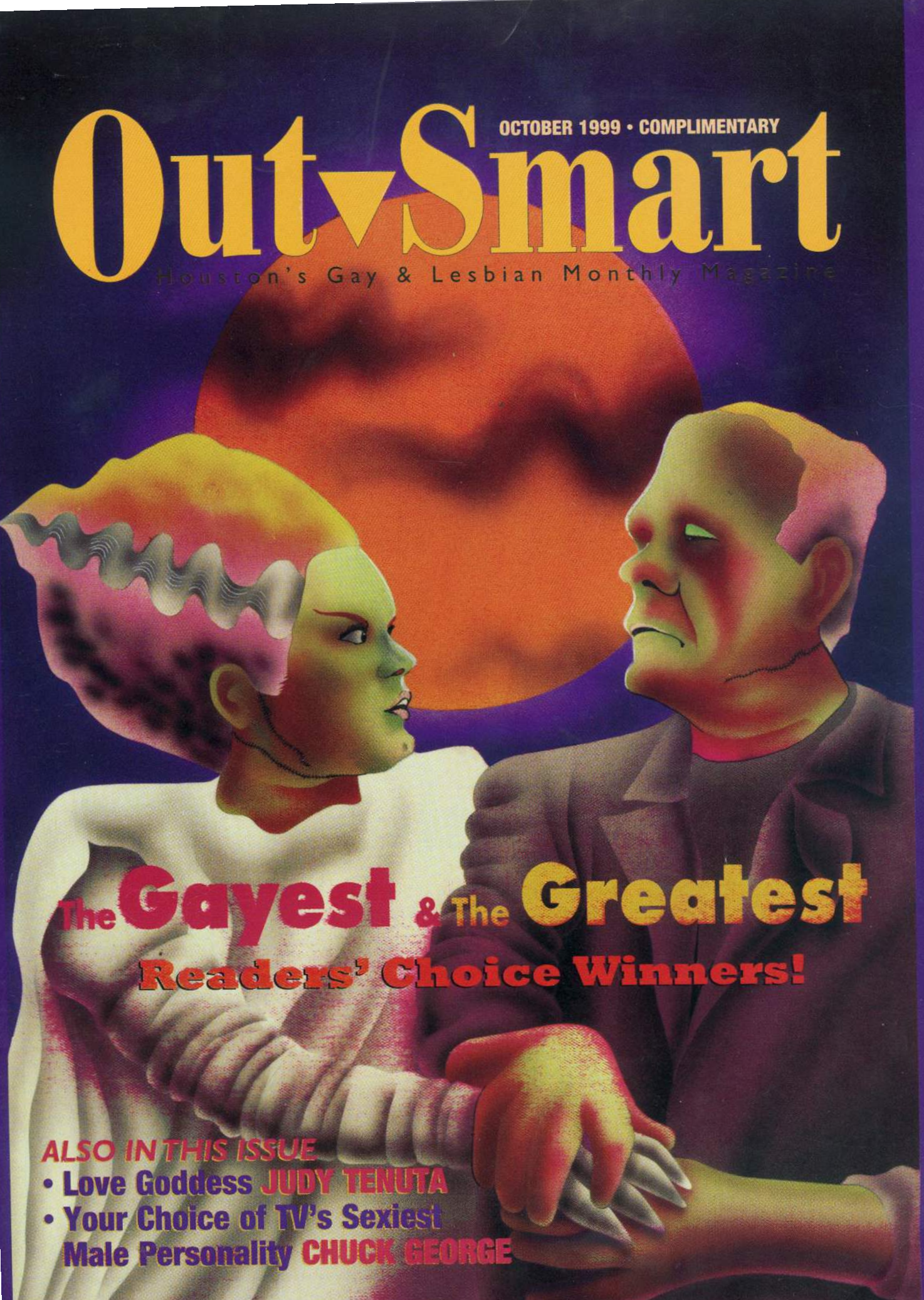


OutSmart

OCTOBER 1999 • COMPLIMENTARY

Houston's Gay & Lesbian Monthly Magazine



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CROSSROADS MARKET Houston's Nonalcoholic Gay Hot Spot

Before Crossroads Market became what it is today—a neon-lit storefront teeming with a mixture of gay and lesbian faces: perusing popular gay literature, consuming caffeinated libations, and chatting it up, all the while checking out incoming patrons—there were numerous hurdles to surmount. The place, after all, did not become “the place” overnight.

For example, the original Crossroads Market actually has its roots in Dallas, our sister city to the north. And, it was in existence for about 10 years before business partners Joe Ramunni and Tom Kane purchased the 3,000-sq. ft. space in 1991.

The store was already dubbed “Crossroads Market” because of its location—at The Crossroads, the core of Dallas’ gay scene. And, it was a much larger venue than the bookstore that Houston’s gay and lesbian patrons have come to know so well. It resembled more of a marketplace than a bookstore and café.

“The name...is really a good indicator of what the store originally was when we bought it,” explains Ramunni.

“It was a large space... that was occupied by about 10 gay men and lesbians, each of whom had a booth within the store.” It was from these booths that the peddlers sold books, health food, and even antique furniture to Dallas’ gay and lesbian community.

“We basically bought [the Dallas store] for the location,” he recalls, “but the name was pretty well embedded in the community, so we completely reformatted it over the following three years.”

After about a year, the partners worked to open a Crossroads store in Houston, but they had difficulty in finding the right location. “Houston, unlike Dallas, doesn’t really have a gay epicenter. In Dallas, everything is very concentrated, so there was really no equivalent here,” Ramunni says.

The corner where the current Houston store stands—at bustling Westheimer and Waugh—was identified early on as an ideal location, and the partners eventually purchased the

the Houston thing happened first because we were able to get that corner and because there was sufficient space. That was always our design, we just didn’t have a place to put it.”

The Houston store very much resembles its Dallas counterpart. The open setting and bright illumination reminds one of a fishbowl more than a store—a design that took some getting used to for both the gay and straight community. Some people expected something more “back alley” and without “full exposure.”

“Every time a gay and lesbian establishment opens up and it has no windows or it has few windows, the immediate thought, especially amongst gay men and lesbians, is: ‘well, you know what kind of place that is,’” Ramunni says. “And, among straight people, I mean, forget it.”

Ramunni admits that there was one event that occurred even while the new edifice still had paper taped over its massive storefront windows.

Ramunni tells the story: “I get a phone call in my office one day from a

very prim and proper man, who said, ‘I have been designated by a group to speak to you about something. We’ve been looking at your store, and we would like to know where the entrance is going to be?’ And I told him that it would be right under the marquis, in the front.

“He says, ‘Will there be a rear entrance?’ And I said, ‘No.’ And he said, ‘Quite honestly, my friends and I are very concerned about the amount of glass and the location of your entrances.

“We are not the traditional 1960s, 1970s gay and lesbian, back-street, back-alley store. We’re very open, we try to maintain a look and feel that no one, absolutely no one, should be ashamed to come in.”

space. But it took about four years to move the store to its current plot from its first location on West Alabama.

It was at this time that the café portion of the store was added. “We had the idea to serve coffee for six years, but again it was an issue of location,” Ramunni says. “We couldn’t do it in Dallas, because we didn’t have the space and because of parking restrictions. It took us literally six years to get that going in Dallas by the time we got the city approvals and the additional space. So,

TIMELINE 1991-93

Each month OutSmart continues its timeline series on the past 30 years of Houston gay history.

1991 The early '90s were marked by the gay and lesbian community continuing its efforts to assist in the AIDS crisis. The '90s also were marked by a continuance of speaking out for the rights that other groups so enjoyed. **LiB (Lesbians in Business)** began to provide area lesbians with a forum to confront issues in their places of work. The group also assists to "empower lesbians to lead proud, positive, and integrated lives in the workplace and the world at large." Through charitable and service-oriented work, LiB increases the visibility of lesbians within the community, while projecting a positive image of lesbians beyond the gay community boundaries. Members of LiB possess different abilities and interests and come from various races, areas of employment, and educational backgrounds. Helping to curb the rise in hate-related crimes, **Q-Patrol** was formed. The group, affiliated with the Houston Police Department's Citizens on Patrol program, is made up of volunteers who monitor the Montrose bar areas looking for suspicious and malicious activities. Q-Patrol accomplishes its goal through the use of "noninterventionist" techniques, watching out for potential threats to gay and lesbian safety, usually on the weekends. When suspicious activities are spied, the police are notified and, following an offense, the appropriate actions are taken. Q-Patrol also actively educates the public in self-defense techniques as well as first aid and CPR.

1992 Asians & Friends of Houston Inc. (A&FH) was formed as a nonprofit organization for gay men and lesbians of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. A&FH accomplishes this goal through numerous activities, including cultural and educational programs; discussion

groups, which feature topics of importance to its members and to the gay and lesbian community; and various social functions. Social events vary from viewing movies at the home of an A&FH member to dim sum Sunday brunches at Asian and non-Asian restaurants. A&FH also provides the community with AIDS educational materials in numerous Asian and Pacific Island languages. **Log Cabin Republicans-Houston** was begun in Houston to ensure that "the Republican Party fulfills its promise to be a party of principles, a party of ideas, and a party of inclusion." The group also tracks the Grand Old Party candidate's position on gay and lesbian issues.

1993 Just For Us began as a spin-off of Houston Gay and Lesbian Parents as a social and support group for children in 6th-12th grades with gay or lesbian parents. Joining the ranks of growing AIDS/HIV services, **Steven's House** was started after receiving an initial grant to help obtain and operate a facility for up to six people for one year. The organization provided intermediate care for the daily living activities of its residents free of charge. Steven's House intermediate care residences help chronically sick individuals—usually those recently discharged from area hospitals—to "renew themselves physically, spiritually, and emotionally before resuming independent activities." Trained nurse's aides provide caring and companionship in a nurturing home-like environment, says the organization. "It is the combination of skills and experience that makes Steven's House a viable and valuable community service agency," the organization says.

Timeline constructed from personal interviews, personal recollections, and documented information.



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Many of us are very prominent in the community and have very important jobs, and we would not want any of our associates who may be, say, going to Ruggles, to see us sitting in the window or going into the store."

Needless to say, Ramunni was a bit taken back by the phone call, almost breathless. "That attitude is such a throwback and this man was perfectly serious and very concerned," says Ramunni. "He wanted a back door!"

It is for that reason that Ramunni thinks that Crossroads is more defined by what it is not. "We are not the traditional 1960s, 1970s gay and lesbian, back-street, back-alley store. We're very open, we try to maintain a look and feel that no one, absolutely no one, should be ashamed to come in."

And although it may be most convenient to call Crossroads a bookstore, in reality, it's much more. "It's a gay and lesbian meeting place," says Ramunni. "We are very non-traditional from a gay and lesbian point of view in terms of our approach. We think that there's a lot more to the world and a lot more to going out and seeing people than looking at pornography, for example."

And, this is the very element that Crossroads invites through its doors. Patrons who aren't afraid to sit in the store's window and have coffee across from their partners and reach over to hold their hand or perhaps even give them a kiss. "People do that in our store all the time," says Ramunni. "And that's what we want."

Crossroads has been labeled, more than just a few times, a nonalcoholic JR's. "I've heard it called that over and over and over, and...as I look at the clientele and what they do, it really is a nonalcoholic gay bar," says Ramunni. "They stop there on their way to the bars; they will stop there because they don't want to drink or because they don't want to smell the smoke."

And, so far, after the initial obstacles were hurdled, the hard work has paid off. Ramunni attributes much of the store's success to a strategy of

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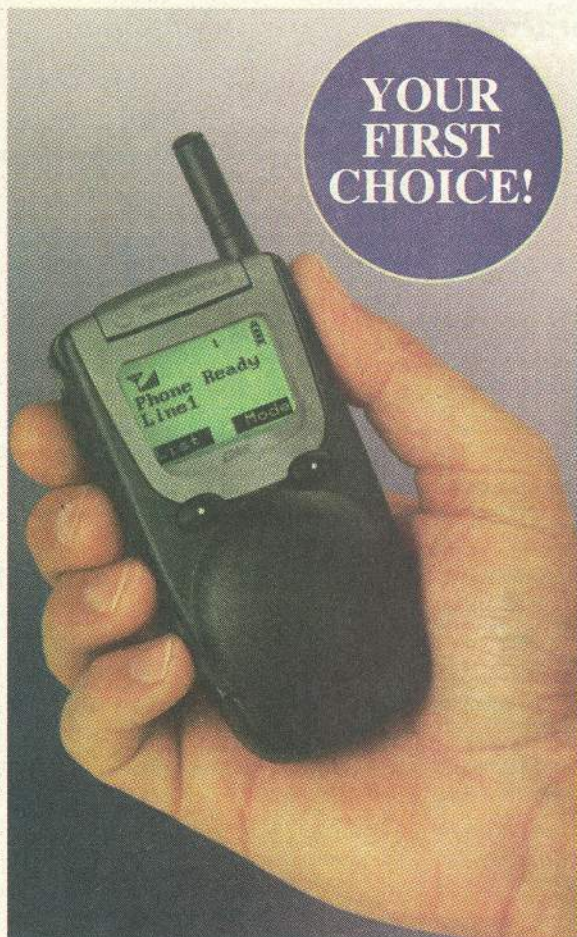
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constantly changing to suit its customers, who have changed considerably over the years.

"When we got into this business," he explains, "there were lots of gay and lesbian bookstores across the country, but there were only two big chains: Lambda Rising in Washington, [D.C.], and A Different Light, which has stores in several cities.

"Well, Lambda Rising has been getting beaten about the head really badly and A Different Light [according to an article in a bookseller publication] is now considering closing their stores, because they are losing money.

"Crossroads Market has now become the No. 2 gay and lesbian bookstore in the U.S.," Ramunni says. "Between the two cities, we now

sell more gay books than probably...we're probably on par with Lambda Rising."

So, what's the draw to the store if all the material contained within the store is available on the Internet at Amazon.com? "Even though this stuff is available everywhere else, it's not available in the quantity and variety that we have and it's all in one place," says Ramunni.

"There's a big sense of gratification in knowing that people are enjoying what you're doing. And, I think, in our small way, hopefully we have an impact in providing people with something other than a bar to go to and sit down and be able to do what they want to do."

Steve Poruban is a community writer and newly dubbed TimeOut historian. He can be reached care of this publication.



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