

OUT FOR CHANGE: LGBTQ CANDIDATES RUNNING IN 2022 Pg.30

OutSmart

FEB. '22

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

Black History Month

Pride Parade Founder
Larry Bagneris
Pg.42

The LOVE Issue

Space City Sweethearts

TONI MASCIONE
AND JACLYN MADRID
PREPARE FOR THEIR
DREAM WEDDING
Pg.48

Plus

Local queer
couples navigate
married life
Pg.50



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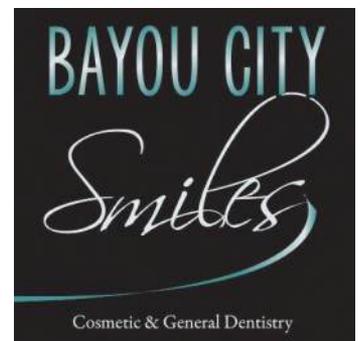
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Toni Mascione and Jaclyn Madrid prepare for their dream wedding
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Copy Editor Howard Maple

Web Editor Lourdes Zavaleta
Staff Reporter Lillian Hoang

Contributing Writers

Olivia Flores Alvarez, Rich Arenschioldt, Bill Arning, Susan Bankston, Connor Behrens, Jenny Block, Sam Byrd, Blase DiStefano, Andrew Edmonson, Ste7en Foster, Alys Garcia Carrera, Martin Giron, Sarah Gish, DL Groover, Marene Gustin, Kim Hogstrom, James Hurst, Lisa Keen, Ryan M. Leach, Don Maines, Zachary McKenzie, David Odyssey, Joanna O'Leary, Lilly Roddy, Adriana Salazar, Terri Schlichenmeyer, Gregg Shapiro, Janice Stensrude, Henry V. Thiel, Terrance Turner, Megan Wadding, Brandon Wolf, Grace S. Yung

Photographers/Illustrators

Edgardo Aguilar, John-Paul Arreaga, Dalton DeHart, Yvonne Feece, Frank Hernandez, Ashkan Roayae, Alex Rosa

Marketing Department

Jack Berger, Gene Mikulenko, Angela Pisecco, Adriana Salazar

National Advertising Representative

Rivendell Media - 212.242.6863

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February might only be 28 days long, but there is no shortage of local LGBTQ happenings this month.

Between Valentine's Day, Texas primary elections, and Black History Month observances, there's lots of ground to cover in this special edition of *OUTSMART*.

We kick off "the month of love" by introducing you to four local queer duos who are navigating life together in Space City. Writer Jenny Block interviews our cover stars Toni Mascione and Jacklyn Madrid, a lesbian power couple preparing for their dream wedding. Meanwhile, writer Ryan Leach speaks to husbands Cole Wehner and Brett Chynoweth, while writer Sam Byrd chats with wives Barbara

Ervin and Enita Torres, and writer Lillian Hoang sits down with spouses Ashleey Houston and Jose Suarez.

Elsewhere in this issue, we gear up for the Texas primary elections by spotlighting four LGBTQ candidates who are stepping up to ensure their community's voice is heard. Writer Zach McKenzie talks to Ben Chou about his run for Harris County Commissioner Precinct 4, while writer Marene Gustin interviews candidates Jolanda Jones for State Representative, Porscha Natasha Brown for Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 3, and Steve Duble for Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2.

Early voting for the March 1 primary runs February 14 through 25. For a list of polling locations and hours, visit

vetotexas.gov. Learn where the candidates stand on LGBTQ issues through the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus' current roster of endorsements, which is available at thecaucus.org.

This Black History Month issue honors queer Black pioneers who paved the way for LGBTQ visibility in politics and the arts. Ryan Leach speaks with Larry Bagneris, the founder of Houston's Pride parade and the first Black president of The Caucus, and Sam Byrd spotlights modern-dance icon Alvin Ailey, the gay Black Texan whose iconic dance troupe comes to Jones Hall this month.

And don't miss the other touring performances by some of our favorite queer artists. Writer Connor Behrens chats with

gender-fluid pop artist Dorian Electra about their tour stop at Warehouse Live on February 19, while writer Don Maines talks to *RuPaul's Drag Race* star Miz Cracker in advance of her March 2 show at The Heights Theater. For a full list of events, be sure to check out our monthly Queer Things to Do Calendar.

See you next month!

Lourdes Zavaleta
Managing Editor




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Queering the Vote

LGBTQ organizations encourage folks to rally for change at the polls on March 1.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Last year, a record number of LGBTQ candidates—at least 410—ran for public office nationwide, an increase of 7 percent over 2019. And the rainbow wave continues this year, with more LGBTQ candidates than ever.

Former Houston mayor Annise Parker, now president and CEO of the LGBTQ Victory Fund, released the following statement about their current candidate endorsements:

“The 2022 election cycle presents enormous opportunities for our community, including the potential to dramatically increase the number of LGBTQ state legislators and electing LGBTQ leaders in states where there are few. These LGBTQ candidates are essential to defeating the wave of anti-LGBTQ legislation we see across the country, and to pushing forward policies that are inclusive of our community. We are investing early in these races because that is when we can make the greatest difference—and winning in 2022 is more important than ever.”

“We have over 700 LGBTQ+ candidates running nationwide this year,” Parker tells OUTSMART. “It’s a combination of things—people are saying ‘enough is enough’ about the Trump years, and success breeds success. We’re finding that being LGBTQ is not a positive, but it’s not a negative. There’s what I call the Pete Buttigieg effect. By running for president, he increased awareness. As we get more high-profile LGBTQ candidates, whether they are successful at the ballot box or not, they raise awareness.”

Here in Houston, there are several LGBTQ candidates on the March 1 ballot, including three LGBTQ women of color—Jolanda Jones, Aurelia Wagner, and Namrata “Nam” Subramanian—running for the State Rep. District 147 seat alone. Porscha Brown is running for Harris County Criminal Court No. 3; Steve Duble is running for Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2; and Ben Chou is running for County Commissioners Court in Precinct 4. Also, the so-called “Fab Five” LGBTQ judges (Beau Miller, Jason Cox, Jim Kovach, Shannon Baldwin, and Jerry Simoneaux, who all won



Annise Parker



Jovon Tyler



Ricardo Martinez

election in 2018) are up for re-election.

“Locally, we have our work cut out for us this year,” says Jovon Alfon B. Tyler, president of the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus. The Caucus is the oldest LGBTQ civil-rights organization in the South, founded in Houston in 1975 to endorse local LGBTQ-affirming candidates and encourage education and activism through political advocacy.

“Due to the voter suppression bill passed during the special session, we are fighting an uphill battle to get out the vote,” Tyler emphasizes. “Vote-by-mail has become more difficult, we have bans on 24-hour voting and drive-thru voting, and there are now partisan poll watchers at the voting booth. Governor Abbott and Republican state legislators wish to disenfranchise Texans, and particularly Texans of color, from their constitutionally protected right to vote, but we will do what we can to combat this by clearly communicating SB 1 changes, helping to register people to vote and, as always, pushing our pro-equality slate of candidates. We desperately need a change in leadership for the betterment of the state, and we welcome any and all help from community members to make that a reality.”

And how can voters find out exactly who’s who in the Texas races?

“Equality Texas is launching a brand-new directory for any candidate running in the 2022 election,” says Equality Texas CEO Ricardo Martinez. That nonprofit battles discrimination targeting the LGTBQ community,

primarily during odd-numbered years when the Texas Legislature is in session. They work with pro-equality legislators to protect LGBTQ Texans from legislative attacks.

“Our goal is to give voters as much information as possible before they turn out for the polls, including highlighting those candidates who are pro-equality and who themselves identify as LGBTQ+,” Martinez says. “Our directory should not be seen as an endorsement; we simply want to centralize information so that our community has a place to turn to before conducting their own in-depth research on candidate platforms. We will not endorse any candidates in the primary election, but we will use the directory to invite candidates to participate in our general-election endorsement process.”

“We’re playing the long game,” Parker says. Things are changing as voters get younger and the fallout from the Trump years motivates both candidates and voters. “The toxicity inspires people to run. These issues are ridiculous. Should trans students be allowed in sports? Of course! And more and more people are seeing that.”

For the Victory Fund candidate endorsement list, visit victoryfund.org. For the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus endorsements, visit thecaucus.org. Candidates wanting to be listed in the Equality Texas directory can visit tinyurl.com/dndbc58w.



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SCENE OUT

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On December 18, 2021, The Caucus presented A December to Remember holiday party at Buddy's Houston. Pictured are **Katharine Ligon, Jeff Watters,** and **Jovon Tyler.**



The Krewe of Olympus presented Twelfth Night Laissez les Bon Temps Rouler (Let the Good Times Roll) at Central Houston Cadillac on January 8, 2022. Pictured are **Andy Eversole** and **Tony McClland.**



On January 15, 2022, the 10x10 Art Show 2022 was held at Hardy & Nance Studios. Pictured are **Robin Baker, Angela Buentello, Wood Fancher Anthony,** and **Himesh Patel.**



ERSICSS held its Coronation 37: Enchantment Under the Sea at the Sheraton Brookhollow on January 15, 2022. Pictured are **Empress XXXVII Ivanna Hyde Cupcake** and **Emperor XXXVII Landon J. Fatale.**



On January 22, 2022, Pride Sports Houston Dodgeball held its Week 1 Team Play at Q&B Sports Complex. Pictured is Team "Balls Out."



Bunnies on the Bayou presented Snow Bunnies 2022 at ReBar on January 16, 2022. Pictured are some of the Bunnies on the Bayou hosts.



The Montrose Center held its Martin Luther King Jr. Volunteer Project on January 17, 2022. Pictured are the volunteers.



EPAH held its January 2022 dinner meeting at Maggiano's Little Italy on January 18, 2022. Pictured are **Kennedy Loftin, Michele Laprade, Jodie Morris, Raidel Roque Gamboa,** and **Chris Corey.**



On January 19, 2022, An Equality Texas Meet-Up was held at Jenni's Noodle House. Pictured are **Indigo Giles, Ann Elder, Ben Elder, Diamond Stylz, Meghan Fairbanks, Brad Pritchett, Rafferty Laredo, Gabe Cazares,** and **Derin Dacey.**



John Ross Palmer exhibited his recent artworks at Braemar on January 20, 2022. Pictured are **Matthew Janak, Kevin Pope, Cindy Childress, Jay Stone, Midge Claiborne, John Ross Palmer, Jack Charles,** and **Walter Chartrano.**



On January 16, 2022, Steve Duble held a fundraiser for his Justice of the Peace campaign at Under the Volcano. Pictured are (front row) **Dave Riddle, Steve Duble, Jacques Bourgeois, Queen Persephone,** and **Kevin Begnaud.**



Pride Sports Houston Dodgeball held its Week 1 Team Play at Q&B Sports Complex on January 22, 2022. Pictured is Team "Black Bulls."

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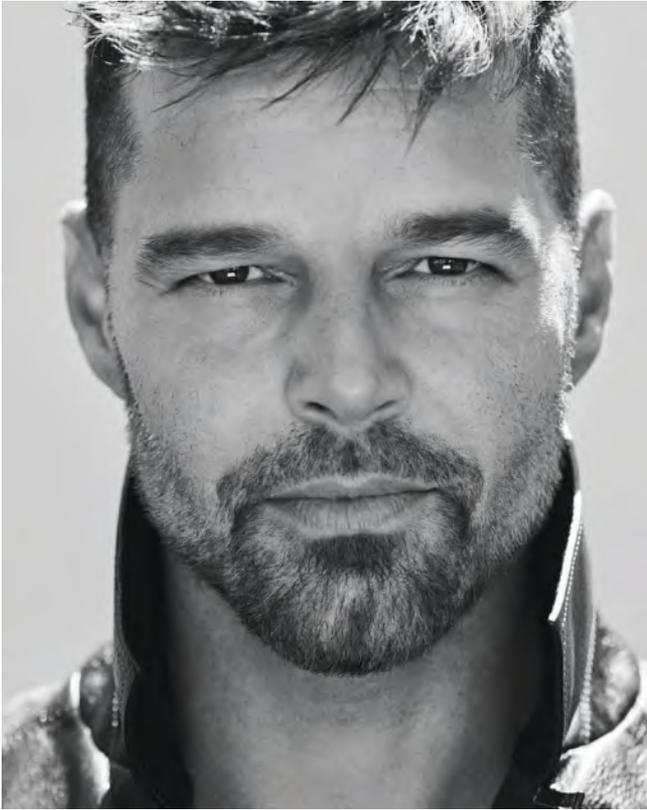
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QUEER THINGS to DO



STAGE

February 28–March 20

Houston Rodeo

The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo celebrates its 90th anniversary with an impressive lineup that has LGBTQ locals waiting in anticipation. Traditionally, entertainment at the Houston Rodeo has focused on country music artists, but it has now branched out into EDM, banda, pop, rock—creating a more diverse event.

As the Rodeo expands their offerings, they are also becoming more LGBTQ inclusive. This year, openly gay superstar Ricky Martin will be performing on March 15. Martin is widely known as the “Latin King of Pop” and has sold over 70 million records worldwide, making him one of the most influential Latin artists.

Martin publicly came out as

gay in 2010 by saying, “I am proud to say that I am a fortunate homosexual man. I am very blessed to be who I am.” In 2018, he married Syrian-Swedish painter Jwan Yosef, and they’re now the parents of four children.

Along with including an out musician in its lineup, the Houston Rodeo has also included LGBTQ allies who have openly supported the community. This includes Maren Morris, Sam Hunt, Khalid, and Brad Paisley, as well as queer fan-favorite Gwen Stefani.

Tickets for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo start at \$20 and can be purchased at rodeohouston.com.



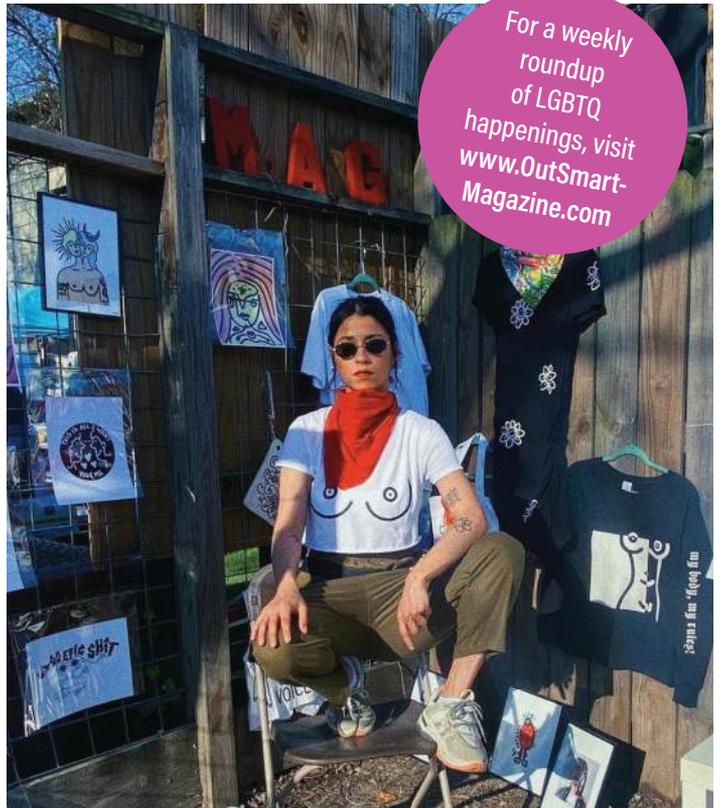
COMMUNITY

February 1

PRIMARY-ELECTION ENDORSEMENT MEETING

The Houston Stonewall Young Democrats, an organization of progressive Democrats that supports the LGBTQ community, hosts their virtual endorsement meeting for the upcoming primary election. Register on the group’s Facebook page.

tinyurl.com/mv6zdm2a



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

February 6, 13, 20, 27

PRIDE MARKET

Pearl Bar hosts its weekly Pride Market. From crawfish to art, the event features all LGBTQ vendors—your one-stop shop for all things queer.

tinyurl.com/2padct94

COMMUNITY

February 4, 11, 18, 25

DRAG RACE VIEWING PARTY

JR's Bar & Grill hosts its weekly RuPaul's Drag Race Season 14 viewing party. Happy hour lasts until 10 p.m., and food will be provided by What-A-Taco Kitchen. tinyurl.com/yw23t34c



COMMUNITY

February 5

MONTROSE ART MARKET

BUDDY'S Bar hosts its monthly Montrose Art Market. The event will showcase crafts, paintings, wall art, and fashion accessories created by local artists. tinyurl.com/ywpd57z7

February 6

DRAG BRUNCH EXTRAVAGANZA

Head down to Scotty's Pub on the Bay in League City for its Drag Show Extravaganza hosted by Kiki Dion Van Wales, with performances by Miss Pride Galveston, Emerald Foxx Paris, and Miss Island Goddess Chachie Petrada Van Wales. For reservations, call 281-339-7474. tinyurl.com/2s49xh9m

February 6, 13, 20, 27

BOHEME'S FAMOUS DRAG BRUNCH

Head over to Bar Boheme for their Sunday Funday Drag Brunch featuring Cyn City, Chloe C. Ross, and Angelina DM Trailz. DJ Athenz will be on the turntables until 4:30 p.m. tinyurl.com/3xfdj8jt

February 12

BATTLE OF THE BALLADS

Tony's Corner Pocket presents Battle of the Ballads, a celebration for Angela Mercy's 10-year "drag-iversary" and a fundraising event for the KAOS scholarship fund. The surprise lineup will feature local Houston drag performers singing infamous power ballads. tinyurl.com/2yrpya27

COMMUNITY

February 18

BUDDY'S INK

Get tattooed at BUDDY'S Houston during this BUDDY'S Ink event. Artist Megan Medina offers her tattooing services ranging in price from \$80 to \$150. Food provided by Tacos Orlando. tinyurl.com/mw89kudp



STAGE

February 18, 19

ALVIN AILEY DANCE COMPANY

The Society for the Performing Arts presents the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, an iconic troupe founded by Alvin Ailey, a Texas-born gay man whose works have deep roots in the Black experience. tinyurl.com/48bf7a9d See page 62

STAGE

February 19

DORIAN ELECTRA

Warehouse Live presents Houston native Dorian Electra, a nonbinary queer artist on their 2022 tour, My Agenda. Purchase tickets on the Warehouse Live Eventbrite page. tinyurl.com/ycknjxkn See page 65



STAGE

February 24

MITSKI AT WHITE OAK MUSIC HALL

White Oak Music Hall presents Mitski live in concert performing her upcoming album, Laurel Hell. All attendees must wear a mask and provide proof of vaccination or a negative PCR test taken 48 hours or less before the show. tinyurl.com/yzfcbane

More QUEER THINGS TO DO →

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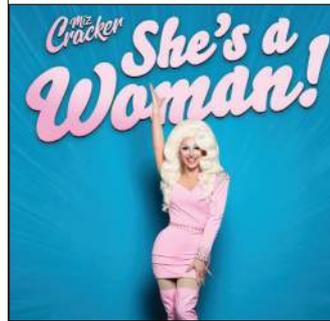
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STAGE
March 2
MIZ CRACKER'S COMEDY AND MUSIC TOUR
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tinyurl.com/2p845jc9



STAGE
March 10
FLETCHER
 Live Nation presents Fletcher, a queer rock musician, at the House of Blues Houston. The out artist rose to fame in 2016 when her song “Wasted Youth” reached #1 on Billboard’s Emerging Artists Chart.
tinyurl.com/mr3he8xr



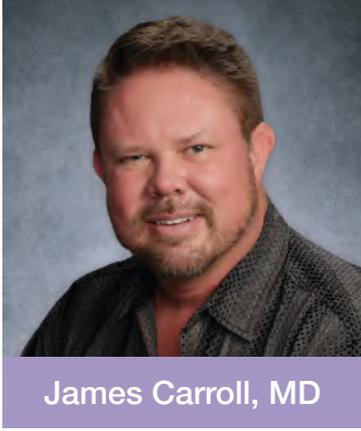
STAGE
March 24
BEN PLATT
 Openly gay stage, screen, and recording artist Ben Platt is supporting the release of his new album *Reverie* with a spring concert tour coming to Sugar Land’s Smart Financial Centre.
tinyurl.com/pxdcd824



COMMUNITY
March 27
TODRICK HALL
 Live Nation presents openly gay musician Todrick Hall at the House of Blues Houston. Hall is well-known for his YouTube personality and appearances on *American Idol* and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.
tinyurl.com/2wsve2yj

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you know that I am fixin' to sprinkle glittery chaos dust all over your pathetic self. And I'm asking my friends to help.

In the news this month, the Republican National Committee says it will prohibit their presidential candidates from participating in the debates unless the Commission on Presidential Debates changes their rules. Personally, I think the Republicans are just afraid of ending up with several candidates who can't sip water and listen to questions at the same time.

As you would expect, the Republican National Committee is being cagey about exactly which rules need changing. I suspect it depends on who their nominee is.

For example, if Congressvarmint Majorie Taylor Greene wins the nomination, the debate rules will be the ones used for trailer-park knife fights. The debate halftime will feature

a hair bleach-off, with cussing not mandatory but strongly encouraged.

If Senator Marco Rubio is their guy, the rules must state that extra points are awarded for being short and smug.

Senator Rand Paul's debate rules would require moderators to only ask questions that can be answered "No!" (After all, there's no point in surrounding a perfectly good "No!" with actual sentences.)

Texas Senator Ted Cruz would surely insist that the debate can only be held in Cancún. Lucky for us, we won't have to endure the broadcast because he'll also require that the power grid goes down.

To make Florida Governor Ron DeSantis feel right at home during the debates, the rules will state that all participants, moderators, and spectators must be COVID-positive.

Radio jock and kook-king Alex Jones will just yell, "Screw the rules! This is a damn brawl and I'm the victim!"

Former Vice President Mike Pence would change the rules to require the Secret Service to storm the stage and rescue him from the evil clutches of Donald Trump halfway through the debate.

And nominee Donald Trump (heaven forbid) would have the debate rules changed to give him five minutes to promote his online store, which will be renamed GiveTrumpAllYour-Money.com. No, seriously. Give him all your money. You know he's going to get it all anyway.

* * *

Moving on to other sage observations, imagine making \$174,000 a year, showing up for work less than half the time, and refusing to work when you do show up. As if that were not enough, then start to purposely sabotage company goals and fight nonstop with your coworkers. And don't forget to spend endless hours on Twitter and the TeeVee news shows bashing your employer while feeding your enormous ego. That's pretty much the United States Senate.

Until next month, whatever you do, first ask yourself: Is this gonna cause the word "premeditated" to get tossed around in the courtroom?

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

Uncoupling After COVID

How the pandemic is impacting intimate partner relationships.



Every time you turn around, someone is talking about another relationship that became a COVID casualty. Perhaps it's a couple who began dating shortly before

the pandemic, quarantined together, but then broke up as restrictions eased. Or a long-term couple that seemed to have it all together, but ultimately decided to split once the world reopened.

Although these stories may feel commonplace, it has actually been quite difficult for researchers to measure the degree to which COVID has impacted intimate partner relationships. And finding out how LGBTQ relationships have been affected remains especially challenging.

Studies suggest that divorce rates have increased as much as 30 to 50 percent since COVID began. Newer relationships, and particularly marriages of less than one year, seem to have been especially hard-hit by the pandemic.

All of this raises an important question: if intimate partner relationships are supposed to be a source of strength and support, what does it say about relationships—and perhaps our expectations for them—that so many couples have been driven apart by the stress of COVID, rather than turning toward each other?

As it turns out, the overall stats on same-sex marriage are pretty good. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, in 2019 there were roughly 980,000 households with same-sex couples in the United States, and most of those were married (58 percent, compared to 42 percent unmarried). And when it comes to splitting up, the



divorce rate for same-sex couples is about half of that for heterosexual married couples. These numbers challenge the stereotype that LGBTQ relationships are unstable. Yes, queer people are partnering up and getting married. And yes, those marriages *can* be successful.

In fact, it's possible that a unique type of mutual understanding lies at the core of queer relationships, creating a bond that is difficult to erode. This may be the result of LGBTQ couples having to overcome so much—including family, work, coming-out, and health issues—in order to be together.

Relationship Challenges

So how, exactly, has COVID contributed to the demise of so many relationships? Certainly, the annoyances of everyday life were magnified during the most intense days of quarantine restrictions. Without the usual

outlets for relief, couples were forced to spend inordinate amounts of time together, resulting in areas of minor friction deepening the pre-existing cracks.

Beyond the usual relationship dynamics, LGBTQ couples can be disproportionately impacted by employment stress, financial strains, and mental-health or substance-abuse disorders. These additional stressors can contribute to relationship demise by weakening the resolve of one or both partners.

And as always, bringing the best version of yourself to an intimate relationship is often impossible when you're still struggling internally to become the best version of yourself.

Back to Basics

Starting and maintaining relationships can be tough. It requires you to negotiate a way to create time and space in your life for another →

Meghan Gerety Vanitas



Meghan Gerety, *Vanitas (04)*, 2021. 25 x 21 inches (framed), blockprint ink on carved plywood.

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person. As you make accommodations for your partner's wishes and desires, you end up compromising in order to meet in the middle. You're figuring out how to communicate your side of things while also allowing the other person to be heard and understood. You practice vulnerability, hoping your partner accepts you—warts and all—as they begin to see a side of you that no one else has seen. Expressing vulnerability is an important and underdeveloped skill for many people. Most societies and cultures prize people who appear to have everything together, even when they don't. The good news is, these skills can be practiced and learned over time.

How can people in relationships find support, strength, and comfort through their partners during trying times? Do you ask for help when you need it, or do you assume that your irritable behavior will tell your partner that you're having a tough time?

Do you work to create more open channels for communication and dialogue? Scheduling time to “check in” on each other's feelings can be a vital component of deepening intimacy.

Getting Real about Dating

If you're single and meeting new people, it's important to monitor your expectations. Making assumptions about a potential partner's character or intentions is an easy way to get off track when dating, especially since we may not always be entirely generous when interpreting the behavior of others.

Avoid making long lists of “must haves” for your dates. Sometimes the most exciting aspect of building a relationship comes when you discover something unexpected in a new partner.

If your tendency is to commit to others prematurely after only a few dates, perhaps you should work to slow things down. While you don't want to play games with other people's feelings, it's helpful to keep your options open and remember that it takes more than a few dates to get to know someone.

Looking at your previous patterns of behavior can provide many of the answers on how to proceed with future relationships. What things have you done in the past that work well and enhance getting to know someone? What mistakes have you made that you want to avoid repeating? Ultimately, it is through our relationships with others that we learn the most about ourselves. Knowing yourself is the key to finding the right partner.

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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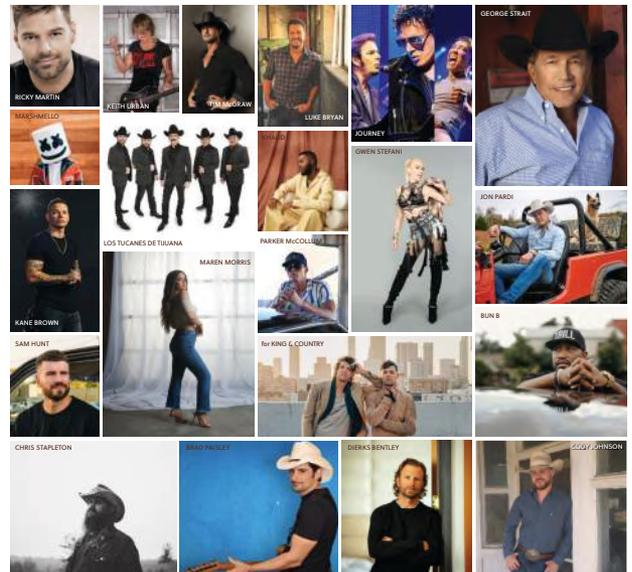
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Reprioritizing Your Retirement Goals

Self-care and self-love begins with financial security.



Although the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting our world for over two years now, there is still a great deal of uncertainty regarding when—or if—it will ever end. Because of

that, many people have been re-evaluating and re-prioritizing different areas of their lives, including work and retirement goals.

Regardless of the ways in which you and your loved ones have been impacted by COVID, you (and perhaps your partner) may be among the growing number of individuals considering early retirement, even if you are still many years away from qualifying for Social Security, Medicare, and penalty-free withdrawals from your retirement savings plans.

And with the right strategies in place, you could find that financial security isn't just a distant dream, but rather a very real possibility—as well as a way to promote self-care and self-love.

Re-evaluating Big and Small Goals

When COVID-19 initially hit the U.S. in early 2020, the severity of the pandemic caught most people by surprise. With millions of lives lost and countless jobs terminated, our previous notions of “financial security” have been severely challenged.

Given that our world will likely never be the same, more and more people are now realizing just how precious life can be. Even more than money or property, time is a valuable commodity, and once it has passed, it is gone forever.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has prompted many people to rethink their retirement timelines and how they live. But before jumping ship and taking early retirement, it is absolutely essential that you (and perhaps your spouse or partner) have a good, solid financial plan in place.

Taking Control of Financial Security

Having true financial security can allow you to worry less about paying your bills, so you can concentrate on more important areas of your life such as spending time with your loved ones. Personal goals that you have pushed to the back burner because of work-related demands,



such as going for a daily hike, volunteering at a favorite charity, writing that book you've been meaning to complete, or visiting all 50 U.S. state capitals, can become real possibilities with a solid financial plan.

With that in mind, many financial planners agree that it is extremely important to review and revise your plan in light of our “new normal” and the associated changes in priorities that have come with it. Doing so can help you work toward staying on track and not letting future uncertainty derail your goals.

Enjoying Life at Any Age

Creating financial security is no longer just a nice goal “for the future.” So if you want to retire early, how can you ramp up your savings and reach your objectives sooner?

There are actually several potential strategies available. While some of these may not seem like they would make a big difference, even small changes can really add up. These could include:

- cutting expenses and creating a spending plan,
- downsizing sooner rather than later,
- having a plan to cover future healthcare costs,
- being more mindful of current and future tax obligations,
- gradually easing into retirement.

While many people don't like the thought of using a budget, having a spending plan in place can help you curb expenses and divert more of your income into savings. Even the little things can make a big difference, such as cutting your cable TV bill by just \$25 per month. And more dramatic changes, such as downsizing your home or apartment now rather than in the future, can reduce major expenses such as your monthly rent or mortgage, utilities, and home maintenance bills.

As we get older, healthcare costs tend to rise. Many individuals are eligible for Medicare when they turn 65, and if you have worked and paid enough taxes into the system, you will qualify for premium-free Medicare Part A (hospitalization). Married same-sex couples are now entitled to the same rights as opposite-sex spouses, so your spouse may also qualify for Medicare based on your work credits, or vice versa.

If you leave your job and lose your healthcare coverage prior to age 65, you may have to purchase an individual insurance policy, or it may be possible to get coverage through your spouse or partner's employer-sponsored plan.

Another key area that can make or break your financial security is taxes. That's because the more income tax you have to pay, the less net spendable income you'll have available for paying your bills.

Over the past century, the top federal income-tax rate has vacillated between a low of just 7 percent and a high of 94 percent. And in 49 of the past 109 years, it has been 70 percent or more. It is believed that tax rates will go up again in the future, so taking advantage of tax-free savings accounts like the Roth IRA, or other tax-free strategies, can make a tremendous difference in how well you are able to live.

When it comes to income taxes, your tax rate depends on your income amount and your filing status. In some cases, it may make sense from a tax perspective for same-sex couples in long-term committed relationships to get married.

In other instances, particularly for higher-income earners, LGBTQ couples could obtain more tax breaks if they wait to marry until after one (or both) retires. Each case is different, though, so it is important to work with a tax advisor and a financial-planning professional who can guide you with this type of planning.

If you aren't financially ready to completely exit the workforce, you could instead ease into retirement by generating some passive income from your investments or other financial vehicles, while at the same time working a part-time or freelance job. For many people, retirement doesn't mean leaving the workforce altogether, but simply focusing more on things that they enjoy. Going this route could provide you with a steady income and more time to spend in the way you choose. Picking up a part-time job or freelance gig could also provide you with a way to save extra retirement money while you continue to work full-time for a while longer.

Staying on Track

If you want to shave several years off of your retirement timeline, you will most likely need to make some significant changes now. But because everyone's goals and timelines differ, there isn't just one single plan that will work for all individuals or couples across the board.

In order to come up with the right plan for you (and your partner, if you are in a relationship), you should first meet with a financial-planning professional who can evaluate your situation and map out a plan based on where you want to go.

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/lgbtplus.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.

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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
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BEFORE TAKING BIKTARVY

Tell your healthcare provider if you:

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

Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you take:

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

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BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:

- ▶ Those in the “Most Important Information About BIKTARVY” section.
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- ▶ **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.

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

HOW TO TAKE BIKTARVY

Take BIKTARVY 1 time each day with or without food.

GET MORE INFORMATION

- ▶ This is only a brief summary of important information about BIKTARVY. Talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to learn more.
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Please see Important Facts about BIKTARVY, including important warnings, on the previous page and visit BIKTARVY.com.



OUT FOR CHANGE

The Texas primary elections are just around the corner, and LGBTQ candidates from across the state are stepping up to ensure their community's voice is heard. In the Greater Houston area, there are at least 12 out contenders running for office:

- **Aurelia Wagner** for State Representative, District 147
- **Beau Miller** for the 190th Civil District Court of Harris County
- **Ben Chou** for Harris County Commissioner, Precinct 4
- **Jason Cox** for Harris County Probate Court No. 3
- **Jerry Simoneaux** for Harris County Probate Court No. 1
- **Jim Kovach** for Harris County Civil Court at Law No. 1
- **Jolanda Jones** for State Representative, District 147
- **Namrata "Nam" Subramanian** for State Representative, District 147
- **Nelvin Adriatico** for Texas House of Representatives, District 28
- **Porsha Natasha Brown** for Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 3
- **Shannon Baldwin** for Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 4
- **Steve Duble** for Harris County Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2



Read on for interviews with four of these candidates—Jolanda Jones, Porscha Natasha Brown, Ben Chou, and Steve Duble. Early voting for the March 1 primary runs February 14–25. To find a polling location, visit votetexas.gov.



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Bringing Compassion to the Court

Porscha Natasha Brown promises fair and equitable trials if elected to Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 3.

By MARENE GUSTIN | Photo by JANCIA BOLES



Porscha Natasha Brown, 32, grew up as the child of two U.S. Army parents. Her mother immigrated from Trinidad and Tobago, and her father came from a crime-filled area in Stockton, California. Both enlisted to better their circumstances, and they instilled in their daughter (one of five children) a strong sense of responsibility.

Born at Fort Hood, where her parents first met, Brown was raised in north Austin. From there, she traveled to Huntsville to graduate from Sam Houston State University with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice with a double minor in Spanish and political science. She went on to attend the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University, where she participated in the Innocence Clinic as well as the school's first LGBTQ organization that was active in educating individuals about HIV/AIDS. She graduated in 2015 and became a staff attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project in El Paso, and with the El Paso County Public Defender's Office. While there, she obtained a master's degree in public administration from the University of Texas at Arlington. She continues to be involved with Black and LGBTQ causes.

Brown is currently a public defender in Harris County, and lives in Houston with her partner, Samantha Romero, and their two dogs, Pepino and Paleta. She is running in the Democratic judicial primary for the Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 3.

"One of the main reasons I'm running is because I care," says Brown. "I care about people who are accused of crimes, I care about the victims of crime, and I care about the community. As a public defender, I've seen what kinds of criminal-justice reform are successful in real time and can reduce the rate of recidivism."

As a crime victim herself who was robbed ten years ago, she can identify with the victims. And from her own background growing up, she understands how easy it is for people from disadvantaged communities to wind up in court.

"I understand what it's like to not have money and to be different than those around you," she says. "I always try to understand where they are coming from. I want to create a court that is fair for all." →



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In Texas, there are three types of criminal courts: misdemeanor, felony, and appellate. Misdemeanor courts, such as Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 3, handle cases like DWI, possession of marijuana, evading arrest, assault, and family violence, among other low-level offenses that still have jail time as a consequence.

“I believe that in pre-trial and sentencing, we can push for more comprehensive services that provide for future success—resources that address mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness. I believe that I can be a part of the solution for Harris County and provide a court that is efficient, follows the law, and is fair for all.”

“I BELIEVE THAT I CAN BE A PART OF THE SOLUTION FOR HARRIS COUNTY AND PROVIDE A COURT THAT IS EFFICIENT, FOLLOWS THE LAW, AND IS FAIR FOR ALL.”

—Porscha Natasha Brown

Brown feels that her experience as a public defender sets her apart from her primary opponents.

“I’ve been in the jail and have stood by my clients in court as they are being sentenced,” she says. “I’m a first-generation college graduate and lawyer, a first-generation American on my mother’s side, and a Black lesbian. I have compassion for all of the people I serve.”

Former Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 3 Judge Erica Hughes’ term ended December 31, and she isn’t running again. On January 4, Brown was nominated by Harris County Commissioners Court to fill the vacancy. Although she was honored by the nomination, Brown decided to turn down the appointment and continue with her efforts to seek the approval of voters in the upcoming election.

“I love Houston,” says Brown. “I love the diversity, the cutting-edge feel. I love that the city is so progressive, and that criminal-justice and bail reform are at the top of the list. As a Black lesbian, I have felt nothing but love here. And the food is great—that, and the dog parks!”

 For more info on Porscha Natasha Brown, visit porscha4judge.com.

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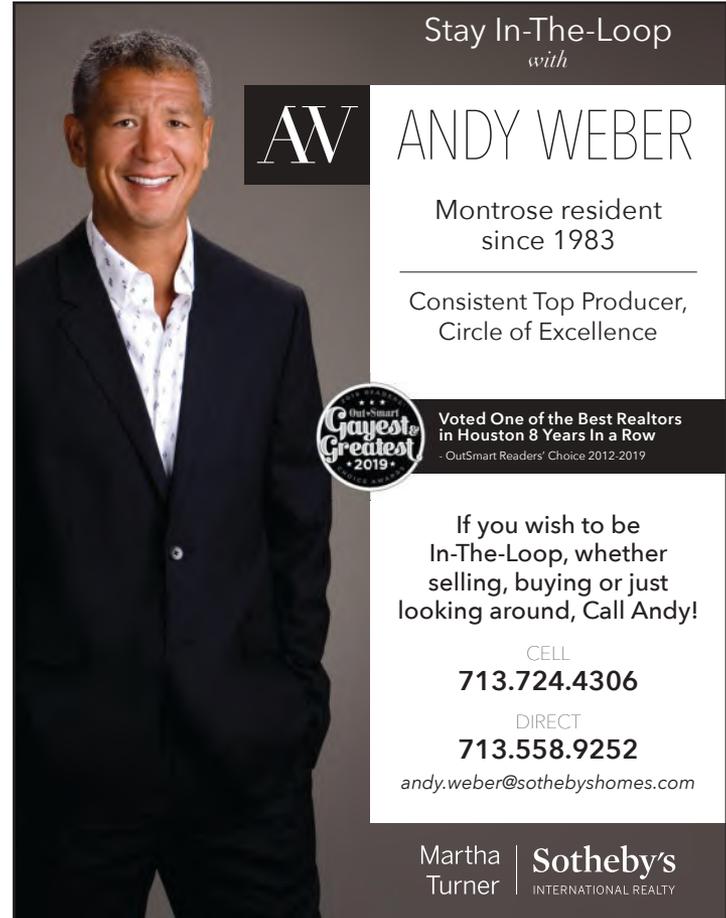
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Political Powerhouse

Jolanda Jones vies to continue her legacy of activism in Texas District 147.

By MARENE GUSTIN



In a crowded seven-candidate field to replace retiring State Representative Garnet Coleman in District 147, Jolanda “Jo” Jones stands out in the Democratic

primary race.

Jones, 56, is a medal-winning athlete, University of Houston graduate, criminal-defense attorney, reality-TV star, and a politician who previously served on the Houston City Council, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) board, and the Democratic Party committee for Senate District 13.

Despite having grown up surrounded by violence in Houston’s Third Ward—including the suicide of her father when she was only 13 months old, and the murder of a sibling—the Black lesbian Houstonian has had some notable successes. The longtime LGBTQ advocate was once married to an abusive husband, and until a year ago was in a relationship with businesswoman and trainer Cherisse Traylor, her best friend since 1982.

“My [current] girlfriend is my campaign,” Jones laughs. “I can’t even think about dating until it’s over.”

She has indeed persevered through a rough childhood, an abusive marriage, and suicidal thoughts. “Whenever I was at my most desperate, there was always someone there for me,” Jones recalls. “My aunt or my grandmother—it was a village of people.”

She knows her past political experience will benefit the constituents of Texas House District 147.

“Having an attorney drafting legislation will be good, and having someone with past government experience is a plus,” Jones says. “When I was on City Council, people would call and complain about things that were State issues that I could do nothing about. [And then while I was on the HISD board], the same thing would happen [with people complaining about school funding] that we could do nothing about.” →



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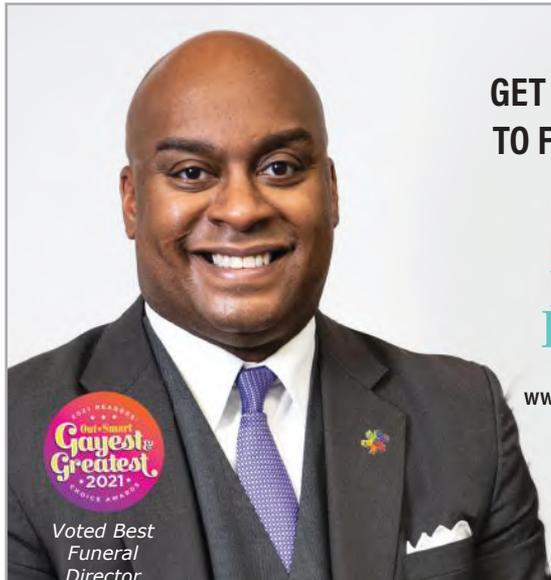
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Her priorities at the state level would be voting rights, healthcare access, public education, and public safety.

“There are states where you have to opt out of voting,” she explains. “In Texas, you have to opt in. That’s wrong. We should also have same-day registration, longer voting hours for workers, and restore voting rights to those who have done prison time. Voting is stacked against the poor and minorities.

“I also want to expand the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid in Texas. Before Obamacare, I didn’t even have health insurance. My son broke his foot and it got infected. They were going to amputate it. I nearly went bankrupt saving my son’s foot. That shouldn’t happen in this country.”

Jones was living in Spain when her son was born, and she had free prenatal and natal care while she was there.

“When it comes to Texans’ health care, I say ‘What would Governor Abbott get?’ When he got COVID last year, he had the antibody treatment,” Jones notes, referring to the governor’s Regeneration therapy, a two-drug cocktail of monoclonal antibodies that costs \$1,250 per infusion. “Whatever health insurance the governor and the legislators have, everyone in Texas should have,” she says. “What they get, we all should get.”

Jones also has a laser-focus on public education. “Teachers and school staff need pay raises,” she says. “And I’m not for tax dollars going to pay vouchers for private schools. Plus, we need to focus more on trade schools. Not everyone is cut out for college. Trades—like electricians and plumbers—make good money. And the tugboat captains down at the port can make up to half a million dollars a year, in some cases.”

She’s also adamant about improving public safety. “People don’t need assault rifles,” Jones emphasizes. “As a criminal-defense attorney, I know what the system is like. People want to blame judges for letting violent offenders out on bail. But often, the district attorneys won’t set a bail hearing, and that forces the judges to set bail for them. That’s the law right now.”

Jones is also passionate about LGBTQ rights, and very proud of her son, Giovanni, who is now 30 and recently graduated from law school. She raised him to be an advocate, and he has been a straight ally member of the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus since he was 12. “He’s always been supportive of me, and I’m very proud of him,” she says.

“I fight for the oppressed,” Jones concludes, “and against the oppressors.”

 For more about the candidate, visit jolandajones.com.

An Innovative Advocate

Ben Chou's inspiring ideas are a driving force in his campaign for Harris County Precinct 4 Commissioner.

By ZACH MCKENZIE
Photo by YI-CHIN LEE



Houston made national headlines during the 2020 election season, thanks in part to Harris County's massive success in implementing drive-thru voting locations. That system, intended to make voting safe and accessible during the ongoing pandemic, was the brainchild of gay Southwest Houston native Ben Chou.

Chou's talent for innovation, his upbringing as a child of immigrants, and his passion for inspiring future generations are what drives Chou's current campaign for Harris County Precinct 4 County Commissioner.

The 31-year-old candidate's experience with creating a local drive-thru voting option as the director of innovation at the Harris County Elections Office showed him the possibilities for bringing old systems into a new era. "The drive-thru voting system was so successful. In fact, we did a survey after our July primary race in 2020, and we had bipartisan approval," Chou says. "Then the state legislature [got rid of] voting innovation, for no other reason than Donald Trump cried voter fraud, which we know was never actually an issue. It was so widely supported, which is evidence that we need these new ways of thinking in county government."

It may seem like an uphill battle to go up against Texas Republicans, but Chou is more than prepared to answer the call. "Republicans have gerrymandered the state legislature so much, but we have opportunities to win at the county level. We've got to continue to stand for our values and create policies that are effective. I'm sick and tired of Republicans beating us up. We have to keep pushing the envelope to fight back."

Aside from voting rights, Chou's priorities

include a list of grievances he's heard for years through his community-service work. "When I talk to people, the biggest things I'm hearing are the need to fix potholes and sidewalks, flooding, and criminal-justice reform," Chou emphasizes. "In just about every neighborhood, people are talking about potholes. I want to create a 72-hour guarantee, where you can report a pothole and within 72 hours we will have someone on it and fixing it. Other cities are doing it, so we should be, too. All of our government services need to be in a 21st-century model."

Honing in on an issue that is top of mind for all Houstonians, Chou says, "Flooding is a constant issue, and we must act in environmentally responsible ways to improve our bayous." And summarizing his priorities with criminal-justice reform, the candidate says, "We must decrease violent crime [in a way] that treats people with dignity and respect and keeps law enforcement accountable."

The personable public servant also knows the turmoil that LGBTQ youth in Texas can face, which is why his goal of empowering young queer people is so important to him. "It wasn't until I was in college and Annise Parker was elected mayor that I realized politics was a possible future path," he recalls. "When I made my campaign announcement, a student who identifies as nonbinary messaged me on Instagram and told me that Katy ISD had banned LGBT websites [that supposedly promoted] 'alternative lifestyles.' They asked if I would be willing to speak to the school board to op-

pose this. I don't live in Katy, but my district is largely in Katy. The student was proactive and reached out, and I was more than happy to go and speak on their behalf. I'm glad to be able to carry these messages and speak out about what school boards are doing [and how their actions hurt] LGBT kids."

Despite pressure from his family to become a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer, Chou remains devoted to serving his community through the political process. "This is our first chance to elect someone that is gay to a county commissioners court in Harris County, and possibly in Texas. It's not just about being gay, but about my lived experiences," he says. "I am the most experienced candidate. I'm the only one who has worked for a Harris County agency. I know how they work, as well as how the budgeting process works."

Reminiscing about coming out as gay while interning in Shanghai with the State Department, Chou, who had a religious upbringing, explains how his government experience gave him the perspective he needs to lead people from all walks of life. "Coming out, and figuring out who you are and how to love yourself, is hard. There are so many kids—and adults—that are working on that," he admits. "Whether you're gay, straight, or somewhere on the spectrum, we all deal with things that we aren't comfortable sharing with others. I want to be their champion and let them know I'll be there for them, because I know what it's like."

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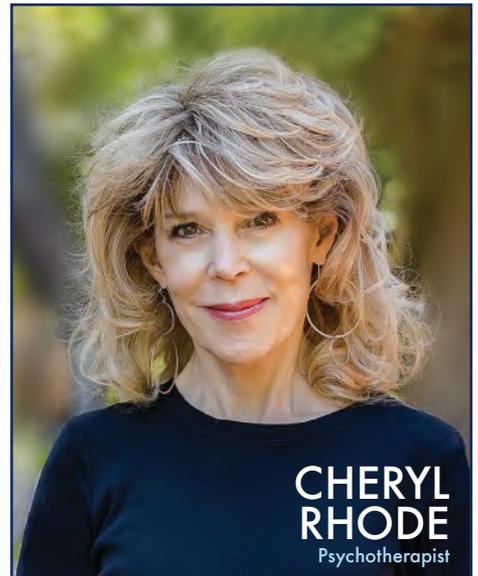
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A Progressive Platform

Steve Duble wants to pioneer systemic change as Harris County Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2.

By MARENE GUSTIN

Steve Duble, 57, is running for Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2, a post that Judge David Patronella is vacating to run for County Civil Court #4. If elected, Duble would become the first openly gay justice of the peace in Harris County history.

A respected attorney who has held leadership roles in the Harris County Democratic Lawyers Association, Duble lives in the Upper Kirby area with his husband, Evan Choate, and their rescue dogs Dewey and Augusta.

“I have been active in progressive politics for a long time, but my interest in this particular position started in 2019 when I represented members of the Houston Tenants Union who were facing evictions,” Duble says. “The way that they were treated in the JP court was really shocking. Many of the people there had taken a day off work or found childcare because they thought they would have a chance to be heard. But they weren’t given any information, they weren’t listened to, and the judge just ended up rubber-stamping their evictions. Luckily, we were able to appeal these cases, but the experience really opened my eyes to the problems in our current system.”

Last year during the pandemic, the Texas Supreme Court allowed the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eviction moratorium to expire, causing a host of problems for renters.

“I cannot comment on the Texas Supreme Court’s decision, but regardless of that, JPs still have discretion to extend eviction protections for renters,” Duble says. “For example, Travis County JPs have extended eviction protections through March of 2022, pausing eviction trials for unpaid rent for 30 days so renters can seek rental assistance, consult a pro bono attorney through a Travis County JP program set up for indigent tenants, and negotiate a settlement without the need for an eviction. Also, the Texas Supreme Court issued its 47th Emergency Order of the COVID-19 pandemic on January 19,



COURTESY

2022, allowing JP courts to suspend or modify trial-related and pretrial hearing deadlines through March 1, 2022. The bottom line is that while a JP must follow the law, there is a lot they can do to help people in need and protect the community.”

A justice of the peace is often the first point of contact for many, since they can handle traffic cases and marriages in addition to evictions. But interacting with this system for the first time can be a daunting experience for many.

“They deserve to be treated with dignity,” Duble says. “Court shouldn’t feel like high-

school detention, so I am going to listen to people, not scold them. I won’t use a gavel, and I won’t impose dress codes or arbitrary codes of conduct. I don’t see a problem with people using their phones or chewing gum while waiting in court. I will honor and respect everyone’s name, pronouns, and gender expression.”

There are five other candidates seeking this Precinct 1 JP seat in the Democratic primary race. So why vote for Duble?

“I have the most progressive and substantive plans, and I have the experience to realize them,” he explains. “I have been an attorney for →

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Pioneering Pride

Larry Bagneris is the Black activist who gave Houston its LGBTQ parade.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Larry Bagneris should be a name that's widely known throughout Houston's queer community. After all, he is responsible for originating the city's first Pride parade. He was also the first Black president of what is now the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus. Despite these hefty credentials, the 75-year-old's name does not loom as large as other LGBTQ luminaries like Annise Parker, Phyllis Frye, or Ray Hill—all of whom he has worked alongside. That is about to change.

"Shortly after I moved to Houston [from New Orleans] in 1972, I brought my sister, Gina, to see the Foley's Thanksgiving Day Parade when she was about 8. I was so excited for her to see it, and I looked down and asked her what she thought. She said, 'It's boring.' She was right. It dawned on me that the gay community needed to do a parade and make floats and throw beads to really show them how it's done," Bagneris recalls.

This idea stayed with him over the years as he became more involved with Houston's LGBTQ community, which at the time was the epicenter of queer politics in the South. The Caucus, which was then known simply as the Gay Political Caucus (GPC), was at the forefront of queer community organizing and slowly built political clout in the late '70s and '80s. Bagneris would go on to lead that organization in 1982, but his commitment to fighting for civil rights began many years before that.

Unearthing a Lost Story

Local activist Harrison Guy is largely responsible for the re-emergence of this Houston icon. Guy founded the Charles Law Community Archive in Houston's African American Library at the Gregory School in 2019. The Law Archive focuses on the stories of Houston's queer Black community.

When Guy was named one of Houston's



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Pride grand marshals in 2019, he decided to dig in and research Bagneris' story. "When I was up for grand marshal of the 2019 Pride parade, I started going through all of the archives to see if any other Black men had come before me. I wanted to make sure that I acknowledged them for paving the way. I was shocked to learn that I would be the first. Someone mentioned that it was ironic that a Black man had never won, considering the parade was started by a Black man. I said, 'Excuse me?' So I got to researching, and found out that Larry Bagneris was in New Orleans. I immediately hounded all of my friends in NOLA to get me in touch with him, and I was able to get his email."

Once they connected, Guy organized a recorded sit-down interview with the Houston icon that streamed on OUTSMART magazine's social media. Finally, a piece of Houston history that had disappeared into the ether had an opportunity to be told.

"I can remember attending the Pride parade for years and feeling like it wasn't for me," Guy admits. "Imagine if I had known that Blackness was a part of its founding. I am a firm believer that we cannot move forward unless we first tell the truth about where we are and where we've

been. Sharing Larry's story allows us the opportunity to acknowledge Black contributions and learn from erasure, in the hopes that this will help us to move forward."

From New Orleans to New York City

Bagneris, who grew up in New Orleans, picked up his first picket sign in 1962 at age 16. That was in front of the Maison Blanche department store on Canal Street, where he joined a protest to condemn the store's racist treatment of Black people during the height of segregation.

His struggles as a Black man in America were compounded by his internal struggle with being gay. At first, he tried to resolve those feelings through his church. He was concerned about attending an all-boys school, where he might do something that would reveal to others that he was gay. Having no success at church, Bagneris paid a psychologist to help him sort through his feelings. That doctor recommended shock treatment, and Bagneris knew that wasn't the answer. He told that doctor to "shove his shock treatment up his ass" before walking out and hopping on a streetcar. But before he got home, he encountered the Maison Blanche protesters on Canal Street.

“I saw the protest and I thought to myself, ‘Okay, let’s take care of this [Black] problem, and then we will get to [gay rights] in the future.’ I knew there would eventually be a movement for people like me,” Bagneris says.

The young Bagneris discovered early on that due to his age he could avoid jail time whenever he was arrested at protests. He was emboldened by this fact, and became even more active in the civil-rights movement.

Then in June of 1969, a gay professor and friend took him to New York City, where Bagneris found himself at the Stonewall Inn just a few weeks before it would become the birthplace of the modern-day LGBTQ civil-rights movement.

“The diversity of the crowd was amazing,” Bagneris recalls about his night at the Stonewall Inn. “Puerto Ricans, drag queens, transgender people—all in this melting pot. The tribal music and the lights were such that I thought I had found heaven. And then the lights came on suddenly, and this guy that I had been dancing and having drinks with grabbed me by the hand and said, ‘Let’s go! This is a raid!’ We climbed out of the bathroom window onto the patio and climbed a ladder over the fence. I started crying, and I said, ‘This is like *West Side Story!*’ [My friend just replied], ‘If you don’t move your ass, you’re gonna get arrested.’ It was a magical awakening for the young New Orleanian.

The next day, Bagneris realized that if he had been arrested, his life would have been ruined. In the late ‘60s, being arrested for the “deviancy” of being gay could cause you to lose your job or prevent you from ever getting hired. And as a gay Black man, he was even more susceptible to discrimination. He bravely decided that there was no choice but to join what was about to become “The Gay Rights Movement”—which itself was not immune from racism.

Houston Beckons

That pivotal summer of ‘69, Bagneris got his degree in political science from Xavier University and moved to Houston to take a public-relations job at Foley’s department store. Bagneris chose Houston because it was one of the few “gay meccas” in the country. Once here, he was introduced to queer organizations like The Diana Foundation and the Caucus, both of which are still around today.

“I saw the presence that the Caucus had. I decided that’s where I needed to be. That’s where the power was. This was now 1977, [so we were preparing] for Town Meeting I and the March on Washington in 1979.”

Bagneris was able to rise through the leadership ranks of the Caucus by building a coalition made up of diverse members of the queer community. He was often mistaken for being Latinx rather than Black. This may be why he is



BOTS COLLECTION

Larry Bagneris during Houston’s Gay Pride Week 1979 (top left, clockwise), at the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1979, and at the Gay Political Caucus Christmas Party in 1978, and with Harrison Guy at the LG-BTQ+ Political Caucus’ Equality Brunch in 2021.



also considered responsible for developing the first gay Chicano political caucus.

Former Houston mayor and LGBTQ activist Annise Parker recalls the broad coalition of people that Bagneris was able to cultivate. “When I picture Larry from back then, I see him in green Army pants and a really tight, white T-shirt with an Army-green cap on his head—and black combat boots,” she says. “That’s how I picture him, but he also got up every day and put on a suit and tie and sold insurance. Larry couldn’t have cared less about running for office. He was very much a truly independent player, and a chameleon. He could effectively move in different circles. In some ways he was always an outsider, but he could also fit into many different groups as well. That’s part of what made him successful.”

In 1979, he became the vice president of the Caucus and eventually president in 1982. It was during his tenure as vice president that he put into motion the idea that his sister sparked in him at the 1972 Thanksgiving Day parade—to organize Houston’s first Pride parade.

Battling at City Hall

Strategy has always been one of Bagneris’ special talents. He knew he would need parade permits from the City, and at the time those were doled out through the police department, which was not exactly friendly with Houston’s

queer community or its communities of color.

“I never saw Larry lose his temper,” Parker recalls. “He was always very passionate, but very controlled and focused. I don’t know how he internally processed the racism in our community, but he put it aside and did what he needed to do.”

Bagneris recalls developing a plan that first involved throwing his political support behind Judson Robinson Jr., a Black City Council member at the time. He knew that if he did so, Robinson would help get him an audience with the police chief. It worked, and the chief sent Bagneris and his friend Carol Finema to Assistant Chief Bankston, who was responsible for issuing parade permits.

“I asked Carol Finema to go with me to get this permit. We dressed in business attire, and we walked in. Back in 1978, police were at a level where most were ex-Ku Klux Klan members. They could see [our community] was building political clout,” Bagneris recalls.

During that meeting with Bagneris, Bankston used the N-word, as well as the pejoratives “wetback” and “queer.” Finema dug her nails into Bagneris’ leg during that conversation, but he was determined to get the permit in spite of the verbal abuse. Surprisingly, Bankston quickly agreed to the parade permit, but Bagneris needed more: a permit for a band, and another one for “female impersonators”

(aka the drag-queen performers).

First, the band permit. “[Bankston said to me], ‘Oh, y’all will be blowing on instruments, not on each other? Okay, we will get permission for the band, too. Get out,’” recalls Bagneris.

But then Bankston balked at Bagneris’ drag-queen permit request, which was necessary since cross-dressing was illegal at the time. Bankston regaled the two with a speech about how “Houston was not San Francisco” and that the parade would need to live up to the “moral standards” of the community. Bagneris then rolled the dice and boldly pushed back by saying, “You do realize that some of these drag queens look better than most of the women you know, right?”

Amazingly, Bankston simply chuckled and replied “I am going to hold you to that on parade day.” The permits were granted, and the parade was going to happen in 1979.

Houston’s first Pride Parade

On the day of the parade, only two patrol cars were present. Bagneris recalls the pride he felt when he saw the impressive floats that had been created. Mary’s, a popular gay bar at the time, created a float with flowers and water pumping. There was a band to lead the parade, and “Disco Grandma,” a familiar personality at the gay bars, danced her way down the route.

“We had [a permit for only] one lane of Westheimer. I started moving the buses off the other lane, and we eventually took over the whole street. We realized we had about 10,000 people there, and we knew it was a success because that is about how many we had for the Anita Bryant march,” Bagneris says.

The parade finished at Spotts Park, where there was music, fireworks, and people getting registered to vote. They were allowed only nine minutes of fireworks, and Bagneris timed the music perfectly for that brief display, which (of course) ended with the ’70s gay anthem “We Are Family.”

“Larry always insisted we had to have fireworks,” Parker notes. “It wasn’t a celebration without fireworks, and the parade was a celebration.”

The Parade and Bagneris March On

Bagneris marvels at how Houston’s Pride parades have expanded over the years. “That first year, I was really the only one putting it together and getting permits. But as the years went on, it grew. More people got involved to help manage it. People commend me, but there were hundreds of volunteers.”

That growth was slowed in the 1980s as AIDS began to devastate the community. Parker cites the epidemic as the reason so many stories from those early Pride parades have

been lost. “A number of gay male leaders died of AIDS, and their stories and impact went with them. I think Larry’s story got lost because he moved away, in part because of the trauma he experienced—that we all experienced—because of AIDS. I am glad that his story is finally getting told. I wish all of those lost stories could be told,” says Parker.

Bagneris ended his role in organizing the parades in 1986. His job began to require more travel, and the burden of losing so many people in the community to AIDS was traumatizing. He moved back to New Orleans with his partner, Jimmy Chavers Armstrong, who died in a car accident in 1990. Over the years, Bagneris has focused a lot of his time on fighting anti-LGBTQ legislation, including bills that discriminate against individuals with HIV. After flirting with the idea of entering politics, he ran for the New Orleans City Council a few years after returning home. Unfortunately, he did not win.

Bagneris still lives in the French Quarter (which he says is “the only place to be”), but he does manage to return to Houston every year for the Pride parade—that gift he gave to Houston’s LGBTQ community over 40 years ago.

 For more info on the Charles Law Community Archive, visit houstonlibrary.org/gregory.

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Before the “I Do’s”

Fiancées **Toni Mascione** and **Jaclyn Madrid** have laid the foundation for a healthy marriage.

By **JENNY BLOCK**

Photo by **JEXSE STUDIOS @JEXSESTUDIOS**



Proud Houstonians Toni Marie Mascione and Jaclyn Nicole Madrid say they fell in love and built the relationship of their dreams by first loving themselves, and then by opening the lines of communication—and their hearts.

Mascione, 34, is the corporal of public affairs at the Harris County Precinct 1 Constable’s Office. She is also completing an accelerated bachelor’s and master’s degree program in public administration at Villanova University, where she is on the dean’s list. Madrid, 32, is the owner of Alchemy Salon Houston in EaDo, where she also works as a stylist. Their home is in that same neighborhood near downtown Houston.

The two met through mutual friends on October 4, 2020. “Meeting Jaclyn was a very surreal experience,” Mascione remembers. “From the moment we met, it felt as though she had been in my life before.”

Mascione knew on their very first date that Madrid was the one. “There was a moment when it felt as though time slowed for a moment. After Jaclyn kissed me, she leaned into my chest. It was a feeling of knowing my life is here in my arms.”

Madrid knew Mascione was the one because she made her feel safe when it came to being vulnerable and opening her heart. Madrid confessed her love after the ball dropped on New Year’s Eve to ring in 2021. “I knew in that moment Toni was my forever, and I wanted to spend every day of my life with her.”

Mascione had plans in the works to pro-

pose to Madrid after their one-year anniversary, but Madrid beat her to it. It was Halloween, and the couple was in Scottsdale, Arizona. As they walked in the mountain air among the succulents while returning to their room from dinner, Madrid announced, “Toni, I spoke to my mom before we left, and I told her I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, and I’m asking you, will you marry me?”

Mascione says that her understanding of love came after taking the time to work through the challenge of loving herself. “Each of us has our own history, and I know with an absolute certainty that everything in my life led me to this moment,” Toni says.

Finding love had been very difficult for Madrid. To her, love was all about giving your all to someone. “In my past relationships, I was never able to be myself 100 percent. When I met Toni, I was finally able to experience what love is by giving her my all, but also being accepted for who I was.”

Mascione and Madrid’s wedding ceremony will take place on August 8, 2022, near Breckenridge, Colorado, at the top of Sapphire Point Mountain. Mascione’s high-school pastor, Allen Strickland, is officiating, and this will be his first LGBTQ wedding. “It is a true testament to what Christianity means—loving all without judgment,” Madrid says.

Throughout their wedding planning, the couple has searched for LGBTQ and ally vendors to handle the many components of their wedding. “It was important to us to ensure that the [venue we’ve chosen] understands the dynamic of our relationship as two women,”

Madrid notes.

The couple plans to honeymoon in Italy by traveling from Rome to the Amalfi Coast, where Mascione’s family is from. “With Toni’s family being from Italy, I want to experience her culture and her country,” Madrid says.

When asked what drew her to Mascione, Madrid explains how much she loves Mascione’s generosity. “She gives more than she receives, especially when it comes to her community. Mascione has selflessly given for the past 13 years as a police officer, but in the last year I have experienced her giving outside of that as a board member of the LGBTQ+ Political Caucus.”

And one of the things Mascione loves the most about Madrid is that she is so conscious and present. “Whether it’s in her business, how she cares for the environment, how she gives back to her community, or how she loves her family,” Toni says. “In everything she does, she considers others.”

When it comes to crafting a strong foundation that couples can build a relationship on, Madrid says the key is to work on yourself first. “Learning healthy boundaries and loving yourself first will prepare you to love another person. We both show up every day wanting to better our lives—individually and collectively,” Madrid says.

Mascione agrees wholeheartedly. The key to a happy, healthy relationship, she says, is “effective communication, and having someone who is complete on their own. We just show up to the relationship needing only love and respect, which creates a very peaceful and easy life.”



Toni Mascione (l) and Jaclyn Madrid in Downtown Houston



Brett Chynoweth (l) and Cole Wehner

Brewing Up Love and Equality

Husbands **Cole Wehner** and **Brett Chynoweth** bond by blogging about their favorite craft beers on.

By RYAN M. LEACH | Photo by TODD MESSENGER



H-Town beer guys Cole Wehner, 35, and Brett Chynoweth, 40, are a Houston couple as committed to local craft beer as they are to each other. After getting married, they even had wedding receptions in two different breweries. Together, they have built a social-media presence as the Htownbeerguys to focus on their beer adventures and each other.

“We actually had two receptions at breweries in Kansas City (where Cole’s family is centered) and in Houston where Brett’s family is centered, along with all of our H-Town friends. The Houston reception was at City Acre Brewing, another great Houston-area brewery that we always recommend!” Wehner says.

Their Instagram profile says it all. If you follow @htownbeerguys, you will discover photo after photo of the bearded duo showing off their

favorite beers, breweries, and merchandise. Their photo gallery pops with vibrant colors, big smiles, and scenes from breweries all over the city.

Their first date seven years ago ended with a cold beer at local beer bar Hay Merchant, but it started in Hermann Park at the natural-science museum.

“We first met online, and after talking for a while we met for our first date at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. After spending a couple hours checking out the exhibits and walking around Hermann Park, we continued the date at Hay Merchant to enjoy some beers—and the rest is history. I would say our mutual love for beer was discovered on our first date,” Chynoweth says.

The men have enjoyed getting to know Houston’s beer community, which is unique in

how tightly knit and close it is.

“We generally can’t go to a brewery without running into someone we know—not to mention the friendliness of the staff and owners. Each brewery truly feels like a home away from home,” Wehner says.

“The community is such an amazing group of creative, diverse, and accepting individuals, and it’s always cool to see some of the local breweries collaborate with each other. We’ve become close friends with some amazing people that we’ve met through the beer community,” Chynoweth adds.

When asked to name their top-three local breweries, the two agreed on all but one. While they think True Anomaly and Equal Parts are both top-notch, Wehner places Great Heights in his top three while Chynoweth rounds out his list with New Magnolia.

“What makes a great brewery for me is the ability to both brew fantastic beer *and* provide a friendly and fun venue,” Wehner says. “These breweries exhibit both of those features while also creating a [mutually supportive] community.

And their top-three beers? They’re in complete agreement on Scout, a Mexican lager from True Anomaly; Loggerbier, a German-style Pilsner from Equal Parts; and Hella Pils from New Magnolia.

Throughout their social media and website, it is evident that the couple also makes sure they support local brewers who have an eye on social- and racial-justice issues.

“Social justice absolutely factors into the breweries and beers that we feature [on our social media and regularly] visit. We think it is important that breweries recognize the issues and struggles, both within the industry and within the community to which they belong,” Wehner says.

According to the men, beers like Brave Noise and Black Is Beautiful were created to support various social-justice movements. Brave Noise is a beer that brewers across the country have brewed and sold in order to benefit charities supporting women, BIPOC, and



LGBTQ people throughout the beer industry. Black Is Beautiful was initially created by Weathered Souls Brewing Company in San Antonio. The brewery made the recipe widely available for any brewery or home brewer around the country to brew and sell, with the understanding that all proceeds go toward racial-justice charities.

“These sorts of things are incredible to see in the community, and we proudly spread awareness on our platform. The past couple of years have shown that while we have come

a long way in this country, we still have a long way to go to make sure each one of us feels accepted, welcome in our community, and that we are all treated equally,” Chynoweth says.

Houston also has a handful of breweries that brew to create the kind of change these beer guys support. “Lavender Bunny, from Eureka Heights Brewing, is brewed during Pride Month, and one dollar per pint is donated to support resources for Houston’s LGBTQ+ community, including the Montrose Center. Based on sales and donations from their partners this year, they donated over \$20,000 to the community. And Haze Not Hate, by Great Heights—everything about this beer is perfect, and the fact that it is brewed in support of the community is simply amazing. It all makes us so happy and proud to see,” Wehner says.

This ambitious couple is not currently planning to open their own brewery, but they hope to someday open up a place in their neighborhood with two or three taps. That would allow them to showcase some of their favorite breweries and introduce even more people to the craft-beer community that they love.

 Follow the Htownbeerguys on Instagram @htownbeerguys.

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35 Years and Counting

Wives **Barbara Ervin** and **Enita Torres** continue to make their relationship work.

By SAM BYRD



New York-raised Enita Torres was brought up Mormon, married a man, and gave birth to two children before she moved to Texas in 1982, divorced, fought a custody battle, and fell in love with her future wife. She had experienced more by age 28 than most people do in a lifetime.

Torres' first job in Houston was at the University of Houston's M.D. Anderson Library. Unbeknownst to her, her future wife, Barbara Ervin, also worked at that library. This is where Ervin first spotted Torres in the stacks and knew there was something about her. It was love at first sight.

Well, almost at first sight.

"When I first saw Enita I remember going, 'Holy shit, who is that?'" Ervin gushes. "And then the next day, I saw her go into the office, where I knew there was a back entryway. I snuck in to ask a friend of mine who she was."

Torres caught Ervin skulking about and spoke to her, which left Ervin dumbstruck and at a loss for words. Ervin then worried that Torres might have taken her silence as a sign that she wasn't interested. "I'm just not very forward," Ervin admits.

Could romance possibly blossom between the two? Initially, according to Torres, the answer was no. Her ex-husband was also in Houston, and he decided to wage a custody battle for their children. "I knew that my ex-husband was getting skittish about my sexual orientation. I was avoiding women because I had previously been involved with another woman, and he got really awkward." Because of the custody battle, she knew she couldn't be seen in a casual relationship with a woman. "So instead, we kept a friendship,"

Torres explains.

But eventually, Torres softened and started coming around to the idea of allowing something more with Ervin. "How often in your life are you going to meet someone that you feel this way about?" Torres remembers thinking. "We started hanging out by taking our breaks together, and I was getting smitten."

Ervin explains how Torres' children actually brought the couple closer together. "After the first couple of dates, Enita said, 'I need to let you know I have children.' She showed me the pictures, and I knew those kids!" Ervin had gotten to know the children at the home of a mutual friend who was Torres' babysitter. That scored bonus points in Torres' eyes, as her children's well-being surpassed all other priorities.

As their relationship grew, the bitter custody battle with Torres' ex-husband weighed heavily on the couple. "That was basically the environment for almost the first two years of our relationship," Torres recalls. "We could not live together. This was the late 1980s, and I was basically told I need to be in the closet in a big way [in order to keep the children]. We were incredibly careful to not be seen as a couple."

But they still spent time together every day while concealing their relationship publicly. They would occasionally take the children to a park, or Torres would visit one of Ervin's softball games.

But the question still lingered: could their relationship last if the children's future was on the line? At one point, they considered separating out of concern for the children's welfare.

And then, for some unknown reason, Torres' ex unceremoniously dropped the custody case and left town. It was an immediate change for the women. They started living together,

and rested easier knowing they didn't have to hide their relationship anymore.

"We had been in fight mode [for our relationship to last. After so much] conflict and constant fear, I wondered how we were going to function in normal mode," Torres recalls. "But it was amazing! We fell into being really good co-parents and partners."

The years went on with both women being happily involved, raising a family, pursuing their careers, and owning a home. After being together for 10 years, the couple decided to hold a commitment ceremony in 1996. And when their relationship hit the 30-year mark, they threw a blowout celebration with 200 guests.

Both women are now retired. Torres made her final bow at UH in January 2021, followed by Ervin's farewell at the Menninger Clinic in September 2021. Their love is as strong as ever, and they have traveled to The Netherlands, Spain, Oregon, and Florida. Next up is a return trip to The Netherlands, followed by an excursion in Japan.

Aside from traveling, they truly enjoy the small traditions they've kept throughout their 35-year relationship. "We still have some things that we've kept, but not in the same time frame. In other words, one of the wonderful things [about retirement] is not setting an alarm. We go to sleep when we're tired. We wake up when we're done sleeping. We have our morning coffee, and we work the crossword puzzle. We did it every morning when we were working, and we still do it now," Ervin brags.

But one dramatic change does come to mind as Ervin reflects on their happy retirement together: "No more shopping at the grocery store on the weekends!"



Barbara Ervin (l)
and Enita Torres

Made for Each Other

Ashley Houston and Jose Suarez
share how their love has kept them strong.

By LILLIAN HOANG



The key to a long and rewarding relationship is open communication, according to the recently married local couple Ashley Houston and Jose Suarez.

“Understanding and not judging each other all the time, being able to sit down and talk to each other, is key to any relationship,” Houston says, and Suarez agrees.

Houston, a 51-year-old trans woman and local showgirl who has been performing for 37 years, grew up in Humble, Texas. She had her first performance as a showgirl at age 14. At 16, she won her first beauty pageant and has earned many awards since, including Miss Texas Continental Elite 2018 and Miss Transexual Universe 2020. She sings in Spanish and English, and dances at several nightclubs like Tony’s Corner Pocket, Hamburger’s Mary’s, BARCODE Houston, and Darwin’s Pub.

Suarez, a 33-year-old native Houstonian and bisexual man, is a gamer who wants to become a videogame designer. While Houston is out performing, he maintains their home and takes care of their pets, a Husky named Molly and two Yorkies named Julie and Carmen.

Having been together for nearly 12 years, the duo has many similarities—including the fact that they both come from big families. Suarez is the youngest of seven children, and Houston is one of twelve. And they’ve both lost their parents, which led the pair down some dark paths.

While Houston experienced a great deal of negativity and transphobia from her siblings, her parents accepted her. Her mother embraced her when she first came out as a gay man, and continued to support her when she



came out as a trans woman. She remembers how her mother was proud of her until the day she died. Although her father did not fully understand her identities, Houston says, “He accepted me totally when I accepted myself.”

Brokenhearted by her parents’ deaths, Houston drank every day to cope. Suarez dealt with the loss of his mother similarly.

Growing up, his biological father was absent and one of his siblings often told Suarez that he wasn’t smart enough and wouldn’t

amount to anything because he didn’t graduate high school. However, his mother always supported him and even spoiled him with video games and consoles like the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, GameCube, and Nintendo 64.

Suarez was heartbroken when his mother died of a stroke. Just 16 years old at the time, he coped by drinking, doing drugs, and hanging out with a crowd that enabled his addictions. He was later arrested and jailed for

drug possession.

Houston and Suarez's lives changed when their paths crossed.

In 2010, Suarez attended one of Houston's performances as a showgirl. He was drawn in by her talent, moves, and welcoming personality. He asked her out to the movies that same day.

The two soon began dating, and Houston says she realized Suarez was "the one" when he agreed to take care of her sick parents while she worked from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. as a showgirl. When her mother had to go to the hospital for kidney problems, Suarez accompanied her and stayed by her side until Houston got off work. When her mother died, he did the same for her father, who had pancreatic cancer.

"He's different from what I've had before," Houston admits. "I was like, 'Oh wow, this is who I want to be with. This is who I *deserve* to be with.'"

Suarez says he realized Houston was the one when Suarez's own family wanted nothing to do with him after he got out of jail, and Houston was the only person who stood by him. She believed in him when no one else did, including himself. She often told Suarez, "You need

to stop thinking badly of yourself and push through. We're going to get through this."

Houston appreciates how straightforward Suarez is with her. She also likes how sweet he is to everybody he meets, and how he lights up every room he walks into.

And Suarez loves Houston's performances, her directness, and the fact that they don't hide anything from each other, especially during hard times.

After her parents died, Houston was arrested for a DWI. When she went to jail, Suarez shared with her how her actions hurt his feelings, and she promised she would learn from the incident and never make the mistake again. Suarez decided to trust her and move forward, and she did the same for him when he was arrested for not paying his old traffic tickets. Houston even fought for him by demanding a better court-appointed lawyer.

"At the end of the day, it's love. We love each other," she emphasizes.

A year after they started dating, while they were drinking at a bar, Suarez asked Houston, "Hey, if I was to propose to you, would you be able to say yes?" Houston replied, "What? Boy, leave that alone right now, we've been

drinking." To which Suarez said, "I meant what I said."

Houston didn't accept his proposal because she believed they didn't need a piece of paper to validate their union for life. But after Houston turned 50, her mind changed. Not only did she want to make Suarez happy, but she also wanted to make sure he was taken care of if she ever got sick. "Being older, I wanted to make sure he would be stable and comfortable if I was gone."

The couple got married on October 20, 2021, in a small courthouse wedding chapel surrounded by Suarez's family and most of Houston's closest friends. They held the reception at Tony's Corner Pocket, where they danced to the Diana Ross and Lionel Richie song "Endless Love."

The couple is currently living together with dreams of opening a bar and moving into a bigger home.

"I see us as a common couple that lives their day-to-day life like everybody else," Houston says. "We wake up, we do our chores, I run errands, and every month we pay our bills. A lot of people ask me, 'What's it like to be married now?' It's the same thing!"

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Proud Parents

Influencer couple **Aidan and Heather Silva** documented starting a family on Instagram.

By LILLIAN HOANG

Starting a family isn't easy, and for LGBTQ folks, having children can require overcoming additional barriers.

Aidan and Heather Silva know this experience firsthand. Three years after getting married on July 2, 2016, the Texas influencer couple began trying to have children through intrauterine insemination.

Aidan, a transgender man, and Heather, a cis woman, went to the Aspire Houston Fertility Institute, where a doctor decided to use Heather's egg and sperm from a donor to start their family. The process took over a year due to COVID-19 restrictions, and because the pregnancy didn't immediately take.

"It was a very long, emotional process, and it was just a little lonely," Heather says. "But we had each other."

Fortunately, after their fourth attempt over six months, they received a call that the insemination was successful. "It was a beautiful surprise. I almost didn't believe it. I was like, 'Really? For sure, really? Oh God, what do I do now?'" Heather recalls.

Their daughter, Atlas Orion Silva, was born at Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston on October 26, 2021. After several months of documenting Heather's pregnancy online, Aidan revealed to his over 34,000 Instagram followers that Atlas suffered from several complex heart defects and would have to stay in the hospital for surgeries and monitoring. Heather shared similar updates with her 5,000-plus followers.

Still, the couple was confident in Atlas' recovery. "The fact that she was able to become full term, at a healthy weight, and crying at birth were all amazing signs of a strong baby," Aidan posted on October 30. "There is no sure time of recovery or estimation of when we can bring her home. Ultimately, Heather and I aren't looking to rush anything and want her to be completely healthy and ready."

After 10 weeks of being monitored at Children's Memorial Hermann, Atlas was released. Her parents are grateful that she has come out the other side of her ordeal stronger.



Aidan and Heather Silva holding their daughter Atlas on her first Thanksgiving

"She was the healthiest baby in the pediatric cardiac unit," Heather says. "Even with her infection, she was happy and active. It was mind-blowing to all the doctors. She had sepsis, and she was smiling."

Atlas will be four months old this month. "She's just a really heavy, healthy baby. I'm grateful, though, that she can break my back while I'm carrying her," Heather laughs.

Aidan and Heather, who were both Vic-

toria's Secret employees, met on Aidan's first day of work. It was 5:30 a.m. and Heather was sitting on the floor, wearing sweatpants with no makeup on, and folding panties. He fell in love at first sight.

Aidan pretended to be bad at his new job, forgetting how to fold the merchandise, just to have an excuse to talk to Heather. At one point, she reminded him how to fold panties, bras, yoga pants, and more several times in one day. →



The Silva family celebrating their first Christmas together at Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital

"SHE WAS THE HEALTHIEST BABY IN THE PEDIATRIC CARDIAC UNIT. EVEN WITH HER INFECTION, SHE WAS HAPPY AND ACTIVE. IT WAS MIND-BLOWING TO ALL THE DOCTORS. SHE HAD SEPSIS, AND SHE WAS SMILING."

—Heather Silva

"I was just thinking, this freaking idiot doesn't know how to fold. I have to show him every day!" Heather recalls.

Heather realized she was in love with Aidan after a couple weeks of spending time together. She woke up one morning and felt an ache in her chest. She missed Aidan and really wished he was beside her. Two months later, she told him she loved him.

"It's funny, Aidan didn't know how to flirt, and I don't know how to flirt or even accept flirtations. Putting us two awkward people together, I'm surprised we're even married now," Heather adds.

The couple began dating in April of 2012. Three years later, Aidan realized he was a trans man and came out to Heather. She worried he would change—not just physically, but emotionally and mentally—and would no longer want to be in a relationship with her. But

she put her fears aside, and ultimately realized she wanted to be with Aidan and help him during his transition.

"I was just like, 'Dude, who the fuck cares?' Thinking about it so hard and so long means you care about this person. That's all you need to know: you care, and can't have a life without them," Heather says.

She helped Aidan get the letter he needed from a therapist to begin his physical transition and hormone therapy. She gave him his testosterone shots, made his doctor appointments at LGBTQ-friendly clinics, and helped him correct his name and gender marker on his ID documents.

Aidan documented his transition journey on Instagram and became a popular creator when he shared a video of his top surgery after three months on testosterone. His story encouraged many, including trans men and

parents of trans folk who didn't know they could get top surgery so soon after starting hormone-replacement therapy.

"Happiness is possible as a transgender person," he says. "You're worthy of happiness, finding love, having a family. You don't have to be this special person to have a family. You just have to know what you want, and get it."

He continues to post about his personal milestones, such as getting married and becoming a father. "I just wanted to be that person I needed when I was younger," Aidan says.

Aidan surprised Heather with a flash-mob marriage proposal at Jasper's on Market Street in The Woodlands on November 21, 2015. The couple and their friends were at the destination when Heather saw their mutual friend Wesley Cordova, a professional performer, outside dancing to "Marry You" by Bruno Mars. She shrugged and decided to watch the show inside with her lunch.

However, her friends and Aidan convinced her to go back outside. It was only after several minutes of the flash mob's performance that Heather realized she was the one getting proposed to. As she turned around and saw Aidan on one knee, he handed the ring to her, shaking with nerves. Heather then handed it back to him, crying, "You have to put it on me first!"

When their wedding planning proved overwhelming, the two decided to elope in July 2016 and have a simple ceremony near the waterfalls at McKinney Falls State Park in Austin.

"It was perfect," Heather says as Aidan nods in agreement.

The happy family now lives in The Woodlands with a bearded dragon named Mr. Miyagi and their two cats, an 8-year-old orange tabby named Prizmo and a 6-year-old tortie named Obsidian. Aidan works as a swimming-pool designer, and Heather is an office admin for The Pool Whisperer. She and her sisters want to start a company that renovates and flips houses in the future.

Aidan and Heather say they are not special people, just folks trying to figure out life. "I just so happen to be transgender," Aidan says.

"As long as you want anything—happiness, family, a new car—it's possible," Heather adds.

When asked what the key to a fulfilling, long-lasting relationship is, the couple replies in unison, "Communication!"

"We can't read each other's minds. We are most successful when we communicate how we feel and what we need from each other," Heather says. "Communicate your honesty."



Follow Aidan on Instagram @captain_aidan_silva, and follow Heather @hvrbear.

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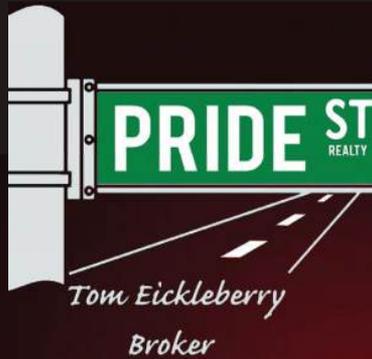
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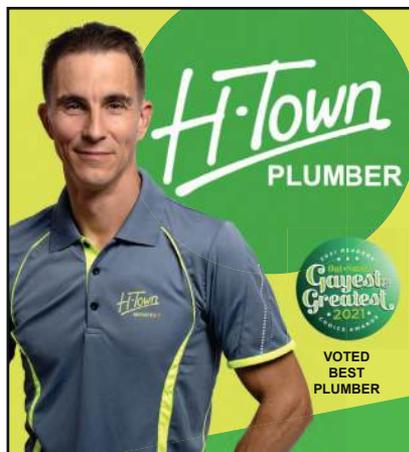


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Leading a Liberated Life

Life coach **Shaquinta Richardson** empowers professional women of color.

By LILLIAN HOANG
Photo by SWEEN SHOTS STUDIOS





“You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have,” Rowan Pope said during a 2013 episode of *Scandal*. The quote struck a chord with many Black women across the

country, including Dr. Shaquinta Richardson, a queer Black life coach and the owner of the consulting company Beyond Achieving. Richardson is focused on empowering high-achieving Black women and other women of color—many of whom were taught to put others’ needs before their own.

“We have been told since childhood that we have to work twice as hard for half as much, so it’s an endless cycle of overworking ourselves, doing more than most people, but always feeling like our labor, our work, our competence, our capabilities are never good enough for anyone,” she says.

Richardson inspires her clients and changes lives, one coaching session at a time. She strives to show women how they can reduce stress, build confidence, balance their work and personal life, overcome perfectionism, become their most authentic self, and more.

“The unique thing about me and my work is [that I allow] people to be exactly who they are, to be able to feel that grace and love and care rather than being shamed and beaten down for [the ways in which] they survived throughout their lives.”

She also provides consulting services for companies, including training sessions that deal with anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Richardson has several tips for people looking to live their best lives in 2022. For starters, people should get familiar with their fears, ask where they came from, how they developed, and what validates (or invalidates) them. “Fear tries to protect us, but oftentimes it keeps you in a place that may feel safe but is just a comfort zone that isn’t actually helping,” she says.

People should also try journaling, or some other habit that gives them an opportunity to get in touch with their deepest thoughts.

She encourages folks to incorporate more rest into their schedule, because it will give them the energy they need for self-reflection and growth. “Rest doesn’t always mean sleep,” Richardson clarifies. “Even if you get eight hours a day, you still need 20, 30 minutes or an hour to not be doing anything specific. Just to clear your mind.”

Rest and self-care come in many forms. Richardson says people must figure out and do what feels good, rather than stick to a strict routine. For example, she loves journaling with fountain pens, meditating, scrolling through

social media, cuddling with her dogs, listening to music, watching Netflix, and walking to the mailbox with her wife.

Her journey as a life coach in Houston started after she moved to Space City in June of 2020 to marry her wife, Kim Daily, a lawyer and life coach who helps her clients reconcile their faith with their sexuality. They’ve been together since 2018 and have two dogs—a 12-year-old rescue named Bishop, and a nearly 2-year-old Miniature Schnauzer named Deacon.

Originally from South Carolina, Richardson is a first-generation college student who had little guidance when it came to college applications and selecting a major. “I didn’t have a lot of role models or help figuring out where I wanted to go. People just said, ‘You’re smart, so go be a doctor.’”

**“THERE’S A LOT OF POWER
IN COACHING—HAVING
A GUIDE TO HELP YOU
MOVE BEYOND AND HAVE
A MUCH MORE FULFILLED,
CONFIDENT, AUTHENTIC,
LIBERATED LIFE.
THE ULTIMATE GOAL
FOR ALL OF US IS TO BE
LIBERATED. AND I CAN HELP
GET YOU THERE.”**

—Shaquinta Richardson

She tried her hand at pre-med studies, but soon realized she did not like science. With little help from others, she decided to major in marketing after watching a film about a marketing executive. She earned a bachelor’s degree in marketing from Claflin University in 2019. However, after becoming a business analyst at Target, she knew corporate America wasn’t for her, either. While she didn’t enjoy managing inventory for over 17,000 stores, she did love connecting with people, helping them adjust, and serving as their confidant.

“I was interested in the relationship aspect—how people function in relationships with other people, and how they form or influence our experiences,” she says.

Richardson left Target and got her master’s degree in marriage and family therapy and counseling from Converse College in 2013. She later earned her PhD in human development and family science from the University of Georgia, where she developed an interest in the experiences of disabled people and other marginalized groups that she prioritizes in her therapy practice.

Richardson has been a therapist for a decade now, and has worked with people from all walks of life. However, she is most passionate about helping marginalized groups because they are often underserved and overlooked by therapists, whose “best practices” were developed to serve mainly straight white clients.

“I wanted to provide therapy that is affirming,” she says. While working with Black queer women, she realized they suffered from a similar problem.

“Primarily Black queer women come to me, and they are completely burned out, feeling overworked, overwhelmed, constantly having to always be ‘on’ for everybody else,” she notes. “I saw this come up time and time again, and wanted to do work that addresses this.”

Richardson finds her work as a life coach rewarding for many reasons. “So many of the big moments are not tangible, like the clients who finally feel like they can be themselves in this world, and who get their voice back that they lost so long ago,” she says. “Being able to find our voices, speak for ourselves and our needs—and do that confidently—is huge. You can’t put your hand on it, but you feel it.”

One of Richardson’s clients sums it up well: “Throughout the program, I’ve laughed, cried, and have been forced to confront myself on deeper levels than I’ve been able to achieve on my own. Working with Dr. Shaquinta is not for the faint of heart. If you stay with it, though, the results are transformative.”

Although people are more familiar with the idea of self-care and mental health nowadays, Richardson points out that familiarity is only half the battle. “We can get all this information, but really figuring out how to apply it to our own lives can be a challenge. I think that’s where coaching can be super-helpful.”

Richardson encourages people to find a credible life coach—and to be wary of people who call themselves coaches but provide little help.

“There’s a lot of power in coaching—having a guide to help you move beyond and have a much more fulfilled, confident, authentic, liberated life. The ultimate goal for all of us is to be liberated. And I can help get you there.”



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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Jacqueline Green and Solomon Dumas.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Comes to Houston

Company member **Vernard Gilmore** discusses the troupe's significance.

By **SAM BYRD** | Photos by **ANDREW ECCLES**



The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is not just a dance company. It is *the* dance company for many modern-dance lovers.

Houstonians can witness the excellence of this accomplished troupe when they take the stage February 18 and 19 at Jones Hall, thanks to Houston's Society for the Performing Arts.

As one of the world's leading contemporary-dance companies, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been recognized with a U.S. congressional resolution as a vital American "cultural ambassador to the world" that has forever changed the perception of American dance.

Company member Vernard Gilmore took

some time out of his busy rehearsal schedule to provide **OUTSMART** with some insights about Alvin Ailey's lasting impact on the arts, as well as his own experiences as a Black dancer.

"What's so great is that Texas is where Alvin Ailey was born. It's significant to come back to his home state and show his excellence, who he was to us, and how he's changed history for so many people," Gilmore says. "I take honor in being able to perform there for him. It's a great celebration of his excellence."

The three Houston performances will feature the company's signature masterpiece *Revelations*. Using African American spirituals, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues, Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* fervently explores

the places of deepest grief and holiest joy in the soul.

"*Revelations* is one of the greatest modern-dance works of our time. It never fails to reach across the footlights and touch people the way no other ballet can, because you can see yourself in the joy, the happiness, the struggle, and the triumph of spirit," Gilmore notes.

Gilmore's own history in the performing-arts world is storied. He began his training at Curie Performing and Creative Arts High School in Chicago, and is a 25-year member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. His career highlights include an appearance on CBS Chicago's *Someone You Should Know* series, and a performance at the 2010 White

House tribute to dancer and choreographer Judith Jamison. In 2017, he was honored in *OUT* magazine's annual "Out100" issue.

As an openly gay man, Gilmore credits dance with helping him find his center as he was coming out in his teenage years.

"Dance really freed me. It gave me the outlet and the ability to see that it's OK to be you and it's OK to be gay," he recalls.

He also credits his mother and grandmother for providing strength during his coming-out process. "My mom has always been open to talking about the gay community, and her mom used to make dresses for drag queens back in the day," he adds.

A fabulous upbringing, indeed!

As a Black gay male, Gilmore naturally uses his own experiences as an incubator for his choreography. He says it's only a part of who he is as a whole, and while it does influence his art, it is only a microcosm. He also thinks it creates a more inclusive experience for the artists he works with.

"I really believe in taking everything that I've learned and bringing it to whatever I'm doing. For me, [my experience as being both Black and gay] creates more color and more ways to connect to an audience. [And I can]



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's
Vernard J. Gilmore.

connect better to other artists in the ways I think about movement, and the ways I think about structuring choreography," he adds. "As gay people, we always want to feel welcome in any situation that we're in. And so to bring that type of [welcoming] spirit into the room is really what I'm about."

Alvin Ailey was a gay pioneer of the American performing-arts scene, although he initially tried to conceal his sexuality from the public eye. Most recently, PBS aired the

documentary *Ailey* that traces the contours of his childhood in Jim Crow-era Texas—a period that provided much of the inspiration for his *Revelations* masterpiece in 1960.

He formed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to carry out his vision for a company dedicated to enriching the American modern-dance tradition and preserving the uniqueness of the African American cultural experience. The awards he received throughout his career included a 1988 Kennedy Center Honor, in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to American culture. In 2014, he posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, in recognition of his contributions and commitment to civil rights and modern dance in America.

Although Ailey is not here to see it, his creativity is very much alive in troupe members such as Vernard Gilmore, who sums it up best: "Mr. Ailey wanted to put people on the stage so others could see their lives celebrated onstage."

What: *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*

When: Feb. 18 at 7:30 p.m. and

Feb. 19 at 2 and 7:30 p.m.

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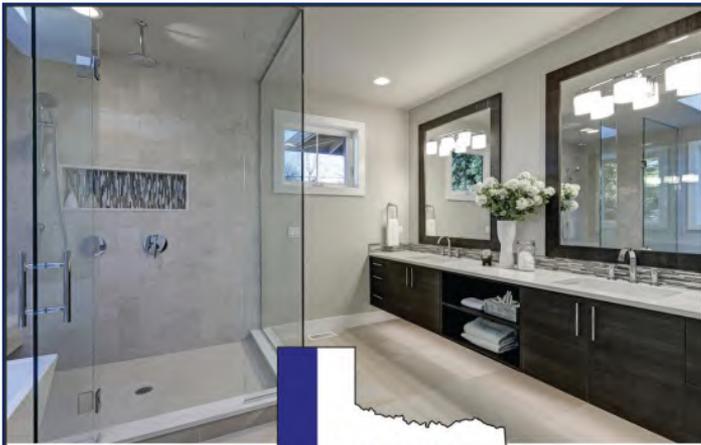
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Pushing Their Agenda

Dorian Electra brings an edgy new tour to H-Town this month.

By CONNOR BEHRENS

Photo by PHILLIP SOULLIERE

Since making a splash on the indie pop scene, the gender-fluid Dorian Electra has combined an outlandish persona with lyrical musical messages to gain national attention over the last decade. Local fans will get the chance to see them in person this month at the avant pop star's My Agenda tour stop.

The singer will perform in Houston on February 19 to promote their new album, *My Agenda*, which touches on a variety of themes including politics, gender fluidity, masculinity, and LGBTQ rights. →



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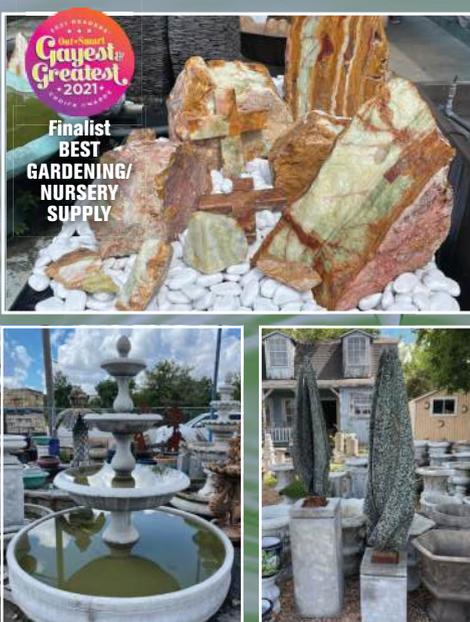
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“MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO BECOME OPEN TO THE IDEA OF GENDER FLUIDITY AND FLUID SEXUAL ORIENTATION. IT FEELS VERY NATURAL TO ME TO COMBINE THESE THINGS WITH POP MUSIC.”

—Dorian Electra

Electra believes music should always strive to have a deeper message. “I think these topics come naturally to me. I find them fascinating on a personal level, but also on a larger cultural scale,” they explain. “It has been really cool to see larger conversations happening about these topics. More and more people are starting to become open to the idea of gender fluidity and fluid sexual orientation. It feels very natural to me to combine these things with pop music—a genre that already deals with sexuality and identity so often.”

Electra’s new release is a concept album about toxic masculinity, as seen through the lenses of the LGBTQ community. In an interview with *Document Journal*, Electra described the album title as a sly reference to the right wing’s dire warnings about “the gay agenda.”

“The idea that gays are organizing to tear down the traditional family, and all that, is so funny to me,” Electra says. “The title track was written from the viewpoint of ‘a conspiracy theorist who is watching the country being taken over by a gay dictator.’”

Exploring themes through music has always interested Electra as a natural conduit for expressing oneself. “For me, making music began as a means to an end. [I wanted to] communicate ideas that I was interested in studying, and music seemed like a way to make those ideas accessible. I would do book reports in school as songs, and I loved combining my academic interests with music and videos. Even though my music is no longer strictly educational, I still feel like my brain is inclined to approach music that way sometimes. I think if

a career in music had not worked out for me, I would probably be doing educational videos or something of that nature.”

Electra’s February 19 show will be a full-circle moment for the Houston-based singer. “I am really excited to be playing in Houston, especially since I am performing at Warehouse Live where I saw a bunch of formative concerts in my youth. I saw bands such as Of Montreal, Bloc Party, Deerhoof, The Rapture, and more. Sometimes bands would skip Houston and just play Austin, so I was always really excited and grateful when they would make it down to Houston. I’ll be really excited to see both fans and friends and family.”

Electra is eager to go back on tour because meeting fans is such a special experience—something that cannot be replaced by talking to people online.

“Like most people [during COVID], I definitely became more ‘online’ in general, which I think has been cool for getting to connect with fans and other artists in new ways,” they note. “Of course it also has its downsides, like anything.”

Whether or not fans can make it to the concert, Electra hopes the music can continue to lift people’s spirits. “I just want people to have an absolutely epic time.”

And as for the artist’s plans for new music going forward, Electra hopes to continue expanding their brand. Recently, the indie musician worked with Charli XCX, as well as with Lady Gaga on her *Dawn of Chromatica* remix album. Electra says it’s been inspiring to work with more mainstream musicians—experiences that will surely impact Electra’s future projects.

“Those are two of my favorite and most inspirational artists,” Electra says. “It was a dream come true to get to work with both. I am ecstatic to see larger artists like them use their platform to support other musicians. After those experiences, I want to collaborate with more rock and rap artists, as well as jazz artists, and just explore more genres of music. That would be dope!”



For more info, visit
dorianelectra.com.

The Snack that Smiles Back

Miz Cracker brings her first solo tour to Houston.

By DON MAINES
Photo by ANDREW KIM



Whenever she tours the country, Miz Cracker likes to get up early and explore the city she's in. So, fellas, don't be surprised if you end up in her March 2 show at The Heights Theater.

"All my jokes are about me and my boyfriends," she says via a transatlantic phone call in January. "My boyfriend is anyone I've passed on the street."

In 2018, Miz Cracker was a breakout star during the 10th season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, and she's been working tirelessly in various media ever since. Her solo music video, "She's a Woman! (On Top of the World)" gave name to her first American solo tour. "This is my very first full hour of comedy, so it is a landmark for me," the artist notes.

Miz Cracker was formerly considered to be "a lost Jewish kid" from Seattle. "I moved from the West Coast to New York City because I wanted to work in publishing. At the time, I had no interest in the performing arts, but that changed when I met Bob the Drag Queen," she says, referring to the winner of *RuPaul's Drag*

Race Season 8.

It was during a New York blizzard at night that Miz Cracker, "just a twink with a death wish," was stumbling home drunk when she saw Bob trying to haul a battered bookcase down the street. Miz Cracker offered her assistance and ended up inside Bob's apartment, surprised by his treasure-trove of drag paraphernalia. "Bras hanging from a dusty chandelier," she noted in *Slate* magazine.

"I had never done drag before," Miz Cracker admits. But within a couple of months, Bob the Drag Queen helped her become the Big Apple's undisputed queen of "cheerful pessimism," an attitude that faces Death with "What took ya so long?"

At press time, Miz Cracker's She's a Woman! tour is scheduled to kick off with a sold-out show at Dynasty Typewriter in Los Angeles. Then she crisscrosses the country in some 16 states before landing in Houston, just in time to celebrate Texas Independence Day, which honors the 50 settlers in Mexican Texas who officially declared independence from Mexico and created the Republic of Texas in 1836.

Miz Cracker's audience can expect "the old

jokes" that she references in her music video. "They like the old style of humor—raunchy," she says. "I tried to do political humor," but fans igned it in favor of jokes and stories about Miz Cracker's bizarre childhood, her vices, her worst mistakes, and how she somehow manages to survive it all.

Miz Cracker proudly follows in the footsteps of Jewish comedians from the Borscht Belt—hilarious performers such as Jackie Mason, Norm Crosby, and Henny Youngman, along with others who were featured in the 2013 documentary film *When Jews Were Funny*.

"Sarah Silverman was a big influence on me, for sure," she adds.

On *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Miz Cracker was introduced as "thin and salty," a phrase that originated from a NYC DJ known as TK.

"He used to introduce me as 'thin and salty.' I said, 'I'm taking it!'"

What: Miz Cracker: She's a Woman! Tour
When: March 2 at 8 p.m.
Where: The Heights Theater, 339 W. 19th Street
Tickets: theheightstheater.com

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Meaningful Melodies

Kam Franklin's new social-justice themed EP features local LGBTQ artists.

By MARENE GUSTIN
Photo by TROY EZEQUIEL

Out Houston musician Kam Franklin is beloved for her soulful mezzo-soprano vocals, which she lends to multiple genres, as well as her colorful fashion style. She's been wowing a legion of local and international fans with both her music and her work as an activist and visual artist. And her new EP *Bayou City Comeback Chorus* dropped January 17 on all streaming platforms.

"It's a reflection of what is possible when faced with the impossible," Franklin, 34, says.

This is something the artist knows about. Franklin, who identifies as pansexual, used to work as an oil, gas, and power trade-support analyst at the Houston office of an Australian financial-services company. She was fronting her band *The Suffers* in 2014 when David Letterman's show came calling, and she suddenly found herself working full-time on her music. She's performed on five continents, sung with the Houston Symphony and before an Astros game, and produced events promoting up-and-coming independent, minority, and female artists.

Last year, she started a solo career with an album featuring the song "Don't Get Sick," about the state of health care in America. Her new album is focused on social-justice issues and features several local LGBTQ artists, including Sugar Joiko, a contemporary pop/urban singer, gamer, and Japanese culture addict who loves Franklin.

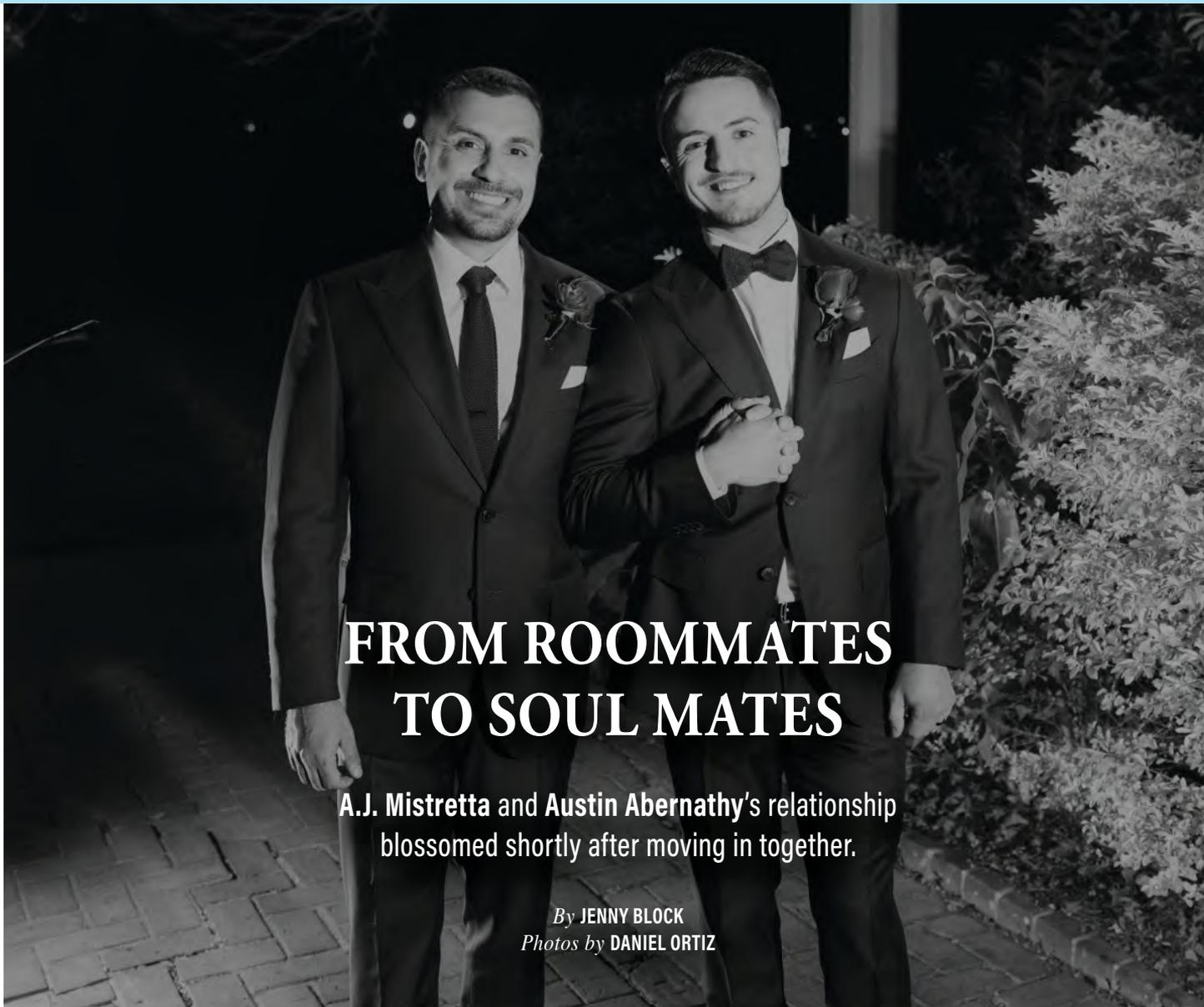
"This was my first project producing key and synth parts on a modern soul project featuring multiple artists," Joiko says. "It was an incredible and fun experience. *Bayou City Comeback Chorus* is an album written for our city's dreamers, underrepresented communities, and anyone that persevered through this tragic pandemic. This is an album for Houston."

"Aside from the world being affected so heavily by COVID, police brutality was massively highlighted around this time," says featured Latino trans rapper Uncle Tino. "Kam really wanted to create something positive and progressive amidst global collective trauma. →

Kam Franklin's 'Bayou City Comeback Chorus' features Uncle Tino (bottom left, clockwise), Ryanseetoe, Lilly Aviana, Nick Connors, Z'maji Glamouratti, Sugar Joiko, Kam Franklin, and Dende



WEDDING GUIDE



FROM ROOMMATES TO SOUL MATES

A.J. Mistretta and Austin Abernathy's relationship blossomed shortly after moving in together.

By JENNY BLOCK
Photos by DANIEL ORTIZ

A.J. Mistretta (l) and Austin Abernathy



New Orleans native Anthony J. “A.J.” Mistretta was looking for a roommate when he met Austin R. Abernathy.

Instead of just a roommate, A.J. found love. “A friend introduced us when I moved to Houston from the suburbs and was looking for a roommate. Austin was looking for a place to live. We connected. He moved in, and about a month later, we began dating,” A.J. says.

A.J., 40, is a graduate of the University of New Orleans and is the vice president of communications at the Greater Houston Partnership. Austin, 28, is from Texas City and graduated from the University of Houston. He is the assistant production manager at Stages Theatre, and they currently live in Houston’s

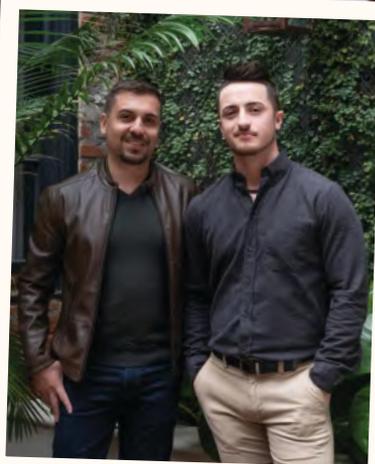
Third Ward.

About four months after they started dating, the couple was hanging out at a “Sunday Funday” in Montrose with friends when Austin grabbed A.J.’s arm as they were walking to the car. Austin then told A.J. that he already knew they would get married one day. “I think it took him by surprise, but he quickly warmed up to the idea,” Austin recalls.

The couple bought a house together in May 2020. “It was stressful to search for a place and sell ours as the uncertainty of COVID set in. But I knew that I wanted to propose to Austin around the time we moved,” A.J. says. He had considered a number of ways to propose, but he knew for sure that he wanted their dog, Abby, to play a part in it.

“Abby has become such a big part of our lives since we got her four months after we began dating,” A.J. says. So he asked a friend to paint a sign addressed to Austin from Abby’s point of view, asking her Papa if he would marry Dad. “I put the sign around her neck, played a romantic song, and asked Austin to join me on the couch. He was very surprised, began to cry, and quickly said Yes.”

They chose New Orleans as their wedding destination because it holds a lot of special memories for both of them. “We went down there one weekend last fall to find a venue, and after a long search, we picked the New Orleans Botanical Gardens at City Park. We chose November 5, thinking that the weather would be ideal at that time for an outdoor wedding,”



Austin explains.

They both wrote their own vows for the ceremony. "I had rehearsed mine many times, so when the time came, I ended up not using the paper at all." Austin says. "In the end, it might not have been exactly what was written, but what I said was natural and heartfelt. I don't really like being the center of attention, so this was a big deal for me. And I could tell A.J. was proud, as well."

While they chose to walk down the aisle unescorted, they each did mother-and-son dances after the ceremony. "This was definitely a special moment for our mothers, and for us. We chose the song 'Landslide' by Fleetwood Mac because of the poignant lyrics. Halfway through the song, we switched moms. We both feel extremely welcomed by the other's family," A.J. says.

Although they didn't specifically seek out LGBTQ vendors, they did ask each vendor if they were comfortable doing a gay wedding. "We didn't want to make a fuss about it, but it was important to us that the vendors wanted to do a gay wedding and not just feel obligated," A.J. notes.

When they first met with the coordinator at the Botanical Gardens, she was very direct and matter-of-fact about the details. For a minute, they wondered if she was OK with gay weddings,

so they asked her how often she had gay couples getting married there. She then took them both by the arms and said, "Oh honey, I do them all the time. Just had a gay couple last weekend. You are so welcome here."

"From that moment on, we absolutely loved working with our coordinator, and would recommend the gardens to anyone having a wedding in New Orleans," A.J. says.

So what does this happy couple think about their married life together? "Austin absolutely makes me smile, each and every day," A.J. says. "He has a tremendous sense of humor that often makes the little things funny and adventurous. We love exploring new places and experiences together."

And Austin adds that the feeling is certainly mutual. "It was also important to me that the person I married believed in and respected individuality. In addition to us being a couple, we [need to] be our own selves and not lose our identities to become 'us,'" he emphasizes. "A.J. and I are definitely on the same wavelength, and I appreciate that we could have that important conversation early on in our relationship."

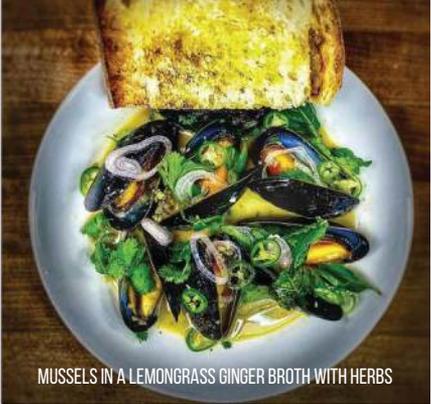
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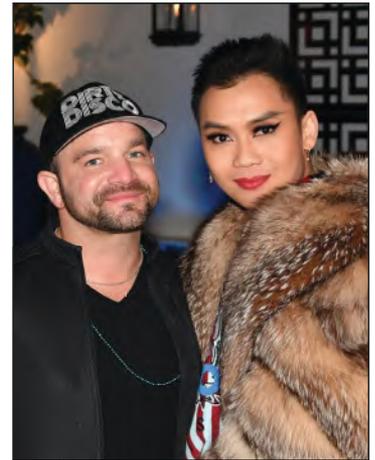
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SNOWBUNNIES AT REBAR HOUSTON

January 16, 2022

Bunnies on the Bayou presented its annual Snowbunnies at ReBar Houston. The event featured tunes by DJ Danny Verde, and all proceeds will benefit the volunteer-run LGBTQ nonprofit.



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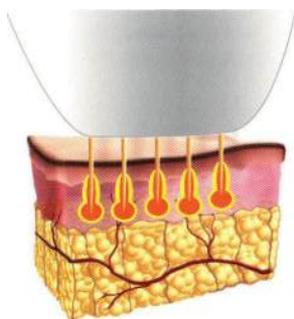
Pride Sports Houston kicked off its 9th dodgeball season at Q&B Sports in Spring Branch. The LGBTQ-affirming sports league is open to all players above the age of 20, and games occur through March 5.



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As we posed at the photo shoot, she specifically mentioned that we should keep 'healing' in mind—and that 'sometimes healing doesn't always look pretty.' It was so random, but honestly such an honor. I was just chillin' and checking emails when I came across one from Kam asking if I'd be down to be a part of a choir. I dabble in most art forms but very rarely do I get asked to sing, so I was like, 'Well that's sick.' She [asked] if I wanted to play talk-box on it as well, and I was like, 'Oh yeah, this is about to be crazy.' We didn't have a whole lot of information on the project as far as release dates or progress—just the reference mp3's, a few instructions, and the concept."

Also featured on the album are Dende, Lilly Aviana, Z'maji, Nick Connors, and Ryan Ramirez. The project was funded in part by the Houston Arts Alliance.

"I had the absolute honor of producing these songs for some of my favorite up-and-coming singers around the Houston area," says Franklin. "All of them are incredible solo performers in their own right, and I am grateful to them for allowing me to share their voices in a whole new way."

"The initial idea for 'Be The Light' was written after the death of Atatiana Jefferson, who was shot to death by a police officer in her home in 2019. Her death haunted me for months, and writing this song served as therapy. I wanted people to know what it felt like to be a Black person who was terrified to sleep at night because of what the police might do. And while it would have been easy for me to focus the entire project on trauma, I refused to do that. I instead chose to focus the EP's remaining three songs ('Stronger Together,' 'Bring It On,' and 'We Can All Be Free') around healing, possible solutions to fixing the problems we collectively endure as a society, and pathways to personal freedom and unity. We as a people deserve healing, and it starts by claiming it."

Franklin admits that the past two years have been like a roller coaster for her, with extreme highs and lows. "But I've been able to create more art than ever," she says. "This has been a long project, but I'm so glad it's about to be out to the world now."

 Listen to Kam Franklin's Bayou City Comeback Chorus at orcd.co/bccc.

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By LILLY RODDY

An Active Aquarius Season

Time to put your plans into action after the 10th.



Aquarius, inspired by artist Gengoroh Tagame

SEBASTIAN GOMEZ DE LA TORRE



We start the month with the last parts of both Mercury and Venus retrograde, and we'll be free of their influence by February 10. That will be the time to start your new

projects and try to make those New Year's resolutions stick. It's going to be a busy month, with strong expectations about what we think we can get done. Mars—planet of protection, anger, and confrontation—is in Capricorn, and that will have an impact on the nation's chart. Tensions could be high during this time of saber-rattling and boundary disputes. This is especially strong in the middle of the month. The supply-and-demand balance will continue to be stressed as the world shifts the way it does business. Your friends and your tribe are where you should find support and some positive viewpoints.

ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

Your career area continues to be very active, and you will become more comfortable making decisions about where you are going to focus your energy. Your natural tendency to do everything right now is being amplified through mid-March. You are ready to make some decisions about your future. You may also seem more defensive and argumentative. Friends and community associations can be very supportive. I know it feels more natural to do things on your own, but asking for help can be especially beneficial this month. You may spread yourself too thin in February, so watch your boundaries and commitments so you don't get overloaded.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

In the first half of the month, you are extending your outreach by seeking more education, exploring other career options, and possibly relocating. This is also a great time for a trip to get away from the demands of the holidays. By midmonth, your career energies are very active, as you look to take on more responsibility or start something on your own. You are being urged to connect with something that stirs your passion and brings in extra money. Business and social contacts offer good advice about meeting the right people and discovering alternative paths toward your goals. You are more open to relationships as you get better at expressing your needs and being more open. You will not tolerate restrictive personal or business relationships. You are looking for more open-minded people!

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

This month is a time to focus on seeking freedom as you deal

with improving your finances and making decisions about what's best. But your real focus may be on stepping back and doing more fun and interesting things. This month is good for expanding your internet presence and developing more credibility. Writing, teaching, and catching up with old friends are all favored this month. By mid-February, your career energies are much more active, and the rest of 2022 can bring new career options to choose from. Don't rush to choose—you'll have plenty of options through the summer. You are also feeling more social, so you will expand your circle of friends this year! As you start feeling more stable, your relationships improve.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Relationships continue to be one of the main topics for you this month. The retrogrades of Mercury and Venus have both been traveling through this part of your sign. Your positive relationships will experience a more intense bond. In tense relationships, the retrogrades help bring your issues to the surface so they can be addressed. Those faltering relationships either continue on a better note or come to an end. By midmonth, you are ready to move on to some fun times. You pay much more attention to your finances in the latter part of the month. It's a good month to address debt, since that can stifle your creative spark. This is a good month for writing, podcasting, or just sharing your discoveries with friends.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

You are making some real progress with your health and exercise program this month. You are going to make some

changes that include improving your office space—especially if you need a home office that's free from family distractions. The second big emphasis this month is relationships. With positive relationships (especially in business), it's time to set new goals so you're both moving in the same direction. You won't allow difficult relationships to continue, so this month is the time to address the problems. This is also a good month for loans and refinancing, since lenders are more open to your requests.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You are focused on getting routines back in place so you can restore some order in your life. You will be making some decisions this month about your job, where you need some stability as the pandemic sows uncertainty about what "the new normal" will be. You will have less tolerance for co-workers who whine instead of fixing problems. You are also putting effort into turning a hobby or personal interest into a side business. You should see some positive results from those efforts by the end of the month. This is a very good month for relationships after February 10. If you are involved, this is a great time to connect with your partner and share some fun times. If you are single and looking, the energy is much better for you to meet new folks. Enjoy!

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

Although home and family issues are less stressful after February 10, you are still making decisions about the best way to handle the changes that are going on there. As we move forward through the month, you are in a more playful and creative mood. If you have children, this is a very good

time to strengthen your connections with them. You may be looking at relocating, home repairs, or downsizing to fit your life now. Libra is the sign of relationships, and your relationship energies are especially positive in the summer and fall. That can improve all of your partnerships and even create new possibilities. This is also a good time to look at investments and reduce debts. There are even new career opportunities beginning to develop, and you are feeling more confident about your decisions throughout this entire month.

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

You are getting clearer every day about how to bring positive structure and routines back into your life. This will be a lot easier after the retrogrades are over on February 10 and you feel more decisive. Creating a safe home and family nest is at the top of your list this month. For some, this can be a time of downsizing and shifts in your family's power structure. You may need to take more of a leadership role in your family. This can also be a time of home repairs and makeovers, or even relocating. You may also be making plans to start your own business to create the freedom you need in your work. Romantic partners will need to give you more freedom and support your efforts. You are in a more playful mood by the end of the month.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov.22–Dec.21)

As the month opens, you are still working on improving your finances, personal resources, and skill sets. You are working very hard to become as debt-free as you can be! You are putting more structure into your routines so you can be

more effective in your work, and give yourself more free time for personal pursuits. You will be much more direct in your communications, and less flexible with people who waste your time. For some of you, this is a time to interact with your siblings or friends from the past. You also want to make your home a much more comfortable place this year. You may be looking at buying property, especially if it's a place you can escape to! This impulse is much stronger in late February. It's also a good time to improve your work environment, upgrade your office electronics, and expand your outreach on social media.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

This has been a heck of a time for the Old Sea Goats! As the month opens, both Venus (planet of love and money) and Mercury (planet of communications and routines) are retrograde in your sign! This has been creating delays and in-decision on your part, and with the other people you've been interacting with. This should all shift by February 10. You will feel ready to make decisions and be more confident about those choices. You are reviewing your finances as the month begins, looking at ways to reduce your debt and make better use of what you already have. You are more concerned about money, even if there don't seem to be any current problems. You are more open to spreading your wings this month and being more social, even if it's only virtually.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

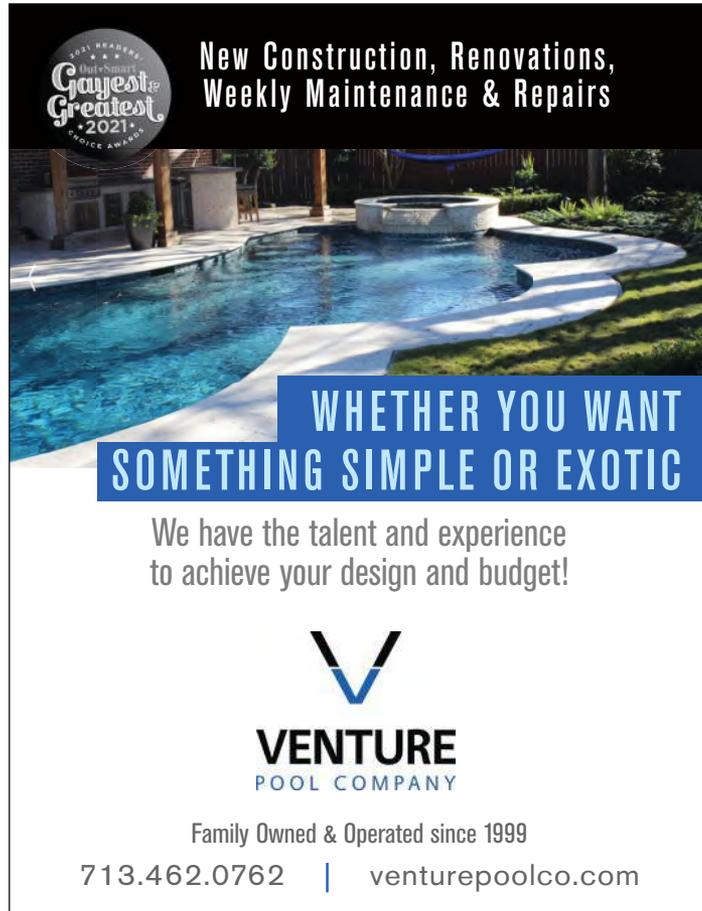
Happy Birthday to the Aquarians! This is your personal yearly cycle when you are reviewing last year's decisions,

making new plans, and setting goals for 2022. This all becomes easier as we get past February 10. You are in a very serious and somber time as you make long-term plans for your career, relationship commitments, and perhaps even retirement. You are still a little shy about interacting with others, as your sensitivities are still very strong and negative people can really set you off. You will feel much more energetic and ready to take action as we get to the end of the month. You are still getting rid of stuff from your past so you won't feel so weighed down. And finally, you are paying more attention to your health and making plans to get yourself back in shape.

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

The energies feel lighter and better as the month begins, and after the 10th you will be ready to move forward with your plans. In many ways, this is a better year for career, travel, relationships, and expanding your connections. Last month was a time to review your choices, but this month you are ready to act on your hopes and dreams. Your friends and community associations can all be very supportive, but choose carefully to make the best use of your time and money. By midmonth, you are ready for some rest and retreat. You are more sensitive, and negative people can have a stronger effect on you. This is a good month for seances, past-life regressions, meditation, and enjoying a good bottle of spirits!

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



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From Paris, with Love

Alexye'us Paris brings her glitz and glam to the Bayou City.

By SAM BYRD
Photo by ALEX ROSA



London. Milan. Alexye'us Paris. With a kiss from her lips and the swivel of her hips, she has the crowd eating out of her hand. And with a name that can take her around the globe, Houston is lucky to claim this glam girl.

Pronouns?

I often say "he," "she," and "we" because I'm often all three at some point in the day.

Hometown?

San Angelo, Texas.

Drag birthday?

October 31, 1997.

Describe your drag persona.

My drag persona is a glam, over-the-top expensive look. In other words, traditional drag.

Favorite artists to perform?

I have many, but I really love artists from the '80s and '90s.

Who are your drag idols?

My idols are Lawanda Jackson, Tommie Ross, Roxanne Collins, and the late Sasha Boom.

What does Black History Month mean to you?

It is a time to reflect. While I celebrate it all year long, I love the fact that the nation celebrates the movements, achievements, and progression that we as African Americans have achieved and contributed.

Who are your Black heroes?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Emmett Till, and some local modern-day heroes like Harrison Guy, Ian Haddock, and Atlantis Capri, who all contribute to keeping Black queerness alive.

Any Valentine's Day plans?

Considering that I'm single and not dating, I would say nothing as of yet. But who knows what the future holds!

How do you define love?

The only way it should be: Unconditional.

What's the most romantic thing someone could do for you?

Show lots of affection.

What's something people would be surprised to know about you?

I'm actually very shy. When I'm in drag I'm there to



entertain, but as my guy persona I'm very reserved.

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

I've learned how to be humble while achieving every thought and dream I have.

Advice for up-and-coming performers?

No one becomes successful overnight. Do the work and reap the benefits.

What would you tell the world about the LGBTQ community?

We are here, and we are queer. Most importantly, allow us to exist.

What's on your bucket list?

To travel the world and explore history.

Most embarrassing moment on stage?

Tripping over my own feet.

Which titles have you won?

I'm Miss Epitome. Also, I'm a former Miss Texas USofA At Large, for Miss Essence Plus, and I've won several titles in the preliminaries leading up to Miss Texas USofA. Plus several local club titles.

Do you perform any illusions?

I'm currently perfecting two: Mary J. Blige and Dionne Warwick.

What are you most known for?

Hosting various shows, and performing "End of the Road" by Gladys Knight.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Take your time growing up.

Any final thoughts about yourself, Houston's LGBTQ scene, or about drag?

I am often found in Montrose, so if you see me, say Hello. And support local drag!

Where can people see you perform?

I am the director of entertainment at Hamburger Mary's Houston. And I perform every Sunday at The Eagle.



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