

FEB. '23

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

Out & Smart

The Love Issue

Houston husbands
Mario Castillo (l) and
Joel Rottier shine the
light on local civic
engagement

**Four Houston
power couples
share their stories**

Pg.47

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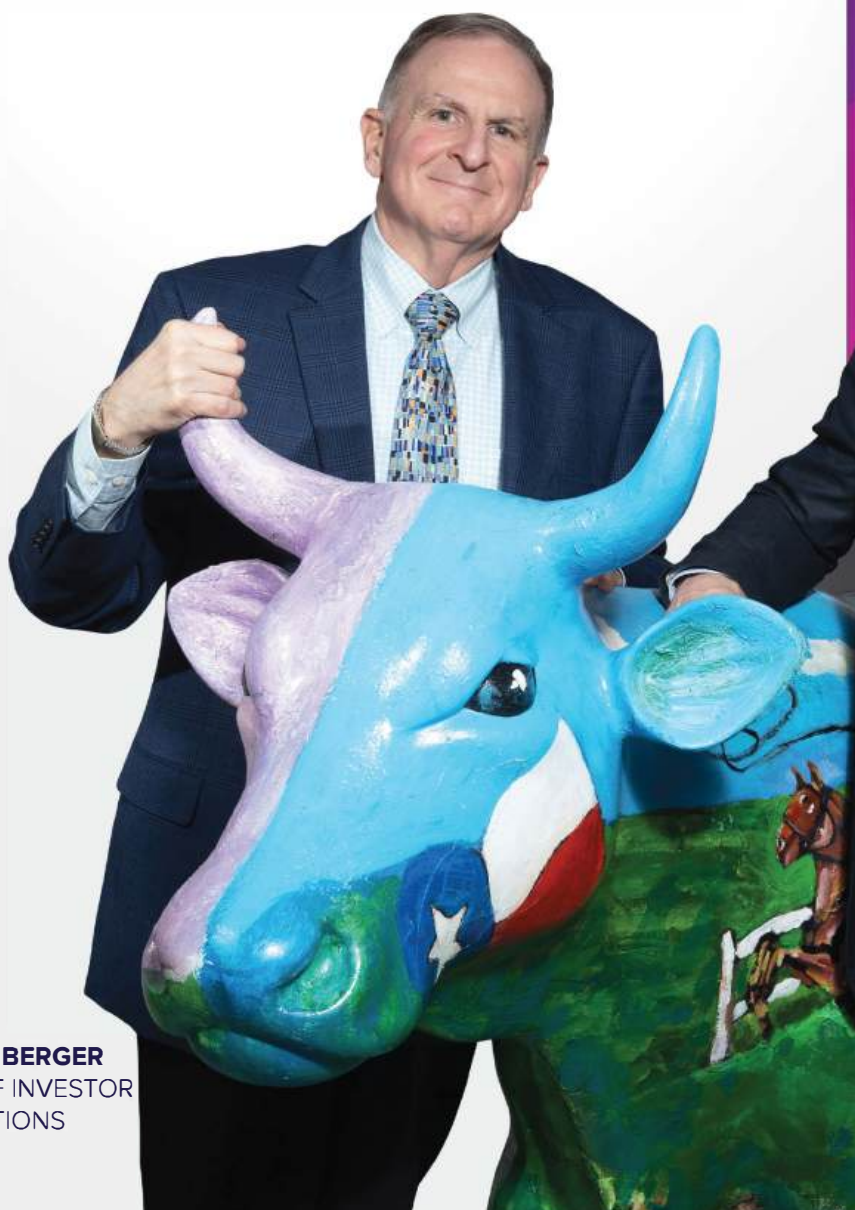
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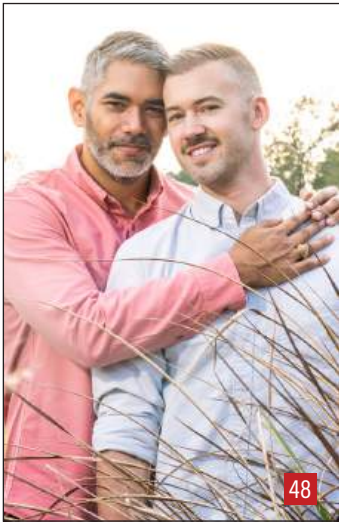
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FEBRUARY 2023

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RADIANT ROMANCE

Houston husbands Mario Castillo (l) and Joel Rottier shine a light on local civic engagement
Photography by Frank Hernandez @the_creativex for OutSmart magazine. Shot January 17 at Memorial Park's Clay Family Eastern Glades.

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February might be the shortest month of the year, but there sure is a lot happening in Houston!

Our Black History Month feature profiles three Black LGBTQ leaders whose work enriches the lives of countless Houstonians—celebrity stylist Ty Hunter, HIV activist Jordan Edwards, and youth advocate Natalie Ferguson, whose work supports homeless teens of all gender identities and sexualities. We also fill you in on the Ensemble Theatre's production of *Paradise Blue*, as well as this Midtown theater's legacy of Black storytelling excellence.

To celebrate the month of love, we introduce you to four local queer couples who remind us that communication is the key to

a happy relationship. Writer Ryan Leach introduces you to our cover stars, politically active husbands Mario Castillo and Joel Rottier, and writer Zach McKenzie interviews husbands Desmond D. and Justin Bertrand-Pitts, whose mentorship program reaches out to young men throughout the city. Writer Sam Byrd sits down with Kerry and Grayson Chandler, the Galveston trans couple who spearhead a national pageantry system, while writer Jenny Block chats with wives Jessica Williams and Lauren Smith, co-owners of the highly successful EventSmith Productions.

And downtown in Houston's Theater District, *Cambodian Rock Band* is electrifying audiences this month at the Alley Theatre,

thanks to award-winning director Chay Yew. Don't miss our interview with this engaging playwright.

Over at the Hobby Center, perennial favorite *Chicago* is this month's Theatre Under the Stars production. Writer Zach McKenzie sits down with star Christina Wells, our talented hometown gal who plays Matron "Mama" Morton. The Out@TUTS after-party, sponsored by OUTSMART magazine, follows the February 9 performance.

Get your tickets to the Houston Ballet's March 3 performance of Stanton Welch's *Romeo and Juliet* and attend our LGBTQ Out at the Ballet private reception before the show—a great way to meet fellow ballet lovers next month!

Thanks to local photographer Frank Hernandez and OUTSMART creative director Alex Rosa, who created the striking Memorial Park sunset photos for our cover story. You'll want to check out that recently completed Clay Family Eastern Glades area of the park during your next visit.

See you next month!



Greg Jeu
Publisher



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STAGE

Through March 3

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL: KOOZA

This year, Cirque du Soleil returns to its circus origins with their show under the Big Top at Sam Houston Race Park. *KOOZA* combines acrobatic performance and the art of clowning, while exploring fear, identity, recognition, and power.

The performance tells the story of an Innocent's journey, which brings him into contact with comedic characters from an electrifying and visual world full of surprises, thrills, audacity, and total involvement.

British daily *The Independent* says that "KOOZA blends, almost to perfection, its subcontinental sounds, its stunning lighting and costumes with theatrical ingenuity and acrobatic wonder."

Tickets to the 100-minute, family-friendly performance are available now. Additionally, attendees can take their Cirque du Soleil visit to the next level with the VIP experience, which includes exclusive access to a VIP suite and some of the best seats in the house. tinyurl.com/4ueyaycd



FILM

February 4

THE WATERMELON WOMAN

MFAH screens this landmark example of New Queer Cinema. Director Cheryl Dunye's romantic comedy explores the history of film with an inventive plot set in the 1930s. A Q&A with Dunye follows the screening.

tinyurl.com/mtjw47nx



STAGE

February 23–March 5

ROMEO AND JULIET

The Houston Ballet brings Shakespeare to life on stage. Stanton Welch's *Romeo and Juliet* returns to Wortham Theater Center for the first time since its debut in 2015.

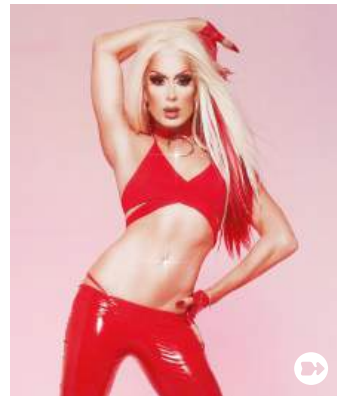
The star-crossed lovers meet again, and their tale is woven into the ballet with music by Sergey Prokofiev and lavish sets and costumes inspired by the Italian Renaissance, created by acclaimed Italian designer Roberta Guidi di Bagno. Welch's *Romeo and Juliet* reimagines the famous Shakespeare tragedy by combining classic themes with fresh choreography.

 Tickets are available now, and Houston Ballet is partnering with OUTSMART for a special **March 3 LGBTQ Out at the Ballet night—25% off** orchestra-level seats and a complimentary drink during private receptions before the show and at intermission. tinyurl.com/bddufcep



STAGE
Through January 2024
DRUNK SHAKESPEARE

Serve up cocktails with a side of comedy, tragedy, and history as Drunk Shakespeare's cast makes their way through some of the best of the Bard's canon with a cast member drunk each night.
tinyurl.com/57c3tw4t



STAGE
February 9
VALENTINE'S DAY IS TERRIBLE

RuPaul's Drag Race star Alaska 5000 brings her tour to House of Blues Houston. Tickets to the three-city Valentine's Day-themed tour are on sale now.
tinyurl.com/2ysn7e7h

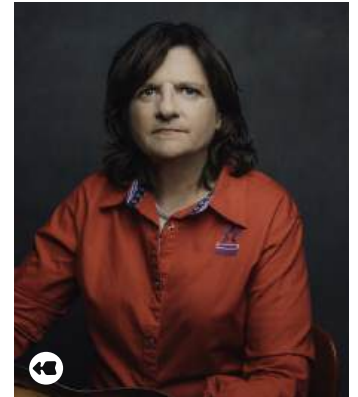
ART
February 10
SPRING FLING: SOCIAL HOUR

Rice University's Moody Center hosts a free outdoor concert featuring the People Museum band and Bright Light Social Hour. Tour the Moody's fiber-art show and enjoy light bites during the concert.
tinyurl.com/494t9u2c



STAGE
February 11
AMY RAY BAND

Lesbian singer-songwriter and Indigo Girl Amy Ray comes to Houston with a band tour for her acclaimed new solo album *If It All Goes South*, which explores her personal connection to the South.
tinyurl.com/4a2nj9p5



FOOD
February 12
CRAWFISH AT PEARL BAR

Crawfish season kicks off at Pearl Bar this February during their weekly Pride Market. DJ Raqcity will be spinning tracks all afternoon while visitors make their way through pounds of crawfish and a market of local LGBTQ vendors
tinyurl.com/yf4ju9m2



STAGE
February 22-March 12
MOULIN ROUGE! THE MUSICAL

Ten-time Tony Award-winning musical *Moulin Rouge!* comes to the Hobby Center, bringing Baz Luhrmann's revolutionary film to life onstage. The Broadway hit is a celebration of truth, beauty, freedom, and love.
tinyurl.com/muwyrx3j

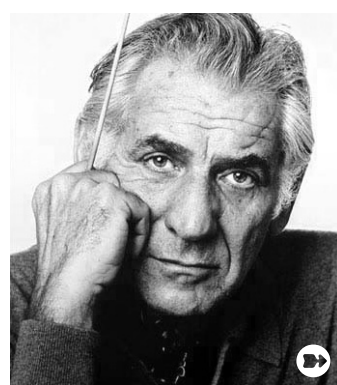
COMMUNITY
February 26
BLCK HISTORY NOW

Visit Karbach Brewing Co. for BLCK Market, an organization that supports small businesses and entrepreneurs with financial literacy, wellness, and creativity resources.
tinyurl.com/bdj2f7ch



NIGHTLIFE
February 17
GIMME GIMME DISCO

The disco hits of ABBA will fill the downstairs of White Oak Music Hall. Fans can dance to their favorite ABBA hits as part of Gimme Gimme Disco's nationwide tour.
tinyurl.com/36w6w5p6



STAGE
February 13-27
GLITTER & BE GAY

Explore Leonard Bernstein's Broadway at Ovation, featuring favorites from *On the Town*, *West Side Story*, *Candide*, and more. Paul Hope headlines this tribute to one of America's greatest composers.
tinyurl.com/596wu6xn

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QUEER THINGS to DO

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STAGE

March 9-16

SUMMER AND SMOKE

Houston Ballet unveils its world premiere of a new one-act ballet inspired by gay playwright Tennessee Williams' poem *Summer and Smoke*. The show is choreographed by internationally recognized choreographer Cathy Marston, whose works are often inspired by literature. tinyurl.com/ym4k9aju

STAGE

March 24

MALAYSIA "BABYDOLL" FOXX

Malaysia "Babydoll" Foxx, from *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 15*, takes the stage at ReBar Houston for a live performance. A meet-and-greet session is available before the show. tinyurl.com/mrxbfe6t



STAGE

May 6

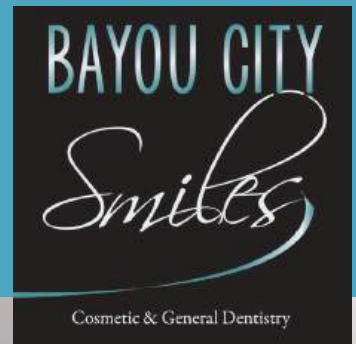
BLACK QUEER AF MUSIC FESTIVAL

The Black Queer AF Music Festival returns to Houston for a second year that promises to be bigger and better than ever. In addition to a full schedule of music and entertainment, highlights include immersive games and a launch celebration for 14 businesses that are part of the Project Liberate program. This festival has been created and produced with Houston's Black LGBTQ community in mind. tinyurl.com/32bfm4k7

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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



On January 2, 2023, the Harris County Elected Officials Swearing-In Ceremony was held at NRG Stadium. Pictured are C. Patrick McIlvain, Jerry Simoneaux, and Kevin J. Hoffman.



The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce held its first Friday Meet & Eat at City Cellars on January 6, 2023. Pictured are Crystal Idika, Julianna Romero, and Maddie Villarreal.



JR's Bar & Grill held a *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 15* viewing party on January 6, 2023. Pictured are Brian Kapchinskier, Mistress Isabelle Brooks, and Chad Guidry.



On January 7, 2023, the Krewe of Olympus presented its Twelfth Night Event at Resurrection MCC. Pictured are Stephanie Hall, Kaleb McElyea, Corey Helweg, and Queen Debbie Helweg.



On January 8, 2023, Tony's Corner Pocket added a flag for the Club Q victims to the flag pole commemorating the Pulse Nightclub victims.



The Montrose Center's Rising Leaders young professionals group attended a special tour of the Contemporary Art Museum Houston's recent Troy Montes Michie exhibit on January 12, 2023.



On January 19, 2023, a Nick Hellyer for Houston City Council At Large 2 campaign fundraising reception was held at the home of Annise Parker and Kathy Hubbard. Pictured are former mayor Annise Parker, Nick Hellyer, and Kathy Hubbard.



The Empire of the Royal Sovereign and Imperial Court of the Single Star held its Coronation XXXVIII at Houston Marriott North on January 14, 2023. Pictured are Impress 37 Ivanna Hyde Cupcake, Empress 38 Alexa Bouvier, Emperor 38 Geary B Whitney, and Emperor 37 Landon J. Fatel.



On January 15, 2023, Snow Bunnies 2023 was presented by Bunnies on the Bayou at ReBar. Pictured are the event hosts and volunteers.



On January 17, 2023, EPAH held its January dinner meeting and program at Gloria's Latin Cuisine. Pictured are Susan Smith-Snyder, Fran Smith, and Michele Laprade.



The Greater Houston LGBT Chamber held its inaugural 3rd Thursday Breakfast at Harold's Restaurant on January 19, 2023. Pictured are Tammi Wallace, Dalton DeHart, and Connor J. Rock.



On January 14, 2023, Arden Eversmeyer's Celebration of Life was hosted by Lesbians Over Age Fifty (LOAF). Pictured are LOAF members who attended.



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The National LGBTQ Task Force Marks 50 Years of Progress

The Creating Change 2023 Conference is celebrating in San Francisco.

By ANDREW EDMONSON



Thousands of activists, advocates, and allies are descending on San Francisco this month for Creating Change 2023, the first in-person version of the venerable LGBTQ conference in three years.

Creating Change, which is organized and sponsored by the National LGBTQ Task Force, is billed as “the foremost political, leadership, and skills-building conference for the LGBTQ movement.”

Creating Change held virtual conferences in 2021 and 2022 during the pandemic, so it has not met in person since the January 2020 Dallas convention. The theme of this year’s conference is “The State of the Movement: Past. Present. Future.”

Creating Change 2023 will also mark the launch of the 50th-anniversary events that will celebrate the founding of the National LGBTQ Task Force, the country’s oldest civil-rights and advocacy organization fighting for queer equality.

A Star-Powered Conference

To help celebrate its golden anniversary in grand style, the Task Force has lined up an array of stage, screen, and pop-culture stars to speak at Creating Change.

Angelica Ross, a transgender-rights activist and one of the stars of the hit television series *Pose* and *American Horror Story*, will deliver the closing plenary address. In the fall of 2022, Ms. Ross made history as the first openly trans woman to play a leading role on Broadway when she debuted as Roxie Hart in the long-running musical comedy *Chicago*.

Transgender American writer Amy Schneider will also address the conference. In the fall of 2021, she captivated the American public when she emerged as the most successful female contestant in the history of the quiz show *Jeopardy!*, winning 40 consecutive



Transgender American writer Amy Schneider, the record-setting *Jeopardy!* contestant, is a keynote speaker at the Creating Change conference.



Acclaimed transgender actress Angelica Ross, star of the TV series *Pose* and *American Horror Story*, will be the conference’s closing speaker.

games and amassing \$1.38 million in earnings.

X González, who survived the harrowing school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in 2018 and has emerged as one of the nation’s foremost advocates for gun violence prevention, will also appear at the convention. Since 2018, they have riveted the nation with their fervor and eloquence in impassioned public speeches at March for Our Lives rallies, most notably when they famously asserted “We call BS” on politicians supported by the National Rifle Association who would not take legislative action to address America’s epidemic of gun violence.

The celebrated LGBTQ historian Eric Marcus, founder and host of the popular podcast *Making Gay History*, will also speak at Creating Change 2023.

The convention will honor a number of community activists for their distinguished service to the LGBTQ movement, including Barbara Satin, a longtime transgender activist who has worked on issues of faith, aging, and gender justice. Satin retired from the Task Force as their Faith Work director in 2022, and she will receive the Carmen Vázquez SAGE Award for Excellence in Leadership on Aging Issues.

A Decisive Early Victory

The National LGBTQ Task Force (originally known as The Gay Task Force) was founded in New York in October 1973 by some of the nation’s leading activists, including Dr. Howard Brown, Martin Duberman, Barbara Gittings, Ron Gold, Frank Kameny, Nathalie →



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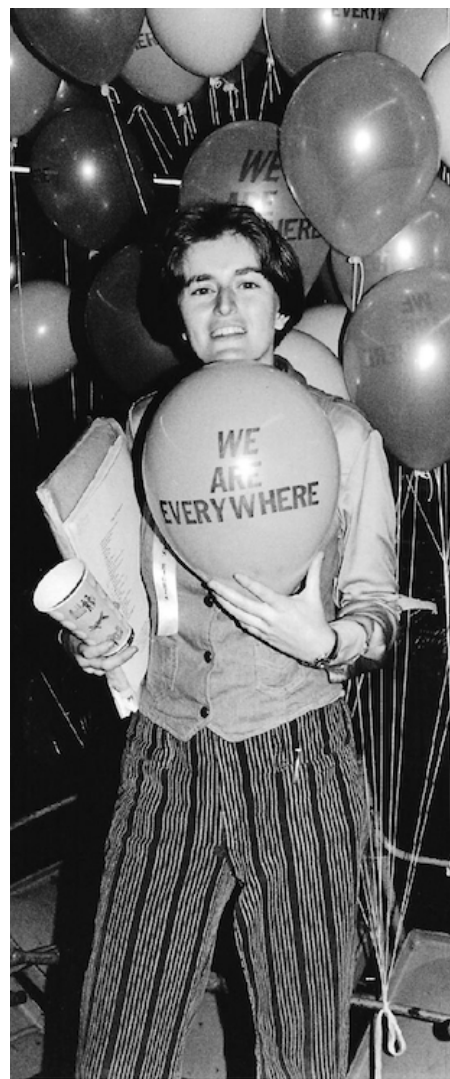


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In 1977, trailblazing Houston lesbian activist Pokey Anderson (at right) made history as a member of the first contingent of LGBTQ Americans invited to the White House to discuss gay issues. They met with Midge Constanza, a top aide to then President Jimmy Carter.



Rockhill, and Bruce Voeller.

Later that same year, the Task Force scored a decisive victory early in its history when it lobbied to remove the diagnosis of homosexuality from the official list of mental illnesses in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). In one stroke, the American Psychiatric Association established that there was no inherent link between homosexuality and mental illness, a long-held tenet of American life. This helped to set in motion a process of reducing the stigmatization of queer Americans.

The White House Meeting

A number of LGBTQ Houstonians played important roles in the early history of the Task Force. Pioneering gay activist Gary Van Ooteghem, the first president of the Houston Gay Political Caucus, went to Washington, DC in 1975 and spent five days lobbying members of Congress alongside Bruce Voeller, one of the founders of the Task Force. Inspired by this experience, Van Ooteghem returned to Houston and came out publicly in his position as Harris

County comptroller, calling for a civil-rights resolution to protect gay citizens. He served as a co-chair of the Task Force from 1976 to 1977.

Trailblazing lesbian activist Pokey Anderson, a co-founder of the Houston Gay Political Caucus, also served as co-chair of the Task Force's board of directors in 1977. In that role, she made history as a member of the first contingent of LGBTQ Americans invited to the White House to discuss gay issues. On March 26, 1977, the group met with Midge Constanza, a top aide to then president Jimmy Carter.

In the 1990s, Houston was a focus of the Task Force's then executive director Urvashi Vaid, who traveled to the city regularly to give rousing speeches, nurture young activists, and organize on the ground. In 1992, Houston hosted the Republican National Convention, one of the most homophobic presidential conventions in American history. Vaid mobilized both Houston and national activists in marches and protests, and helped to shine a spotlight on the anti-queer Republican rhetoric.

In the 1990s, another veteran Houston activist stepped into a leadership role with

the Task Force. Deborah Moncrief Bell served as national organizer for the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, which drew hundreds of thousands of queer Americans from across the country. For her tireless years-long effort, Bell was affectionately nicknamed "The Supreme, Mega Grand Diva of the Whole Blessed Universe."

In 2022, the Task Force again made history when it named Kierra Johnson as its first Black female executive director. "We take an intersectional, proactive approach to our advocacy, underscoring our fundamental interconnectedness," she has observed of her leadership vision for the organization. Johnson will deliver one of the keynote addresses at Creating Change 2023, focusing on the work being planned in the year ahead to advance LGBTQ equality.



For more event info, visit creatingchange.org.

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Meet Louie Minor

Texas' first openly gay county commissioner.

By MARENE GUSTIN



On January 3, Louie Minor was sworn in as Bell County's Precinct 4 Commissioner—the first openly gay county commissioner in the state of Texas. He is also the first Latino on the Bell

County Commissioners Court.

Bell County, a predominately white and Republican area of Central Texas, has voted for every Republican presidential candidate since Ronald Reagan. However, Bell County's largest city, Killeen, is a Democratic stronghold and every elected official in Precinct 4—which includes Killeen—is a Democrat.

Born to a large Mexican-American family in Belton, Texas (the Bell County seat), the 43-year-old Minor is an Iraq War veteran who later worked in the United States Department of Homeland Security's National Operation Center as an Incident Management Officer. But when family and the political bug called, he returned to Bell County and started a general contracting company in Killeen with his daughter Alexandra. He earned his master's degree in public administration from Norwich Univer-

sity in 2013, and he majored in criminal justice during his undergraduate studies in Texas.

"I have been in politics for over ten years and have run for various offices," Minor says. "I have been a public servant for most of my adult life. I was a police officer, an Army officer, and an incident-management officer. The ability to effect change in your community and bring diversity in the decision-making process will only make for better decisions.

"Over the ten years that I have run for office, this is probably the most troubling time. I feel that the LGBT community as a whole is under assault, and leaders at every level of government must stand for righteousness and equality." Minor faced vandalism at his campaign office back in September, but he attributes that incident to his Democratic Party affiliation as opposed to being gay.

"I believe running for office over the years took the novelty off of [the fact that I'm openly] gay," he says. "The only time that it was mentioned in the press is when

I received the Victory Fund endorsement. My strategy was always to support the underserved and underrepresented. As far as running as an openly gay candidate, being gay never came up in public forums during my race. This is because when you stay engaged with the community, the public observes your passion to help and serve.

"I do find it interesting that the first openly gay county commissioner in the state did not come from Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, Travis, or Bexar County. It came from Bell County," he adds.

Minor is looking forward to hitting the ground running, and has several priorities already lined up. "The County is currently in the design stage for a new annex in Killeen," he says. "As commissioner, I will be intimately involved with the designing and building to meet the needs of Killeen for the next several decades. I'm also involved with small-business initiatives, and I want to make a push for local women, minority, veteran, and Historically Underutilized Businesses that are actively sought when purchasing goods and services."

"BEING GAY NEVER CAME UP IN PUBLIC FORUMS DURING MY RACE."

—County Commissioner
Louie Minor

Public transportation is another priority for Minor. "Bell County's public transportation system is currently lacking," he notes. "I would like to work on a rapid-transit authority for the County."

And he is adamant about removing the last vestiges of Confederate memorials in the area. "Fort Hood has a new name as of 2023. It is Fort Cavazos, named for the first Latino four-star general. Bell County touts its support and love of the military, and I believe this is a needed move in solidarity."

There is also a controversial Confederate monument on the Bell County Courthouse grounds that has faced

repeated attempts to remove it. "There is not a majority of support for removing the Confederate statue, but that will not deter me," he emphasizes. "I have four years to keep this issue [on the agenda]."

"Decriminalizing marijuana is another issue. Killeen and Harker Heights voted in the November election to decriminalize by ordinance. Bell County Commissioners Court voted last month to sue Killeen over that ordinance. This will affect Austin, San Marcos, Denton, and Elgin, who [all] have voter-approved decriminalization ordinances."

Minor certainly has a lot to accomplish in his first term. In addition to being focused on some thorny issues, he is also engaged to his boyfriend, Jacob. And he doesn't rule out runs for higher offices in the future.

"I enjoy my business and politics," Minor concludes. "If you love what you do, it will never be work."

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AFH's Annual AIDS Walk Set for March 5

The Walk to End HIV supports several local nonprofits.

By MARENE GUSTIN



AIDS FOUNDATION HOUSTON/FACEBOOK

Since early January, folks have been creating or joining walk teams and soliciting donations for AIDS Foundation Houston (AFH), the non-profit that hosts Houston's annual AIDS Walk. This year's goal for the March 5 event is \$300,000—money that will be well spent in our community.

For 40 years now, AFH has been de-stigmatizing HIV/AIDS as it offers testing, treatment, PrEP care, and support services to thousands. In 2021, AFH conducted 1,178 HIV tests, aided 319 clients with affordable housing, and helped 682 clients obtain food through its Stone Soup Food Pantry.

"The Walk to End HIV is important to raise community awareness that the HIV epidemic is not over, but also to let people know that we have more resources than ever to prevent acquiring HIV and to treat it successfully," says AIDS Foundation Houston CEO John Huckaby. "What's great about the Walk is that it truly is a community fundraiser that raises critical dollars to support the good work being done by several organizations throughout the greater Houston area."

Funds raised this year will benefit several local nonprofits, including The Truth Project,

Inc., Lazarus House, Avenue 360, The Normal Anomaly Initiative, and Fundación Latinoamericana de Acción Social (FLAS)—a group that provides education, HIV/STD counseling and testing, and treatment referrals for Latinos affected by HIV/AIDS. FLAS supporters have been participating in the annual walk for the past seven years.

"For me, the walk is to let the community know we must continue to fight, decrease the stigma, and end the HIV epidemic in Houston," says Elia Chino, the founder and executive director of FLAS. "We must screen more people in Houston for HIV."

According to the Centers for Disease Control, HIV testing has sharply decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic began, prompting an urgent push to increase testing. Houston, the fourth-largest city in the U.S., ranks ninth in the nation for newly reported HIV diagnoses, according to a recent report from Brown University's School of Public Health.

Houston also lags behind other cities in the percentage of people who remain in HIV care and achieve viral suppression.

More than 3,000 Houstonians are expected to participate in the non-competitive 5K walk to remember and honor those affected by HIV/

AIDS, and to celebrate the advances in treatment that successfully control HIV.

The 2023 AIDS Walk check-in begins at 9:00 a.m. on March 5, with the opening ceremony beginning at 10:00 a.m. at Sam Houston Park downtown. The Walk kicks off at 10:30 a.m., followed by a party in the park from 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. where walkers can enjoy bites and beverages from favorite local vendors, fun prizes, music, outdoor activities, and photo opportunities.

Chino has some good advice for fellow walkers on her FLAS team: "Wear sneakers, and bring water! I always prepare sandwiches and breakfast tacos for our team to eat before we start." Sounds like her FLAS team would be a good one to join, although every team (and many individual walkers) will be glad they participated in the fight to end HIV/AIDS in Houston.

What: AFH's 2023 Walk to End HIV

When: March 5, 9:00 a.m.

Where: Downtown Houston's

Sam Houston Park

Info: walktoendhivhouston.org



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Hilarity in the House

C-SPAN serves up the stoopid to welcome the 118th United States Congress.



Let's take a moment to thank the humor gods for sending us last month's C-SPAN coverage of all the tomfoolery in the House of Representatives. Only

during the election of the House Speaker is C-SPAN allowed to let the cameras show us *everything* going on in that big room we're paying for, filled with all those people we're paying to raise our taxes—which we also pay for.

Normally, C-SPAN is prohibited from showing us the House floor during those long, boring speeches that congress-critters love to give. That's because the vast majority of them are speaking to a completely empty room. Of course, they don't want you to know the room is empty because it makes them look even sillier than usual.

Rep. Mike Rogers, a Republican from Alabama, is the lovesick Kevin McCarthy admirer who wears a toupee that looks like he runs it through his dishwasher. C-SPAN showed him on the teevee lunging for fellow Republican Matt Gaetz after Gaetz helped sink McCarthy's 14th attempt to be elected as the House Speaker.

After Rogers lunged at Gaetz, North Carolina Republican Richard Hudson pulled Rogers out of the confrontation (which we call a bayou brawl down here in the swamps). What words were spoken between the two are nunaya business, but we

can assume they stank like fried gym socks.

But that wasn't enough embarrassment for the Republicans. Oh, no.

Tennessee Republican Tim Burchett later told a CNN reporter, "People shouldn't be drinking, especially when you're a redneck, on the House floor."

Tennessee Republicans are a refined bunch, ain't they? You gotta wonder if Burchett's quote was inspired by Jack Daniels or Jim Beam.

My friend Juanita Jean at the beauty salon has some good advice for these characters. Juanita's Rule states that rednecks should not be drinking, *period*. You give them fellas some hooch, and the next thing you know they're dressed up in jackbooted Daniel Boone outfits whipping up a Capitol insurrection.

Darlin', let's be honest about this thing. We've got about as much chance as a wax cat in hell once these folks start drinking. Marjorie Taylor Green is about two beers away from demanding neon lighting for the House chamber, and two beers might get our own Rep. Chip Roy from West Texas to put mechanical bulls on the protected species list.

But there's more to the story: Rep. Burchett then told that CNN reporter, "I would drop Rogers like a bag of dirt. Nobody's gonna put their hands on me. Nobody's gonna threaten me!" Burchett seems oblivious to the fact that nobody even wants to touch him. And he was the sober one in this episode?

But let's admit it—we depend on the Republican Party to supply a few bozos in each

legislative session who can distract us from the sorry state of the world.

It was a sad day when Rep. Madison Cawthorn lost his North Carolina re-election bid. Cawthorn thrilled us all with allegations of congressional insider trading and sexual hanky panky—and he even brought a loaded handgun to the airport and appeared in a buck-ass nekkid video.

We've also lost Louie Gohmert, the East Texas congress-critter who did not believe in science, but did believe the 2022 election was stolen. He's the one who seriously asked if we could alter the orbit of the earth or the moon to reduce climate change. Damn, we're gonna miss him.

But nature abhors a vacuum, as they say, so the Republicans have come through again and given us that lying congressvarmint George Santos of New York.

Mere moments after pretty much every Republican official in his home district called for his resignation, Santos decided to pick a fight with fellow Republican Rep. Adam Kinzinger. When Kinzinger tweeted that Santos should resign, Santos replied: "Go on CNN and cry about it."

Well, that's just real damn friendly, and very helpful. Welcome, George, we've been waiting for you!

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

By GRACE YUNG, CFP



The New Retirement-Savings Landscape

The recently passed SECURE Act 2.0 can benefit your savings strategy.



Stretching your retirement income and assets can be challenging as our average life expectancy increases. Today, spending 20 or more years in

retirement is becoming the norm rather than the exception!

In order to help ease the financial strain on current and future retirees, Congress recently passed the SECURE Act 2.0, which includes some sweeping changes to the retirement-planning landscape going forward. Some of these updates could change the way you retire.

To take full advantage of the legislative provisions in the “Setting Every Community Up for Retirement Enhancement” (SECURE) Act 2.0, there are a number of deadlines and time frames you need to keep in mind to avoid missing out on some key opportunities.

A SECURE Act 2.0 Overview

The SECURE Act 2.0, which was part of the massive \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending package signed into law by President Joe Biden late last year, is an attempt to build on previous initiatives intended to help a wide range of Americans achieve retirement security. Some of the highlights of the SECURE Act 2.0 include:

- The conversion of the “saver’s credit” from a traditional tax credit to a direct government contribution of up to \$2,000 into an Individual Retirement Account (IRA).
- Requirements that (except for small plans) newly created employer-sponsored 401(k) plans must automatically enroll their employees in a plan.
- The ability for employers to treat their employees’ student-loan payments as if they were 401(k) contributions for the purpose of employer matching contributions.
- An increase in the age at which required minimum distributions (RMDs) must begin from traditional IRAs and retirement plans—up from the current age 72 to age 73 in 2023, and to age 75 by 2033.
- The ability to make tax-free transfers of unused 529 college savings plan funds into Roth IRAs.
- Expanded eligibility for long-term part-time workers to contribute to their employer’s 401(k) plan.

Beginning in 2023, small businesses with fewer than 50 employees can qualify for a

“credit” that is equal to 100 percent of the administrative costs for establishing a workplace retirement plan. Businesses with up to 100 employees may also be entitled to a tax credit, based on their employee-matching or profit-sharing contributions. This credit, “capped” at \$1,000 per employee, will gradually phase down over five years, and it is subject to additional reductions for companies that have between 51 and 100 employees.

Starting in 2025, the SECURE Act 2.0 also requires automatic enrollment into new 401(k) or 403(b) employer-sponsored retirement plans. The initial default rate must be between 3 and 10 percent, with an annual auto-escalation of 1 percent (up to at least 10 percent, but not more than 15 percent).

Automatic enrollment into a retirement plan is designed to make it easier for employees to set aside money for the future. However, employees who prefer not to participate in the plan are allowed to opt out.

There is, however, an exception for small companies that have 10 or fewer employees, as well as for new businesses that are less than three years old. Such companies may integrate this automatic enrollment into their payroll system.

And starting in 2023, the minimum age→

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to begin taking required distributions from traditional IRAs and retirement accounts will gradually increase from the current 72 to 73 in 2023, and then to 75 in 2033. This will give investors more time to grow their nest egg before taxable withdrawals must begin. Further, the penalty for not taking some or all of one's required minimum distribution will drop from 50 percent to between 10 and 25 percent.

Starting in 2024, parents who opened 529 college savings plans at least 15 years ago for their children will have the ability to make tax-free and penalty-free rollovers of up to \$35,000 total from unused 529 college savings into a Roth IRA.

Also, note that many provisions of the SECURE Act 2.0 take effect at different times. Taking required minimum distributions from traditional IRAs and retirement plans must begin at age 72 if you were born in 1950 or before, at age 73 if you were born between 1951 and 1959, and at age 75 if you were born in 1960 or later.

Taking advantage of these retirement savings perks—and thinking about retirement preparedness in general—can be particularly important for those in the LGBTQ community, many of whom tell researchers that they are falling behind in this area. Competent financial support and guidance can make the difference between simply getting by and creating a secure retirement in the future.

Staying On Track with SECURE 2.0

Financial legislation such as the SECURE Act 2.0 always contains a myriad of “fine print” that can oftentimes be overwhelming. With that in mind, it is important for you to discuss your objectives with a financial-planning professional who can help you develop financial and retirement strategies that are right for you.

In addition, working with a professional who is well-versed in financial and retirement planning for LGBTQ individuals and families is key to making sure that safeguards for same-sex couples are part of your plan.

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 midtownfng.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.

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Our news and social-media feeds are filled with entire groups of people and communities being targeted for their gender, race or ethnicity, or sexuality or gender identity.

The recent mass shootings and hate crimes directed against the Asian American/Pacific Islander community in California serve as a stark reminder of the real dangers that historically marginalized groups face every day. It is deeply saddening to witness the senseless loss of life and mounting fear about the constant threat of domestic terrorism in community “safe spaces” that are no longer safe.

Just as concerning, these horrific tragedies have occurred against a backdrop where the passage of invalidating legislation in Florida implies that there is no place for African American history. Nationwide, over 120 anti-LGBTQ bills have already been proposed just this year, with the attacks coming from all sides.

Additionally, there are those who are forgotten, discarded, or erased because they are unhoused, or because of their disability status or affiliation with other historically marginalized groups.

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of finding or expressing love in the modern era isn't about focusing on self-love, or love for our own family and community. Rather, the thought of loving humanity—all of humanity—feels like an impossible challenge. How can we develop a comprehensive love of others that includes even those who are not in our immediate circle? Is it even necessary to carry that type of love, care, and concern for others? And just what will we gain from expanding our need for love and connection to humanity as a whole?

Ancient philosophers, as well as modern-day thinkers, spiritual scholars, and armchair pop psychologists, have all weighed in on this topic, and their opinions are widely varied.



Indian politician and social activist Mahatma Gandhi, for example, espoused the principles of nonviolent protest and love for humanity. “True love is boundless like the ocean and, rising and swelling within one, spreads itself across all boundaries and frontiers, enveloping the whole world.”

On the other hand, modern-day scholars such as Stephen Asma argue that to “love your neighbor as yourself” is not only impossible, but impractical. He states, “All people are not equally entitled to my time, affection, resources, or moral duties.”

Ultimately, our love for humanity is perhaps the reason that we can allow ourselves to continue wrestling with and challenging even its darkest and most offensive parts.

Can anything be gained from trying to love *all* of humanity? We commonly hear the adage, “I cannot love others if I don't first love myself.” What if the opposite is also true?—“I cannot love myself if I do not first love others. I must show compassion to others in order

to know how to show compassion for myself.”

The concept of self-love, while important, seems to have been misinterpreted. In many cases, people express love for themselves through selfish acts, without any care for the impact those actions may have on others. This type of self-love seems to be increasingly driven by fear, or a ‘scarcity mentality’—the sense that things will be taken away.

It's important to not confuse the fear of loss with an actual love of self. Self-love is a radical acceptance of the self—of one's strengths, weaknesses, and flaws. The love of self does not have to inflict harm on others or spread collateral damage. Self-love is also not a destination we arrive at and exclaim, “I'm done!” Instead, our journey as human beings is marked by our constant striving to accept and love *all* of the parts of ourselves—even the parts that are most challenging. →



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As LGBTQ people, it can be terribly challenging to connect to a sense of self-love, particularly when so many of the messages we receive, both direct and indirect, are rooted in hatred and condemnation. There's also the tendency, particularly in the age of social media, to compare ourselves and our internal feelings to the sunny external images posted by friends, acquaintances, and distant loved ones. This comparison can be extraordinarily toxic, resulting in a sense that one is never good enough, or that our natural strengths and talents do not measure up to those displayed by others. Ultimately, this can contribute to a general sense of futility as we question our lives and all of our unhealthy habits and behaviors.

Is it by loving others that we might come closer to the ideal of self-love?

We cannot love ourselves without loving others, and that love cannot extend only to those that we know. Instead, our challenge is to love even those who do not always wish us well.

In truth, there are times when we don't always wish ourselves well, yet we still strive to find a way to make peace with our flaws. We can easily sabotage our relationships, or make financial or wellness decisions that are not in our best interest. By wrestling with our ability to love even the most difficult humans, we can find ways to love and accept even the most difficult parts of ourselves.

What we may need, ultimately, is to actively direct love toward others in order to be psychologically healthy. Our love and care for all parts of humanity actually enriches our sense of connection and our spirit. By caring for others, we can hopefully find forgiveness for ourselves. As we wrestle with the challenges of loving *all* of humanity—even when humanity does not love us back—we can make peace with the parts of ourselves that we find unacceptable.

As you celebrate Valentine's Day this month, how can you express your love and acceptance for someone who perhaps doesn't deserve it?

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. Dr. Shorter can be reached at dr.darylshorter@gmail.com.

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Austin Davis Ruiz

The new LGBTQ+ Political Caucus president sets his sights on positive political change.

By ZACH MCKENZIE

Photo by JOSH & DANA FERNANDEZ



What is the mission and purpose of The Caucus?

Founded in 1975, the mission of the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus is to eliminate prejudice, violence, and injustice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people through education, activism, and political advocacy. What that looks like in practice is screening, endorsing, and getting out the vote for pro-equality candidates that will support the LGBTQ+ community, as well as other marginalized communities. We are one of the most respected political organizations in Houston, and while our primary focus is Houston and Harris County, we also do advocacy work statewide.

Tell me about your experience with The Caucus prior to being elected president.

I first became a member of the organization on June 23, 2019, at the suggestion of my best friend, Stephen Miranda. I was looking to get involved in the LGBTQ+ community and to fill my time with some volunteer work, so I signed up in June and attended my first meeting in July. Being that it was ahead of a major endorsement meeting for municipal races, I remember the meeting being contentious—as Caucus meetings tend to be. I eventually joined the leadership team in December of that year, later became the communications director, and officially joined the board to finish an unexpired term in September 2020. I ran for my first full term in January 2021, and continued to be the communications director alongside my board role.

What does your role as president entail?

Being president of The Caucus is no small undertaking. Every president has the usual responsibilities such as being the official representative of the org, liaising with elected officials, fundraising, chairing membership meetings, etc. However, I think the most significant part of the role is that of a visionary—to decide what the organization aims to accomplish in a given year. Each president has their own vision of what they want to do when they're elected to office, and ultimately it's up to the president to ensure that vision is accomplished by the time they leave.



**"THE MOST
SIGNIFICANT PART
OF THE PRESIDENT'S
ROLE IS THAT OF A
VISIONARY."**

—Austin Davis Ruiz

You're the first Hispanic male and one of the youngest people ever elected as Caucus president. What does that mean to you, and do you feel added pressure to succeed?

Oh, of course that's added pressure! Being the first male Latino president, and one of the youngest, definitely adds another layer of scrutiny to an already highly scrutinized position. But it's also an extreme honor and privilege, especially when representation for young people of color in politics is relatively low. This position has previously been held by powerhouses in Houston's LGBTQ+ community, and the significance of that is not lost on me.

What are you most looking forward to in your new position?

Making a significant impact for our community. I'm a born-and-raised Houstonian, and I absolutely love my city. I can't think of a better way to express that love than to make positive political change that will impact all Houstonians.

You also work at the Montrose Center. What is your role and day-to-day like?

I'm celebrating three years as communications and marketing manager at the Montrose Center, and I oversee things like graphic design, social media, our website, public relations, video production—everything in the communications and marketing world! My day-to-day can be pretty different, depending on the time of the year, but I regularly spend time running our socials and taking media requests. You can often see me on TV talking about LGBTQ+ issues and stories on behalf of the Center!

Why is working and volunteering for LGBTQ+ organizations so important to you?

It's what makes me feel fulfilled. I jokingly tell friends that I get paid to be a "full-time gay," but I really can't think of anything better than getting to work with my community, *for* my community. It's the best feeling in the world knowing I'm making a difference for other LGBTQ+ Houstonians.

Outside of work and The Caucus, what are some of your hobbies?

I really love the performing arts—dance, theater, musicals, the symphony—and try to catch shows when I'm able. I don't get to do it often, but I enjoy traveling, I love concerts and music festivals, I'm a pretty avid spinner (indoor cycling), and I'm always down for trying a new restaurant.

What are some of your favorite spots around town?

Siphon (coffee), El Bolillo (Mexican sweet bread), Chilosos (breakfast tacos), Himalaya Restaurant (Indian food), Piggy's (weekend brunch), and RYDE Houston (spin).

Anything else you'd like to share?

Beyoncé's *Renaissance* is a masterpiece, and I can't wait for the next two albums!



For more information, visit thecaucus.org.

A Montrose Lifeline

Natalie Ferguson helps Montrose Grace Place empower housing-insecure youth.

By **ZACH MCKENZIE**
Photo by **SARAH ONTIVEROS**

History has proven that there is no one-size-fits-all formula for becoming a successful leader. As a Black woman (and self-described “nerd”) with unique interests, Natalie Ferguson discovered that while her interests may not align with common perceptions of Black womanhood, they are the character traits that have made her the solid leader she is today.

Ferguson is president of the board of directors for Grace Place, a local nonprofit that supports and empowers youth of all sexualities and gender identities experiencing homelessness. Answering the call of service while remaining authentically herself has led her to career success and even love.

“I am a marketing and communications manager for the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, which is a local and international funder and convener for Jewish life and interests here in the city and abroad in Israel,” Ferguson explains.

Prior to beginning her full-time work at the Federation, Ferguson was feeling consumed by a grueling schedule and took a step back. “Back in 2014, I was working up to 70-plus hours a week as a freelancer. Most of my work has always been in the nonprofit sector, and I’ve done a lot of nonprofit work that has been close to my heart, but I was really jonesing for some volunteer work—something that I could get into that was less focused on myself and more



**“I LEAD
INITIATIVES
THAT UPLIFT
THE MISSION OF
GRACE PLACE.”**

—Natalie Ferguson

focused on other people.”

A serendipitous encounter at a bus stop ultimately set Ferguson on the trajectory she’s on today. “I went on a drive to go grocery shopping and happened to see a home-insecure young woman with several bags. In Houston, you’re used to seeing a lot of home-insecure individuals on the streets, but what really made me focus on her was the fact that she was really young and she had a German shepherd with her, which is the breed of dog that I grew up with,” Ferguson recalls.

She returned from the grocery store with

some essentials to give the young woman, and struck up a conversation with her while she waited for her bus. “It was a really interesting conversation, and something that I still mostly remember. The irony was that, later on, I got on Facebook and a friend of mine posted about this organization called Montrose Grace Place. They were looking for [volunteers] to help mentor mostly Black and brown youth experiencing homelessness. It was just too timely for me to ignore.”

Ferguson volunteered with Grace Place for a few years before joining the board of



Members of the Grace Place board of directors with executive director Courtney Sellers (r) at the 2022 Haus of Gingerbread fundraising event.

directors. “As president, I lead our board of directors, which is largely a working board, meaning that we actively support Grace Place,” she explains. “The board is very much a fundraising, advocacy, outreach, stewardship, and marketing arm of the organization. As the president, I lead all of those initiatives and really help our board uplift the mission of Grace Place to be evangelists of our organization and what we do.”

Despite always being told that her interest in anime and video games, among other interests, is a contradiction to her Black

womanhood, Ferguson is proud of her self-described nerdiness. It was this perseverance to remain authentically herself that ultimately led Ferguson to love. “Carrie’s my partner, and we actually met through a video game called *World of Warcraft*,” she recalls. “There was a forum for people to tell queer stories in the context of the game. This fan community was mostly queer people wanting to see more queer stories in this world that they loved.”

After years of long-distance friendship, Carrie ultimately made the move to H-Town. “We were always super-close friends, to the

point where people would always ask if we were dating. We were very much the stereotypical lesbian couple that started out as just very good friends,” she says with laughter. “We made it official in 2020, and have been together ever since.”

Ferguson stands strong in her Black womanhood, using her perspective and experience to boldly lead Grace Place to the next level. Having created an annual Black Hair Care Drive for the organization, for example, she now encourages members of the community to donate hair products specifically for youth of color. And she constantly pushes to provide more opportunities for the youth at Grace Place, many of whom are Black.

“I love to embrace and emphasize the fact that Blackness is not a monolith, and the experiences of Black people within the Black community are very different. That’s why I shied away from the idea of what I needed to be as a Black person. What it meant for me to be Black, what the parameters of that were, and concluding that no matter what I enjoy—or what I do, or how I dress, or who I love—I’m still Black.”



For more information, visit montrosegaceplace.org.

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Life Well Lived

Jordan Edwards is a tireless advocate for people living with HIV.

By LILLIAN HOANG



Local advocate Jordan Edwards remembers learning about his positive HIV status at age 21 and not having anyone to turn to. Today, he serves as an educator who is

there for others living with HIV at The Normal Anomaly Initiative (TNA), an organization that empowers Black queer people.

"I hope to be a voice for others, and I'm hoping to be someone who can help end the stigma by normalizing people living with HIV as human first," says Edwards.

As the program director of the BQ+: Center for Liberation program at TNA, Edwards and his team take a holistic approach to helping people living with HIV. The program not only provides individuals with at-home STI self-testing kits (which test for a variety of conditions such as chlamydia and hepatitis C), but it also helps people find sustainable employment and get the transportation they need for medical appointments.

"If I was someone who needed housing, employment, food, and medicine, I'm not going to be concerned about getting my medicine because I don't have money to pay my copay, and I can't get my blood drawn because I don't have enough food in my stomach. The Normal Anomaly eliminates barriers to actualize a new norm," he says.

Edwards believes other organizations dedicated to people living with HIV must address the needs of the Black LGBTQ community on a case-by-case basis rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. "Not every Black man who has sex with men has the same healthcare concerns."

A Houston native, Edwards has been helping people all his life. He helped take care of his sick grandmother, his mother who worked 12-hour days, and a family member living with HIV. Edwards' family treated that relative

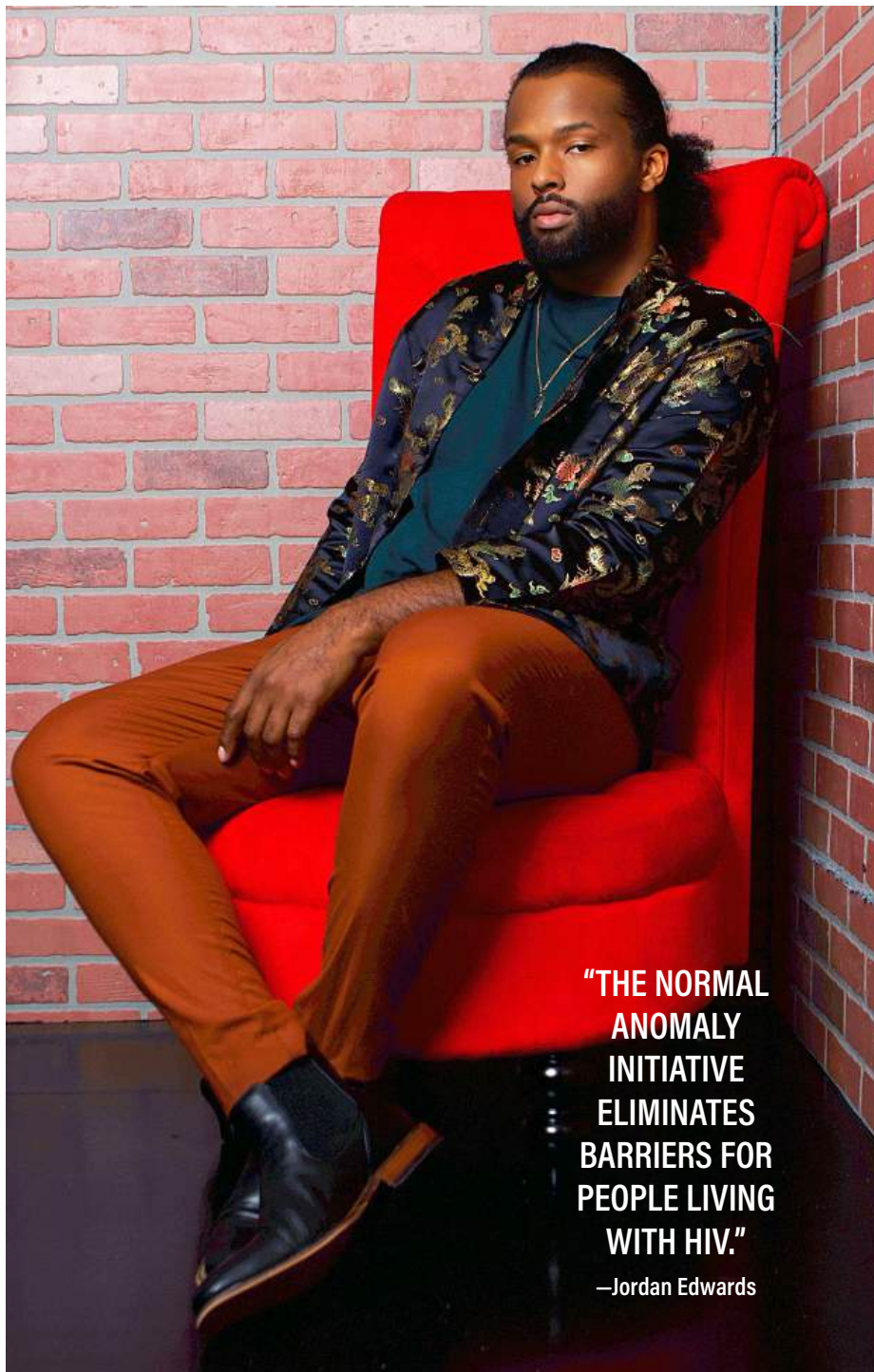
without discrimination or fear by eating from the same dinner plates and using the same bathroom.

"Even though we didn't have enough knowledge then—because oftentimes the Black community doesn't have a lot of knowledge around certain health topics due to barriers—we still treated our [relative living with HIV] as 'family first,'" Edwards notes.

Edwards was devastated when that relative died due to AIDS complications. And his stress was further heightened over fears that

he was destined to contract HIV because of his attraction to men. "At the time, we were taught that if you are a man who has sex with a man, you will eventually contract HIV. I was in a space thinking, 'I'm a Black man. I'm going to die of AIDS,'" Edwards recalls.

He did end up contracting HIV in March of 2013 from his partner at the time, who was not taking his HIV medication. (Effective HIV treatment almost always reduces a person's HIV viral load enough to eliminate



"THE NORMAL ANOMALY INITIATIVE ELIMINATES BARRIERS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV."

—Jordan Edwards

the risk of HIV transmission.) Edwards also grew up in an area fraught with drive-by shootings and other violence, so dying young was a real possibility for many. “I had just made it to age 22, and I thought, ‘This is it.’”

After moving from Houston to rural Virginia with his mother, Edwards discovered that the local HIV healthcare system was woefully inadequate. After being told not to touch any pens or share toilets with his family to avoid transmitting the virus, he was fortunate to find an educated caseworker who helped him understand that he was not at risk of harming his family by touching the objects in their home or using the same bathroom.

Edwards remembers a poster on the caseworker’s office wall that read, “Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind, always.” He also remembers when she told him he would make a difference helping others one day—and she was right.

Determined to share what he had learned about HIV/AIDS, Edwards started going to support groups for individuals living with HIV. Back in Houston, he has worked at AIDS Foundation Houston and served as a facilitator at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to educate indi-

viduals about HIV, STIs, and more.

Edwards’ life story is proof that listening to and caring for people living with HIV can be life-changing. When he was still a teenager, a friend who had just been diagnosed with HIV called him and told him where their body would be after they committed suicide. Edwards kept his friend on the phone while secretly rushing to the site to pick up his friend and reassure them that he would offer support and a shoulder to cry on. That friend is now living her best life as a trans woman living with HIV.

Circumstances for people living with HIV have improved since Edwards became an advocate. In his experience, people are now more likely to talk about who they are as unique individuals, independent of their health status. There has also been progress in HIV research, and a shift in terminology. People are now described as living with HIV, instead of simply being labeled “HIV-positive.”

Even so, Edwards knows that life for people living with HIV can always improve, especially within the Black community. Black people account for 13 percent of the United States population, but 40 percent of the population living with HIV in 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC also found that new HIV infections disproportionately impact Black gay and bisexual men and

Black straight women.

Edwards encourages everyone to help people living with HIV in the Black community by donating to The Normal Anomaly Initiative and participating in their events to learn more about identity, sexuality, and their own health. People can also help by sharing what they’ve learned from these TNA events.

Edwards will be leading a curriculum-based training this month as part of TNA’s P.O.W.R. program to help people advocate for themselves and others living with HIV. The month-long program will teach participants how they can help eliminate stigma and barriers that harm people living with HIV.

And beyond Black History Month, Edwards notes that his advocacy work will continue throughout the year. “We often celebrate Black History Month but forget about the community during the other 11 months,” he says. “Caring about the community throughout the year would have more of an impact.”

Still drawing inspiration from the poster in his caseworker’s office, he also hopes that Black Houstonians will offer compassionate support to everyone in their community—including those who are queer, trans, and nonbinary. “We all matter,” he emphasizes.

 For more information, visit normalanomaly.org.



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Houston Stylist Digs Deep

Ty Hunter's new memoir
'Makeover from Within'
focuses on nurturing inner beauty.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Fashion stylist Ty Hunter has a long list of clients that includes names like Billy Porter, Rosario Dawson, Jennifer Hudson, and Naomi Campbell. However, it was fellow Houstonian Beyoncé Knowles Carter and her mother, Tina Knowles-Lawson, who actually discovered his talent back when he was working as a high-end stylist and retailer in the Bayou City.

Hunter's new memoir, *Makeover from Within: Lessons in Hardship, Acceptance and Self-Discovery*, which he wrote with Eila Mell, even features a foreword from the pop superstar. He is hoping the stories he shares in the book will inspire, excite, and heal.

"Houston is where it all started. It's where I met the most wonderful Ms. Tina Knowles. Houston has a lot of cool thrifting and consignment shops," Hunter recalls. Through his role as Beyoncé's stylist for 18 years, he became a major force in the fashion industry who helped shape an entire generation of fashionistas.

Hunter eventually went on to design his own collections, and has shown some of them at New York Fashion Week. He currently collaborates with the accessories brand A.Cloud, and most recently joined forces with Billy Porter as his head stylist and creative director. Porter, who wrote the *Makeover from Within* afterword, is always one to watch on the runway as he sets and resets the standard for celebrity fashion, time and again. With Hunter's help, Porter is moving beyond the artificial bounds set by gender, color, and style as he sparks a fashion revolution for men.

Although Hunter is always working with influential women, it's the women who raised him that had the most significant impact on him, especially in his early years. The first chapters of *Makeover from Within* focus on his relationships with the matri-

archs in his family: his mother, Connie, his grandmother (who he calls "Mama"), his great-grandmother Mama Bea, and his Aunt Ethel.

"What I value and respect more than anything is that they taught me how to *respect* women, [even though] I loved them so much," says Hunter. "I wouldn't be who I am today if it wasn't for that strong female foundation. They also instilled Southern hospitality in me. It took four strong women to make me see how to respect people and their boundaries."

One of Hunter's biggest challenges has been his commitment to care for his parents, who were both diagnosed with cancer. "I am still caring for my mom, who will suffer from stage 4 breast cancer for the rest of her life. Although it's a tough time, it's a blessing to be able to return the love and care they both gave me. During this time, it's important to leave no stone unturned. It can only make you stronger."

Each chapter of his memoir closes with "Ty's Takeaways"—wisdom and life lessons he learned along the way that can help anyone live a more authentic and happy life.

"While our outward appearance can give confidence and be a form of self-expression, focus first on being happy in your skin," Hunter asserts. "After that, work on [your outer] shell

all you want, but start your makeover from *within*."

Take it from his celebrity clients. They have experienced first-hand the confidence Hunter can engender in people.

"Ty knows just what to say to motivate you, make you laugh, or give you words of wisdom and encouragement when you need them the most," says Tina Knowles-Lawson. "This book takes us on an amazing journey of turning lemons into lemonade."

Although Hunter is no longer based entirely in Houston, he still has a fondness for the city that opened up his world to so many opportunities. It should be no surprise that the one place he remembers the most, and the place he would likely return to first, is The Galleria.

"I used to work in the Galleria mall, and that has a lot of nostalgia for me. I would probably spend most of my time there with friends, now that I'm older," he says.

And next on Hunter's Houston to-do list is Pappadeaux's restaurant, the annual rodeo, and the radio station HOT 97. "Those are some of my favorite things about Houston!"



Hunter's memoir, *Makeover from Within*, is now available at major retailers.

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Paradise Blue cast members (l-r)
Crystal Rae, Jason Carmichael,
Brandon Morgan, Liz Rachelle,
and Curtis Von



The theater has long been a refuge for marginalized voices. For both the LGBTQ and African American communities, it can be a place of storytelling, community, and—most importantly—acceptance.

During Black History Month, it seems fitting to celebrate the Ensemble Theatre's legacy as a venerable Houston performance venue for people of color, as well as one of the best places in town to find quality entertainment.

Ensemble Theatre was founded in 1976 by George Hawkins as an outlet for Black playwrights, actors, and stage workers. According to the organization's website, Hawkins "observed that professional roles were few and far between for Black actors, and his frustration led him to create his own company."

Hawkins persevered in establishing a theater that would provide diverse roles for Black artists, and today's Ensemble Theatre is the fulfillment of that dream. It is the oldest and largest professional African American theater in the Southwest, and it holds the distinction of being one of the nation's largest African American theaters with its own facility and in-house production staff.

The organization welcomes more than 65,000 theater-goers each season. Its Performing Arts Education program provides educational workshops, artist-in-residence ex-

periences, and live performances for students both off-site and at the theater. Also, its Young Performers Program offers intensive summer training in all disciplines of the theater arts.

Paradise Blue, running now through February 26, is the latest opportunity for Houstonians to witness the Black storytelling experience through the dramatic arts. The production chronicles the story of trumpeter Blue, his Detroit-based jazz club, and songbird Pumpkin, the object of Blue's affection. Just when Blue starts to ponder whether or not to sell the club, a mysterious woman shakes up the scene, and everyone's fate is left in the balance.

"It's sort of a roller coaster. There are various highs and lows. You go through an

emotional exchange between the five actors on stage. Each actor has a narrative that propels them to engage with each other in this intense search for their own being," says Andre Harrington, *Paradise Blue's* costume designer. "The way Dominique Morisseau wrote the play, each character is searching for some type of peace and comfort that will help sustain them during this time of potential dislocation from the neighborhood."

Harrington brings his own costuming touches to the story, and he has just the right background to make everything pop. As a theater professor as well as a costume and makeup design specialist, he has worked with numerous professional theater companies including Alliance Theatre, Theater-

The Curtain Rises for Ensemble Theatre

Paradise Blue continues a tradition of Black storytelling excellence.

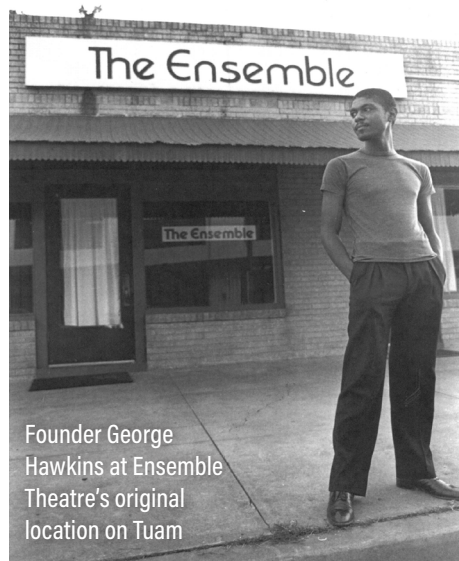
By SAM BYRD | Photo by AESTHETIC ALKHEMY

Works USA, Chicago's Court Theatre, and the St. Louis Black Repertory Company. He holds a master's degree from the University of Iowa and a bachelor's from the University of Maryland at College Park, where he had his early costume-design training.

As tailor-made as he might seem for a theater career, he found his way to the theater almost by accident. He was working as a visual merchandiser in Boston when he took a family friend to enroll in college. While there, he thought it would be a good time to explore the idea of graduate school, and someone suggested costume history as an option. "I didn't know what that meant at the time. My undergraduate degree was just in textiles," he admits.

Yet, armed with the advice of an academic mentor and a solid portfolio, it would not take long for the admissions team to see his talent.

"My mentor looked at my portfolio and saw something that I didn't see. I had a sense of color and [a talent for] maneuvering materials and fabrics to tell a story," he recalls. "I took a couple classes as a provisional student—a history course, an acting class, a paint and design course—and then I applied to graduate school. That's where my career in theater began."



Founder George Hawkins at Ensemble Theatre's original location on Tuam

COURTESY

Harrington was soon immersed in the research work required to create historically accurate costumes for each production by looking at visual information to spark his thinking—be it a painting, a sculpture, architecture, or other people's work. Of course, he had to keep the context of the production in mind.

"You have to read the script to get a sense of where these people are," he explains. "How

is their psychology working? What is their sociology? What is their anthropology? What are these characters about? Find a moment for your audience to connect with them. Find nuances that will keep the audience engaged, as well as keep the character [true to] their choices as a performer."

This is Harrington's first time to work with Ensemble Theatre, but he describes the vibe as an institution with deep roots—both in the Black community as well as in Houston's lively performing-arts scene.

"When I walk into the theater for rehearsals, I feel a sense of welcome. I feel that the work is going to represent the community. And when I say the community, I mean the community at large—the African American continuum," he adds. "The theater allows us to tell a story about what we did, where we did it, when we did it, and why we did it. Telling stories is ingrained in our cultural DNA as African descendants. From oral traditions to written verse, we have to continue that practice. Ensemble Theatre is thriving, and it is working diligently to continue that legacy."

What: Dominique Morisseau's *Paradise Blue*

When: Through Feb. 26

Where: Ensemble Theatre, 3535 Main St.

Info: ensemblehouston.com

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the Love issue

FROM MEETING AT WEDDINGS TO MATCHING ON DATING APPS, LOVE IS BLOOMING IN SPACE CITY THIS SPRING. IN THIS FEBRUARY EDITION OF OUTSMART, WE CELEBRATE THE MANY FACES AND FORMS OF QUEER LOVE — FOR EACH OTHER, AND FOR THE CITY THAT LGBTQ HOUSTONIANS CALL HOME.

First, we feature our cover stars and Houston's up-and-coming political power couple, **Mario Castillo** and **Joel Rottier**, as Castillo prepares for his City Council run.

We also introduce you to **Desmond** and **Justin Bertrand-Pitts**, the married minds behind M.E.N. Incorporated, a mentorship program for young men in Houston. Then meet Galveston's 'It' couple **Kerry** and **Grayson**

Chandler, the first trans couple to run a national pageantry system that aims to make pageants more inclusive of all drag performers. Finally, business owners and couple **Jessica Williams** and **Lauren Smith** share how they make their partnership work, both in business and at home. The secret? Being willing to “boss up and get it done” during rough patches.



Civic Connection

Husbands **Mario Castillo** and **Joel Rottier**
work together to serve the community.

By RYAN M. LEACH

Photo by FRANK HERNANDEZ @THE_CREATIVEX



Newlyweds Mario Castillo, 36, and Joel Rottier, 33, who have been married for less than a year, are already making some major decisions together. No, it's not a kid (yet), or even (another) pet. Castillo has launched his campaign to become Houston's next District H Council

Member, and Rottier will be by his side as they begin the long and sometimes daunting task of campaigning throughout parts of the Heights and North Houston.

Castillo is a native Houstonian who has dedicated his life and career to public service. For him, this campaign is a natural part of ensuring that the Houston he loves keeps moving in the right direction.

His decision to run developed during the summer of 2022. "As a longtime resident of the district and someone who's been civically active, I started to see a number of areas where District H could be doing better. Joel and I started going on walks in the neighborhood during the pandemic to get out of the house and get some exercise and we saw a number of things about the district that could be improved, from consistent constituent services to safer neighborhoods, illegal dumping, and economic development.

"Over time, a number of ideas started to come to me, and that's when I started thinking about running for City Council," Castillo adds. "I've served in leadership positions over the years, and have a lot to offer to help make District H a place people are proud to call home."

Rottier was fully supportive of Castillo's decision to start campaigning for a City Council seat. "Politics has always been a very common topic of conversation in our household, so I always had a feeling that at some point we would have to be ready! It's exciting for me to watch him start this process, and to see how excited he is when he gets to talk to people about his ideas and goals for the district. I know it's what he is meant to be doing."

Although the two men may be aligned on campaign strategy, they do have some disagreement about exactly how they first met.

"We met initially at Meteor in 2014 through mutual friends," Castillo explains. "After a lengthy conversation, I found out Joel had a boyfriend. Shortly after that meeting, I moved to Austin to take a promotion. We didn't keep in touch. It wasn't until the summer of 2016, after I moved back to Houston, that we matched on Tinder and set up our first date."

Rottier has a slightly different recollection: "We've told our separate versions of this story for as long as we've been together!

But Mario's answer is what we've boiled it down to. We met through mutual friends on a random weeknight and kind of hit it off. We talked for a while until I mentioned that I had a boyfriend at the time, at which point Mario quickly disappeared! When we matched on Tinder (shockingly, because Mario's profile was very scarce on information) I quickly realized who he was and remembered our conversation from a year prior. I still joke with him that he didn't remember who I was until much later. We had our first date at Backstreet Cafe, and then on to Boheme to keep talking. And the rest is history!" he laughs.

The two dated and eventually became engaged in February 2020, right as the pandemic started to bear down on the world. The couple took it in stride, however, and used the opportunity to plan their wedding. Rottier, who grew up just outside of Green Bay, Wisconsin, before moving to Houston 10 years ago, had family in the Midwest. Castillo's family was Houston-centric, so they decided to get married in a neutral city and landed on New Orleans.

"Mario and his friends had been going to New Orleans since college," Rottier explains. "And I had been visiting enough times separately that I knew I loved the history and the vibe of the city, so it was a no-brainer for us to have the wedding there. We got married on April 16, 2021, with 100 of our closest friends and family in attendance. [Our wedding included] the first Second Line parade the city had seen since COVID."

Although campaigning will soon take up a large portion of their lives, the two still maintain day jobs that they feel passionate about. Rottier is the vice president of Love Advertising, where he oversees the firm's digital projects including website design and development, social media, and email marketing. He went to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and received a bachelor's degree with an emphasis in graphic design in 2013.

"I've always had a passion for web development, and I started building websites when I was in high school," Rottier recalls. "I also focused on that throughout my time at UWM, including working for the college itself running their website. When I moved to Houston, I started as a web developer at Love Advertising and have worked my way up to VP over my 10 years there." →



Mario Castillo (r) begins his City Council run with husband Joel Rottier's support

"POLITICS HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VERY COMMON TOPIC OF CONVERSATION IN OUR HOUSEHOLD, SO I ALWAYS HAD A FEELING THAT AT SOME POINT WE WOULD HAVE TO BE READY! IT'S EXCITING FOR ME TO WATCH MARIO START THIS PROCESS."

—Joel Rottier

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Castillo is a graduate of Texas A&M University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science in 2008 and a master's degree in public health in 2011. He is currently the executive director of Your Houston, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life in Houston neighborhoods—a great fit for a man who wants to do exactly that for Houston's District H.

The two are also fully invested in other forms of service. As a volunteer, Castillo currently serves on the board of the M.D. Anderson Family YMCA in North Houston, along with the Houston Police Department's Criminal Justice Advisory Board. Previously, he served on the boards of the Hardy/Near Northside TIRZ (Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone), the Houston Land Bank, and the New Leaders Council-Houston. He also recently completed a term on the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus board, where he served as vice president and fundraising chair. The Caucus named Castillo their Larry Bagneris Leadership Team Member of the Year for 2022.

Rottier's service résumé is also quite impressive. "I've worked heavily with the YMCA of Greater Houston on their nonprofit side, the Barbara Bush Literacy Foundation, the Boy

Scouts of America's Sam Houston Area Council, and I'm currently working with Legacy Community Health. Outside of work, I'm also a member of the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus and the Human Rights Campaign."

Although both men have proven their commitment to improving Houston, a campaign is an entirely different animal that opens candidates and their families to public scrutiny. And when that family also identifies as LGBTQ, things become even more intense and sometimes hateful.

"This was a conversation we had when considering the campaign," Castillo admits. "Ultimately, you expect to receive some hateful comments at some point. This has happened to so many openly LGBTQ candidates that have run in Houston. We aren't going to let those bother us, and we'll keep a positive message and attitude about the campaign. We both are grateful to have incredibly supportive families and friends that we lean on for support. Thankfully, at this point, we have received nothing but positive feedback and encouragement."

The men recognize that representation is especially important in a state like Texas, where increasingly hostile legislation is being debated at the state level, all aimed at LGBTQ

people and their families. While Castillo primarily wants to give back to his community, he also understands that his candidacy sends an important message.

"At a time when the LGBTQ+ community, especially the trans community, is under attack from legislatures across the country, it's vital for openly LGBTQ+ candidates to run and to provide representation where these laws are being discussed and debated," Castillo emphasizes. "If my candidacy, or those of other out candidates, give LGBTQ+ youth the confidence to get involved in public service and be a voice for their community, then running for office is worth it. If it gives a depressed youth some hope to keep going through their troubles, or to reach out to someone for help, then everything we go through throughout this process is all worth it."

 For more info, visit marioforhouston.com, follow along on social media including Facebook ([marioforhouston](https://www.facebook.com/marioforhouston)) and Instagram ([@marioforhouston](https://www.instagram.com/marioforhouston)), or email info@marioforhouston.com.

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Justin (I) and Desmond
Bertrand-Pitts at the Buffalo
Soldiers National Museum

M.E.N. on a Mission

Desmond and Justin Bertrand-Pitts
are passionate local mentors.

By ZACH MCKENZIE



When it comes to mixing business and pleasure, powerhouse duo Desmond D. and Justin Bertrand-Pitts have managed to find a balance between the two as they

lead the charge at M.E.N. Incorporated, an inclusive mentorship program for young men in Houston. The married pair is putting in the work to bring hope and support to countless young men, all while taking on other projects and keeping the spark alive in their own relationship.

The mission of M.E.N. Inc., according to the organization's website, is simple and effective: "Mentor, Educate and Nurture young men regardless of ethnicity or sexual orientation within available resources allowed."

"We met online back in the days where you had to wait for people to log back in to respond," Justin recalls. "I was living in Savannah, Desmond was living in Houston, and we just started communicating online. I was coming to Houston for training for my job, and he picked me up from the airport. The rest is history."

Today, Desmond works full-time as the CEO of the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum while also serving as president and CEO at M.E.N. Inc. Justin segued from the Harris County Mental Health Authority into working full-time as M.E.N. Inc.'s executive director four years ago.

"We started getting so many people [from the community approaching us] for advice—everything from housing, resources, food, and other things," Justin explains. "We were doing the best we could, and decided we wanted to do more. That's how M.E.N. Inc. really came about."

The organization meets young men where they're at in order to help them succeed in and beyond the classroom, and to achieve positive

academic, career, and personal goals. "We offer both one-on-one and group mentorship. We are currently vendors for four different school districts within the Harris County Department of Education," Justin explains. "We go into schools and provide group mentoring there. We also have a community group that meets in the spring and summer. Outside of that, our one-on-one matches happen across the city, year-round."

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—Justin Bertrand-Pitts

"We had to learn to work together," Desmond adds. "When you put two alpha males with characteristics of a Type A personality together, there can be instances where we [each have strong opinions about] what we should be doing. What we've been able to do over the years is really communicate. I tell people that we don't have arguments or disagreements, we have conversations."

Those conversations have been a winning strategy for M.E.N. Inc. as the two work together to accomplish the organization's future goals. "A top priority this year for the board, and in terms of outreach, is to secure

more funding," Desmond emphasizes.

"Fundraising is at the forefront of what we do daily. That's a large part of what we're going to be working on this year. Also, we always need mentors. That's obviously a large component of what we do."

As if they didn't have enough on their plates, the two also lead an inclusive ministry at Freedom Church. "We recently joined in [the work of] creating a safe space for people to come together and worship without being judged or looked at funny," Justin explains. "A lot of times, the church world isn't so kind to the LGBTQIA community, so we create opportunities for people in Houston to have a safe space."

And outside of work, the couple prioritizes each other and their married relationship. "We believe in a hard 9:00 p.m. cutoff time in our house. That is typically the time when we turn off computers and phones," Justin says. "We continue to do date nights. We'll go and try new restaurants, and we love finding new places to go, experiencing new cultures, and taking trips."

Their love for one another, and the ambitious goals they have for all of their outreach projects, will undoubtedly lead them to continued success.

"My favorite part of working with Justin is the fact that we can identify and understand the other's point of view, and agree to disagree," Desmond says. "We understand that we're not right all the time. The fact that we can have these conversations, understand each other, and come to an agreement shows how much power we have, and how much belief we have in each other. That's probably my favorite part."



For more information,
visit meninchouston.org.

A full-page photograph of Grayson (I) and Kerry Chandler. Grayson (I) is a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a light pink long-sleeved dress with ruffled cuffs and white high-heeled sandals. She is sitting on a pink tufted sofa with ornate dark wood carvings. Kerry Chandler is a man with short dark hair, wearing a blue and black plaid vest over a dark shirt and a pink tie. He is standing behind the sofa, with his hands on his hips, smiling. The background is a solid light pink color.

Grayson (I) and
Kerry Chandler

Sharing the Crown

Grayson and Kerry Chandler are the first trans couple to run a national pageantry system.

By SAM BYRD
Photo by VIZAL TIO LAVOIE



“When in doubt, just try it out.” That sage wisdom was what helped nudge Galveston power couple Kerry and Grayson Chandler to pursue each other eight years ago.

Kerry, also known by her stage name Kymber DeVine, recalls the fateful night when the two met. She was booked for a drag show in Louisiana, and Grayson was in attendance. Grayson approached Kerry during the show, and the sparks immediately flew. Well... almost.

“I toyed back and forth with the thought of a relationship because Grayson had not started transitioning yet, and [dating someone during the transition process] was something that I had never even thought about or considered,” Kerry says.

She spoke with her castmate DeyJzah Opulent Mirage, who offered that timeless advice to be fearless.

“DeyJzah said, ‘Sis, just do it. What do you have to lose? What has any genetic man ever done for you but leave you heartbroken?’” Kerry recalls.

And that, as they say, was that. Kerry and Grayson entered their relationship and never looked back. In fact, their love has only grown since then, as has their success.

The two recently became owners of the

National Showgirl and Showman Pageantry System, which provides a platform for drag performers to compete for a crown and the opportunity to represent the system both in Texas and across the United States.

One of the pageant events provided an unforgettable moment in the couple’s courtship. “Having Grayson support me through competing in seven national pageants, and then finally having him there the night I won my first national pageant, was one of my most favorite moments of our relationship,” she says. “We busted our behinds so much through the years to be able to afford that, and we finally got to have that moment together.”

The work paid off, and the two have set out to broaden the reach of their pageant system. They have made it a goal for the pageants to be as inclusive as their love for one another.

“We are the first trans couple to run a national pageantry system, and we did change the system. It is all-inclusive now,” Grayson notes. “However you choose to present yourself on stage is [the category] you can perform and compete in. Last year was the first year that we crowned a nonbinary person in the Showman division.”

The call to create an inclusive atmosphere was one that the Chandler family felt was a necessity.

“When we took over the system, we moved it a step further and opened it to everybody.

Our community is so divided, [so not everyone wants that openness]. Yet, we always talk about wanting everybody to be included. We thought we could make a small change and make our system the first system to [be so open],” Grayson adds.

The duo is now looking to broaden their outreach further by encouraging persons with functional disabilities to enter the pageant competitions.

“There’s lots of people with disabilities and challenges who can show out on stage. They should be allowed to do so, and we’re trying to make it so everybody has a place,” Grayson says.

That passion for inclusiveness is evident not just in the Chandlers’ aspirations for the pageant system, but also in their relationship.

“Both of us have gone through big life changes since we’ve been together,” Kerry mentions. “Both of us support each other in our endeavors. [The trick is] finding the right person who is going to support your dreams, no matter what. We found that with each other.”

And their other trick? Communication.

“We talk about everything. Communication is ultimately the key. If we’re not communicating, then situations can become frustrating. [But if we can] sit down, talk it out, and figure out what’s going on, we can keep moving forward. Communication is what keeps us grounded,” Grayson emphasizes. “Communication has always been central since the beginning, but now that we are both running businesses and pageants and the everyday dealings of life, it’s become even more important. We have to be that backbone for each other, keep our lines of communication open, and keep pushing each other forward.”

They also want to encourage others to take a chance on love by reminding them that a dash of bravery never hurts.

“Always live your life with an open heart. That’s the only advice I can give when it comes to that, because you can’t be worried about what everybody else thinks,” Kerry says.

The Chandler family’s record of success stands as the best antidote to the naysayers. And best of all, it’s clear that Galveston’s *it* couple is still as madly in love with each other as when they first met.



Pageant winner Kerry Chandler (as Kymber DeVine) with her husband, Grayson; her drag mother, Teryl-Lynn Foxx (r); and drag daughters Amya Jackson Ross (l) and Cyn City.



For pageant information, visit facebook.com/NationalShowgirlShowmanPageantrySystem.

Partners in Love and Work

Jessica Williams and Lauren Smith's partnership extends from their home to their business.

By JENNY BLOCK

Photo by EVENTSMITH PRODUCTIONS & MEDIA

Successful partnerships require work. That's true when it comes to personal couplings as well as professional ones. And when you are partners in both love *and* work, even more communication and empathy is required—something that couple Jessica Williams and Lauren Smith, founders of EventSmith Productions, seem to have mastered on a whole new level.

The happily married couple has been running their business together since its inception in 2019, when they merged two previous companies into one. They do it all—from corporate branding and social-media management to company events and training videos. And when it comes to weddings, Smith does the planning and design logistics while Williams serves as the event photographer.

“As a wedding photographer and video person, I’ve worked with many planners who I would never want to work with again,” Williams admits. “From day one, I have loved working with Lauren. She is fun, yet is still a badass who gets shit done.”

“As a planner, I see Jessica having the most fun while working efficiently, and everyone just loves working with her,” Smith adds.

Of course, the lines are not so distinctly drawn as they work together on a project. Although Williams is on the production and photography side while Smith does most of the planning, the two have been known to cross the line into each other's specialties. “We get a little competitive, in-house,” Williams admits.

But overall, their greatest accomplishment has been their success at building up a brand with an excellent reputation over the past 15 years. “We’ve created and photographed over 1,000 weddings and endless corporate events while establishing and maintaining amazing relationships with vendors and [corporate

clients],” Williams notes.

The two met at a wedding in July 2016, back when they were both in relationships. But they reconnected at a second wedding in 2017 and began dating shortly thereafter.

“Although Jess thought she had the flirting part down, I never even realized that was happening, even when Jess stuck her head out of a window and said, ‘Oh, hey there!’” Smith recalls. The two talked constantly from that moment on, had their first date three days later, and have been together ever since.

“WHEN YOU SPEND EVERY WAKING MOMENT TOGETHER, THAT POSES QUITE A CHALLENGE. LUCKILY FOR US, WE CAN GET THROUGH THE ROUGH SPOTS QUICKLY.”

— Lauren Smith

Williams’ plan for a surprise proposal on December 7, 2018, was naturally a logistical tour de force. “Jessica had to out-plan the planner!” Smith says with a laugh. The day included a 10-hour scavenger hunt, limo rides, help from many of their friends, a shopping spree at The Galleria, hair and makeup sessions, an unforgettable setting for the proposal, a private moment for just the two of them, a surprise appearance by Smith’s father, and an evening dinner with their closest friends and family members.

The two originally eloped early in 2019 before finally having a wedding ceremony on November 19, 2021 at Iron Manor in Montgomery, Texas.

“We had the most gorgeous flowers everywhere, at Jessica’s request. Danny Ray and the Atlantic Street Band had one hell of an entrance at the reception,” Smith recalls. The dinner stations included many of their favorite foods. And they had a candy bar, a dessert bar, and a late-night pretzel bar with fresh donuts. The evening even included llamas and an aerialist performing for their guests.

Santa Fe, Texas, native Williams, 36, holds an associate’s degree in media arts from Monroe College in Rochester, New York, and a bachelor’s degree in communications from the University of Houston-Clear Lake. Smith, 44, is from Dallas and began her academic career at Collin County Community College in North Dallas. She then graduated with honors from the University of Houston-Downtown with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. The couple currently resides in Santa Fe.

The best part about working together, the two say, is that they are always there to support one another, allowing them to get through any situation. “Sometimes it’s Lauren calming the moment,” Williams begins. “And sometimes it’s Jessica lightening the mood and helping it all come together in the final hour,” Smith adds. “When you spend every waking moment together, that poses quite a challenge. Luckily for us, we can get through [the rough spots] quickly and get back on track.”

Their advice to other couples looking to follow in their footsteps with a professional partnership? Put your partner’s needs first, and work to understand what those needs are. And when the going gets tough, they say, “Boss up to get it done.”



For more information, visit eventsmithproductions.com.



All That Sass

Houstonian **Christina Wells** stars in the Broadway touring production of 'Chicago.'

By ZACH MCKENZIE
Photo by TASHA GOREL



Hometown songstress Christina Wells is heading home and bringing her show-stopping voice, talent, and razzle-dazzle to the Hobby Center's main stage—much to the delight of Theatre Under The Stars audiences. Wells is currently traveling across the nation, starring as Matron “Mama” Morton in the 25th-anniversary tour of *Chicago*. After years of preparation for this moment, her starring role is the realization of a lifelong dream for Wells—and she's just getting started.

“I’m so excited to be returning to Houston!” Wells exclaims. The entertainer has been teasing her social-media followers with posts counting down the days until she hits the stage at Theatre Under The Stars. “The last time I was there was during *The Little Mermaid* when I played Ursula, and it was the most amazing experience. It got cut short because of COVID, and I always say that COVID stole my ‘sea witch.’ I am just counting the minutes until I come back.”

An early introduction to musical theater (and a brush with Lady Luck) ignited a spark within the out bi-racial performer. “When I was 15 years old, I would watch the [movie version of] *Funny Girl* with Barbra Streisand. And of course, *Dream Girls* was also a favorite. I used to listen to the LP record,” she says of her early musical-theater influences. “I used to listen to a radio station in Houston, and I won tickets to see *South Pacific* at Theatre Under The Stars. That was my very first time ever seeing a musical, and I remember sitting there with one of my friends from high school and saying, ‘One day, I want to do this.’”

The artist credits TUTS artistic director Dan Knechtges with giving her an opportunity she never expected. “Dan did something that TUTS had never done before. When they were casting for *Memphis*, he opened the door to the

community to audition. I went in to audition, and Dan turned to the man next to him and said, ‘She would be a great Silvia.’ That next year, for the summer show, they did *All Shook Up* and I got a phone call to be Sylvia!”

She went on to play “Sour Kangaroo” in the TUTS production of *Seussical* before taking her star turn as Ursula in the Disney classic. “TUTS did something really cool [during the COVID lockdown] where they featured people from their homes singing musical theater on their social media,” she recalls. “I made a video of myself singing in front of a green screen in my house, dancing in a purple dress. And in May of 2021, I got a phone call saying they wanted me to be Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*! It was my first main-stage performance. I was just so blessed and felt so honored that they would give me the chance to be a part of that gorgeous multicultural cast.”

With dreams of making it to Broadway, the *America’s Got Talent* alum took the advice of an agent who told her that in order to make it big, she needed to be seen—and one of the best ways to do that is to be cast in a national tour. Flash-forward to Wells’ current role in *Chicago*, which is the artist’s first national tour booking.

In her role as Matron “Mama” Morton, she is part of a legacy that she doesn’t take lightly. “I am the warden of Cook County’s correctional facility. There really was a female warden who ran the jail in the 1920s. These stories are plucked from real headlines from the ‘20s in the *Chicago Tribune*,” Wells explains. “Matron ‘Mama’ Morton is a woman who’s in charge of all these really dangerous characters. I sing this big song that literally says, ‘You take care of me, and I’ll take care of you.’ That’s how ‘Mama’ makes sure that all the ladies of the correctional facility are taken care of—and that she’s taken care of, too.”

Chicago originally premiered in 1975, and the show has had a slew of household names

playing the role of ‘Mama’ throughout the years. Wells carries the torch proudly, giving it her own flair and honoring those who preceded her. “I think whenever you play a character that people really know, you need to know the roots. You need to know the seeds of where it came from, because you need to give homage to that,” she says. “But then I think you need to let it live in your own body, and let it be you. Nobody wants to see an impersonation of somebody else. They want to see *your* take.”

Wells’ maternal instincts naturally added a softness to the character. “People will say, ‘Your Mama was so warm!’ And she *is* warm! You can [be loving, but still] not put up with any bull—both of those can exist inside the same person. That’s who I am as a mother. I’m gonna love you.”

And as for what audiences can expect in addition to her motherly warmth, she says, “I like to sing big. I like to sing loud!”

This 25th-anniversary production is an ode to the incredible legacy of the Broadway revival. “We’re an exact replica of the revival with Bebe Neuwirth, who played Velma Kelly,” Wells says. “Something that’s been an unexpected discovery for me has been the relationship between ‘Mama’ and Velma. The [pace of the show] is quick, so audiences have to pay attention and listen.”

After the pandemic cut her time as Ursula short, Wells doesn’t take a single second of her latest artistic venture for granted. “When the show starts and the overture plays and Logan Floyd, who plays our Velma, walks up the steps and you hear the audience go crazy every night, no matter what I’m doing, I stop and listen,” she says. “I love that feeling, both for the audience and for our cast. There’s something magical about knowing that you’re satisfying people, because they want to hear this thing they love.”



Performing on stages across America is something Christina never thought was possible. Having started out as a registered nurse before pursuing superstardom, her role in *Chicago* is humbling—but also the manifestation of years of hard work and perseverance. “I gave up singing when I was like 19 or 20. I ended up having my kids, and thought, ‘I gotta get a career.’ I went to nursing school and I had a job, raised my babies, and that’s what I did,” she admits. “Never, when I was wiping butts and giving people pills, was I like, ‘You know, someday I’m gonna be touring with a national tour.’”

“THEATER MEANS EVERYTHING. IT BRINGS COMMUNITIES TOGETHER. SO COME AND CHEER ON YOUR HOMETOWN GIRL CHRISTINA!”

—Christina Wells

The classic musical *Chicago* has been seen on stages and screens around the world. Wells encourages theatergoers to purchase tickets soon, because this touring cast is incomparable. “This production of *Chicago* is unlike most productions. There’s not anyone in this cast that’s been ‘stunt cast,’ and in the show just because they’re famous. Everyone in this cast is really talented. The bodies are out there. That click, click, click little finger movement,” Wells boasts about one of the show’s iconic choreographed moments, “it’s gonna give that sass and that secret that you want when you see *Chicago*.”

“Theater means everything. It brings communities together. So come and cheer on your hometown girl, Christina!”

What: TUTS presents the 25th-anniversary tour of *Chicago*

When: Through Feb. 12

Where: The Hobby Center

Info: my.tuts.com/overview/5220

Filipino-American artist Saul Jerome E. San Juan's striking images are on display this month at a Montrose art gallery. Figurish, a collection of thematic pieces from several artists that includes San Juan's collection of blue-eyed men, is open to the public through March 12 at Bill Arning Exhibitions.

Art has been an integral part of San Juan's life and how he's expressed himself since early childhood. "I've been drawing since as far back as I can remember," he says. "From my earliest drawings of volcanoes and airplanes, making art has given me the satisfaction of being in control of what goes on within the confines of my composition, limited only by my knowledge, imagination, sense of propriety, and time."

After moving from the Philippines to the United States at the age of 14, art became even more important to the artist as he began teaching high-school art classes. "Since I switched careers [after] many satisfying years in architecture, I have been delightfully surprised at how much inspiration I also find in empowering young artists to express their humanity eloquently in visual art."

San Juan's artworks may appear conventional at first glance, but his pieces are far more complex once you peel back the layers. If you ask San Juan to describe his portraits and landscape art, he will point to John Singer Sargent, a celebrated Anglo-American painter.

"On the surface, my art, like Sargent's, appears more conservative than much modern art in being representational in translating three-dimensional reality into two-dimensional interpretation through careful observation of proportions and visual phenomena like value and color," he says. "Expressionism and novelty get in the way of my subversion of what



COURTESY

Art That Connects

A look at artist **Saul Jerome E. San Juan's** distinctive portraits.

By **CONNOR BEHRENS**

I perceive to be others' proud feelings of moral and aesthetic superiority—feelings of superiority that I admit indulging in myself as I choose how to make art."

The Lone Star State has been an inspiration for San Juan lately, which is evident in his landscape pieces. "I am inspired by the summertime, the rivers of the Texas Hill Country, country music, contemporary art, art history and more," he notes.

"My landscape paintings are done on-site and in one sitting, so they are definitely responses to the momentary scene. I can enjoy the wonder of the place, made more precious by the limited time. The spontaneity and physical immersion of my landscape work are foils to the extremely time-consuming artifice of my studio work."

San Juan also enjoys experimenting with other media and finding additional ways to tell stories that spark audience conversations and emotional reactions.

"My studio work, which is represented in the Houston show, involves hoarding visual material through the internet and photo shoots," he explains. "I then sift through it all and experiment to create pieces that I can take delight in working on for days. It allows me to speak to my audience politely and elegantly, justifying my indulgence in the raw material."

San Juan believes that art is more important now than ever before, because people are looking for a means of escape. He appreciates how art allows people to experience a shared connection with one another.



San Juan's *BlueEyes* portrait from the Figurish art exhibit

"Paradoxically, in a world that is hyper-connected with instant communication, empathy between human beings is easily lost," he says. "I feel that great art has the ability to slow us down and get us to empathize with other people—to find out what keeps them going and, more broadly, remind us what it means to be human, to appreciate our shared feelings of being alive through suffering and pleasure, even as our technology has largely desensitized us and caused us to cower from the awfully beautiful mess that is the wondrous complexity of existence."

San Juan hopes his pieces will spark dialogue and many thoughtful conversations among those who see his works.

"My art, to me, comes alive in dialogue with an audience and the feelings, experiences, and preconceptions they bring," he says. "Part of my pleasure in making art is the expectation that others will see it and be somehow affected by it, even minutely."

What: Figurish art exhibit

When: Through March 12

Where: Bill Arning Exhibitions,
604 W. Alabama

Info: billarning.com and sauljerome.com



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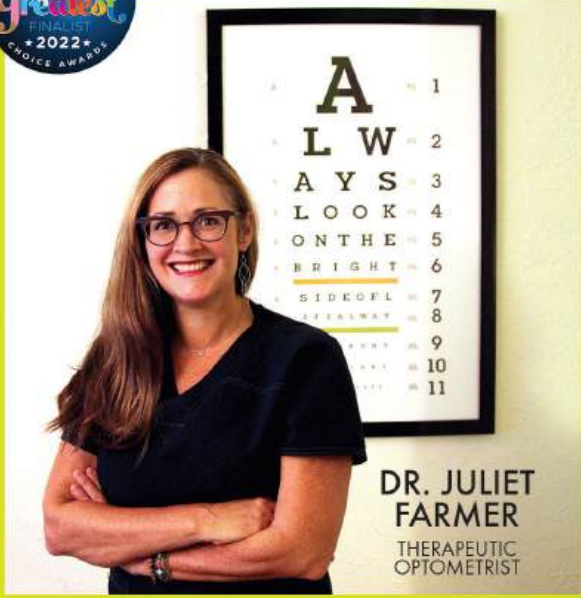
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Weaving Together Identity and Tradition

Sarah Zapata showcases contemporary fiber art at the Moody Arts Center.

By **JENNY BLOCK**
Photo by **IGNACIO TORRES**



Sarah Zapata

Fiber arts are front and center—where many in the art world will tell you they belong—at Rice University’s Moody Arts Center in a new show titled *Narrative Threads: Fiber Art Today*. The exhibit features work from 22 artists, including queer native Texans Sarah Zapata and Deidrick Brackens.

Sarah Zapata, a Peruvian American fabric artist, was born in Corpus Christi and raised in the Dallas area. She holds a bachelor’s degree in studio art and fibers from the University of North Texas. Even though she’s been in New York for 11 years, she feels gratified to have her work shown in her home state. “I think, being a lesbian from Texas, that it’s very important to make that perspective be robust, especially as the LGBTQ community continues to be demonized in the media.”

Brackes, who is from Mexia and currently lives in Los Angeles, holds a bachelor’s degree from the University of North Texas in Denton, and a master’s from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

The curators of the Moody exhibit explain that their goal is to explore each artist’s embrace of the traditional fiber medium to illuminate “topics related to identity, gender, race, sexuality, and power.”

Works in this medium have not always been on an equal footing with other traditional art forms. Because women—and other marginalized groups—are often the ones working in fiber arts, the genre has often been regarded as a “craft” rather than true art. This show makes it clear that the latter category is where these works belong.

Fiber arts are a particularly vital art form

in marginalized communities, and the exhibit makes that vitality palpable. “It comes back to the access of the practice,” says Zapata. “So many communities have practiced some of these techniques from the beginning of time—out of the necessity [to use these objects] or the necessity of expressing one’s existence. Textiles transcend language, yet they exist as documents.”

Women’s work and craft have also been denigrated as a way to uphold hierarchies in the art world, Zapata adds. “Because of these limitations, fibers can be inherently conceptual. There also is this classicism that fibers can tackle: think about the difference between a work that is made with acrylic paint versus acrylic yarn. Accessibility is an incredible tool in art, just as much as concept is. I think these histories make the material



a little domestic waste I, in the exhibit Narrative Threads: Fiber Art Today, Moody Center for the Arts at Rice University

immensely interesting, and a way to honor ancestors past that have upheld and challenged these processes.”

There is a deep sense of tradition and connecting with that which came before us. Zapata loves that those feelings exist in the world of fibers and textiles. “Tradition is thought of [as] something that is to be transcended and sedentary, but I love to think about how pastness can be examined and used to access futurity.”

For Zapata, textiles are both a material and a process. “So it’s something that continues to evolve. That evolution and sense of time is something that is truly so inspiring, as well as always changing. I think, also, what is so important is that every single person has a relationship to textiles, and so there already is a point of access for the viewer.”

Frauke Josenhans, one of the show’s senior curators, explains what viewers can expect. “The show brings together a diverse group of 22 international artists utilizing fiber in innovative new ways. Ranging from small-scale, intimate thread drawings to monumental sculptural installations, these

fiber-based works are inherently experiential, fragmentary, and tactile, inviting viewers to consider new perspectives through familiar means.”

Many viewers will be surprised by the power, depth, and variety found in these works. Even Josenhans found herself surprised by the show’s impact. “The different dialogues between the works that were created through [this exhibit’s] installation and design were surprising—how the various pieces interact with each other through colors and patterns.”

The hope is that viewers who see this show will come to see fiber arts in a whole new light. As Alison Weaver, another senior curator, explains, “We hope viewers will discover a diverse group of new artists and be inspired by the innovative ways they express both personal and political narratives.”

Zapata’s personal goal is all about accessibility, or breaking down the idea that culture is only for the elite. “I hope that viewers see themselves [in the fiber art], or at least see how a material they’re so familiar with can be presented in a way they’re

not familiar with. Having a show that is delving into the fiber [medium], it’s wonderful to see the vastness that exists within this world. I hope they see how tradition and history can be these malleable concepts, and that imagining a better future is possible.”

The Moody Arts Center curators look forward to sharing the exhibit with museumgoers. “We hope that our visitors will discover new artists working with textiles in various (and often surprising) ways, making fascinating connections to contemporary life and culture—including music, social media, and food.”

Zapata’s sentiments echo that of the curators: “I hope [visitors] engage with how different every artist’s work is—whether it is representative or abstract, immense or diminutive. Viewers should feel an air of excitement and interest in how complicated the world of textiles is, and how so much can be articulated with a multitude of techniques.”

What: “Narrative Threads” at the Moody Center for the Arts at Rice University
When: Through May 13
Info: 713-348-2787 or visit moody.rice.edu



Joe Ngo as Chum, Abraham Kim as Rom, Geena Quintos as Sothea, Jane Lui as Pou, and Moses Villarama as Leng in Alley Theatre's co-production of *Cambodian Rock Band*.

Cambodian Rock Band's 'Phnom'enal Success

Director Chay Yew cranks up the volume to showcase '70s surf-rock tunes banned by the Khmer Rouge.

By CLEW

Photos by LYNN LANE



Lauren Yee's hit play *Cambodian Rock Band*, one of the most-produced plays of the 2019–2020 season, finally lands on the Alley Theatre main stage. The captivating drama begins in modern-day Phnom Penh as NGO worker Neary receives an unannounced visit from her father, Chum, and jumps back in time to the Cambodia of the 1970s on the cusp of the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror. Actors double as musicians in a live onstage band, playing the same surf-rock tunes that rang loud until the Khmer Rouge's genocidal purge claimed the lives of two million Cambodians—including countless artists and musicians.

Helming this fragmented memory play-

cum-musically mesmerizing time-travel trip is director Chay Yew, a multi-hyphenate award-winning playwright whose dramas center around LGBTQ and Asian identity. Yew has directed works regionally, off Broadway, and internationally, and served as artistic director of Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater from 2011 to 2020, during which time he championed many new playwrights' works.

Yew sat down with OUTSMART ahead of the show's Houston debut.

Clew: Having stepped away from the responsibilities of leading a theater, you now get to choose your projects. What's feeding you now, and how do you orient your creative compass?

Chay Yew: What's feeding me now is the new generation of writers who are able to see the world in a different way than I do, and who are continuing to light the flame. I'm fed when I work on these projects and deepen my understanding of humanity. We look at art, particularly in the theater, to tell stories, and I'm empowered to tell stories especially when I feel other communities are not being given visibility and a voice. So sometimes, working with people who I'm not in community with is enlightening for me [as we explore] how the story can become part of the American canon. America is a grand experiment, so how do we live together being a diverse, multiracial country? Sometimes the way to fuse communities is through art, or

stories, or food! Those feelings, sensations, and tastes defy language, and through these we become one.

How are you balancing your time between bringing Kristina Wong's *Sweatshop Overlord* to L.A. and all your other projects?

I'm also working on a new play at South Coast Rep, and then a few workshops including [a look at] upcoming work by playwright and poet Jesús Valles at the Flea Theater in TriBeCa.

You've worked with actors from all walks of life, including some who are now household names such as Sandra Oh, Daniel Dae Kim, Raúl Castillo, and BD Wong. How do you get the best work out of an actor?

By trusting them to do their best work, giving them the space, and challenging them to grow. These are special artists with their own unique ways of creating work. So sometimes you need to get out of the way, and sometimes give them the opportunity to look at things differently. The best artists are eager to grow, and that's why they are dynamic actors.

I had the pleasure of seeing Yilong Liu's *Good Enemy* at Audible Theater in New York. That play shared some things with *Cambodian Rock Band*: a father visiting to reconnect with his daughter;

fractured memories of a life before; and the fantastic, fluid Francis Jue. Can you talk about these shared themes?

It's an Asian trope, isn't it? Parents and children—we can never get away from our parents because it's part of our Asian-ness. [Sometimes] our parents or grandparents have fled from very horrible circumstances, be it political [uprisings] or famine, and the reason they come here is because they have no choice but to come here. And when they come to this country, they come to give their children a better world or opportunity than they have had. Sometimes not bringing up the past helps the children move forward more freely—or so they think. But then there's a gap: "Well, if you don't tell me then I don't know who you are; if I don't know who you are, then I don't know who I am. Who am I?" And the cycle repeats. The country doesn't learn, and we don't learn. As much as we move forward with pride, we should never forget about our history and how to share it,

**"WITH MUSIC,
WE DON'T NEED
LANGUAGE BECAUSE
WE CONNECT
REGARDLESS."**

—Chay Yew



Director Chay Yew

particularly with younger people. It's all about legacy.

I was able to see a production of the play in Minneapolis over the summer and was blown away. I think Houston is in for a treat. What might you say to audiences who fear that a show that includes foreign music or lyrics isn't their cup of tea?

This play has a very interesting genre: it's using surf rock, or psychedelic rock of the '70s. Something I've noticed with our previews here is that audiences love the sound of it. It's a live band on stage; it's visceral. I'm mesmerized by the musicianship of the art. And then we see the music being destroyed and banned once Pol Pot comes into the play. And the silence is devastating. Though the music is in the Khmer language, it's a reminder that it's ultimately art. And again, with music, art, and food, we don't need language, because we connect regardless.

You recently got to return to Singapore to not only see loved ones, but also to develop your work after having earlier plays banned in your home country because of their explicit focus on queer themes. What was that homecoming like for you?

It's complicated, because the Singapore I grew up in is a different place than today. I don't feel any nostalgia or emotions, just memories. What's alive is the food and my friends. Coming back was exciting because when I first started there, the theater industry was slowly evolving. To come in now and see young actors confident and ready to do some serious damage was exciting! It's important to realize you can never go home, though everyone longs for that. Where is your chosen home and chosen family? You choose things [that] make a home for you, and for what you want your history to be. We create our own homes wherever we go. I feel at home in the theater because that's where the possibilities live—the fear, and the excitement.

Do you have any comforting words for our Asian and queer communities reeling from the Monterey Park shooting, the stabbing of a student in Indiana, and the Club Q shooting in Colorado?

Only that they are important, and these are the things that we have to still forge through. Things will always get in your way. You have no choice but to actually go through them. But by going through them, and going through them as a community, you are made stronger. You have a responsibility to find some of your brothers and sisters and figure out how to help them—as they can help you. The world is not done; we have to be strong.

I got this notion because when I came out and was ready to taste the world, people were →

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Geena Quintos as Sothea and Jane Lui as Pou

dying [of AIDS complications]. A little intimacy could be a matter of life and death. That was 15 years of darkness. We muddled through it. We made it through, stronger. So when COVID came along, it was a different thing for us. We have to figure out these things in solidarity. They won't take us down if we stand together. Stand strong, walk forward, don't fall, and if you fall, get up. It's not about falling, it's about the art of getting up.

On the flip side of these sobering acts of violence, we are in an era where more Asian stories, creatives, and projects are receiving nods for excellence. I'm thinking about the historic spree of A24's EEAAO, and our queen Michelle Yeoh. What would you like to see on the horizon?

I'd like to see more Asian actors and artists telling their own stories and being more visible. And I also hope there's a way for Asians and non-Asians to come together and collaborate on works that inspire more stories that create understanding between communities. Sometimes our stories are not always harmonious—the 1992 L.A. riots, [for example]. But these stories are important for us to understand [in order to] become more united as different communities—as one. We have to figure out how we connect our communities, because I would hate to think

we [can be so] easily divided by the straight white power structure. The only way for us to come together is to find understanding and empathy among our communities. We have to understand these historic tensions and move beyond them.

What's something you haven't crossed off your bucket list yet?

I'm happy where I am, and I am interested in how it slowly evolves. How can we age gracefully and figure out what it means to grapple with mortality? When will I [no longer] be able to tell stories, and what does it mean to do something different?

Don't forget to do the things on your list. Do them! Go to Machu Picchu, go to Greece and dance with the boys! I've done those things already. You have one short life. What are you going to do? Live fully. Other people in other countries can't do that.

What: Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band*

When: Through February 12; ActOut LGBTQ pre-performance reception on February 2 at 6 p.m.

Where: The Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Avenue

Info: alleytheatre.org or call 713-220-5700 for tickets

Writer and native Texan Clew (they/them) is a queer nonbinary Asian actor with a passion for storytelling. Follow them on Instagram @clew.cifer

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WEDDING GUIDE



A Port in the Storm

Kimberly Nicole and Cassie Nicole Butler-White find refuge in each other.

By **JENNY BLOCK** | Photos by **@SCOTTKELLEYPHOTOGRAPHY**



Kimberly Nicole Butler-White and Cassie Nicole Butler-White met on the dating app Bumble. But there's nothing virtual about the shelter from the storm they have found in one another.

One evening, during one of Houston's random flash-flooding events, Kimberly was attempting to drive home from work. She ended up getting stuck on Memorial Drive. "I had to drive through dangerously high water, as there was nowhere else to go. Because I was so afraid, I had a major panic attack—so bad that I couldn't even remember how to turn on my hazard lights," Kimberly recalls.

She ended up calling Cassie, who was able to guide her to a parking lot to wait out the storm. "Ignoring my protests, Cassie hopped in her car to come and rescue me. At one point the water was too deep to cross, so she got out

and attempted to walk to me. I'd never been so relieved to see someone before!"

For Cassie, there was always something different about Kim. "We would sit and talk for hours and hours about anything—from silly things to incredibly personal experiences. We are different in so many ways, but Kimberly has this gift for making you feel comfortable; you're never afraid to be vulnerable with her. I think I realized pretty early on, during one of those conversations, that the space we shared together was really special and unlike anything I'd experienced before," Cassie adds.

Chicago native Kimberly, 39, is a graduate of Stephen F. Austin State University and a change-management analyst for a large oil and gas company. Cassie, 36, from Conroe, is a client program manager at Quorum Software. The couple currently lives in the Lindale Park

neighborhood.

Cassie proposed to Kim during a week-long vacation out east in New England—a trip that each of them had always wanted to take.

"During the trip, we'd taken a private tour to different lighthouses, ending at Portland Head Light in Cape Elizabeth, Maine," Cassie explains. "We talked about the significance of lighthouses and how they represent hope and guidance during even the darkest times—similar to the way we'd always been there for each other. I secretly struggled to get the ring out of my pocket because I was so nervous, and I thought she was catching on to the plan. When I proposed, at first there were no words; just tears. Those five seconds felt like an eternity until Kim finally just started yelling, 'Yes, Yes!'"



The couple was wed on November 4 in a Conroe wedding chapel, where Kimberly's cousin, Judge Tonya Parker, officiated the ceremony. "The venue had a special significance to me. My mother had always loved the property and used to comment on it when she passed it," Kimberly says. "Since she wasn't able to be there, we thought we could honor her memory by getting married there."

For both Kimberly and Cassie, being surrounded by their closest family and friends and seeing everyone come together for them was the best part of their wedding. "Also, right after the ceremony, Judge Parker led us to a little room off to the side of the chapel. She told us we needed to take in the moment, just the two of us together, before seeing any of our family or friends. It was nice to have those special first few moments as a married couple all to ourselves," Kimberly says.

The couple chose not to partake in any of the usual reception traditions like a bouquet

toss or garter throw. "We also both decided not to wear white. We wore black dresses instead. We aren't a traditional couple, so a traditional wedding just didn't make sense," Kimberly notes.

The couple's after-party was held back in Montrose at Boheme and featured DJ LC, who is part of the LGBTQ community. "Both Boheme and DJ LC were phenomenal to work with," Kimberly adds. "Having LGBTQ+ vendors is a huge plus, because there's a certain level of instant familiarity when dealing with other members of the community."

The couple admits that during the week leading up to the big day, anything that could have gone wrong did—including issues with the venue, the flowers, and the coordinator. "It really was a scramble to pull everything together, but we held onto each other and enlisted the help of friends and family to bring it all together," Cassie says.

The shelter that this couple has found in

one another promises to be a theme throughout their lives. "Cas has a seemingly tough exterior, but she is actually one of the kindest, most sincere people I've ever met. She's wildly resourceful, brilliant, and confident," Kimberly emphasizes. "I love that her best qualities have rubbed off on me, and have made me a stronger, better woman. I honestly admire my wife."

Cassie is equally grateful for the growth she has experienced in their relationship. "Kimmie is one of the most free-spirited people I have ever met. She isn't led by convention or social constraints. She's incredibly confident in who she is, while always allowing herself the space to learn and grow. She's taught me to open my heart and learn more from the world around me, and she encourages me to be a better person every day."

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January 15, 2023

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Photos by VICTOR CONTRERAS



THE MONTROSE CENTER'S RISING LEADERS EVENT AT THE CAMH

January 12, 2023

The Montrose Center's Rising Leaders young professional group attended a special tour of the Contemporary Arts Museum's recent exhibit, Troy Montes Michie's Rock of Eye.



GREATER HOUSTON LGBT CHAMBER OF COMMERCE'S 3RD THURSDAY BREAKFAST

January 19, 2023

Members and guests of the Greater Houston LGBT Chamber of Commerce gathered at Harold's Restaurant & Tap Room for their inaugural 3rd Thursday Breakfast - Community & ConnXions. Making the event extra-meaningful this month, a representative from Chamber Corporate Partner HP was on hand to present Chamber photographer and community icon Dalton DeHart with a suite of technology equipment to help him get back on his feet after the devastating fire that destroyed his condo during the holiday season.



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Barcode

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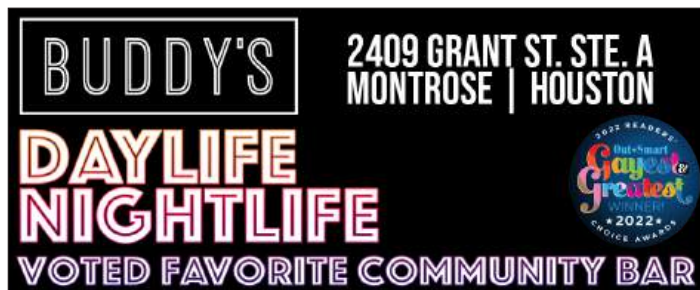
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Houston's newest Latin LGBTQ club offers dancing, drag, and game shows all week long. Visit Papi's and experience the spicy side of Montrose!

570 Waugh Dr, Houston TX 77019

Pearl Bar

Houston's only lesbian bar—one of just 21 left in the nation—is home to a wide variety of events including weekly drag-king shows, nationally known LGBTQ DJs, and a queer farmers market on the patio.

4216 Washington, Houston TX 77007

ReBar

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202 Tuam St, Houston TX 77006

Sabroso Patio Bar and Restaurant

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5503 Pinemont Dr, Houston TX 77092

South Beach

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810 Pacific Street, Houston TX 77006

RIPCORD

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715 Fairview, Houston TX 77006

Tony's Corner Pocket

If you love a friendly bar staff, sexy male dancers, and entertaining showgirls, Tony's Corner Pocket is the perfect spot. The bar is open seven

days a week and hosts shows like Tornado Tuesdays, Wepa Wednesdays, and Sassy Saturdays.

817 W. Dallas, Houston TX 77019

Viviana's Nite Club

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4624 Dacoma St, Houston TX 77092

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1706 23rd Street Galveston 77550

Robert's Lafitte

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2501 Avenue Q, Galveston TX 77550

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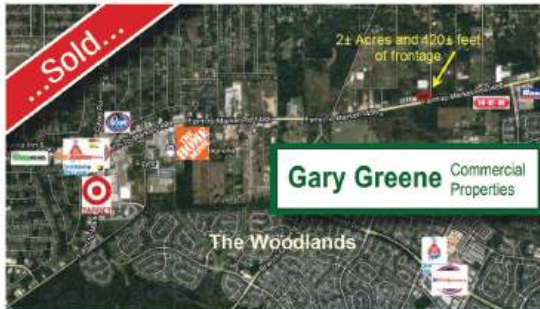
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ADRIAN HERNANDEZ

Time for Action

This Aquarius season is a positive month for new opportunities.



General Information: February will be a more action-oriented month for making decisions! We start the month with no planets retrograde, so this is the best time to put your New Year's resolutions into play. This should be a more positive time of opportunity for the cardinal signs of Aries, Libra, Cancer, and Capricorn. The fixed signs—Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius—are breaking with the past and looking for something that lights up their passions. The mutable signs of Gemini, Virgo, Sagittarius, and Gemini are restless and all too ready to act on their agendas.

Good days this month are February 6, 8, 17, and 22. Days with more tension are February 3, 4, 10, 19, and 21. The Full Moon on the 5th opens our hearts to share our love with others, while the New Moon on the 20th takes us on a spiritual journey.

ARIES (Mar. 21–Apr. 19)

The desire to make career and long-term security decisions is very strong this month. New opportunities for a job or career change (or even relocating) are all possible this month. Friends and business groups can be very helpful with their suggestions! All of your relationships should be improving, both business and personal. If you are single, the last part of the month is an excellent time to meet some new folks. If you are happily involved, this is a time to plan for the future and maybe to take time for a vacation! You are entering a more social period in your life. The end of the month is a time for rest and retreat. Be careful not to overload your schedule.

TAURUS (Apr. 20–May 20)

The strong focus on your career and long-term security plans continues. For some of you, this will be a time to consider having your own business. If you are older, cutting back and focusing on more personal goals could be beneficial. If you are comfortable in group settings, this would be a great month to invest in your community. Friends could help you with those plans. The 20th, 21st, and 22nd could be a demanding time, so after that you'll want some time to rest—maybe a short vacation to gain some perspective. The spring is going to be very busy for you!

GEMINI (May 21–June 21)

Mars (planet of action, initiation, self-defense, and taking risks) has been traveling retrograde in your sign since last October. You might have experienced several false starts, or just not being able to get a project off the ground. Now that Mars is moving forward, February and March is also the time for you to push forward. You have

plenty of ideas that you're sorting out. By the end of the month, your career is very active. You may be making some decisions there, and more stability should appear in that area of your life. Relationships were also affected by Mars retrograde, and you may have been looking for the "magic" that seemed to be lost. But now that energy has returned, and this is a good time for some bonding. If you are single, there are more options this month!

CANCER (June 22–July 22)

Communication is improving between you and your partner. You have been sharing some ideas, but aren't ready to reach a consensus. If you are in a difficult relationship, this will be a time of resolution one way or the other. Your career area is going to be very active through May 2023. This would be an excellent time to look for other places to work, or to look at mentoring those around you. Later in the month, you are in a creative phase—a good time for taking classes, expressing yourself on social media, and offering your services to a larger market. You continue to work on lowering debt and being more conservative with your money. This is also a great month to restart exercise programs that you were previously active in.

LEO (July 23–Aug. 22)

Personal relationships are very active this month. If you are in an existing relationship, this is the time to set new goals. If you are in a difficult partnership, you may need to move on. These desires can be even stronger for business partnerships. If you are single, this is a much better time to meet new folks. You are adapting your routines to the new way business is being done as you work more from home. You continue in a time of exploring options

for self-expression. You may feel more social and want to get out. We will be wanting more intimacy in our partnerships. In the last part of the month, you are paying more attention to finances in light of the unsettled world markets.

VIRGO (Aug. 23–Sept. 22)

For the last few months you have wanted to move forward on your career, but there were delays and setbacks. That time is over, and now it's time to put your ideas and projects into play with your renewed confidence. You still need to improve your exercise and diet plan. You are also making your office a more efficient place with new electronics and internet services. In the last half of the month, relationships are on the menu. This would be a great time to reconnect with your partner. If you are looking to refinance or do some investing, the end of the month is a super time for that.

LIBRA (Sept. 23–Oct. 23)

As the month begins, you are in a time of constructive creativity, looking to have more fun, and enjoying your children! The need for family security has held your interest recently, but you are ready to take a break from all that. This is a very good month to have a strong social-media presence. Both your business and your love life will be improved by you stepping out and doing something different. In the last half of the month, you are back to your routines. Your job will demand flexibility as people change their minds about what they want. Relationships are getting better. If you are single, these next few months will be a good time to put yourself out there!

SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

Your interest in your family, home, and personal history is motivating you this month. Recent shifts in your family have moved the power around, and the resulting cracks are revealing family truths. You are busy adapting to the new work environment. With the Full Moon active in your career sector on the 5th, this is an excellent time to improve your office space, or hire more staff. By the end of the month, you are ready for some fun. You will still be busy, but taking time off will help with your perspective.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

Relationships are much more active now. You are ready to generate positive connections and bring new interests to your existing partnerships. If you are single, these next couple of months are very good for meeting potential partners. You want to lighten your load by working smarter and eliminating those who make your job harder than it needs to be. Toward the end of the month, family becomes a more important topic as things improve. There may be a new matriarch taking over to fill in the gaps. It's a good time to make your hobby or side gig into something more substantial. You're still not sleeping as well as you could be. Exercise can help burn off the extra energy you are feeling.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

The start of 2023 was a big time of rethinking past accomplishments and looking at current goals. You are ready to act this month! Your initial goal is finding something that makes you feel more secure about the future. This is a good time for positive career choices. You may be ready to run your own operation more like a general contractor does, but co-worker or supplier relationships may be edgy. Give them time to adjust and become more adaptable. This may also be the time to consider relocation for a new position, to be closer to your family, or to better balance your home and work lives. In the last half of the month, you are speaking out more freely. Remember that it's not easy for you Sea Goats to ask for support. You will need to take time for yourself toward the end of the month.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Happy Birthday to the Aquarians. This is your personal yearly cycle of evaluating the past year and considering what your intentions are for this year. You have spent the last year improving your boundaries, so you are cautious about choosing what to keep and what to get rid of. Later in the month, you are focusing on your need to be rewarded for what you know and what you do. You are more open and receptive in the last half

of the month. You will need to choose your company carefully as you explore writing, taking classes, or creating a stronger social-media presence. You continue to break free of your family's expectations that often seem to control what you do!

PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

This time before your birthday month is a period of rest and retreat. Your sensitivity levels remain high, so you may need more time away from others' demands. Boundaries are going to be important throughout the year. If others are not deserving, you will hold back. In relationships, this is a time to move your relationship to the next level. You are still not sleeping as well as you'd like to be. This will continue through the end of next month. Exercise can help drain excess energy that may cause you to overreact to situations that you would normally ignore. Career is going to be a huge focus this year. If you are younger, this is a time to step into a leadership role. If you are older, you may be looking at cutting back to make life more manageable. Be careful about impulse spending. You'll be ready to move forward with your plans next month.

➡ For more astro-insight, lillyroddyshow.com.



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A Journey to Oz

Jermani Oz-Jackson elevates performance to a new level.

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



When the lights dim and the beat swells at Pearl Bar, one thing is guaranteed: Jermani Oz-Jackson is about to dance the house down. For this

fashion-forward entertainer, there is no place like home—or, in his world, the spotlight. “My dream job as a child was to make a *name* for myself, whether it was on TV or in the theater. I knew the stage was where I wanted to be in life,” he says. Find out more about this whirling dervish below.

Pronouns? He/Him

Hometown? Houston

Drag birthday? September 2018

What got you interested in performing?

Watching Mr. Gay USofA At-Large 2018 and seeing the male entertainers on stage.

Describe your drag persona.

I would say I’m a theatrical dancer. I love to dance, but I also love to give vibrant facial expressions.

How did you pick your name?

My original name was Germani because I have a baby cousin with that name. But then I met Vegas Van Cartier and she said, “Why not change it to Jermani?” That’s how Jermani got his name.

Any titles or pageants under your belt?

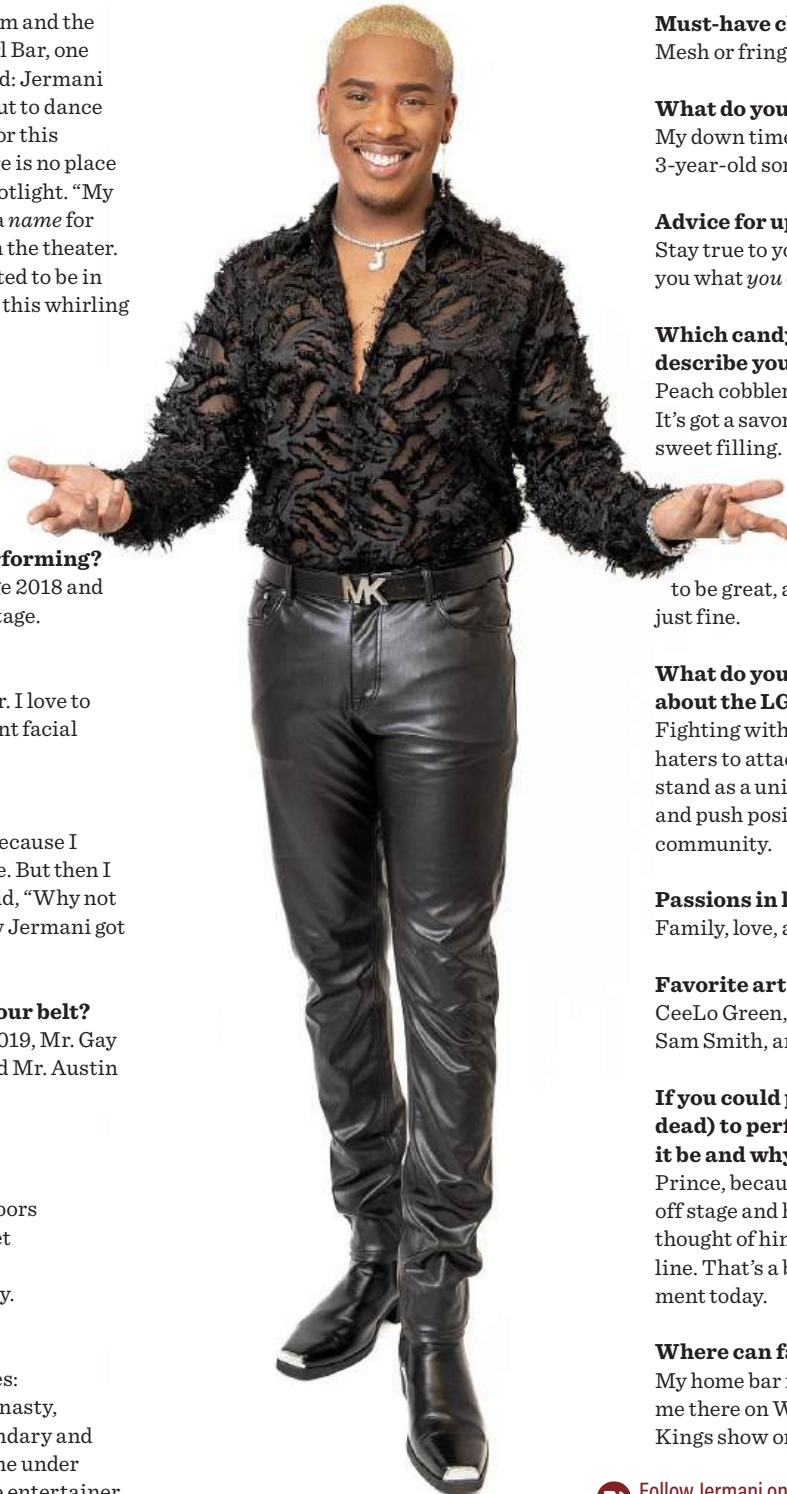
Mr. So You Think You Can Drag 2019, Mr. Gay Texas USofA Newcomer 2019, and Mr. Austin Sweetheart 2019.

What’s your ultimate goal as a performer?

My ultimate goal is to break the doors down so that male entertainers get the same opportunities as our female counterparts in this industry.

Who is your drag family?

I have three different drag families: The Paris Effect, The Jackson Dynasty, and The Haus of Oz. All have legendary and iconic members who have taken me under their wings to help me become the entertainer I am today.



Must-have clothing accessory?

Mesh or fringe on my costumes.

What do you do in your down time?

My down time is occupied with my 3-year-old son.

Advice for up-and-coming performers?

Stay true to yourself. Don’t let anyone tell you what *you* can do.

Which candy or dessert would best describe you, and why?

Peach cobbler would best describe me. It’s got a savory butter-brown crust with a sweet filling.

What is your life’s mantra?

I love you! Today is going to be great, and even if it isn’t, we will be just fine.

What do you want the world to know about the LGBTQ community?

Fighting with each other only causes [the haters to attack us even more]. We need to stand as a united front to fight the fight and push positive narratives about our community.

Passions in life?

Family, love, and happiness.

Favorite artists to perform?

CeeLo Green, Sisqo, John Legend, Sam Smith, and Sylvester.

If you could pick one celebrity (living or dead) to perform with you, who would it be and why?

Prince, because of his confidence on and off stage and his not caring what people thought of him being feminine or masculine. That’s a big issue in male entertainment today.

Where can fans see you perform?

My home bar is Pearl Bar Houston. Catch me there on Wednesdays for the H-Town Kings show on a rotating basis.



Follow Jermani on social media @ [crownmekingray](https://www.instagram.com/crownmekingray) and [facebook.com/jermani.ozjackson](https://www.facebook.com/jermani.ozjackson).

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