaving behind those who don't step into more adult-like behavior. Words and ideas have power this year, and you will be careful about how you use them.

Family relationships will be easier to navigate this year. Relatives are more ready to forgive the past and move on. Personally, you will need more time to yourself at the beach, the lake, or by the pool. Your home may feel more like a sanctuary or a place of retreat. This is also a great year to travel to a secluded getaway. There will be more marriages and more children in the family this year.

With your job, you are making better use of your time and not working as much. You will want more freedom and more balance between work and the rest of your life. This can be a great year to update the office, get some new equipment, and develop a better presence on social media. →



Christian Louboutin

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22–JANUARY 19

The heaviness that you have been dealing with over the last five years is slowly beginning to fade. You are getting more and more grounded, and you're almost ready to move forward. With Venus retrograde in your sign until February 10, you should wait until then to make any permanent decisions. After that, you'll be ready to clear up your financial picture and create more stability. You are wanting more freedom to pursue a path that invigorates your passion.

With the current crazy business environment created by COVID, you are looking at alternatives and adapting to new tools. You are much more open to new ideas, especially through the spring and summer. This can be a great time for improving your skills or exploring a totally different career path. You may be going back to school or taking your hobby to the next level.

You are overly conscious about money in 2022, and very likely to cut back on spending as you pare down to what you consider the necessities. You will also want to eliminate as much debt as you can, since being in debt makes you feel trapped and is a massive drain on your energy. In all of this, you are coming to terms with what you think your "real" value is, and who controls that valuing process.

You are wanting more time to delve into things that give your life meaning and joy. Your inner child needs someplace to have more fun. If you have children, they want more freedom and independence. They will test your boundaries, so this may be the time to give them more opportunities to become responsible.

This is a more social time for you, with new business associations and possibly new friendships being triggered in late April, mid-May, late October, and early November. These could be opportunities for more gainful employment as well.



Gengoroh Tagame

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20–FEBRUARY 18

Over the last year there were many options presented to you, but you held off on making some decisions because you wanted to feel fully committed. This applies to your career path, long-term security goals, and your relationships.

With career, you are exploring lots of new ideas. If you are older, you are cutting back and creating more balance in your life. If you are younger, you are looking to move up the ladder or start something on your own. And with the eclipses in April/May and October/November occurring in your career sector, you will find something that suits you this year.

Family demands and expectations are also very intense this year. On one level, you are looking to be free from the roles that you played in your family of origin that you may be duplicating with your own family or close friends. For some, this can be a time of home improvement or a possible relocation. You are wanting more space, more windows, and a place where you can breathe freely.

In your relationship sector, you are looking to make your relationships more secure and tailored to who you are at this time. If you are involved, you are looking at new long-term goals to bring new energy to your commitment. This can be a time of marriage or some other formal commitment. If you are unhappy, this energy will push for resolution—whatever the outcome may be.

You are still exploring your spirituality, clearing out past beliefs, and seeking new ways to understand your place in the universe and the afterlife. You are connecting more easily to your past lives in order to see where you have been before.

Finances are improving this year, but you are also more likely to want to spend more. This is a good year to find new investments or charge more for your services.



Alexander McQueen

PISCES FEBRUARY 19–MARCH 20

This year is certainly going to be more active, more social, and possibly offer much better job and career opportunities.

With career, you are looking at new prospects and possibly even going back to school to reinvent yourself. You are looking for something that you really connect to, rather than something that is just about income. This is a good year to look into international businesses.

Along with this career energy, you are more ready to travel to some exotic locations. You are looking to expand your horizons and maybe even move to another country.

You are continuing to define and redefine your sense of spirituality and your religious beliefs. You are looking for real proof that there is something beyond what we experience here on this planet. You may be looking into past lives, exploring your current life path through tarot or astrology, or starting over and creating your own perspective on what spirituality and religion really are. You have been more psychically sensitive since 2011, and this process continues through 2025. As this becomes more a part of your life, your inner life becomes more active and you may be drawn to alternative life experiences.

Relationships are also more positive this year. If you are single, this makes you more magnetic. If you are involved, this energy helps to smooth over past problems as you look for an improved relationship.

You are revamping your friendships and business associations. You are looking for people who want to participate in the process, rather than just wait for you to come up with a solution.

You are expressing your views more openly, even if that causes some waves of discontent. This is also a good time for a podcast, blogging, and increasing your presence on social media.

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

Sebastian Gomez de la Torre's OUTSMART Zodiac series is inspired by queer literary, visual, and performing-arts figures.

By NEIL ELLIS ORTS | Photo by ALEX ROSA

Sebastian Gomez de la Torre, who was selected as OUTSMART's 2022 Zodiac artist, almost didn't become an illustrator.

Originally from Peru, Gomez de la Torre's family first settled in Miami, where he spent much of his childhood drawing. "My earliest memories are of drawing some birds, because they were pretty simple. Then I remember being obsessed with Pokémon, so I drew a lot of those.

But for a time in high school, he just stopped. "I don't have a reason for it," he admits. He attended a Miami magnet high school where he was pursuing agricultural science, with the intent of becoming a veterinarian. When his family moved to Texas, he saw an art class offered at his new high school in Conroe. "I remembered being so into it when I was younger, and those feelings came back." Following graduation, Gomez de la Torre headed north to earn his bachelor's degree at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, after which he moved back to Houston to start his career in design and illustration.

If you follow Gomez de la Torre on Instagram @illseabass, you'll see a wide range of styles—from the bold, clean lines in his children's book *Pancho and the Inca Poncho* (which he produced with the help of a grant from the Houston Arts Alliance) to the photorealism of his portrait work. "One thing I'm conscious of is that because I do things in so many different ways, it may be difficult for people to recognize my work," he says. "The children's book and the illustrations I'm doing for OUTSMART are so completely different that [you wouldn't think] it's by the same person."

For his twelve Zodiac illustrations that will be featured throughout 2022, Gomez de la Torre chose a range of queer literary, visual, and performing-arts figures from different eras. His illustrations meld traditional Zodiac elements with images of writer James Baldwin, artist Frida Kahlo, singer Freddie



Mercury, and manga artist Gengoroh Tagame, among others.

In researching the iconic LGBTQ personalities he's using, Gomez de la Torre noted the importance of the struggles they faced, such as Oscar Wilde's imprisonment on sodomy charges. Almost all of these figures had to exercise some level of civil disobedience to live their lives. "It's unfortunate, but also kind of triumphant, that they've all had some sort of tribulation because of their identity."

Overcoming adversity is a thread that seems to run throughout Gomez de la Torre's work. In *Pancho and the Inca Poncho*, Pancho is an immigrant child who struggles to fit in until he learns more about his heritage. "You have to be proud of your heritage," the artist stresses. "Even after the conquistadors, the Inca people still exist today. They have endured."



Visit Sebastian Gomez de la Torre's website at illseabass.com

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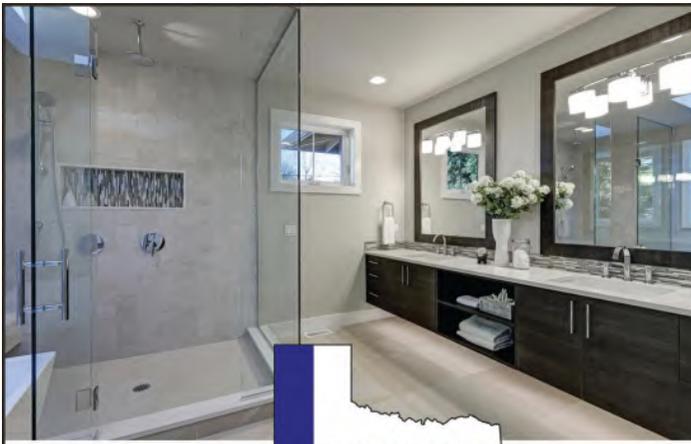
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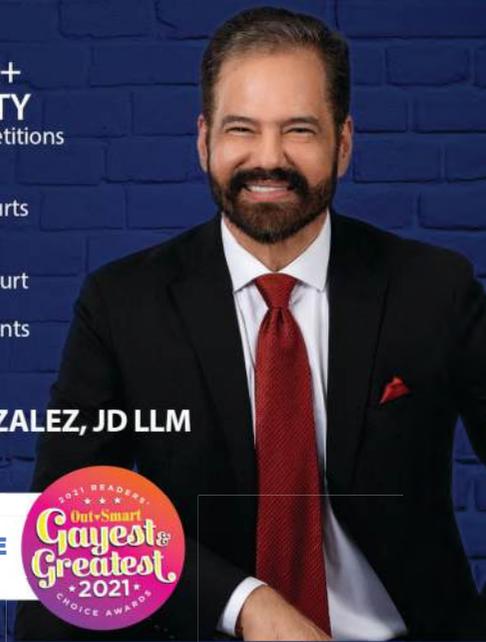
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New Taste-and-Choose Technology

Shoot The Moon is the first full bar self-pour restaurant in Houston.

Over in near-loop Spring Branch, a revolutionary tasting tavern awaits. Shoot The Moon, features first-in-the-world self-pour technology that allows guests to pour themselves samples and full pours of 80 fine selections of craft cider, beer, wine, signature cocktails and straight spirits. Guests never have to flag down a server or bartender to place a drink order or get a refill, because they can simply head to the tap wall and serve themselves.

"The Shoot The Moon experience is very different from a traditional table service restaurant, because we've eliminated a lot of the frustration points like waiting to get the attention of a server to order your next drink or food item," says Kevin Floyd, Shoot The Moon's executive director. "We give guests a high level of control - we won't dictate the pacing or try to steer choices, unless you ask for input, so you can simply make it your own."

Wait—how is this legal?

The Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC) allowed self-pour concepts to be licensed in 2019. Shoot The Moon is the first full bar self-pour restaurant in Houston, and the first restaurant in the world to offer taste-and-choose technology with drinks on draft and finer selections in from-the-bottle Enomatic machines (all with the convenience of a one-tap access card). And don't worry, the high-tech system tracks consumption so it's not an all-you-can-booze buffet.

So what about the food?

Shoot the Moon's dynamic tasting tavern experience includes a delicious menu anchored by hand-crafted pizzas, complete with house-made dough, fresh sauces, house-made meats, plus an impressive array of toppings.

Chef Dax McAnear's from-scratch kitchen turns out not only top-notch pizza, but also fresh salads, fun, shareable plates such as calamari, buffalo crab claws and pimento cheese stuffed mushrooms. The menu also features comfort food entrees prepared with healthy touches. Quite a few items comply with gluten-friendly, vegan, Whole30 and Paleo lifestyles, making it the perfect spot for groups with a wide range of tastes and preferences.

While the menu is meticulously prepared, this fine-food experience won't take three hours to play out. The food at Shoot the Moon is served up in a fast-causal format. Much like the tap wall, guests are not constrained by a traditional service format, and can simply order their food and have it delivered to their table promptly.

Where is this amazing place?

Shoot The Moon is located in the Spring Branch Village. Opened in late Summer 2021, Collaborative Projects, known for its restaurant projects, completed the building's 4,000-square-foot space. Local graphics firm Letterset Houston designed the restaurant's logo, branding and a range of playful signage and graphic, displayed inside and outside the restaurant space.

What should I expect when I go there?

Guests will check in, show IDs, open a tab, place their food order, and get a special card that activates the tap system. They'll be able to select and pour their own drinks at their leisure, while their food is prepared and promptly delivered.

Who owns Shoot The Moon?

The restaurant is owned by STM Hospitality LLC, a team comprised of Kevin Floyd, Dax McAnear, and Jonas Herd. Floyd co-founded Anvil Bar & Refuge, Underbelly, Hay Merchant and several other Montrose concepts. Chef McAnear has worked alongside many of Houston's elite chefs, including Ryan Pera, Scott Tycer and Chris Shepherd. Herd is also a partner with Collaborative Projects and has been the operating partner of Cecil's Pub in Montrose since 2017.



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Dynamic Designer

Travis Shirley creates immersive stage experiences for the music industry.

By **CONNOR BEHRENS**

Between traveling the globe with musicians such as Enrique Iglesias and designing large-scale concert stages, Houstonian Travis Shirley has a lot to be thankful for these days.

“I am so grateful for what I am able to do,” he says. “What I strive to do is really take each project and be appreciative of it.”

The San Francisco native has had a lifelong love for music—a passion that has resulted in a successful career designing television and touring stages for artists such as Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, and Sam Hunt.

Growing up in the world of live concerts and recording studios, Shirley was destined for a career in stage and lighting design from an early age.

“My father was actually a musician, as well as my brother,” he notes. “There’s always been a lot of love for music in my family. All those

experiences really got me interested in music at a very young age.”

However, it wasn’t until Shirley moved to Houston in his early teens that his passion for music turned into a full-fledged career. “When my family moved to Houston, my dad started working in the golfing business. At the time, I was in love with this country band called Brooks and Dunn. One day, my dad was thinking about ways to market his business. I said, ‘Why don’t you call Brooks and Dunn? They play golf.’ That’s exactly what ended up happening.”

Soon after, Shirley formed a relationship with the country band, giving him access to everything that happened backstage at their shows.

“Any time the band came to Houston, I would get out of school early and go to the sound checks and hang out with the lighting guys, the video guys—the whole crew,”

he recalls. “That really ignited my career in production design.”

Shirley’s devotion to his work has always stemmed from his passion for creating immersive experiences that both supports the music and creates a memorable event for fans.

“Production design is so interesting to me because it involves coming up with the creative concept of the entire visual element of the tour,” he says. “I love spearheading all the elements that are related to the production—the stage design, the set design, the lighting design, whatever special effects we have happening.”

While the fan experience is important, working with the artists to execute their unique vision is Shirley’s real challenge.

“I usually pitch an idea of what I want the show to look like, based on my initial meetings with the artist,” he says. “Once they get approved, the artist and I work together and start creating the show in terms of what will happen.

It's almost like writing a script, to some extent. You can almost view me as a music producer, but for the visual side. I try to get on a comfortable creative wavelength with the artist [so we can] both work at our maximum creativity."

Shirley also tries to create a unique "look" for each show. "I don't really have a specific style, but I think we are all human and we have tendencies to do things a certain way. I pride myself in making each show different."



Travis Shirley

Nowadays, Shirley needs to shake things up even more as COVID-19 forces artists and designers to get creative with livestreaming and pre-taped performances. "In terms of the music industry, we all have had to collaborate and come up with some unique ways to portray the artist," he notes. "One of the good things to come out of the pandemic is how we produce promotional materials. Artists have become more creative with their late-night TV appearances. They can now pre-film [a concert preview] and make sure everything is super-creative and perfect. It has opened up the level of creativity and the level of professionalism."

When he's not crafting shows and working around the world, Shirley bounces between his two homes in Nashville and Houston.

"Houston is definitely home," he says. "I use it as an escape. I learned early on in my life and career that it was healthier for me to 'leave' work once in a while, instead of constantly being immersed in it. I like to have a little separation in my life."

Going forward, Shirley has several projects planned, with a dream tour knocking around in the back of his mind. "I think we designers all have our dream tours. I think mine would probably be Nine Inch Nails or something like that, just because of the complexity of the music. I'm always looking forward to the next project."

➔ For more info, visit travisshirley.com.



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Redefining Teen Romance

Vichet Chum and Jarred Tetley preview Alley Theatre's 'High School Play: A Nostalgia Fest.'

By DON MAINES



It's the 2003–2004 school year in Carrollton, Texas, and Dara is navigating his senior year as a closeted Cambodian American thespian. Into his drama class walks Paul, a handsome,

confident, openly gay kid from New York City.

That's when things start to get interesting in the Alley Theatre's premiere of out playwright Vichet Chum's comedy *High School Play: A Nostalgia Fest*.

The production has been nostalgic for Chum, "a gay, queer Cambodian American" who graduated in 2004 from Creekview High School in Carrollton. And it's "super-exciting" for out Montrose actor Jarred Tetley, who's been entrusted with the role of Paul.

"This is the kind of high-school experience I would like to have had," says Tetley, who was a theater student at Kempner High in Sugar Land, where he graduated in 2006.

Dizzying sparks fly between Paul and Dara, but "they are not sure how to name it," says Chum. "Conversations around gender expression, race, and sexual identity are much different now than when I was in high school. We did not have as much vocabulary as we do now."

Both Chum and Tetley have fond memories of their involvement in annual University Interscholastic League one-act play competitions, a rite of passage that plays a pivotal role in the production. The fictional Riverside High (a stand-in for Creekview) hopes to redeem itself from an unprecedented loss at UIL, and Paul's arrival from New York City appears to be a godsend for the school's competitive theater coaches, who make the bold choice to spotlight Paul in their one-act play entry. Adding to the drama is the negative community reaction to the play's gay content. And yes, offended parents do make their voices heard.

Equally outspoken are the fictional school's drama coaches—Melissa Pritchett as Ms. Blow and Todd Waite as Dirkson. "They are blunt—especially the way they talk to Dara, because he's Asian," says Tetley. "Their harsh rhetoric is funny in some ways, but it's clear that it is problematic. That's kind of the point—that



Jarred Tetley

funny [comments] can also be damaging. It's definitely not a heavy play; it doesn't get too dark, but today [such an episode] would be all over Facebook. It would make its way through the community and there would be a lot of heat on those people."

At the real Creekview, Chum participated in three UIL shows that advanced to state, including scenes from *Side Man*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Picnic*. But what he remembers most fondly—"my favorite performances, and the space where I felt the most joy"—was speech and debate. Those performances included duet acting and solo turns including Chum's appearance in a monologue from *Wonderland* by Chay Yew, a gay Asian writer.

"It took me some time to come out. I was probably in my late twenties or early thirties," he says. "I have been writing since I was a kid, but my first professional experience as a writer was in 2018—a play that I performed called *Knyum*, which means 'I' or 'myself' in the Cambodian language. My parents are from Cambodia; they were survivors of the Cambodian genocide and they met in the Philippines in a refugee camp."

At vichetchum.com, the playwright describes *Knyum* this way: "[The main character] works the night shift at a hotel in NYC to support a meager artistic life. As the city rests,



Vichet Chum

he encounters his dreams: those of his own and those of his parents who survived the genocide in Cambodia."

Chum's website is chock-full of insights into his identity and work, including his portrayals of gender-bending characters such as Song Lilling in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*.

"I've played various roles that explore gender, race, and culture, and the duality of that," he says.

In a press release for the Alley production of *High School Play*, Chum explains that the play "endeavors to be a love letter to today's, yesterday's, and tomorrow's youth, to offer them grace, power, and love [to face] the journey to be the most authentic version of yourself."

Rounding out the Alley cast are Richard Dávila, Sabrina Koss, Mai Lee, Kiaya Scott, and Daniel Velasco as Dara. The director is Tiffany Nichole Greene, a Houston native.

The play runs January 21–February 13 on the Hubbard stage, and tickets start at \$28. For designated performances, discounted tickets are available for military, seniors, and any student or educator (regardless of age) with a valid student ID.



For more info and tickets, visit alleytheatre.org or call 713-220-5700.

Comedy Queen

Fortune Feimster brings her latest tour to Houston on January 21.

By **JENNY BLOCK**



You see her everywhere—in films, including *Office Christmas Party*, *Social Animals*, and *Father of the Year*. And you hear her everywhere—on television, including,

voicing Evelyn on *The Simpsons*, Brenda on *Bless the Harts* for Fox, and Ava on *Summer Camp Island* for the Cartoon Network.

Fortune Feimster is a stand-up comedian, writer, and actor. She first gained notoriety as a writer and panelist on E!'s hit show *Chelsea Lately*. She then starred as a series regular on *The Mindy Project* for Hulu, and *Champions* for NBC. After that was a slew of guest appearances on television shows including *Claws*, *2 Broke Girls*, *Workaholics*, *Glee*, *Dear White People*, and *Tales of the City*, plus recurring roles on Showtime's *The L Word: Generation Q* and CBS's *Life in Pieces*.

If Feimster is not acting, she's doing stand-up touring all across the world. She's also released specials on Netflix (*Sweet & Salty*) and Comedy Central. She appears in Season 1 of Netflix's *The Standups*, and she created and starred in *Family Fortune* for ABC, which Tina Fey produced. And Amblin, Steven Spielberg's production company, recently acquired *Bad Cop*, *Bad Cop* and *Field Trip*—two features that Feimster is attached to star in.

You can tune in to hear her every morning on Sirius XM's channel 93 for Netflix with Tom Papa, and she hosts a weekly podcast with her wife, Jax, called *Sincerely Fortune*. You can also catch her regularly on David Spade's nightly Comedy Central show *Lights Out*, and she even guest-judges on *RuPaul's Drag Race* now and again.

Houstonians have the opportunity to watch Feimster in all her glory in person this month. The out comedy queen answered some questions for **OUTSMART** ahead of her 2 Sweet 2 Salty tour stop at Cullen Performance Hall on January 21.



COURTESY

Jenny Block: Were you that kid who was just always cracking people up, or did the funny come later?

Fortune Feimster: It happened later. I definitely was a late bloomer in all ways, and that was certainly one of them. I think I would have spurts of confidence that would take people by surprise, because I was fairly quiet and shy.

And then all of the sudden, I would get up on stage at an event where I'd start dancing or do a funny little "bit." So I would pick and choose my moments where people were like, "Oh, we didn't expect that," and I would make people laugh. It was neat to see people's reactions, but then I would go back to being more of the observer and the class clown. So I had it in me, but it took me just getting older for it to really come through on a regular basis.

So when you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

I think I had a more academic path in mind. I was very studious, and I had perfect attendance in school for seven years. So I really enjoyed being in school. I thought maybe I'd be a lawyer or something like that. It just seemed like the studious thing to do, but it was never like I had a passion for that. I thought when I graduated college, maybe I would go to grad school and figure it out then. But then my life took a turn and I ended up in Los Angeles. And for years my mom was like, "Are you sure you don't want to go to grad school?"

If you could go back and tell your 10-year-old self, "Hey, guess what we're going to be doing in 2021," what would she think?

I don't know that I would've believed it. It seemed impossible that someone like me, and from where I was from, could do this. So I think I would've been like, "You're losing it!" But it certainly would have saved me some stressful years knowing that I'd figure out a lot of this stuff one day.

But you know, I would not have been as strong to survive this business and all the rejections had I not had those hard times growing up. I think that stuff all contributed to my thicker skin.

So is there a moment when you knew that you really could make a go of it?

Once I discovered comedy. At least half the battle was that I found comedy and knew right away that it was for me. So I could at least have a clear path of what I was working toward, instead of aimlessly just putting in a bunch of work.

There was something inside of me that was like, "You know what? You're going to figure it out. If you have to take on a couple extra jobs, if you have to do this or that, you're going to figure it out." And that's because I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do, and I think that helped me overcome harder times.

Is there anything that still surprises you about

your work?

It's pretty crazy when I think that I get to make a living making people laugh. I mean, that's incredible when I think, "God, my profession is I get to try to make people happy." I pinch myself every day, and this tour is no exception. After a year and a half of not being able to go on the road and do my job, now we're back on the tour. It started in July, and people have been coming out—and, I think, with a different mindset than before. That people are choosing to come out and see me means a lot. People [have always] liked to laugh, but now you can tell they need to laugh.

You can see the stress and the anxiety of the [past two years] fall off of people's shoulders for a little bit. It gives people just a little bit of a break to let their faces smile. And it's really cool to look out and watch that, because we were all experiencing this truly terrible thing together. And so now, to laugh together means that much more.

Do you have something on your "If I could wave a magic wand" wish list?

My next big goal is to be a bigger part of a movie. I've written a couple of scripts that have been in the development stages, and I wrote them with the intent of playing one of

the main parts. So my big vision-board dream goal would be to make one of those movies that we've written, where I get to be one of the main ensemble characters. I know that I could show a side of my acting in a way that people haven't gotten to see.

I'm very lucky. I get to do a lot of funny things where I come in and have a funny part in a movie. So it would be really great to be able to do that for a whole movie. I'm working hard on rewriting one of the scripts right now, really trying to get that going. So, fingers crossed.

If you could speak to queer kids who are feeling lost, is there something you would want to say to them?

The biggest thing is finding your people so you don't feel as alone, or like you're different. You'll see that there are people just like you, and I think that's pretty powerful. The good news is there is a lot more representation than there used to be, and I think that certainly helps.

I like to perform in places where people haven't had as much representation. If I can have one person see my story and be inspired by that in some way—be it a parent or a kid, or someone who's confused about their sexuality—I can help open their minds or be an

example of a gay person. I take that responsibility seriously. It means a lot to me to try to be a voice for people.

What can audiences expect from your current tour?

Well, my last special left off with a story about me growing up and my journey—trying to figure out who I am. I pick up sort of where that left off. Now I talk about myself as a full adult, and what that looks like and how people can look at me and think that I'm one certain way. And I tell a lot of stories about how I'm not quite what they might think, based on my appearance.

I got to perform in Houston at a club maybe six months before the pandemic, so I'm excited to get back there and do this beautiful theater. And yeah, I just hope people will come out. I think it's a really fun show. It's a whole new hour of material that no one's seen, so if people can make it, I think they'll have a great time.

What: Fortune Feimster's
2 Sweet 2 Salty Tour

When: January 21 at 7 p.m.

Where: UH's Cullen Performance Hall,
4300 University Dr.

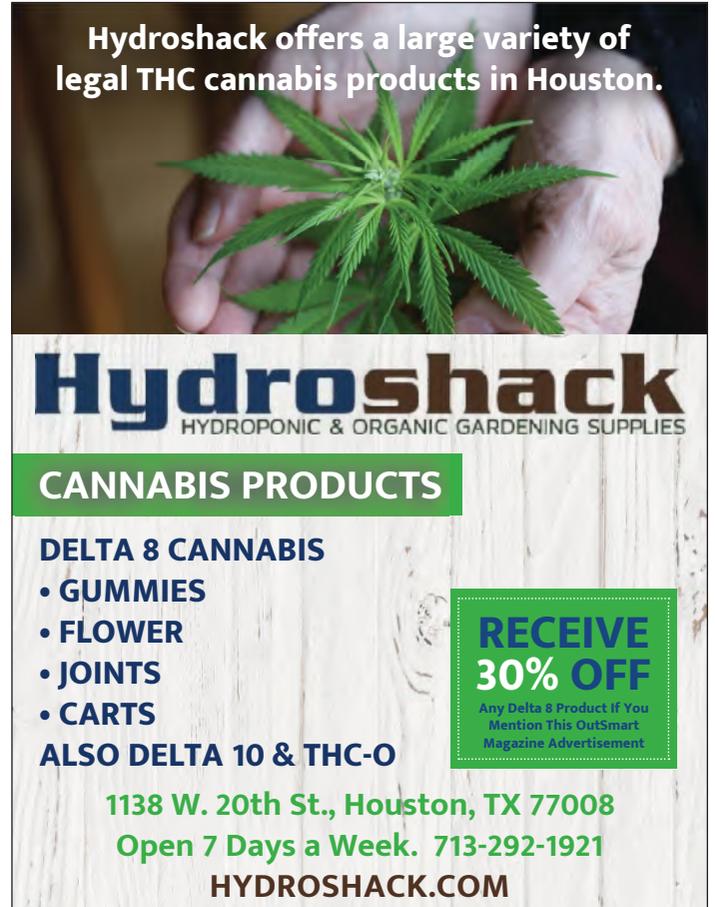
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Making 'em Laugh

Funny man **Matteo Lane** brings the humor to Houston Improv.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **ALEX SCHAEFER**

Matteo Lane has finally made it as a comedian. We're used to seeing clips of the handsome funnyman on social media or performing on Netflix's *The Comedy Lineup*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, *Late Night with Seth*

Meyers, or HBO's *Crashing*. Houstonians will get to see him live January 21–23 doing what he loves to do.

But before he launched his comedy career, Lane started in a much more classical part of the performing-arts world. “[When I was 15], I knew that I wanted to be onstage, and I wanted to do the comedies at my high school, but I wasn’t old enough. So a classmate told me I could join the show choir,” he recalls. “I didn’t think, at that point, that I could sing. But when I joined, I realized I really *could* sing. My teacher pulled me aside and said my voice is very well developed and that I should use a private teacher.”

Lane studied under Nick Falco, one of the Chicago area’s renowned voice coaches, who taught him proper breathing and opera technique. “And all the good stuff that you need as a classical singer,” he adds.



After high school, he went on to art school and studied storyboarding and fashion illustration, where he focused on figure painting. (Not finger painting, Lane jokes.) He also studied oil painting in Italy.

"I graduated and got a job immediately out of college. I was storyboarding for television commercials and fashion ads professionally. I made an entire living doing commercials for clients like Lexus and 7 Up. I did a lot—a lot—of hair and makeup commercials because I can draw a believable woman very quickly, which gets you a lot of work. My whole life was basically art: drawing, painting, portrait painting, more drawing, etc."

But the calling he felt to get into comedy never stopped. "It's like a nun's calling," Lane notes. "My friend was dating a comedian in Chicago [who] said he would give me three minutes on stage. And I just loved it. Then I started learning more about comedy: 'Oh, you have to do this every night. Oh, you have to go to open mics every night. Oh, there's a whole community. Oh, you need to start doing bar shows.' Everything kind of opened up to me, and I started to discover what the world of comedy is, and I became obsessed. It was a huge shift in my life."

It was then that Lane decided to move to

New York City to pursue his dreams.

"I moved to New York for a drawing job, and I thought I'd keep performing stand-up. I knew literally no one in New York, and on my first day living in the city I went out to an open-mic night. It really is a young man's game—I don't think that I could not do that now at 35. But I was 25, and I had nothing to lose, so I just went for it," he says.

He spent the next two years doing stand-up every chance he got. (Or, as he puts it, "I sang in high school, made art in college, and started telling dick jokes at 25.")

"I did comedy every single night, and three to four open-mics a night. I eventually got on TV and was able to quit my day job. I didn't get paid a lot, but it was enough for me to say, 'If I'm going to make this move, I'm going to make this move.' It's a lot of work. It's no dating, no drinking, no partying. You focus 100 percent on stand-up comedy. Your friends are comedians, your life is comedy, your entertainment is comedians, your life is all about jokes. Now I'm a little more established, so I can take a vacation or go on a date. But at first it was like training for the military."

He mentions Kathy Griffin, Margaret Cho, and Joan Rivers as his inspirations. His humor is drawn from his experience growing up gay

in a big, messy family, so he credits his relatives with giving him his start in comedy.

"I have a very, very funny family. My mom and her brothers and sisters had a very traumatic childhood: interracial parents, divorce, and separate families. My childhood was a complete mess. My family turned their negative experiences into something palatable through humor. So I was taught to deal with a lot of my issues with humor," he admits.

Now that he has finally started gaining notoriety as a comic, he can slow down and enjoy a few evenings at home enjoying his original passion: music.

"I'm not very exciting. I don't go out anymore. I'd rather stay home and listen to older music. I love Sarah Vaughn, Cleo Laine, Barbra Streisand, and Mariah Carey. I like good vocalists. It's the only kind of music I listen to," he explains.

In fact, even though he claims the "G" in the LGBTQ acronym, he laments that there's not an "M" in there for "Mariah Carey fan."

 *Matteo Lane plays at the Houston Improv, 7620 Katy Freeway #455, January 21–23. For show times and tickets (\$40 to \$180), visit improvtx.com/houston/comic/matteo-lane.*

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WEDDING GUIDE

MAGICAL MOMENTS

David Armendariz and Jesse Gudino honored their fairy-tale romance with an adventure in Spain.

By **JENNY BLOCK**
Photos by **JOY ZAMORA**
and **MANUEL BORRERO**



Jesse Gudino (l) and David Armendariz



It was a “meet cute” made for the big screen when David Armendariz and Jesse Gudino met in September of 2015. Jesse was working at Hollywood Video, and David

was there shopping. David knew Jesse was the man he wanted to marry as soon as they met. And Jesse recalls that he knew David was “the one” from the moment they eventually had their first kiss.

David’s feelings were confirmed as he learned more about Jesse. “He has strong family values, is interested in the beauty industry, and wants to have children. He also likes to make everyone around him happy,”

David explains.

David and Jesse are both Houston natives who now live in the First Ward. “We both are first-generation Americans and have had a business together for eight years now,” says Jesse, who co-owns Houston’s Studio A Salon with David. Hard to argue about a love that works at home *and* in the office.

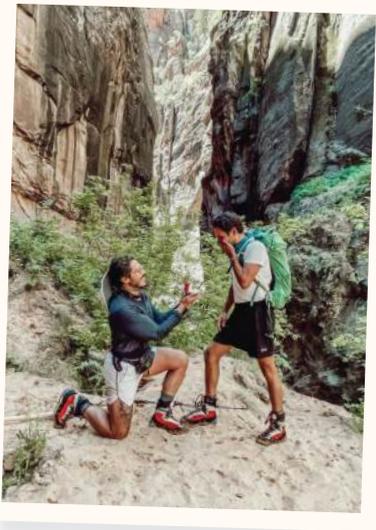
Although the couple was ready to wed in 2020, they were forced to postpone their wedding three times because of the pandemic. Then they decided to forgo a traditional wedding altogether. “We decided to take advantage of the small window of travel last summer and elope in Spain—one of our favorite countries,” Jesse explains.

Jesse, 28, went to San Jacinto College for

his cosmetology training, and also studied art at the Glassell School of Art. David, 41, who went to the University of Houston Moores School of Music to study music and dance, is the founder and co-owner of Studio A Salon.

Of course, such a fairy-tale meeting needed to be followed by an equally romantic proposal. That happened on July 28, 2020, when David proposed to Jesse on a hike in Zion National Park. David got down on one knee on a tall rock, pretending it was a photo-op, and told Jesse he was ready to spend the rest of his life with him. Jesse was completely taken aback, and tears filled his eyes immediately.

Interestingly, that magical moment was just the first of three national-park visits for the couple. “Our engagement, engagement



shoot, and wedding were all in national parks,” David notes.

The pair eloped on July 28, 2021, to El Pico de Águila in Yátova, a Spanish mountaintop near Valencia. But they still wanted to support their LGBTQ community even a continent away from home, so they searched on Google and found photographer Joy Zamora and a few other gay-friendly vendors. “We found Joy and fell in love with her work,” Jesse says.

Then, with the help of a wedding planner, they crafted a romantic adventure in Spain to honor their union. “Our elopement started with us bathing in an old palace marble tub, strolling through the city of Valencia dressed in Versace and Fendi, and then riding a boat across a local lake while indulging in Valencian paella,” Jesse recalls. “We finished our day on a secluded mountain at sunset. This is where we said our vows dressed in McQueen. We ate a traditional Spanish picnic and had a local Flamenco group dance and serenade us. Mind you, our excellent wedding planner Lorena, of Eventos Clandestine, had all of this coordinated in one week.”

There was one moment in particular at their wedding that the couple says will stay with them forever. “The Spanish guitarist [playing in] the crisp mountain air was unforgettable. So romantic. And we planted a tree for our recently lost dog, Darla, in the same place where we married,” David adds.

Because they eloped, the romantic pair decided not to have an officiant. “We wrote our vows and said them to each other,” David says. To make it legal, they will go to the county courthouse in Houston to be married by a judge.

Because they love the Greek island of Mykonos and its beaches, David and Jesse decided to honeymoon there.

The couple is filled with kind words about one another, as should be the case in any sweeping love story. “Jesse is a kind soul. He loves to make people feel special and happy. I see it every day in how he treats his clients and staff,” David says. Jesse continues by explaining what makes David so special. “He comes from a family of ten and treats his salon company like they are family, as well. He is kind and loyal, and wants to be a part of his community.”

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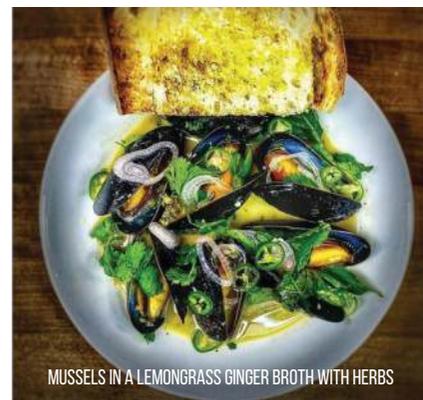
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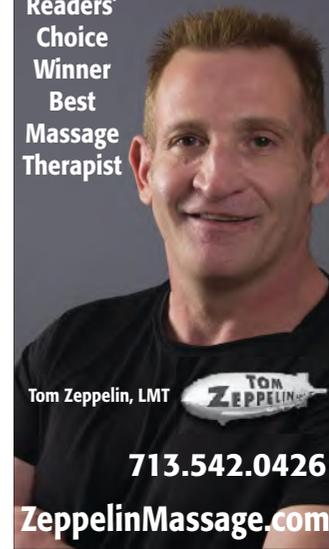


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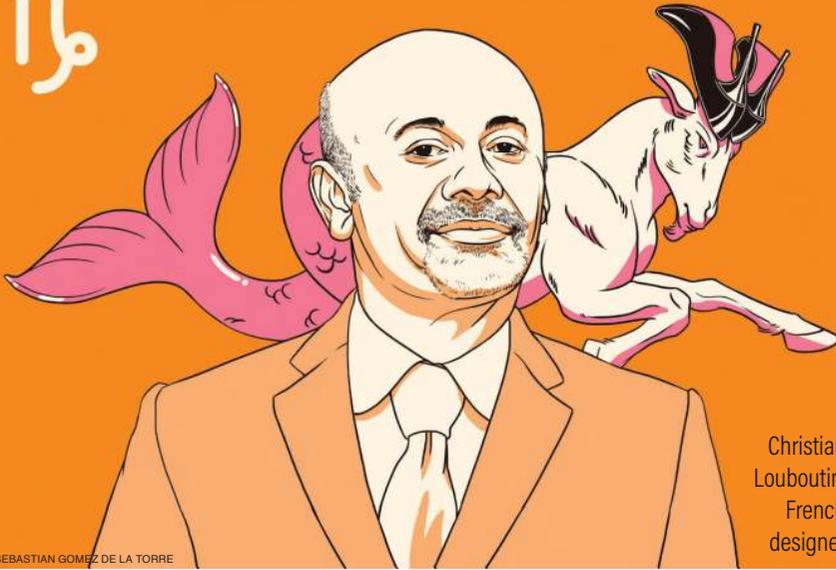
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A Smart Start to 2022

Capricorn season gives us time to set our goals for the new year.



We start the month with both Mercury and Venus retrograde, so we may want to wait to work on our New Year's resolutions in early February. We are having a sluggish start to our New Year! The cardinal signs—Aries, Cancer, Libra, and Capricorn—are the ones most impacted by the Venus retrograde, while the fixed signs of Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius are being influenced by the Mercury retrograde. This is a good month to review where we are and decide what we want to accomplish this year, which activities and work commitments we will keep, and which ones we should bring to an end.

The days that are easier for us are January 1, 5, 8, 10, and 23. More difficult days are January 11, 14, 16, 28, and 30. Mercury retrograde begins on January 8 through February 10. Focus on what's in front of you instead of taking on new tasks. Venus will continue to be retrograde until February 10 as well. Avoid new commitments and investments, and don't spend your money without some thought. This is a much better time to deal with the past and the choices you've made.

ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

Career activity is very active as the month begins, with both Venus and Mercury retrograde in this area of your horoscope. You may be feeling more than ready to make a change, as these planets will highlight the problems that have been bothering you all year. Your sense of responsibility will be tested. Be sure and seek out advice from friends and professionals who can help clarify your thinking. You can easily feel unappreciated if you haven't been paying enough attention to your boundaries. By midmonth, you are a bit more detached but you still have strong feelings. This can be your time to start something new, or to take on a different role along your career path. You will not be very patient, and exercise can help channel the excessive energy you are feeling.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

This month, you are more in touch with the flow of the holidays and the people around you. You have positive things to say that can help boost people's attitudes and self-confidence. This is a much better month for opening yourself to new ideas, exploring ways to enhance your education, or considering starting a podcast to reach a broader audience. By midmonth, you are shifting your focus to your career as you reinvent yourself and find work that really calls to you. With your ruling planet, Venus, retrograde, it's better to review your plans now and then put them into action after February 10. This continues to be a time of setting goals, creating better bonds with your partner, and expanding your outreach to business or self-improvement groups to get their support.

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

Any tasks or projects you would like to get started should be

completed in the first week of January, as your ruling planet, Mercury will be retrograde from January 9 through February 10. You have a view of the bigger picture, and by midmonth you are reviewing your career path. There are some big opportunities coming your way in the spring. Relationships are very active, and will need some attention this month. This is a good time to get away to have some fun. If you aren't paying attention, your partner may become easily irritated. This month you are reviewing your resource base, your debt, your commitments, and the reality of your situation. It's also easier to see people's motives more clearly. You will be ready to move forward in February.

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

This month you are working to improve your fitness program, restructure your relationships, and chip away at debt to improve your financial picture. Business and personal relationships are very much in review, as Venus retrograde is having a direct impact on you. Difficult relationships will need to be addressed at this time, no matter the outcome. Existing relationships need some nurturing. This is a good time to advertise to your existing client base, rather than trying to reach out to a new market. By midmonth you are back to improving your resource base, eliminating debt, and taking a closer look at yourself. The latter half of the month is a very good time for therapy, seeking out a life coach, and establishing better habits and boundaries. You may need to replace some office equipment or communication devices.

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

This month you are paying attention to your self-care routines, possibly by revisiting things you did in the past. This is also a super time to redo your office setting. You need to get updated to deal with the general changes that are occurring

in business. Difficulties with a co-worker may also show up this month. These are definitely old problems that have reignited, and rumors may add to your problems. You will be confronting this particularly in the latter part of the month. By midmonth, you shift your focus to your partnerships as you work on improving your boundaries and being clearer about what you will or won't do. Your desire to look for a more suitable career continues. You will be better prepared to make some choices after mid-February.

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

You are in a creative and playful time as the month begins. This should have also made your holidays a lot more fun. Some of you are exploring ways to turn your hobbies and interests into something that can generate income. You are definitely looking for something that is more soul-satisfying, and at the same time is valuable to the community. This is a very good time to be around children or people who are less restricted. They can show you a happier and more nourishing way to live. By midmonth, your need to get your routines and obligations in place gets stronger. You may be improving your office space, and especially your internet devices. Establishing boundaries will help limit interruptions and improve your efficiency. Relationships are definitely improving this month, and through the entire year. If you are single, after February 10 is a good time to look for a partner. If you are involved, that period will help you heal old wounds.

LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

Your holidays were somewhat unsettled, and that energy continues through January as well. With family, there are a lot of changes that are creating a different power base. Senior family members may be competing to be the patriarch or matriarch as older relatives age or leave the planet. This

energy is exacerbated by the fact that Venus, your ruler, is retrograde in this area, forcing everyone to relive the past. You may be deciding on who in your family you want to continue having a relationship with! By midmonth you are ready to take a step back for some perspective, but you aren't ready to find clarity just yet. The latter part of the month is also a more creative time, and you're looking for ways to make that creativity contribute to your long-term security. Work gets busier, and that may help you gain some perspective to make the best choices.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

This month is a big time of rethinking your choices and decisions. You may even feel stuck and unable to move forward. If you are a writer or blogger, you are looking for a more organized approach to making social media work for you. You may be thinking about stepping into a student or teacher role as you explore what makes the universe go! By midmonth you'll need to focus on your family and decisions about elderly family members. You are also trying to create more balance in your home and work lives. Relationships are very interesting at this time. If you are involved, your partner is looking to renew those bonds. If you are single, you are open to the clever, smart types! If you are having difficulty, this will be a time to confront those problems. Take your time, because decisions are best made after February 10.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov.22–Dec.21)

You continue to be busy and ready to start new adventures on a moment's notice. You could also be more restless and have difficulty sleeping. This is a very good time for

fitness programs. It will also be easier to lose your temper as you take life more personally! You are very focused on your financial picture this month. You may be considering different investments, retirement, asking for a raise, increasing fees for your services, or getting out of debt. In the latter part of the month, you are speaking your mind more directly. You are also guarding your personal time by improving boundaries with the people you interact with. Family issues are improving this month, and through the whole year. You may be doing some remodeling or even moving. It's going to be busy!

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

Well, the center of the universe has apparently settled in your sign this month. Not only is Venus retrograde, making you rethink all of your commitments and decisions, but she is also ready to help you clear out the past. The holidays may not have felt like much because you are focused on yourself and your immediate needs. Your environment continues to change, so you are not feeling much stability. You may want to act, but you will find that there are obstructions that force you to rethink your original plans. It's best to wait until February 10 before moving forward. You may feel like you are overbooked and overcooked! You get a big boost of energy at the end of the month that will help you to get moving. Finances still feel tight as you try to make sure that you are safe in the future. Exploring a new approach is a great option, especially as we get into February.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

You are in a rest-and-retreat mode as the month begins. You are taking time to get centered, as you have some big deci-

sions to make this year. By midmonth, you are getting more active and connected to your larger career and relationship goals. You are wanting your partner to participate more in your relationship, and you may be feeling under-appreciated. This is a good time to make sure that your partnerships, both business and personal, are aligned with your interests. Career is going to take on a much larger role for you this year. You may be looking at starting something on your own, taking on more responsibility, or looking at retirement. You will feel better about making decisions after February 10. You are still trying to lighten your load and get rid of people and things that limit your freedom.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

This is going to be a busy and dynamic year for the Mermaids and Mermen. Jupiter, the planet of growth, travel, education, and personal growth, is visiting your sign in 2022, starting this month. This Jupiter cycle repeats every 12 years. You may want to look back at 2009 and 2010 to recall what you did at that time. Despite the retrogrades this month, you are still moving forward in your career by creating new options to explore. You are looking for work that really calls to you, and not something that just pays the bills. Friends, social groups, and business associations can be very helpful and supportive in suggesting ways to improve your financial security. By midmonth, you are ready to take a back seat and rest. You are entering a more sensitive time, and you will need to choose your associates more carefully.



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Sister Act

Kara and Tara Dion are Houston's dynamic drag duo.

By **SAM BYRD**
Photo by **ALEX ROSA**



No, you're not seeing double vision. There really is a pair of identical siblings in Houston's drag scene. Kara and Tara Dion have often used their mirror images, sharp wit, and bilingual abilities to captivate audiences. And what's more, they can show twice the love for their community through their joint philanthropic efforts. There were never two more devoted sisters, either. This July marks their 29th year performing as female illusionists. Read on for more about these Texas twins.

Hometown?

Huntsville, Texas

Pronouns?

He/him/his

Inner Avatar?

Kara: The Mandalorian

Tara: Mickey Mouse

Drag birthdate?

July 1993

How did you get into drag?

We had a roommate who worked at Rich's. It was a turnabout show and he was moving the next day, so he offered up his twin roommates since he was busy. The rest is history.

How did you choose your names?

Tara: In the back of the car on the way to Rich's. We both loved Celine Dion, so we felt like that was a good last name. Then our friend Jonathan said our names should rhyme. Kara and Tara was called out in the car, and Kara quickly claimed that name. No "first dog or first street" names here!

Talk about growing up as twins.

Tara: Growing up as twins was great. We had each other. Our own built-in BFF. We got a lot of attention being identical. At age 5, I got involved in theater and the arts. I don't know how we would have made it out of high school and on to adult life without arts and

entertainment. I think it saved me.

Have you ever pulled a switcheroo?

Tara: We have. As it relates to drag, the biggest one was at Miss Gay USA. I changed into a "Kara" costume [to perform, then left the stage so Kara could quickly come on] in the same costume—but a different color! That was special and something that would be hard for anyone else to recreate. It was a moment I know we and others won't forget.

Do you perform any illusions?

Kara: Shania, P!nk, Katherine Zeta Jones.

Tara: Michael Jackson, Edward Scissorhands, and Ronald McDonald are my dead ringers.

Talk about your charity work.

Tara: I am most proud of the work some friends and I have done recently at the Pride Pantry.

What are you leaving behind in 2021?

Kara: 2021 has been a year of many struggles and losses. It's been a year with lots of negativity and fear. I'm looking forward to people hugging and loving on each other more.

Tara: I'm looking forward to continuing to create our new normal. I am recently officially married, so this is my first Christmas and New Year's as a husband. I'm really grateful to be able to say that. I did not think I'd reach this point ever in my lifetime, but the world has changed so much.

New Year's resolutions?

Kara: To live a healthier and more productive life, both on and off the stage.
Tara: To continue to grow my professional career, and entertain when I can during my off-time.



What do you want people to know about Houston's drag scene?

Kara: Believe it or not, drag is everywhere around us. From College Station to Galveston, you can find a show on almost any given night. There are so many kinds of drag and art.

Most embarrassing moment in drag?

Kara: You should pin your wig all the way around. Pinning the front will give you the Pez Head effect on stage. That was embarrassing.

Tara: It's a long story, but I carried a ferret on-stage during my first attempt to become Miss Gay Texas America. She peed on me. I am not sure what happened to her after that category!

How did you develop your sense of humor?

Kara: Growing up, we were in theater. Humor is a way to break barriers, and takes a long time to get it right. Often during shows and events, we are called upon to stall. Gotta be funny to pass the time!

Tara: Believe it or not, our mother is very funny. I think our quick wit came young as a defense mechanism, and showed up later in life as a newfound confidence in who I was. I really don't think I am that funny. I think I have a different perspective—not taking stuff too seriously.

What do you see as the future of drag?

Kara: I hope that people will embrace every facet of drag entertainment. There is no box. All drag is valid.

Tara: The sky is the limit. We see so many variations of drag these days. I think it will continue to be a platform to change the conversation and move the needle on acceptance, art, and freedom of expression.

Who were your drag influences?

Kara: Miss Piggy (lol!), Paivi Lee Love, Lawanda Jackson, and in my early years traveling the state, Lauren Taylor was a great friend and mentor.

Tara: Paivi Lee Love, Lawanda Jackson, Britney Paige, Miss Zach, Ron Sue, Dyan Michaels. There are many. I was very lucky to sit in dressing rooms of past legends, and I still have opportunities to meet and work with these individuals.

What do you get to do as twins that no one else gets to do?

Kara: Quick-change costumes.

Tara: We share unique DNA. No one can be Kara and Tara Dion but us. It's funny because some of the drag kids have gone dressed as us for Halloween.

Houston's best-kept drag secret?

Kara: Although he has basically retired, we

were fortunate enough to have Lupe do our hair for many years. Many people do amazing hair now, but back in the day he was the best, and we were among the few who were blessed to have many custom pieces.

Tara: There are more dresses in closets than you might think. We are some of the bravest role models around. We are influencing and showing others—some you may not know or suspect—that it is okay to be yourself, express yourself, and not be defined by the fact that you wear makeup or costumes.

What's it like representing as Ms. Gay Texas America?

Kara: It was a great year for me. It was a one-time opportunity to leave my mark, and influence future symbols of excellence. It is a job you don't take lightly, and is rewarding far beyond your "give up."

Tara: It is something I cherish. I met many people that year and learned a lot about myself. It was a gateway to opportunity, and it taught me that being visible comes with challenges. You are a role model and an example. That never leaves you.

What's on your bucket list?

Kara: Christmas in New York.

Tara: A trip abroad.

Do you get recognized in the drag community for being the rare twins?

Tara: We do. It's funny because sometimes someone will look at me and just say something like, "Are you one of the twins?" I may or may not know them, but we do get recognized.

Do you have any sibling rivalry, or is it 100 percent being supportive of each other?

Tara: We are brothers, so we have had our spirited conversations. But it's mostly all love. We are each other's number-one fans, for sure.

What has drag taught you about yourselves that you carry in your everyday lives?

Kara: Responsibility for managing a busy schedule [in so many] different places. Also, you have to invest in yourself and your art.

Tara: In my professional career, I am reminded that it is always right to look for the person behind the makeup and the attire. First impressions are powerful, but lasting impressions are what create friendships and chosen family.

Describe your drag personas.

Kara: Fun, funny, and classic.

Tara: Funny and particular.

Pet peeve when you're performing?

Kara: Nails! You *have* to have on nails!

Tara: Nails, for sure! I knew we both would say that. And taking time to stop and thank a fan, or say hello. I know I stop lip-syncing during my performances to say a verbal thank you. I appreciate everyone who comes to see me and likes my art.

What do your fans in the audience do that you appreciate?

Kara: When a fan or audience member is there to see and appreciate a show. You can tell when the audience has respect for the performer. It makes us work harder and definitely gives them a better show.

What is your dream job?

Kara: To work full-time on a cruise ship.

Tara: I have it. I am not done growing professionally, but I love what I do. But if I had to say a "dream job," I would say something in musical theater on Broadway. Maybe in drag, but not necessarily.

What is your ultimate goal as Tara and Kara?

Kara: To continue helping our community, and to entertain. Staying relevant is a challenge, so having our own style and gimmicks has always been a plus.

Tara: There is no ultimate goal for me. I want to entertain as long as I can, or feel that I want to. I'll continue to try and be a role model for up-and-coming entertainers.

What are your hobbies outside of drag?

Kara: Long weekends to Las Vegas and other cities to see friends and shows.

Tara: Playing pool, going to outdoor markets, and attending sports and live music events.

What advice would you offer your younger self?

Kara: Don't second-guess yourself. Appreciate that you are different, and that being different sets you apart.

Tara: Don't be in such a hurry to find the next big step or thing in your life. Enjoy each moment, be open to learning, and embrace mistakes.

What else can you tell us about Tara and Kara that would be interesting?

Kara: Our mother always had drinks and snacks for us in the car during trips. If you look in our purses when we are out, chances are there is a cheeseburger in there. Either in our purses or our cars, there is literally anything we might need.

Tara: I take about an hour longer to get ready than Kara does. I don't know how she gets ready so fast!

SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



On November 14, 2021, "Revolution of Love" honoring Don Gill was held at Neon Boots. Pictured are **JP Gill, Jules Czarnek, Larry Arbo, Don Gill, Regina Dane, David Armstrong,** and **An'Marie Gill.**



Houston Pride Band hosted the national Pride Band Alliance Conference in Houston November 17-22, 2021. Pictured are **Christopher Wells, Elizabeth De Los Rios, David Lee Williams, Russell Ben Williams, Daniel Summers,** and **Vanessa De Los Rios.**



On November 27, 2021, the Disco Turkey 20th-anniversary celebration was held at ReBar. Pictured are the hosts and friends.



World AIDS Day event was held at Legacy Wellness Bar on December 1, 2021. Pictured are **Kenneth Celestine, Sandra Arreola,** and **Maggie White** along with the performers.



On December 1, 2021, AIDS Foundation Houston presented its Behind-the-Scenes reception at BeDesign. Pictured are (front row) **Caleb Brown, Angel Rau, Sheng Kuan Chung, Leslie Nagy, Jennifer Simon, Derrick Brown,** and **Chris Chism;** (back row) **Russell Cotton, Kyle Pierce,** and **John Huckaby.**



The Montrose Center's annual Out for Good gala was held at The Ballroom at Bayou Place on December 3, 2021. Pictured are **Jack Berger, Dalton DeHart, Ann J. Robison, Julia & Jason Wang,** and **Deborah Duncan.**



The Montrose Center's annual Out for Good gala was held at The Ballroom at Bayou Place on December 3, 2021. Pictured are **Dina Jacobs, Ann J. Robison, Kennedy Loftin,** and **Tara M. Kelly.**



Share Your Blessings Holiday Blast, benefiting Legacy Community Health and Interfaith Ministries, was held on December 5, 2021, at La Griglia. Pictured are **Greg Harper, Lisa Foronda Harper, Jim Sikorski, Martin Cominsky, Chree Boydston,** and **Tim Martinez.**



On December 10, 2021, the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber held its annual food drive at SignatureCare Heights and Eureka Heights Brewery. Pictured are Chamber members and volunteers.



Pride Chorus Houston held its Holiday Traditions concert at Lambert Hall in the Heights on December 11, 2021. Pictured are members of the chorus.



On December 12, 2021, The Legends special holiday show was held at Curtain Call at Bayou Place. Pictured are **Kara Dion, Cristina Ross, Dina Jacobs, Bubba McNeely, Monterio J. Ross,** and **Mimi Marks.**



The Holiday Ball 2021 Red Ribbon Toy Drive was held at Michael's Outpost on December 14, 2021. Pictured are **Oscar Perez, Joanna Jetton, Bobby Balderas, Crystal Vallair, Lucy Salazar, Angela Mercy, Dena Page, Maria Mendizabal,** and **Martin Enrique Munoz Colon.**

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