

JUDICIAL EXCELLENCE VS. POLITICAL GAMESMANSHIP: FIVE LGBTQ JUDGES FACE VOTERS IN 2026 Pg.26

OCT. '25

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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INSIDE!
Pg.34

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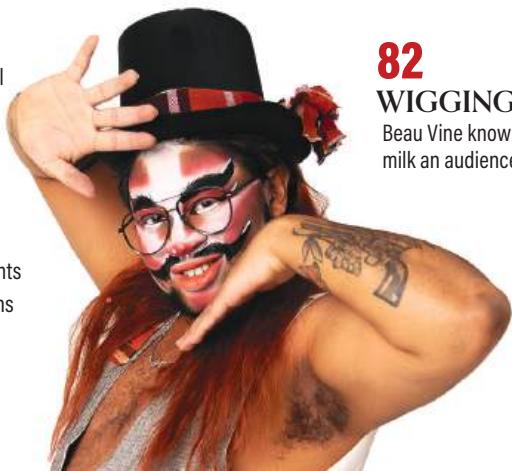
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As we step into October—a month that celebrates both National LGBTQ+ History Month and National Coming Out Day—*OutSmart* is proud to present this print issue brimming with stories of resilience, achievement, and community leadership.

This month's issue begins with news of the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund's unusually early endorsement of Harris County's "Fab Five" judges—a move that speaks to the reputation that these LGBTQ judges have for consistent excellence on the bench. They remind us of the importance of authenticity and impartiality, and that LGBTQ representation in the judiciary strengthens our democracy.

The theme of visibility continues in Lourdes Zavaleta's profile of Alejandra Salinas, who is running for Houston City Council At-Large Position 4. With experience in grassroots activism and national political work, Salinas is a strong voice for accountability in infrastructure spending, reminding us that local politics is at its best when every impacted community has a seat at the table.

October also brings an event especially close to our hearts: the University of Houston



LGBTQ+ Alumni Network's Coming Out Day fundraiser. Emceed by Gianna Christina Ramirez, the evening illuminates our collective history through storytelling. It's a testament to the power of sharing our journeys openly—and to the chosen families that sustain us.

Of course, October is also the month of our annual Gayest & Greatest Awards. This year, more than 100,000 votes poured in for over 2,500 nominees, highlighting the depth and breadth of Houston's LGBTQ community. Inside, you'll find the full slate of winners, along with feature stories on 13 honorees whose work reflects joy, innovation, and impact. From Delulu, our Best New Drag Queen whose playful artistry is matched only by her determination, to community leaders like Kelly Nichols at the Montrose Center and photographer Nora Dayton, these stories remind us why Houston remains a beacon for queer life in the South.

Elsewhere in this issue, we highlight advocates like Brian Klosterboer of the ACLU of Texas, who continues to defend LGBTQ rights in the courts; Gianna Christina Ramirez, honored with a Gayest & Greatest award for her decades of community work; and Eric Kirkpatrick, whose legal practice centers empathy and

the lived experiences of his clients. Arts and culture awards went to innovators like The Happening at the Orange Show, while dining and nightlife winners include ambitious newcomers like the City Cellars HTX restaurant along the bayou in Houston's East End.

Together, these stories form a rich mosaic of LGBTQ Houston's ambitions and accomplishments. They remind us that our community thrives because of those who dare to serve, to create, and to dream boldly.

Finally, we invite you to join us in person for the **Gayest & Greatest 2025 Celebration at South Beach on October 23**. It will be a night of joy, connection, and well-earned recognition for our winners and finalists who make Houston such a vibrant place to live.



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Greg Jeu
Publisher



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QUEER THINGS to DO

COMMUNITY

Thursday, October 23

2025 Gayest & Greatest Awards Party

It's the party of the year as *OutSmart* celebrates all the winners of the 28th annual Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards at South Beach Houston. tinyurl.com/GG25Ceremony



OutSmart GAYEST & GREATEST 2025



COMMUNITY

Thursday, October 16

Katy Pride Kickoff Party

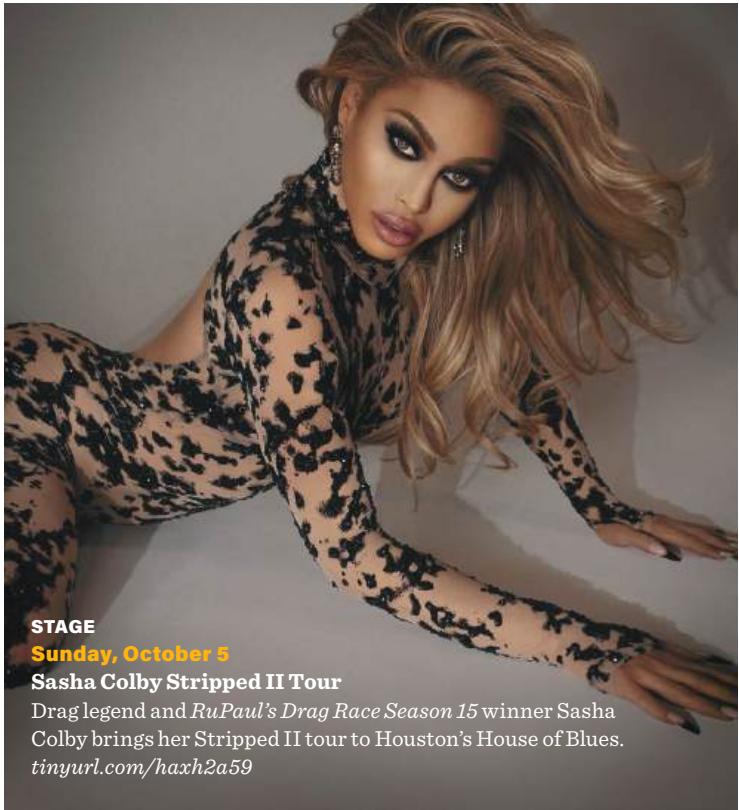
Start your Katy Pride celebration in style with a speakeasy-inspired piano-bar party to kick off the weekend's festivities with music, laughter, and community. tinyurl.com/ys79y42d

COMMUNITY

Saturday, October 18

Katy Pride Celebration

Katy Pride's 2025 celebration features LGBTQ-friendly organizations, live entertainment, kids' activities, delicious food and drinks, and more. tinyurl.com/2sre6e26



STAGE

Sunday, October 5

Sasha Colby Stripped II Tour

Drag legend and *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 15* winner Sasha Colby brings her Stripped II tour to Houston's House of Blues. tinyurl.com/haxh2a59

STAGE**Thursday, October 2****Alley Theatre ActOUT for The DaVinci Code**

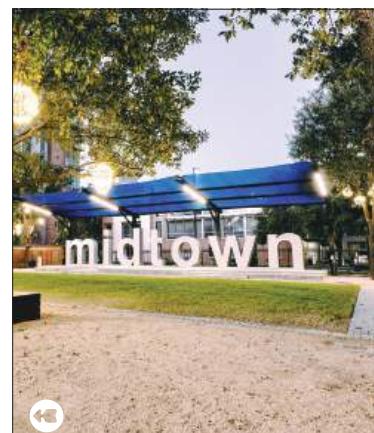
Ticket holders for the October 2 performance of *The DaVinci Code* can enjoy a pre-performance mixer with music, socializing, light bites, and drinks.

tinyurl.com/4rzajj7d

COMMUNITY**Tuesday, October 7****National Night Out at Bagby Park**

Hosted by Midtown Houston, this annual community event is an opportunity for neighbors and local law enforcement to come together in a fun and engaging environment to build connections and promote public safety.

tinyurl.com/yapuj7dh

**STAGE****Saturday, October 4****Houston Pride Band – Silk Road Journey**

Houston Pride Band kicks off its 48th season with Silk Road Journey, highlighting the impact and influence of Asian composers and culture.

tinyurl.com/mr2ye9az

STAGE**Saturday, October 4****David Archuleta at House of Blues Houston**

American Idol alum David Archuleta brings his Earthly Delights tour to the Bronze Peacock at House of Blues Houston.

tinyurl.com/672wdy49

COMMUNITY**Sunday, October 5****ACCT Seawalk**

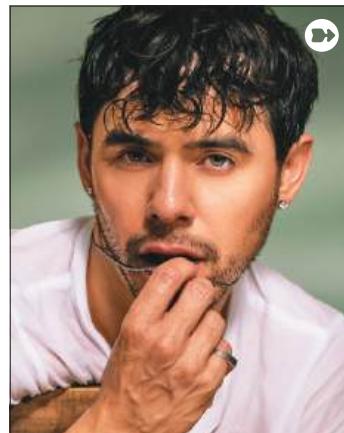
Access Care of Coastal Texas presents the 2025 Galveston Island Seawalk, featuring a 3K run/walk, food, entertainment, and a vendor market. Menard Park at 10 a.m.

tinyurl.com/5dv33uce

COMMUNITY**Saturday, October 11****Red Queen Run Benefitting OWTC**

This 5K fun run is a fundraiser for Off With Their Chest, which assists trans men with life-saving transition-related care.

tinyurl.com/zn8fzfxa

**COMMUNITY****Saturday, October 11****Coming Out Monologues**

To celebrate National Coming Out Day, the University of Houston LGBTQ+ Alumni Association presents *Coming Out Monologues*. Proceeds benefit scholarships and crisis aid for LGBTQ UH students.

tinyurl.com/y9cj72yu

COMMUNITY**Monday, October 13****Frank Billingsley Golf Classic**

Join beloved meteorologist Frank Billingsley for a day of friendly golf competition. Proceeds benefit Legacy Community Health's School-Based Health Care (SBHC) program.

tinyurl.com/5n7atnmc

COMMUNITY**Saturday, October 25****Houston Gaymers Main Meetup**

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tinyurl.com/y5v3es24

STAGE**Thursday, October 30****Out@TUTS for The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee**

Theatre Under The Stars presents its Out@TUTS reception for LGBTQ theatergoers and friends featuring light bites, drink specials, and live music.

tinyurl.com/4z7d9btp



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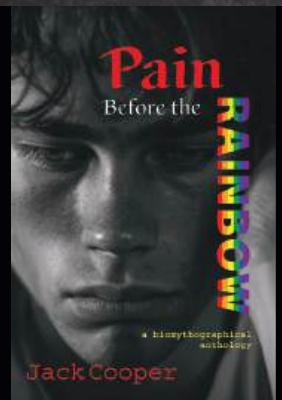
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QUEER THINGS to DO SAVE the DATES

COMMUNITY

Saturday, November 1

7th Annual Barry White Birthday Party

Join in the fun and honor Barry White, who was born on Galveston Island, for an afternoon of food, drinks, music, and much more! Proceeds benefit Access Coastal Care of Texas. Lucky Lounge, 9th and Seawall Blvd. at noon. tinyurl.com/4emj44zy



COMMUNITY

Sunday, November 2

The Diana Foundation - Miss Angela's Country Brunch

The Diana Foundation's annual brunch brings people together for a festive afternoon of BBQ brunch, open bar, live entertainment, and community spirit—all while supporting Tony's Place and Out for Education. tinyurl.com/mr3rynaau

STAGE

Thursday, December 4

Alley Theatre ActOUT for *The Night Shift Before Christmas*

Ticket holders for the December 4 performance of *The Night Shift Before Christmas* can enjoy a pre-performance mixer with music, socializing, light bites, and drinks. tinyurl.com/4rzajj7d



Friday, December 12

Out at the Ballet for *The Nutcracker*

Houston Ballet and *OutSmart* magazine host a special reception for LGBTQ ballet lovers and friends. Get 25% off select seats, a complimentary drink voucher, and access to the reception area before the show and during intermission. tinyurl.com/2w3jnnt5

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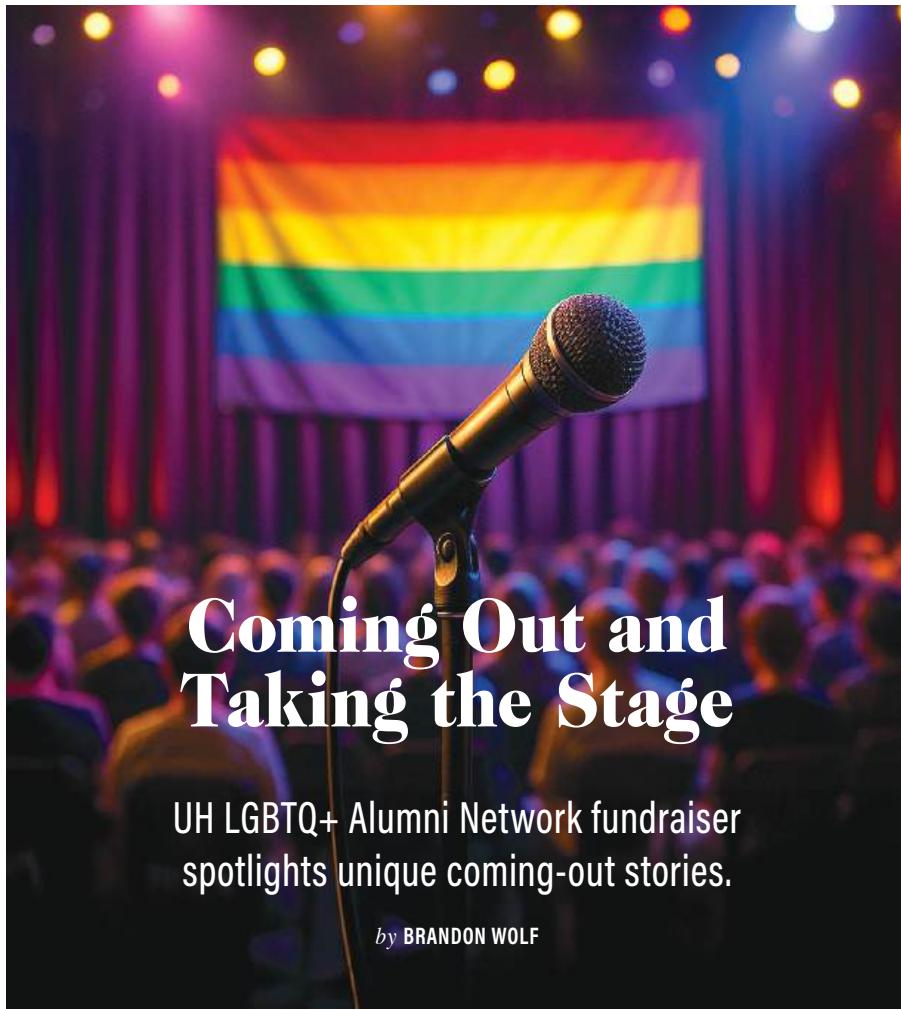
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Coming Out and Taking the Stage

UH LGBTQ+ Alumni Network fundraiser spotlights unique coming-out stories.

by BRANDON WOLF



The University of Houston LGBTQ+ Alumni Network is hosting a fundraiser on October 11 at Los Robles Bar & Grill to support their scholarship grant program. The event takes place on National Coming Out Day, a day to raise awareness, foster acceptance, and celebrate LGBTQ visibility. Its roots trace back to the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

This year's alumni event will feature *Coming Out Monologues and Stories*, a special program in which actors present monologues based on diary-like submissions from members of Houston's LGBTQ community. Trans activist Gianna Christina Ramirez will emcee the evening.

The event's fundraising chair is Frank de Oro, a 39-year-old gay male who also serves as the show's director and editor. He suggested the concept to the board, remembering the emotional impact that similar programs had on him during his years in the Rio Grande area a decade ago.

The program will begin with a diverse

set of monologues, followed by a 30-minute open-mic session for anyone wishing to share their own coming-out story. "These stories open up something very vulnerable," de Oro says, emphasizing the importance of sharing and embracing each other's experiences during challenging times. The monologues reveal how people have come out across different generations, highlighting the value of Pride to people of all ages and backgrounds.

De Oro describes the event as a safe space for all, especially for younger generations seeking guidance from their LGBTQ community. He says the alumni network hopes to make this program an annual event on National Coming Out Day, telling more and more stories from Houston's LGBTQ community.

WHAT: Coming Out Monologues and Stories
WHEN: Doors open at 5:30 p.m.; the event concludes at 8 p.m.
WHERE: Los Robles Bar & Grill, 10444 Hempstead Road
INFO: For adults 17 and older; details at instagram.com/uhlgbtqalumni



Speaking Truth, Finding Family

Jennifer Correa

36, *she/her*

Jennifer Correa, a straight ally, felt compelled to join the monologues presentation with a story about a lesbian woman who came out to her father. While reading the script, Correa was immediately captivated by the woman's humor and vibrancy, noting that she is "hilarious" and fortunate to have the support necessary to feel secure in her identity.

For Correa, these monologues are a testament to the wide range of experiences within the LGBTQ community, revealing the colorful individuality of each person's journey. She observes that our own fears often create greater barriers than actual circumstances, and that genuine support is often present around us, even if we do not always perceive it. Correa emphasizes the importance of chosen family, showing that meaningful support can come from surprising sources. She believes that coming out, while intimidating, may not be as overwhelming as it appears.

Correa regards National Coming Out Day as a tribute to courage and authenticity, celebrating those who bravely reveal their true selves despite the possibility of misunderstanding or rejection. She deeply respects individuals who choose honesty over comfort, and hopes that National Coming Out Day can provide meaningful opportunities to honor the strength and resilience required for self-acceptance and the pursuit of living openly.→

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A Trans Voice Takes the Stage

Alejandro Alvarado

33, *he/him*

Alejandro Alvarado is a proud trans man who is preparing to take the stage and perform a monologue about the experiences of another trans man. He chose this role to challenge himself and step outside of his comfort zone. Recognizing that visibility for trans men can be limited, Alvarado was motivated to embrace this opportunity to share a story that resonates deeply with him—and potentially with others who may feel unseen. “I know there aren’t too many trans men who put themselves out there, so I said Why not?”

When Alvarado first read the monologue, he immediately felt a strong connection to the material. Many aspects of the story reflected his own experiences and emotions. “I felt like I could be the person in the story and put myself in his shoes,” he shared, highlighting the empathy and understanding that comes from lived experience. He believes that performances like these can foster greater awareness and acceptance.

Alvarado also sees National Coming Out Day as an important occasion for the LGBTQ community. He views it as a time to remind individuals that they are not alone. By participating in this monologue, Alvarado hopes to inspire others, promote visibility, and help people realize the value of sharing their stories.



Exploring Emotional Attraction

Holly Harris

30, *she/her*

After an eight-year break from performing in community-theater productions, Holly Harris, a resolute straight ally, is making her stage comeback. Harris was inspired to return with the encouragement of her friend Frank de Oro, who presented her with a monologue that deeply resonated with her.

In this performance, Harris takes on the role of a demisexual character, someone whose experience of sexual attraction is rooted in forming a profound emotional connection rather than being sparked by physical appearance or instant chemistry. Demisexual individuals often don’t feel sexual attraction until a strong bond and deep trust have developed with another person.

Although Harris herself does not identify as demisexual, she finds aspects of the character relatable. “I know what it feels like to not have that immediate physical attraction to someone. And sometimes, even in a long-term relationship, someone’s touch can unexpectedly feel unfamiliar, like the touch of a stranger,” she says. Harris believes these moments of emotional distance echo the demisexual perspective, and she appreciates the opportunity to convey such feelings onstage.

For Harris, participating in this production on National Coming Out Day holds special significance. She views the occasion as a valuable opportunity for people to come together and celebrate life authentically.



Searching for Identity and Belonging

Christopher Krause

35, *it/its*

Christopher Krause, a nonbinary queer polycule, will deliver two distinct monologues during the show: one reflecting on a personal story, and another focusing on someone else’s experience.

Krause’s own piece explores the journey of a gay man coming out, followed by the realization that traditional gender labels don’t fit. Describing it as “a wild ride,” Krause shares, “I was very young, my first relationship was chaotic, and it all led to my coming out.”

The second monologue centers on a gay male who is outed in dramatic teenage fashion. Krause hopes to emphasize that even after such an experience, it’s not the end of the world. “You always get to find your own community, your own tribe, and your own family in the end.”

Active in the local theater scene, Krause recently appeared in *The Laramie Project* and enjoys bringing authentic stories to life on stage. “I love telling stories that get the audience invested,” Krause says. “It’s important to portray real experiences honestly and let the audience join me in that journey.”

For Krause, National Coming Out Day is a celebration of the freedom that comes with honesty and stepping into the light.



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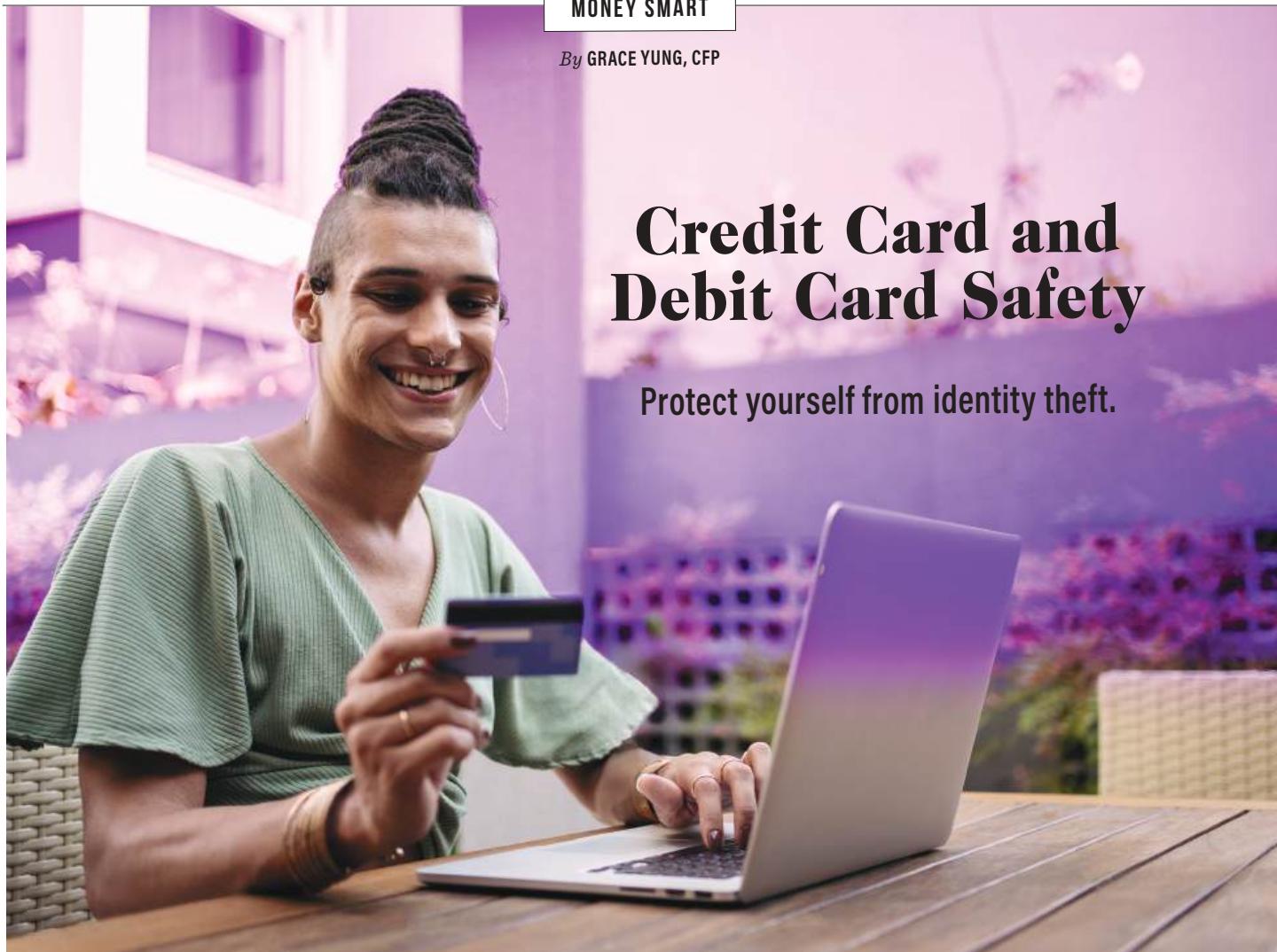
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Credit Card vs. Debit Card Quick Tip:

Use credit cards for purchases and keep your debit card primarily for ATM withdrawals. Credit cards generally offer stronger protection than debit cards:

- **Legal Protections:** Credit cardholders have liability capped at \$50 under federal law – and many issuers offer zero-liability protection.
- **Cash Flow Protection:** Fraudulent charges don't directly drain your bank account, so you maintain access to your cash while disputes are resolved.
- **Ease of Disputes:** Disputing a charge is typically easier and faster, and your credit card account remains usable while you wait for a replacement card.

Preventing Old-Fashioned Theft

- **RFID Protection:** Carry contactless cards in an RFID-blocking wallet or sleeve to prevent wireless skimming.
- **Inspect Card Readers:** Look for loose or tampered card slots at gas pumps, ATMs, or checkout terminals.
- **Keep Cards in Sight:** Whenever possible, watch your card during transactions.
- **Cover Your PIN:** Shield the keypad from cameras and prying eyes when entering a PIN.

Digital Safeguards Quick Tip:

Turn on two-factor authentication and receive instant purchase alerts from your card issuer.

- **Strong, Unique Passwords:** Use a password manager to keep track of secure passwords.
- **Two-Factor Authentication:** Require a text, app code, or biometric confirmation before completing online purchases.
- **Private Connections:** Avoid entering payment information over public Wi-Fi networks.
- **Virtual Card Numbers:** Many issuers let

you generate temporary card numbers for online purchases.

- **Stay Alert for Phishing:** Don't click on suspicious links or respond to requests for personal information via email or text.

Proactive Credit Monitoring & Freezing

- **Credit Monitoring:** Ask to receive security alerts when there are changes to your credit report, such as new account openings.
- **Fraud Alerts:** Tell lenders to verify your identity before approving new credit applications.
- **Credit Freeze:** Block all new credit inquiries until you lift the freeze. This is free and highly effective at preventing fraudulent account openings.

Insurance & Liability Protections

- **Zero-Liability Policies:** Visa, Mastercard, American Express, and Discover all offer strong protections, so check your cardholder agreement.
- **Identity Theft Insurance:** Covers certain costs related to restoring your identity, such as lost wages or legal fees.

- *Homeowners/Renters Riders:* Many policies offer inexpensive riders for identity theft coverage.
- *Employer Benefits:* Some workplaces offer group identity-protection plans, so review what's available to you.

Emerging Security Technologies

- *Biometric Authentication:* Some cards and apps use fingerprint or facial recognition for added security.
- *Digital Wallets:* Apple Pay, Google Wallet, and others use tokenization to protect your real card number.
- *Real-Time Alerts:* Get immediate notifications for every transaction.
- *Geolocation Matching:* Some issuers verify your card use based on your phone's location.

A Quick-Response Plan

If you suspect fraud:

- *Report Immediately:* Call the number on the back of your card.
- *Request a Replacement:* Ask for expedited shipping.
- *Update Automatic Payments:* Keep a secure list so you can quickly transfer recurring charges.
- *Monitor Accounts:* Review statements and credit reports for several months afterward.

Card fraud and identity theft are unlikely to go away, but you can make yourself a difficult target. By combining physical precautions, digital security habits, proactive monitoring, and insurance protection, you can reduce both your risk and the inconvenience if fraud does occur.

The opinions voiced here are for general information only and are not intended to provide specific advice or recommendations for any individual. Grace S. Yung, CFP®, is a Certified Financial Planner™ practitioner and the CEO & Founder of Midtown Financial Group, LLC, in Houston. Since 1994, she has helped LGBTQ individuals, domestic partners, and families plan and manage their finances with care and expertise. She is a Wealth Advisor offering securities and advisory services through LPL Financial, a Registered Investment Advisor. Member FINRA/SIPC. Grace can be reached at grace.yung@lpl.com. For more information, visit www.midtownfg.com or www.midtownfg.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm.



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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



The Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce hosted Perked Up Coffee with the Chamber at New Heights Coffee Roasters on August 28, 2025. Pictured are those in attendance.



On September 2, 2025, the Harris County Democratic Lawyers Association hosted an event at Cadillac Bar & Grill. Pictured are **Judge Audrie Lawton-Evans**, Chief Public Defender **Genesis Draper**, City Council Member **Abbie Kamin**, District Attorney **Sean Teare**, **Barbara Radnofsky**, HCDLA Vice President **Ross Miller**, and HCDLA President **Cawlyn Robinson**.



Lionwoman Productions Texas presented the play *Dancing Lessons* at MATCH on September 11, 2025. Pictured are the cast and attendees.



On September 13, 2025, Houston Pups held its Pups Weekend at various locations in Montrose. Pictured are some of the participants.



On September 13, 2025, The T.R.U.T.H. Project presented Southern Son Shine: A Celebration of Storytelling & Community Care at Deluxe Theater. Pictured are **Roderick Coleman** and **Kevin Anderson**.



Tony's Place presented The Future Starts Here with Future Fabulous - A Drag Voyage Show at Artechouse on September 14, 2025. Pictured are **James Gonzalez**, **Ana Rausch**, **Carrie Rai**, **Kelly Young**, and **Steven Parks**.



On September 16, 2025, a Rainbow Ice Cream Social sponsored by Judge Jerry Simoneaux was held at the Religion Center on the University of Houston campus. Pictured are **Judge Jerry Simoneaux** and members of the faculty and staff.



On Sept. 19, 2025, AmistadesHTX celebrated five years of hosting Hispanic Heritage Month at a Legacy satellite location. Pictured are **Miguel Jacquez**, **Omar Martinez**, **Miguel Martinez**, **Jennifer Comea**, **Adam Compry**, **Oscar Cardoza**, **Hikeem Vincent**, and **Luis Perez**.



The Gay Softball World Series took place at various locations from September 19-27, 2025. Pictured are **Jake Akstins**, **Philip Toups**, **Bill Sansom**, **Victor Gutierrez**, **Cassidy Cryer**, **Brian Crumby**, **Kara Manwaring**, **Alex Niall**, **Clay Zakarian**, and **Steven Amedeo**.



On September 20, 2025, EPAH presented its 2025 Cocktails for a Cause honoring Lazarus House at Spring Street Studios. Pictured are **Danielle Sampey**, **Melissa Serra**, and **Travis Springfield**.



Allies in Hope presented the Hope for Houston Ball kickoff at the home of Kenneth Gayle on September 21, 2025. Pictured are (front row), **Michael Broderick**, **Deanna Breaux-Gathe**, **Kenneth Gayle**, and **LaRence Snowden**; (back row) **Will Morgan**, **Chasta Martin**, and **Jeffrey Campbell**.



The annual Elected Officials Reception hosted by the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce was held at Hearsay Levy Park on September 25, 2025. Pictured are Chamber leadership with elected officials.

IMPORTANT FACTS FOR BIKTARVY®

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

(bik-TAR-vee)

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BIKTARVY may cause serious side effects, including:

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

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- ♦ Have any other health problems.
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- ♦ **Severe liver problems,** which in rare cases can lead to death. Tell your healthcare provider right away if you get these symptoms: skin or the white part of your eyes turns yellow, dark “tea-colored” urine, light-colored stools, loss of appetite for several days or longer, nausea, or stomach-area pain.
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Judicial Excellence vs. Political Gamesmanship

Harris County voters face a choice as they consider re-electing five LGBTQ judges in 2026.

by DAVID CLARKE
Photos by DALTON DEHART



When the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund announced that it was endorsing five Harris County judges for re-election in 2026, a full year ahead of the general election and months before the Texas secretary of state's December 8 candidate filing deadline, it sent a remarkably clear signal. This unusually early endorsement emphatically proclaimed that these incumbents, dubbed the "Fab Five," are simply too good to risk losing.

"It's rare that a group of LGBTQ+ elected officials have done as well in office as the 'Fab Five' in Harris County have done," says Evan Low, Victory Fund's president and CEO.

"When you have a good thing, we say keep it going."

What makes this endorsement so significant is not just the candidates' shared LGBTQ identities. Their collective record on the bench demonstrates consistent impartiality, innovation, and excellence in one of the most complex judicial landscapes in America. Harris County is home to nearly five million people, which is more than the entire state of Louisiana. With dockets spanning civil trials, mental health commitments, and criminal proceedings, the Fab Five's decisions affect residents across every demographic line.

And yet, their very identities mean they carry a burden that their cisgender, hetero-

sexual peers often don't. For highly visible professionals from marginalized populations, there is nearly always the expectation that they must be flawless.

"All judges know they will make unpopular decisions. A ruling in court, by definition, creates winners and losers," notes Judge Beau Miller. "My goal is not to be the best LGBTQ judge there is. My goal is to be the best judge there is who happens to be LGBTQ and/or HIV positive."

That distinction underscores the harsh truth that queer judges don't get to simply be "good enough." They are expected to outperform just to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of voters and colleagues.



Judge Beau Miller

SETTING THE STANDARD OF EXCELLENCE JUDGE BEAU MILLER

Judge Beau Miller, presiding over the 190th Civil District Court, has become a symbol of that higher bar. In April, he was named Trial Judge of the Year by the Texas Association of Civil Trial and Appellate Specialists, an elite statewide organization whose members must be board certified in both civil trial and appellate law. It is one of the most prestigious honors in the Texas legal community.

"Presenting myself as a knowledgeable, experienced candidate who has done well on the bench, who's been recognized for judicial excellence—no matter what the letters after my name are—that's the goal," Miller explains.

A former high-school band director and educator, Miller brings both empathy and rigor to the bench. His lived experience with HIV has also shaped his understanding of how health challenges can affect litigants. "When you walk into the 190th, you're respected no matter who you are, where you come from, and what your background is," he says. "If you can't get a timely hearing or walk in with respect from the judge, then that is unjust."

Respect, he emphasizes, must extend beyond the courtroom. "We have to go out in the community and get to know people who are not like you, respect them, and visit with them. You have those exchanges, and you learn."

Miller's recognition, coupled with his visibility as an openly gay and HIV-positive judge, exemplifies how the Fab Five are redefining what excellence looks like under scrutiny.

LEADING WITH INTEGRITY AND STRENGTH JUDGE SHANNON BALDWIN

If Miller demonstrates how excellence earns recognition, Judge Shannon Baldwin shows how representation coupled with leadership can transform institutions. As presiding judge

of Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 4, she made history as the first African American woman to hold that seat. But as she emphasizes, her legacy is broader than any "firsts."

With more than 22 years of legal experience, including running her own firm, Baldwin has handled cases from traffic violations to capital murder. She has presided over specialty courts like SOBER Court and Veterans Court, providing vital support to people overcoming addiction and to veterans rebuilding their lives.

Her leadership extends county-wide. Baldwin has served as a local administrative judge for Harris County's civil and criminal courts, overseeing all 16 criminal courts. A veteran of the U.S. Army Reserves, she is also an adjunct professor at Thurgood Marshall School of Law and an active member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.



Judge Shannon Baldwin

Representation matters, Baldwin notes, but it is her record that earns trust. "Whoever is on the other side of that bench, they need to see themselves," she says. "Being a woman, being African-American, being a lesbian—all of those things collectively give me insight. It's not a crystal ball, but it is intuition."

Baldwin is also a single mother, and her motivation lies in that part of her identity. "I'd tackle every challenge of this job as long as I can hold my head up and make my daughter proud."

Her story embodies resilience, but also leadership rooted in service. In an era when representation is still a rarity, Baldwin insists that her presence will one day be commonplace. Until then, she wears the mantle with pride, determination, and the quiet insistence that integrity matters most.

BUILDING NATIONAL MODELS JUDGE JASON COX

Judge Jason Cox, presiding over Harris County Probate Court No. 3, oversees both probate and



Judge Jason Cox

all civil mental-health commitments in the county. His dual docket allows him to see, as he says, "every possible walk of life."

Cox is particularly proud of creating an outpatient treatment program for mental-health patients, a model so effective it has gained national recognition. "The judge that preceded him tried to do that for 19 years," Judge Jerry Simoneaux points out. "Judge Cox got it done in two."

Cox is equally candid about the role identity plays in shaping fairness. "Judges have implicit biases. You have to work to set those aside before you go out there," he explains. "Going through that exercise allows you to really hear these cases, and come up with a ruling that delivers justice with fairness."

His commitment to normalizing equality is also personal. In his first year on the bench, Cox married his husband in his courtroom with his staff as witnesses. "I did that not just because I love my husband," Cox shares, "but also to normalize it for all of them. To show them that a same-sex marriage is just like a regular marriage."

Cox's approach illustrates how fairness is not only a principle of the law but also a lived practice, demonstrated daily through both rulings and personal example.

HOLDING TO FAIRNESS JUDGE JIM KOVACH

Judge Jim Kovach of Harris County Civil Court at Law No. 2 stresses that impartiality requires constant self-awareness. "I do have lawyers who take very anti-LGBTQ+ positions, but they're always respectful in court," he says. "It takes a little bit of soul searching to make sure that I'm truthful with myself, and that I'm not going to be biased against them in the case. That would be unfair to their client, and it's not good for justice."

Kovach recalls advice from his conservative mother when he was first elected: "Remember, you're a judge for everybody, →

not just people on your side of the aisle. You're also our judge." Those words became a guiding principle, reminding him that the judiciary cannot afford to appear partisan or exclusionary.



Judge Jim Kovach

That perspective informs his sense of legacy. "If I can leave the judiciary knowing people trusted me to be fair, then that's the most important thing I could accomplish," he reflects. "I think about what legacy I'm leaving, and I want people to say that I was fair and impartial, that I treated everyone with respect, and that I upheld the integrity of the judiciary."

For Kovach, fairness is not simply about the outcome of a ruling. It is about maintaining the public's confidence in the system itself. "Part of the job is making sure people trust the system, because if they don't trust the judiciary, then they don't trust democracy itself."

That responsibility can weigh heavily, but he views it as central to his work. "We're entrusted with people's lives and livelihoods when they come before us," he says. "You can't take that lightly. You have to approach it every day with humility, respect, and the understanding that people need to walk away believing they got a fair hearing."

Kovach's focus on fairness, respect, and institutional trust places him firmly alongside his Fab Five colleagues, each of whom demonstrates in their own way that impartial justice and lived authenticity are not at odds. They strengthen one another.

REDEFINING DIGNITY IN THE COURTS JUDGE JERRY SIMONEAUX

If Miller is about recognition and Baldwin is about leadership, Judge Jerry Simoneaux is about reform. For Simoneaux, who presides over Harris County Probate Court No. 1, innovation and dignity have been the hallmarks

of his service. Long before he wore judicial robes, he was in courtrooms fighting simply for transgender clients to have their names and pronouns respected.

"When I was an attorney representing transgender people in courts, getting judges to acknowledge but enforce the correct pronoun and the correct name for the person that I was representing, just to show basic decency and humanity, was a bit of a struggle," Simoneaux recalls.

That struggle inspired sweeping reforms. He established a gender-neutral dress code, removed archaic sexist terms—like *administratrix*—from court filings, and even drafted a congressional resolution urging lawmakers to adopt non-gendered titles. "Female identifying attorneys were saying, 'Thank you for this. Why are we setting ourselves apart?'" Simoneaux says.



Judge Jerry Simoneaux

His leadership extends beyond language. Simoneaux created the Texas Probate Law American Inn of Court, a bench-bar association that mentors young attorneys and promotes professionalism. Attendance, he says, "has been higher than anybody has ever seen." He also spearheaded a new board certification in probate trial law, currently pending before the Texas Supreme Court.

The results are measurable. In Houston Bar Association polls, Simoneaux and Cox consistently rank at the very top among all judges in Harris County. "I was the first LGBTQ person to be appointed in a statewide judicial position," Simoneaux notes. "It was not because I'm LGBTQ. It was because I'm really damn good at what I do."

Still, he acknowledges the pressure of visibility. "I know that the minute I mess up, the first thing they're going to say is, 'Openly gay judge Jerry Simoneaux did this.' That's my fear. So we are very, very careful about how we conduct ourselves because we know some-

thing bad can reflect on our community, even if it's not connected."

The Fab Five as a Case Study

One of the most compelling parts of the Fab Five's story is how different their backgrounds are, and how those intersections inform their work. A U.S. Army veteran. A high school band director. A longtime probate attorney who once defended queer families in the days before marriage equality. A judge who oversaw Houston's largest HIV/AIDS health provider. Together, these wide-ranging experiences illustrate how diversity on the bench strengthens justice for everyone.

And these judges' consistent recognition bears that out. Whether in statewide honors like Miller's Trial Judge of the Year award or his top rankings in Houston Bar Association polls, the Fab Five aren't simply adequate. They're among the very best judges nationally.

"Judges who cannot be fair because of their own biases don't need to be judges, period," Judge Simoneaux emphasizes. That crystalline clarity underscores why their work matters, not only in Houston but throughout the country.

More Than Representation

Representation is not tokenism, it's perspective. Judges who have lived through marginalization often bring a keener eye for fairness, precisely because they've navigated systems not built for them. And they also know the stakes are high.

"I know that the minute I mess up," Judge Simoneaux reflects, "the first thing they're going to say is, 'Openly gay judge Jerry Simoneaux did this.' That's my fear. So we are very, very careful about how we conduct ourselves because we know something bad can reflect on our community, even if it's not connected."

This pressure, however, has only sharpened their commitment. "When I'm myself, I'm just not going to miss," Baldwin says.

Why This Matters Now

The *L.A. Times* recently noted the historic rise of LGBTQ Americans running for office. In Texas, where politics remain extremely polarized, the Fab Five embody what it means to deliver excellence under scrutiny. They remind voters that identity does not disqualify one from public service. If anything, it enriches it.

Next year's elections will test whether Harris County voters value judicial excellence over political gamesmanship. But the Fab Five have already proven their case. They are not just LGBTQ judges. They are among the best judges Harris County, and America, have ever seen.



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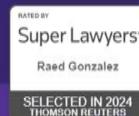
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FIGHTING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

City Council candidate Alejandra Salinas seeks to improve the lives of everyday Houstonians.

by LOURDES ZAVALET



From breaking barriers in student politics to successfully working on a presidential campaign and now litigating high-stakes cases at a top national law firm, Alejandra Salinas is channeling her advocacy work toward Houston City Hall.

Salinas is one of 15 candidates running in the November 4 special election for City Council At-Large Position 4, a seat that became vacant in July after Leticia Plummer announced her run for Harris County judge. When asked why she believes she is the best fit for the position, Salinas points to her extensive background in politics and the law.

"I've spent the last 20 years of my life taking on big fights and getting things done—whether it was figuring out how to effectively organize young people around the country, taking on some of the world's biggest companies in court and winning, or working on pro-bono cases," Salinas says.

Endorsed by organizations such as the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund and Latino Texas PAC, Salinas' priorities include improving public safety, securing affordable and reliable city services, and strengthening the city's infrastructure. These issues are top concerns for Houston voters, Salinas says, noting that an important part of her campaign has been going out into the community and listening to the needs of those she interacts with.

"For too many Houstonians, the government isn't working as equitably and effectively as it should. I want to fight to change that, because if we can make our government work for all Houstonians—no matter who you are or what part of town you live in—we can start to do bigger things," she says. "But, we *have* to get the basics right. Filling a pothole is about so much more than just filling a pothole. It's about making sure that a family gets to work or

school on time, or so they don't have to make a choice between fixing a tire and paying a medical bill or rent."

Rooted in her great-grandfather's story of immigrating from Mexico and building a life in Texas, Salinas' commitment to civic engagement began early. As a high school student in Laredo, she organized a walkout and secured a campus-wide forum for students to speak out against a federal immigration bill that would have harmed their community.

Her passion for uplifting marginalized communities continued as an undergraduate student at UT Austin. During her time there, she served as the first Hispanic president of the College Democrats of America and was a surrogate for President Obama's reelection campaign.

**"I'VE SPENT THE LAST
20 YEARS OF MY LIFE
TAKING ON BIG FIGHTS AND
GETTING THINGS DONE."**

—Alejandra Salinas

In 2012, Salinas, who identifies as a lesbian, was a speaker at the Democratic National Convention and used that platform to come out in front of millions of viewers. "At the time, marriage equality was being debated and discussed in the country," she says. "I thought if I shared my story, it might be a little bit easier for someone else."

Inspired by her father's ability to advocate

for others as a trial attorney, Salinas decided to attend law school and graduated cum laude at Boston College Law School. Now a partner at Susman Godfrey—a major Houston-based law firm that recently made headlines for successfully challenging President Trump's executive order against the firm—Salinas has helped win millions of dollars for her clients in court.

"One of my main cases right now involves suing artificial-intelligence companies for copyright infringement on behalf of authors whose works were stolen," she says. "While this recent litigation has been very meaningful, my pro bono work has also meant a lot to me." These pro bono cases include successfully defending Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo and other County officials in election contests and working with the ACLU to secure a settlement with Magnolia ISD to eliminate a discriminatory hair policy.

Outside of working and campaigning, Salinas served on the board of the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, Second Mile Haiti, and C.60, a nonprofit dedicated to the restoration of LULAC's first clubhouse in Houston.

Salinas lives in Montrose with her wife and law-firm colleague, Elizabeth Hadaway. "I thank God every day that she is with me and by my side," Salinas says. "And also my dad and my sisters—I couldn't do this without them."

OutSmart readers who are interested in getting involved in Salinas' campaign can learn more about upcoming events on her website. "We're block-walking every Saturday and Sunday, so come join us for a two-hour shift," she says. "It's great block-walking weather, and we're having a lot of fun at the doors. Everyone is welcome."

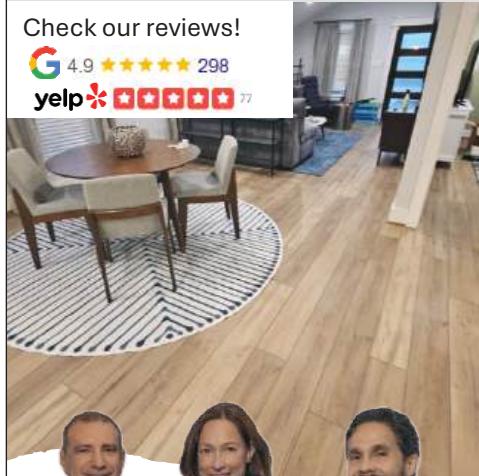
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Favorite LGBTQ Social Group,

Favorite Local LGBTQ Community Organization,
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Best Local LGBTQ Social Media for Community & Culture, and

Best Local LGBTQ Social Media Presence
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Favorite Local LGBTQ Community Organization

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Best Male Pharmacist

Kevon Aloysius, PharmD

Best Male Physician

James Carroll, MD

Best Male Physician

Rocco Richards, MD

Best Men's Health Clinic

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Best Mental Health Practice

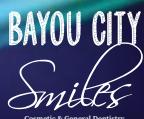
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Best Mental Health Therapist/Psychiatrist

Chad Lemaire, MD Psychiatrist

OutSmart **GAYEST & GREATEST** **2025 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS**

PRESENTED BY



OutSmart magazine is thrilled to celebrate Houston's best and brightest in our 28th annual Gayest & Greatest Awards. More than 100,000 votes were cast for over 2,500 nominees, and this year's winners—extraordinary local individuals, organizations, and businesses—rose to the top, thanks to the support of our readers. This full list of winners includes a closer look at 13 honorees whose stories light up Space City.



Delulu, this year's Best New Drag queen, is a rising star in our dynamic entertainment scene. **Brian Klosterboer**, Most Prominent Male LGBTQ Activist and Best Human Rights Attorney, passionately defends Texas' queer community. **Gianna Christina Ramirez**, winner of three awards, is a force to be reckoned with in our nonprofit sector, and **Kelly Nicholls**, our Leading Female Fundraiser, keeps the Montrose Center on solid ground in uncertain times.

Favorite Female Community Photographer **Nora Dayton** uses her camera to capture joy and resilience, and **Krewe of Olympus**—a four-time 2025 Gayest & Greatest winner—celebrates over 50 years of giving back to the community.

SHINING *in the* SPOTLIGHT

The **Halloween Fantasy Ball**, our Best Dance Party and Favorite LGETQ (Non-Benefit) Event of the Year, hosts another party this month, while **The Happening**, Best Performing Arts Organization, offers an experimental arts showcase. **Duewa Spicer**, Favorite Nonbinary Sex & Relationship Therapist, dedicates their practice to helping others better understand the human experience. **Chanel Chowdhury**, Favorite Female Bartender, keeps the drinks flowing at Pearl Bar, while the owners of **Cleo Roasting Co.** (Favorite Coffee Roaster) and **Cavo Coffee Shop** (Favorite Coffee Shop) energize their loyal customers. **City Cellars HTX**, Favorite New Restaurant and Favorite Restaurant for Outdoor Dining, serves up robust eats in East End, and **Eric Kirkpatrick**, Best Personal Injury Attorney, serves his clients with compassion.

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ENTERTAINMENT
& NIGHTLIFE

Delulu

This Houston drag star thrives on heart and hustle.

By OSM STAFF



In Houston's drag scene, a new star is shining brighter than ever: Delulu, winner of *OutSmart* magazine's Gayest & Greatest 2025 Best New Drag Queen. With pronouns

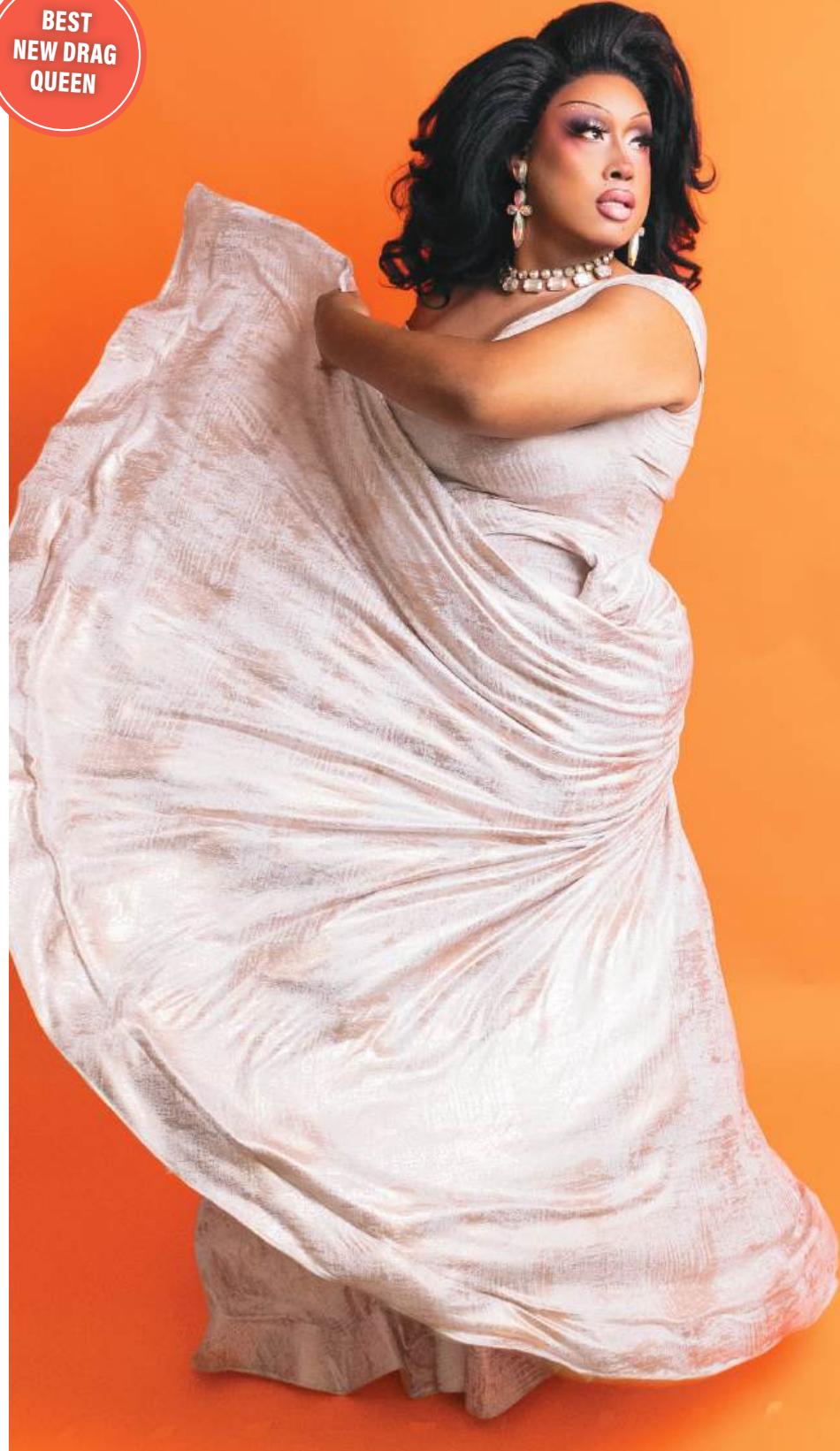
shifting playfully between she/her/they in drag and they/him/she out of drag, Delulu embodies a fluidity and freedom that's at the heart of queer artistry. Born and raised in Southwest Houston before settling in Channelview, they've always been rooted in the city's vibrant culture—and now they're helping redefine it.

Delulu's story begins in the sixth grade, when a dance teacher introduced the class to Janet Jackson's *Rhythm Nation*. That performance unlocked something powerful. "It pushed me to perform," Delulu recalls. Around the same time, *America's Next Top Model* and *Face Off* sparked a love for makeup and femininity. But the true lightning strike came at 13, when *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 6* aired. "It was my first time ever seeing drag. I immediately clung to all things queer."

As a teenager, Delulu boldly wore full faces of makeup to school—sometimes applying it on the bus and then wiping it off before going home. By 18, they were venturing into Montrose, sharpening their craft, and soaking in Houston's local drag energy.

But fear and self-doubt delayed their drag debut. "I kept putting it off, thinking I was running out of time," Delulu admits. The turning point came with a Lady Gaga-themed show, where audience votes secured Delulu's spot. Nerves aside, that first performance was unforgettable. "I basically did seven laps around the venue. By the end of the night, my ankles couldn't hold me up. It was the best fever dream ever."

**BEST
NEW DRAG
QUEEN**



OUTSMART GAYEST & GREATEST 2025 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

WINNERS & FINALISTS

The drag name itself comes from the word *delusion*—a cheeky reminder to create your own reality. “Do what you want. Be delusional. Have fun!”

And playfulness does indeed define Delulu’s drag. Whether dancing, lip-syncing, or delivering comedic beats, her goal is connection. “When you come to a Delulu show, you’re going to get a bit of comedy, a bit of dance, and a whole lot of fun and emotion.” The inspiration comes quickly; when an idea for a mix strikes, she makes it right away. “I always listen to a song and really try to feel the emotion, then connect that feeling to the crowd.”

Drag may be an art form of individuality, but Delulu emphasizes that her journey is a community effort. “It takes a village, and my village was there for me,” she says. Her debut night felt like a dream, not only because of the stage but also because of the overwhelming love from friends and chosen family. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for them.”

Some performances stand out for their unexpected twists—like the time a revealing costume snagged on a lace bodysuit, leaving Delulu exposed in nude stretch fabric. “I truly felt naked,” she laughs. More importantly, she embraced growth through *Persephone’s Game of Drag Season 4*. “I knew I wasn’t going to win because I didn’t know myself enough. But I wanted to make an impact, and I did.” That experience even gave her the confidence to host her own show.

Delulu’s aspirations remain as bold as her performances. She hopes to sharpen her dance skills, expand her creative horizons, and continue hosting and performing across Houston. She dreams of projects that spotlight others, too. And if she could choose one legendary collaborator, it would be Joan Rivers. “I would have loved to hear everything she had to say about this lifetime.”

For now, winning Best New Drag Queen serves as a powerful affirmation. “For the first time, I feel like I’m where I’m supposed to be,” Delulu says. Her guiding mantra comes straight from her dream collaborator: “Life is tough, darling. Life is hard, so we’d better laugh at everything. Otherwise, we’re going down the tube.”

With that spirit, Delulu isn’t just living her drag dreams—she’s making Houston laugh, dance, and believe in the beauty of a little delusion.

 Follow Delulu on Instagram
@ladivadelulu.

ENTERTAINMENT & NIGHTLIFE

BEST LOCAL LIVE MUSIC VENUE

Michael's Outpost

White Oak Music Hall, Dan Electro's, The Continental Club, Rich's Houston

BEST DANCE PARTY

Halloween Fantasy Ball

Finalists: Classic Numbers, DNVRMX, Out at the Rodeo

BEST DRAG SHOW BAR

Michael's Outpost

Finalists: South Beach Houston, Barcode, Pearl Bar, Bar Boheme, Montrose Country Club, JR's Bar & Grill, Los Robles, Grand Prize, Two Headed Dog

BEST DRAG SHOW IN TOWN

Millennial Dolls

The Laugh Track, Eye Cons, King Sized-Pearl Bar, The Queer Cabaret

FAVORITE PLACE TO WATCH DRAG

Michael's Outpost

Finalists: South Beach Houston, Barcode, Pearl Bar, Boheme, The Montrose Country Club, Los Robles Bar and Grill, JR's Bar & Grill, Robert's Lafitte (Galveston)

FAVORITE LGBTQ BAR

Ripcord

Finalists: Pearl Bar, JR's Bar & Grill, Los Robles Bar & Grill, Tony's Corner Pocket, South Beach Houston, George, Michael's Outpost, Barcode, Crocker Bar, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon

FAVORITE GALVESTON LGBTQ BAR

Robert's Lafitte

FAVORITE ALLY BAR

Two Headed Dog

Finalists: Frost Town Brewing, Axlerad, Cecil's Pub, Sassafras, Grand Prize Bar, Poison Girl, Big Star Bar

FAVORITE MEN'S BAR

Ripcord

Finalists: JR's Bar & Grill, Tony's Corner Pocket, George Country Sports Bar, Los Robles Bar and Grill, Michael's Outpost, Crocker Bar, Barcode, Play Nightlife, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon

FAVORITE WOMEN'S BAR

Pearl Bar

Finalists: JR's Bar & Grill, Cecil's Pub, Axlerad Beer

FAVORITE BAR FOR A HAPPY HOUR

Pearl Bar

Finalists: Two Headed Dog, JR's Bar & Grill, Cecil's Pub, The Montrose Country Club, George Your Country Sports Bar, Barcode, Tony's Corner Pocket, Ripcord, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, South Beach Houston

FAVORITE KARAOKE NIGHT AT A BAR

JR's Bar & Grill

Finalists: Pearl Bar, Manic Mondaze-Tony's Corner Pocket, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, PJ's Sports Bar, DJ Andi Pantz, Barcode

FAVORITE BAR TO SHOOT POOL

Ripcord

Finalists: Rudyard's, George Country Sports Bar, JR's Bar & Grill, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, Birdie's Den, Tony's Corner Pocket, Black Magic Social Club, The Room Bar and Lounge

FAVORITE BAR TO TWO STEP

Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon

Finalists: Los Robles Bar and Grill, Shoeshine Charley's Big Top, South Beach Houston

FAVORITE CLUB FOR DANCING

South Beach Houston

Finalists: Pearl Bar, Rich's Houston, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, Barbarella, Crocker Bar, Los Robles Bar and Grill, Numbers Night Club

FAVORITE PLACE TO SHOW OFF YOUR LEATHER

Ripcord

Finalists: Numbers, Robert's Lafitte (Galveston), Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, JR's Bar & Grill

FAVORITE PLACE TO WATCH MALE DANCERS

Tony's Corner Pocket

Finalists: Los Robles Bar and Grill, South Beach Houston, JR's Bar & Grill

FAVORITE GALVESTON BAR TO WATCH MALE DANCERS

Robert's Lafitte

FAVORITE TRIVIA NIGHT AT A BAR

Ripcord

Finalists: Frost Town Brewing, Rudyard's Pub, Play/Pause Nightlife, The Owl in Rice Village, Stonewall Trivia

FAVORITE NONBINARY DRAG ENTERTAINER

Zestial Celestial

Finalists: Malevolent The Psycho Ghoul, Tera Bytz, Barbie Monroe, Pup Naranja

FAVORITE LOCAL (NON-DRAG) FEMALE ENTERTAINER

Christina Wells

Finalists: Phoebe Seymour, Angie Moon Mercy, Alexis Nicole Whitney, Cara Chérie, Sarah Golden

FAVORITE LOCAL (NON-DRAG) MALE ENTERTAINER

La'Darius Mirage Jackson

Finalists: Gavin LeMaire, Dustin Rouge Whitney, Angel OXL, Nick Seelhammer, Gabriel Muneco

FAVORITE LOCAL (NON-DRAG) NONBINARY ENTERTAINER

Pup Naranja

Finalists: Mak Fontina, Andrew Whit, Patricia

FAVORITE LOCAL MUSICIAN/BAND

Jay Ariean

Finalists: Houston Pride Band, Sarah Golden, Isaac Niaz, Kam Franklin, Jane Woe, Afterlife Dating, Ben Chavez, Shame On Me →

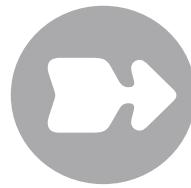


PEOPLE

Brian Klosterboer

An ACLU attorney who fights for LGBTQ rights across Texas.

By BENJAMIN LEGER



Brian Klosterboer does his research. And not just the nuances of the law—he digs deep into Texas' LGBTQ history, learning about the trans rights activists and queer leaders who came before. Their stories put into perspective what his organization is trying to protect.

Before even mentioning his own work, Klosterboer will talk about the work of Phyllis Frye, the Texas judge who is the “grandmother” of the trans rights movement, or Anandrea Molina, who founded the Organización Latina Trans in Texas. And as senior staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, what he does each day is incredibly important in defending the rights of LGBTQ Texans in the court system.

Klosterboer has served as lead counsel on a number of high-profile cases for the ACLU, such as fighting a state bill that aimed to ban drag performances or a school district that attempted to enforce a dress code policy based on gender stereotypes.

Klosterboer joined the ACLU in 2018, and says the threats to LGBTQ rights from state politicians have only increased.

“This is a particularly tough time,” he says, “but we need to learn from our LGBTQ+ elders and especially our trans elders who have persevered through difficult times before, recognizing that tough times are nothing new and we will remain resilient.”

That perseverance continues. In 2025, lawmakers in the Texas Legislature brought up more than 200 anti-LGBTQ bills, eight of which were successful. The ACLU sued to block key parts of Senate Bill 12, which

went into effect this summer and bans school clubs like gay-straight alliances and discourages conversations about sexual orientation in the classroom, among other restrictions. Recently, Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law the state's public bathroom bill, aimed at trans and intersex people.

Klosterboer leans on his legal expertise not just in court, but also in sharing information with the public so they know their rights when it comes to new and discriminatory legislation. The bathroom bill, for instance, can penalize state and local government entities and buildings, but can't bring criminal penalties or fines on the individuals using such facilities, Klosterboer says.

While recent news reports indicate a troubling trend of politicians chipping away at LGBTQ rights, especially toward young people, Klosterboer aims to help the community share accurate information.

"We're kind of in a doom cycle," he says. "It's important to be careful that we aren't jumping to make things worse or spreading misinformation. It could get to a point where things get worse, but we're working to stop that and focus on building a better future."

Klosterboer wants the community to celebrate the rights we have. And to emphasize that point, he has his own celebration in store: an upcoming wedding with his partner. At the moment, he's seeking out queer-owned vendors and businesses for their big day.

Outside of the ACLU, Klosterboer teaches civil-rights litigation as an adjunct law professor at South Texas College of Law Houston. He also helped found the Houston chapter of the National Lawyers Guild of Houston, which is known for defending protesters and observing and documenting police action during protests.

The Round Rock native and Harvard Law graduate came to Houston around 2016 to work as a law clerk for former federal judge Vanessa D. Gilmore. During that time, his interest in local LGBTQ history grew. He met Houston's resident LGBTQ historian and radio host JD Doyle, as well as photojournalist and *OutSmart* photographer Dalton DeHart, who helped him uncover more about the rich history of Houston's queer community.

And today, that history provides context for the work Klosterboer does each day at the ACLU of Texas. "I'm incredibly honored and very grateful to receive these *OutSmart* awards," Klosterboer says. "I'm also very grateful to be in Houston. We have such a vibrant community here, and so many people who fight for human rights."

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PEOPLE

Gianna Christina Ramirez

Building community through trans visibility and hope.

By BRANDON WOLF



Gianna Christina Ramirez, 37, is a lifelong Cypress resident who proudly identifies as a pansexual trans woman. Her advocacy journey began early: at age 14, she came out as gay and founded her high school's first gay-straight alliance group. "I was a very loud teenager. You couldn't shut me up about the queer community," Ramirez recalls.

At the time, transgender representation was scarce and often negative in the media. "I came out as a feminine gay boy because I didn't know trans was an option," she explains, reflecting on a time when trans people were rarely portrayed as happy or well-adjusted.

Her understanding shifted at age 20, when she met Houston drag icon Lana Blake. "I said to her, 'How do you do that?' while I held onto her arm for dear life. I have been holding onto her for almost 17 years now."

After high school, Ramirez pursued non-profit work, starting as a development officer for an animal charity and later fundraising for various Houston-area nonprofits. "It's always been something that I am enthusiastic about."

But her path was not without its hardships. "In my youth, while surviving and trying to become a stable trans woman, I participated in sex work and was homeless at one point."

Outside of work, Ramirez has been deeply involved in the community, organizing drag shows and fundraising for nonprofits. She is now a member of the Diana Foundation, the nation's oldest continually active LGBTQ organization. She uses her skills to help with their fundraising efforts.

"If there is something I can be helpful with, I will sign up for it. I am all over the place. I am a people person," says Ramirez, who thrives on connecting people. "I like making everyone meet everyone."



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VALUABLE
FEMALE
VOLUNTEER

MOST
VALUABLE
FEMALE TRANS
COMMUNITY
VOLUNTEER

LEADING
TRANS
COMMUNITY
FUNDRAISER

She will emcee a National Coming Out Day fundraiser this month, organized by the University of Houston LGBTQ+ Alumni Network, and she also worked with the Gay Softball World Series that was held in Houston last month.

Ramirez always enjoys panel discussions where she advocates for trans inclusivity. She was a participant in Pearl Bar's Transformation panel this past May, and helped with a pool party last month sponsored by FLUX Houston, an affinity group promoting HIV prevention among trans people.

Ramirez finds hope in the increasing visibility of thriving trans people. "I care about my trans peers. I have a special focus on those in marginalized communities. That's where a lot of my drive comes from—making sure that none of my sisters ever has to endure what I did."

The trans women that Ramirez has met in bars and on the streets—women who taught her about safety, survival, and sisterhood—have all shaped her sense of community.

Like so many others faced with today's hostile political climate, Ramirez struggles. "I can't even fathom the words to explain what it feels like to be trans in America right now," she says. "I've dealt with bullies my whole life. But this moment right now feels different. It's horrible."

After 20 years in the nonprofit sector, Ramirez feels burned out. She is now focused on reinventing herself as a full-time advocate and activist, working directly to build community.

A pivotal influence for Ramirez was Jose Esteban Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. "The book is about queer futurism and moving on beyond queer pragmatism. He wants us to dream bigger," she explains.

"During these dark times, the most radical and transgressive thing we can do is have hope. Do not dream within the constraints of the current administration," she says. "I am an optimist. At my core, I believe there are more good people than bad."

As a youth, Ramirez never expected to reach age 40, but as that milestone approaches, she feels indestructible. After a lifetime of challenges, she is honored by her recognition in this year's Gayest & Greatest awards. "I'm just over the moon. This is a real glimmer of happiness during very dark times."

Follow Gianna on Instagram
@messyglitch

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PEOPLE

Kelly Nicholls

The chief development director for the Montrose Center is leading the nonprofit through uncertain times.

By LOURDES ZAVALETA
Photo by RAUL CHAIDEZ

 As LGBTQ nonprofits face the loss of government support, the work of community fundraisers like Kelly Nicholls (she/her) becomes even more significant.

Nicholls, winner of this year's Gayest & Greatest Leading Female Fundraiser, is the chief development director of the Montrose Center, a community center that provides an array of vital services to LGBTQ Houstonians.

"Our organization is about 60 percent federally- and state-funded through grants, so when we face political challenges like we're facing now, it gives us a level of uncertainty," Nicholls says. "This amplifies the need for us to go out, connect with donors, and find people who can help the Center by asking for their support."

Members of the LGBTQ community are rising to the challenge. "There's a lot to be celebrated," she notes, adding that the past year has seen major commitments from individual donors. "We've had foundations who are increasing their support. Even in the climate we're facing, there are corporate sponsors who are stepping up and doing more where they can."

Under Nicholls' leadership at the Montrose Center since August 2024, events like the 2024 Out for Good Gala and this year's Pride Brunch

broke records in both attendance and donations. "There's been a lot of momentum in the past year," she says. "I'm really excited to see that keep snowballing and moving forward."

Nicholls joined the Montrose Center after nearly 15 years of fundraising experience for prominent Houston institutions. A major figure in Houston's LGBTQ philanthropic community, Nicholls previously held leadership positions at the Houston Grand Opera, Theatre Under The Stars, and Allies in Hope (formerly AIDS Foundation Houston).

Her path to becoming a fundraiser in Houston was "completely accidental," Nicholls says. After graduating from high school, the Sacramento, California, native attended UC Santa Barbara and received a bachelor's degree in English. Her degree initially led her to teaching English in Costa Rica, where she also met her future wife.

"We were both teachers in Costa Rica and became very fast friends," Nicholls remembers. "After moving back to the States, my dad passed away. I was back in California looking for something different, and she said, 'Why don't you come to Houston with me?' We then became more than friends, and the rest is history."

The couple has been together for ten years, and married for five.

While living in Houston, Nicholls organically met a director of development who was looking for a grant writer. "That's how I got my foot in the development door," Nicholls says. "Once I started doing that, I was introduced to galas, special events, and interacting with donors. I just instantly fell in love with it."

On being voted this year's Leading Female Fundraiser, Nicholls says she feels incredibly humbled and gives credit to the rest of her team. "To be recognized just really means a lot to me. I have to give a huge thanks to my colleagues at the Montrose Center because any fundraiser is only as good as their CEO, the development team behind them, and the colleagues who do the work every day to make it all possible."

Looking forward, Nicholls plans on continuing her work to secure donations for the essential programs the Center provides to LGBTQ Houstonians.

"In the climate that we, as the LGBTQ community, are facing, it's challenging and stressful," she says. "I hope the community knows that the Montrose Center has been here for almost 50 years and will continue to be here with supportive programs and services. There is hope beyond this. Our community has fought the fight before, and we will continue fighting now."

 For more information, visit montrosecenter.org.

FAVORITE FEMALE DJ

DJ Crazy V

Finalists: DJ Athenz, DJ London, DJ Andi Pantz, Dj Drea

FAVORITE MALE DJ

DJ Chad Guidry

Finalists: DJ Atreyu Frausto, DJ Toma, DJ Twerksum, DJ Joe Ross

FAVORITE NONBINARY DJ

DJ Aracely Manterola

Kittie Purrie, DJ Chopped Liver, DJ Cheeks

FAVORITE MUSIC PRODUCER

DJ Athenz

Finalists: Sugar Hill Studios, Third Coast Recordings, Mark Kidney-Stone Sound, Edgewater Music Group, Stephen Jusko

FAVORITE DRAG SHOW HOST/EMCEE

Queen Persephone

Finalists: Rachel B*tchface, Carmina Vavra, Sasha Frost, Reign Larue, Edna Anderson, Kofi

FAVORITE DRAG KING

Barry Mii Dandy

Finalists: Juecee, Kian Kismet, Preston Steamed, Hugh Dandy, Casper Cain, Sir Debonair, Beau Vine

FAVORITE DRAG QUEEN

Queen Persephone

Finalists: Adriana LaRue, Sasha Frost, Barbie Monroe, Rachel B*tchface, Edna Anderson, Keymiyah Dupree

FAVORITE VETERAN DRAG KING

Hugh Dandy

Finalists: Preston Steamed, Juecee, Barry Mii Dandy, La'Darius Mirage Jackson

FAVORITE VETERAN DRAG QUEEN

Kofi

Finalists: Lana Blake, Alexis Nicole Whitney, Regina Dane, Dina Jacobs, Carmina Vavra

BEST NEW DRAG KING

Beau Vine

Finalists: Kian Kismet, K-1 Vee Zah, Juecee, Hideki Synth, Zestial Celestial

BEST NEW DRAG QUEEN

Delulu

Finalists: Rene B*tchface, Purple, Mari Jane, Jessika Del Ray Larue, K-1 Vee Zah, Madame Prominence Frost

BEST PAGEANT KING

La'Darius Mirage Jackson

Finalists: Juecee, Mykey Whitney

BEST PAGEANT QUEEN

Sasha Frost

Finalists: Violet S'Arbleu, Dessie Love Blake, Sinema LaRue, Angela Mercy, Alexis Nicole Whitney, Malibu Blake Von Schweitz

FAVORITE ADULT FILM PERFORMER

Silver Steele

Finalists: Dante Kieran, Ryan St. Michael, Matt Coven, Mary King, Preston Steamed

BEST PROMOTER

DragSpace

Finalists: Alexis Nicole Whitney, Andrew Whit (The Happening), DNVRMX, DJ Athenz

PEOPLE

BEST FEMALE LGBTQ BUSINESS PERSON

Kris Owens

Finalists: Tammi Wallace, Barbie Monroe, Debbie Storrs, Angel_TheCakeChef, Julie Mabry

BEST MALE LGBTQ BUSINESS PERSON

Christopher Cerdá

Finalists: Colt Ables, Jeff Harmon, Charles Armstrong, Tony Vacarro, Clay Melder, John Donato

BEST NONBINARY LGBTQ BUSINESS PERSON

Queen Persephone

Finalist: Tae Moon

BEST LOCAL LGBTQ SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COMMUNITY & CULTURE

JD Doyle

Finalists: The Shady Gay, Paris London, AmistadesHTX by Legacy

BEST LOCAL LGBTQ SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

Kellen Solomon

Finalists: The Shady Gay, DragSpace, Timothy Wayne, Jay Michaels, JD Doyle, Latin Boy J & Paris London, AmistadesHTX by Legacy →





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FAVORITE FEMALE (COMMERCIAL) RADIO PERSONALITY

Jessie Watt

Finalists: Cindy Burbano, Betsy Ballard, Sarah Pepper

FAVORITE FEMALE (COMMUNITY) RADIO PERSONALITY

Deborah Moncrief Bell

Adriana LaRue-La Mas Draga, Tiffany Scales, Betsy Ballard, Cindy Burbano

FAVORITE MALE (COMMERCIAL) RADIO PERSONALITY

Jay Michaels

Finalists: Special K, Ahmad Wilson

FAVORITE MALE (COMMUNITY) RADIO PERSONALITY

Bryan Hlavinka

Brett Cullum, Davis Mendoza Durusman, Ernie Manouse

FAVORITE NONBINARY (COMMUNITY) RADIO PERSONALITY

Ethan Michelle Ganz

Finalists: Amanda Wolfe, Lee Collum

FAVORITE FEMALE TV PERSONALITY

Pooja Lodhia

Finalists: Cathy Hernandez, Miya Shay, Tessa Barrera, Deborah Duncan, Chelsea Edwards, Cheryl Mercedes, Lauren Kelly, Carolina Sanchez

FAVORITE MALE TV PERSONALITY

Derrick Shore

Finalists: Ernie Manouse, Frank Billingsley, Pat Cavlin, TJ Parker, Nick Nataro

FAVORITE FEMALE (COMMUNITY) TV PERSONALITY

deborah lawson

Finalist: Chelsea Edwards

FAVORITE MALE (COMMUNITY) TV PERSONALITY

Ernie Manouse

FAVORITE NONBINARY (COMMUNITY) TV PERSONALITY

Amanda Wolfe

FAVORITE FEMALE LGBTQ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Pam Straker

Finalists: Samantha Pisarski-May, Shelby Ramos, Ruth Robbins

FAVORITE MALE LGBTQ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Adrian Santos

Finalists: Hazaell Sanchez, Wayne Lopes Matthew Tharp, William (Jason) Dedrick, David Rojas, Jeff Jacobitz, P. Tim Martindell

FAVORITE FEMALE LGBTQ HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Brandi Lira

Finalists: Julie Stayton, Samara Martinez, Teneiza Tibbs, Michelle Palmer

FAVORITE NONBINARY LGBTQ ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Alex Holdford

Finalist: LJ Wysingle

FAVORITE MALE LGBTQ HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Jeff Jacobitz

Finalists: Bryant Johnson-Wood, Sean Saunders, Kyle Levy

FAVORITE NONBINARY LGBTQ HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Aidynn Green

FAVORITE MALE LGBTQ POST-SECONDARY EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Brian Riedel

Finalists: Dr. Patrick Lukingbeal, Richard Hernandez-Lone Star College-Kingwood

FAVORITE NONBINARY LGBTQ POST-SECONDARY EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Julian Losey

FAVORITE FEMALE LGBTQ POST-SECONDARY EDUCATOR/TEACHER

Maria Gonzalez

Finalist: Dr. Rachel Quinn →

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A photograph of two Black men smiling and laughing together. The man on the left has a beard and is wearing a white polo shirt. The man on the right has short curly hair and is wearing a floral button-down shirt. They are standing outdoors with a blurred background of buildings and trees.

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Best Community Health
Services Provider—Finalist

Best Local Resale/Thrift Store
Out of The Closet
—Winner

PEOPLE

Nora Dayton

This celebrated photographer uses her work to help people connect with each other.

By LOURDES ZAVALETA
Photos by NORA DAYTON



Just three years ago, photographer Nora Dayton (she/her) picked up her camera to capture a local community gathering for the first time. Since then, she has become a leading voice behind the lens, documenting Houston's most significant social and political movements.

Her recent work includes capturing Pride Houston 365's 2025 parade and festival in downtown, the No Kings Rally and March at Houston City Hall, and the congressional redistricting hearing at the University of Houston. This powerful body of work has earned Dayton the title of this year's Gayest & Greatest Favorite Female Community Photographer.

"It's humbling to be seen, and it's an honor to feel that I'm touching people's lives in some way," says Dayton on winning the award. "Even if it's in just some small way, it means that people are seeing and appreciating my work and that it's left a positive impression on them."

That's what I really want—to put something out there that makes people feel good."

Dayton, who works in software development, moved to Houston's Montrose neighborhood from New Jersey in 2019 after her wife landed a job at the University of Houston's medical school. "The Montrose area was an environment where it felt like there wasn't judgment," she says. "My experience in the area was just a greater diversity of people, and I think that helped me figure myself out."

After social-distancing restrictions had eased in 2022, she decided to attend an in-person event hosted by the social organization Trans & Gender Queer Houston (TGQH). "I had virtual support groups," she says, "but that was my first time getting out into the community and meeting other people."

Dayton soon became friends with TGQH founder Meghan Fairbanks and began photographing the organization's events. "I got a lot of positive feedback from that very quickly," she remembers. "The second time I took photos at a TGQH event, I got some good photos, and one of them is still the banner on the group's Facebook. It kind of just went from there."

In addition to TGQH, some of the groups Dayton is passionate about and has photographed are the human-rights organizations Equality Texas, 50501 Houston, and Triple A Alliance. She was also the lead photographer during Pride Houston 365's 2025 season, capturing its major events such as the grand marshal reception, Rock the Runway, and the Pride festival and parade.

At a time when Texas's LGBTQ community—and particularly trans Texans—face relentless political and social attacks, Dayton's images depict queer joy and resistance. She says this work is therapeutic for her. "When things are really down or feeling bad, I think to myself, 'I want to put something beautiful into the world.'"

She says another important part of her work has been her ability to help people connect with each other. "There was a school teacher who shared that they were starting the school year in a conservative district, so they were hesitant to share much about themselves. After the teacher's co-workers saw some photos online that Dayton had taken of the teacher at events, their colleagues reached out and said they wanted to get involved in similar causes."

"That's been some of the most meaningful stuff—seeing people I took photos of use those photos as their profile pictures on social media," Dayton says. "That feels good to me, because I gave someone a photo where they felt good about how they saw themselves."

For more information, visit noradayton.com.

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DALTON DEHART

COMMUNITY

Krewe of Olympus

Houston's LGBTQ Mardi Gras organization celebrates 53 years of giving.

By **BRANDON WOLF**

Houston's Krewe of Olympus—one of the nation's largest LGBTQ Mardi Gras krewes—embodies a spirit of exuberance.

Its members embrace a social scene adorned in rhinestones, sequins, and feathers. This lively community is marked by camaraderie, great parties, and a commitment to raising money for Houston's LGBTQ community. The organization is now celebrating its 53rd anniversary.

Founded in 1970 as a gay krewe in New Orleans, members began to hold an annual black-tie ball, showcasing elaborate campy costumes that required months of preparation. The name *Olympus* alludes to the fictional New Orleans carnival ball featured in the 1938 Bette Davis film *Jezebel*.

For years, Houston lacked its own krewes, prompting many local gay men to travel to New Orleans for the Olympus ball. But by 1992, the AIDS crisis left the New Orleans Krewe with

only three surviving members. To revitalize the organization, husbands Bill and Ben Jones-Walters guided the Krewe's relocation to Houston, breathing new life into its traditions.

The Krewe's hallmark lavish costumes are usually built in segments in order to transport them to the ball site. A Krewe motto is "If it's worth being done, it's worth being overdone."

Memorable costumes from past balls include a Tiki Room bar complete with parrots singing in unison, and a dramatic Statue of Liberty descending from her pedestal.

Since 1970, the group has hosted its annual ball every year—except for two years during COVID. The Krewe measures its age by the number of balls held, making this its 53rd year. Past ball themes have ranged from "Illuminations" and "Just Desserts" to "Hell and Heaven," and "Cocktail Culture." Each year, a king and queen of the ball are chosen. The ball is usually held two weeks before the New Orleans celebration of Mardi Gras so that members are

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able to attend the New Orleans event and also the Galveston event.

Despite meticulous planning, the event is not without its amusing mishaps. Members have contended with back braces throwing them off balance, prematurely popped costume balloons, and wobbly headdresses. Each member's headdress is built upon a custom-fitted skullcap, designed to fit snugly without the use of chin straps.

President David Gandy has announced that the 2026 ball will be held at the Wyndham Houston near NRG Stadium on January 31. Gandy has been a member for over three decades and has served as the fundraising chair for 14 years.

The event usually attracts about 400 guests. Attendance is by invitation only, so the best way to see a show is to become friends with Krewe members—who each have a specific number of invitations they can give out.

Beyond the ball, the Krewe hosts a variety of other social events throughout the year. Annual fundraisers include a Twelfth Night celebration with king cake, Witchy Bitchy with Halloween-themed food, and Fais Do Do featuring homemade Creole food.

Members also construct prize-winning floats for Houston's Pride parade and sell beads and flags at the Pride festival. Additional social gatherings include happy-hour parties at local clubs, rush parties, restaurant group dinners, and quarterly membership meetings.

The Krewe of Olympus has always been open to men of all races, and since the 1980s, women have also been welcomed. Heterosexuals are likewise welcome to join. Membership applications can be downloaded at the Krewe website.

Members can choose their level of involvement, with greater participation yielding rewards such as preferred seating at the annual ball. At a minimum, members are expected to pay dues and serve on one committee.

Over the years, the Krewe has donated nearly a million dollars to local LGBTQ organizations. Beneficiaries have included the PFLAG/HATCH Youth Scholarship Foundation, The Pet Patrol Houston, PWA Holiday Charities, Q-Patrol, Omega House, Texas United Charities, Bering Open Gate, Heart of Leather Foundation, AssistHers, Bayou City Performing Arts, Bering Omega Community Services, Colt 45 AIDS Troublefund, Montrose Clinic, Art League Houston, Legacy Community Health Pharmacy, Lesbian Health Initiative, the LGBT Switchboard, and Allies in Hope's Camp Hope.

 For more info, visit kreweofolympus.org

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ FACEBOOK PAGE

First Christian Church Katy

Finalists: Jay Michaels, Paris London, JD Doyle, AmistadesHTX by Legacy, Jorge Serrano aka Latin Boy J, Timothy Wayne, Brian Duhon, The Montrose Center

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ INFLUENCER

Kellen Solomon

Finalists: The Shady Gay, Timothy Wayne, Brian Duhon, Jay Michaels, Paris London, Miguel Jacquez, Jorge Serrano aka Latin Boy J, Kris Owens, Adriana LaRue, Purple_the_clown

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT

The Shady Gay

Finalists: Kellen Solomon, Timothy Wayne, Brian Duhon, DragSpace, Jay Michaels, Paris London, Jorge Serrano aka Latin Boy J, AmistadesHTX by Legacy

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ JOURNALIST

Sam Byrd

Finalists: Frank Billingsley, Jenny Block, Matt Horn-FOX26, Brandon Wolf, Bryce Newberry, Brett Cullum, Jhony T-Montrose Star

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ PODCAST

Ps & Qs Podcast

Finalists: Queer Voices, Queer PositivityTEA, Girl STFU, Prairie Rainbow Review, 22Sides

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ TIKTOKER

Timothy Wayne

Finalists: Kellen Solomon, Paris London, Jessie Cruz,

Jorge Serrano aka Latin Boy J, Tony Pastor, First Christian Church Katy, Matthew Tharp

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ TWITTER ACCOUNT

The Shady Gay

Finalists: Paris London, SimonjamesIII, @thisisroxanne, HairyTrouble

FAVORITE MALE COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHER

Dalton DeHart

Finalists: Victor Contreras-Close Your Eyes Photo, Seferino Garcia, Connor Hart, Miguel Jacquez, Angels Vision, Edgardo Aguilar, Lucio Nieto

FAVORITE FEMALE COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHER

Nora Dayton

Finalists: Tasha Gorel, Chandrayee Soneja, Alexis Melvin, Nathalie Herpin

FAVORITE NONBINARY COMMUNITY PHOTOGRAPHER

Pup Chance

Finalists: Angels vision, Jack Terranova

FAVORITE FEMALE LOCAL POLITICIAN

Molly Cook

Finalists: Annise Parker, Ann Johnson, Abbie Kamin, Lizzie Fletcher, Villa Shurielle

FAVORITE MALE LOCAL POLITICIAN

Mario Castillo

Finalists: Jon Rosenthal, Gene Wu, Christian Menefee

FAVORITE NONBINARY LOCAL POLITICIAN

Paris London

FAVORITE FEMALE LGBTQ COMMUNITY HERO

Tammi Wallace

Finalists: Avery Belyeu, Hunny Phillips, Heather Tolleson, Taylor Mabrie, Cindy Schaeffer

FAVORITE FEMALE TRANS COMMUNITY HERO

Avery Belyeu

Finalists: Gianna Ramirez, Alexis Nicole Whitney, Meghan Fairbanks, Atlantis Narcisse, Taylor Mabrie, B'Yancha Foxx, Mya Wesley, Joelle Bayaa-Uzuri Espeut

FAVORITE MALE LGBTQ COMMUNITY HERO

Timothy Wayne

Finalists: Jim Sikorski, Jay Michaels, Kennedy Loftin, Austin Abernathy, JJ Fulton, Mykey Whitney, Ian Haddock, Jacques Bourgeois, Miguel Jacquez, Erik Smith, Clay Melder

FAVORITE MALE TRANS COMMUNITY HERO

Lou Weaver

Finalists: Kaven O'Neil, Emmett Schelling, Daron Yanes

FAVORITE NONBINARY COMMUNITY HERO

Kevin Nguyen

Finalists: Amanda Rose, Pup Naranja, Han Schaible, Autumn Lauener, Jace Wright, Ethan Michelle Ganz, Kris Owens-The Feisty Collective

FAVORITE NONBINARY TRANS COMMUNITY HERO

Amanda Rose

Finalists: Autumn Lauener, Anya Tsang, Ethan Michelle Ganz, Jace Wright →

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Halloween Fantasy Ball

Houston's beloved Halloween party returns.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



DALTON DEHART

OUTSMART
This October marks the return of the legendary Fantasy Ball, a larger-than-life celebration of community, creativity, and extravagant costumes. And behind the curtain of this iconic LGBTQ event is president Robert Wallace, a community leader who has not only preserved the magic, but reignited it.

"I think it makes me really proud," Wallace says, reflecting on *OutSmart* readers naming the Fantasy Ball their favorite LGBTQ non-benefit event of the year. "The Halloween Ball has been around for 44 years, but it kind of lost some momentum, particularly during COVID. I took over the organization and tried to put some steam back into it. And now, we haven't even sent out the invitations yet and I've already gotten multiple requests from people asking how to get in."

First held in 1980, the Halloween Ball has become one of the longest-running queer traditions in Houston. After a dip in attendance and energy during the pandemic, Wallace stepped in to ensure its legacy endured and thrived. His vision was rooted in preserving the spirit of the event, rather than reinventing it.

"We've tried not to make too many changes," he says. "We tweak things year to year to improve what didn't work, but overall, the event is pretty much the same. It starts relatively early, which people like. They can come

to the Ball and then head to other Halloween parties afterward."

Held at South Beach, the newly reopened Montrose nightclub, the Ball is both a dance-floor extravaganza and a dazzling display of imagination. Last year, roughly 1,000 guests packed the venue—a sea of glitter, wigs, latex, and lace—as DJ Chad Guidry spun tracks that moved through the decades, offering a little something for everyone.

"Chad's been DJing with us for four years now," Wallace says. "People really enjoy his music. It's fun, remix-heavy, and very pop."

But the Fantasy Ball is more than music and dancing. It's a night where self-expression reigns supreme, and guests come dressed to impress. "I enjoy keeping an eye on the door that first hour," Wallace says. "It's unbelievable the amount of energy and time that people spend on their costumes. You may not even recognize someone you know."

While individual creativity at the event is plentiful, Wallace particularly enjoys the group costumes. "One year we did *Alice in Wonderland*," he recalls. "We had over 20 people dressed as characters. Last year we did a classical Disney theme. Another group did *101 Dalmatians*—one woman came as Cruella with over a dozen friends dressed as Dalmatian puppies."

Despite all the pageantry, Wallace is quick to clarify what the event is and isn't. "There's no fundraising aspect," he says. "And that's by

design. The hosts really enjoy it just being a party. So many LGBTQ events are fundraisers, and while that's important, this is different. It's about fun, connection, and community."

The impact that Wallace has had on Houston's LGBTQ scene extends beyond Halloween. He also founded the city's Pride Brunch fundraiser, which has grown into a can't-miss Pride weekend staple that supports the Montrose Center.

"There was nothing happening on Sundays during Pride," he explains. "In other cities, Pride is a full weekend—Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Here it was just two days. So I pulled together my friends for brunch, and it just grew. Now it's a fundraiser for the Montrose Center, which I love working with."

That balance between celebration and service reflects Wallace's broader vision for Houston's queer community—a vision of inclusion, continuity, and joy.

As the Fantasy Ball approaches its 45th anniversary, Wallace is mindful of the importance of sustaining the legacy for future generations. He credits the event's longevity to its dedicated hosts, some of whom have been involved since the 1980s. "This is their party," he says. "They're really dedicated to making it a success."

When asked what he hopes guests take away from the night, Wallace doesn't hesitate with his answer: "I hope they walk away knowing they had a great time!"

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ WRITER

Sam Byrd (tie)
Zach McKenzie (tie)
Finalists: Scott Damon, JD Doyle, Brett Cullum, Matt Horn

LEADING FEMALE ENTERTAINER FUNDRAISER

Alexis Nicole Whitney
Finalists: Alexa Bouvier, Jacklyn Dior, Reign LaRue, Angie Moon Mercy, Miss Demeanor

LEADING FEMALE FUNDRAISER

Kelly Nicholls
Finalists: Angie Moon Mercy, Jacklyn Dior, Shelby Hansen-Castillo, Dominique Hollins, Kylie McNaught

LEADING MALE ENTERTAINER FUNDRAISER

Roger Woest
Finalists: La'Darius Mirage Jackson, Nicholas Standards Mink Gill, Dustin Rouge Fontaine-Whitney, Blair Fullerton, Mykey Whitney, Geary Whitney, Austin Abernathy, Don Gill, Tanner Williams, Robert Wallace

LEADING MALE FUNDRAISER

Tanner Williams
Finalists: Robert Wallace Blair Fullerton, Jacques Bourgeois, Nicholas Standards Mink Gill, Jim Sikorski, Clay Melder, Dustin Rouge Whitney, Erik Smith, Mykey Whitney, Austin Abernathy, Derrick Brown, Don Gill

LEADING NONBINARY ENTERTAINER FUNDRAISER

Zestial Celestial
Finalists: Pup Naranja, Feelin Jabooty

LEADING NONBINARY FUNDRAISER

Zestial Celestial
Finalists: Pup Naranja

LEADING SENIOR LIVING PROFESSIONAL

Fred Reninger
Finalists: Edward Craft, Larry Castillo, Kaven O'Neil

LEADING TRANS COMMUNITY FUNDRAISER

Gianna Christina Ramirez
Finalists: Alexis Nicole Whitney, Pete Makopoulos-Sentleber, Taylor Mabrie, Kaven O'Neil, Lou Weaver, Avery Belyeu

MOST PROMINENT FEMALE LGBTQ ACTIVIST

Tammi Wallace
Finalists: Meghan Fairbanks, Hunny Phillips, Heather Tolleson, Jacklyn Dior, Angie Moon Mercy, Joelle Espeut

MOST PROMINENT FEMALE TRANS ACTIVIST

Avery Belyeu
Finalists: Gianna Ramirez, Meghan Fairbanks, Alexis Nicole Whitney, Dayana Principal, Atlantis Narcisse, Katherine Regis, Taylor Mabrie, Maya Wesley

MOST PROMINENT MALE LGBTQ ACTIVIST

Brian Klosterboer
Finalists: Tanner Williams, Brad Pritchett, Austin Abernathy, Mykey Whitney, Jacques Bourgeois, Clay Melder, Erik Smith, Lou Weaver

MOST PROMINENT MALE TRANS ACTIVIST

Lou Weaver
Finalists: Kaven O'Neil, Landon Richie, Daron Yanes, Emmett Morales-Yoon, Cadence Campbell, Brian Tobias

MOST PROMINENT NONBINARY LGBTQ ACTIVIST

Kevin Nguyen
Finalists: Amanda Rose, Pup Naranja, Autumn Lauener, Ash Hall, Ethan Michelle Ganz, Han Schaible, Hayden Cohen

MOST PROMINENT NONBINARY TRANS ACTIVIST

Amanda Rose
Finalists: Autumn Lauener, Ethan Michelle Ganz, Alex Holdford, Kevin Nguyen

MOST PROMINENT YOUTH LGBTQ ACTIVIST

Timothy Wayne
Finalists: Hayden Cohen, Rose Daphne, Chris McDonald, Marshall Romero, Rose Yard, Lucio Nieto

MOST VALUABLE FEMALE TRANS COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

Gianna Christina Ramirez
Finalists: Alexis Nicole Whitney, Meghan Fairbanks, Nora Dayton, Taylor Mabrie, Shayla Anderson, Dayana Principal, Maya Wesley, Rose Yard

MOST VALUABLE FEMALE VOLUNTEER

Gianna Christina Ramirez
Finalists: Meghan Fairbanks, Heather Tolleson, Angie Moon Mercy, Alexis Nicole Whitney, Sara Beth Summors, Christyna Lewis, Taylor Mabrie, Alexa Bouvier, Angela Mercy, Ana Sanchez Morales, Roxanne Werner, Ana Sanchez

MOST VALUABLE INTERSEX ADVOCATE/EDUCATOR

Koomah
Finalist: Mo Cortez →

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MOST VALUABLE MALE TRANS COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

Kaven O'Neil

Finalists: Lou Weaver, Pete Makopoulos-Sentfleber, Daron Yanes, Jevon Martin, Brian Tobias

MOST VALUABLE MALE VOLUNTEER

Austin Abernathy

Finalists: Tanner Williams, Jack Berger, Timothy Wayne, JJ Fulton, Erik Smith, Mykey Whitney, Brandon Mack, Jacques Bourgeois, Clay Melder, Lucio Nieto, Nicholas Standards Mink Gill

MOST VALUABLE NONBINARY COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

Kevin Nguyen

Finalists: Amanda Rose, Pup Naranja, Han Schaible, Jack Terranova, Ethan Michelle Ganz, Alex Moon

REAL ESTATE

BEST ALLY REAL ESTATE AGENT

Jonathan Williamson-Compass Realty

Finalists: Hedley Karpas, Adalia Espinosa, Shelley Burt, Karen Derr

BEST FEMALE LGBTQ REAL ESTATE AGENT

Jessica Wahlquist

Finalists: Aubrie Layne, Julie Fischer, Debbie Levine, Monica Branch, Lucy Cockrum, Sabrina Calvillo, Katherine Abshire, Karen Derr

BEST MALE LGBTQ REAL ESTATE AGENT

Brooks Ballard

Finalists: Christopher Cerda, David Batagower, Thomas Phillips, Alex Meza, Jay Monroe, Cruz Sanchez, Jeremy Alvarado, Jeremy Fain, Dan DiDonato, Michael Brown-Compass Realty, Mike Copenhaver, Tim Surratt

BEST GALVESTON REALTOR

Hudson Holmes-Joe Tramonte Realty

Finalists: Brian Schwenk, David Bowers, Tom Schwenk, Jay Monroe

COMMUNITY REAL ESTATE ICON

Bill Baldwin

Finalists: Richard Ray, Jerry Blum, Jay Monroe, Hedley Karpas

RISING STAR REALTOR

Jeffery Huynh

Finalists: Alex Meza, Julian Hernandez, Nicholas Guidry

BEST HOME BUILDER

Jamestown Estates

Finalists: Heels 2 Hammers Construction, David Weekley Homes, Noble Contractor Solutions, Player Properties, Seaside Construction

BEST HOME REMODELING COMPANY

Texas Real Estate Rescue

Finalists: Heels 2 Hammers Construction, Best Surface Source, Inc., Noble Contractor Solutions

BEST MORTGAGE COMPANY

Robert Spiegel

Finalists: Riaz Pooran-Pilgrim Mortgage, Adam Buttermore Lender, Flagstone Financial Services, Pilgrim Mortgage

BEST TITLE COMPANY

Alamo Title Company

Finalists: Truly Title, Chicago Title, Riverway Title

BEST REAL ESTATE WEBSITE

HAR.com

Finalists: brooksballardproperties.com, TramonteRealty.com, Sothebysrealty.com

COMMUNITY

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

The Montrose Center

Finalists: Krewe of Olympus, National Leather Association-Houston, Bering Memorial United Church of Christ, The Diana Foundation, First Christian Church Katy, Tony's Place, Brazoria County Pride, Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, Houston Bears, AmistadesHTX by Legacy, Bunnies on the Bayou, ERSICSS, Legacy Community Health, Out at the Rodeo, Montrose Grace Place →

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ARTS

The Happening

The Orange Show's experimental arts showcase.

By BRETT CULLUM



The Happening at the Orange Show, a winner of the Best Performing Arts Organization honor, is one of the wildest and most difficult things to describe.

When asked what it is, the trans man who hosts and organizes The Happening, Andrew Whit, simply states, "It's an experimental and performance-art showcase that happens at the Orange Show the last Friday of every month, from January through October. It is actually the Orange Show's second-largest self-produced and funded event, second only to the Art Car experience."

Typically, they gather together six or seven different "acts," and the audience wanders around a warehouse or parts of the Orange Show on Munger Street, where anything can happen. You could see puppets, poets, musical acts, or anything else the performance-art rebels of Houston can dream up.

Whit says, "The Happening started in the Orange Show Monument itself, but that has been closed for the last year for renovation. This moved us into the Orange Show headquarters, which is a large pavilion-style warehouse located right behind the monument. We are in the second generation of the Happening, which was actually founded by Alex Lechin. Alex was a University of Houston student pursuing her Master of Arts degree, and she started volunteering at the Orange Show by helping with restoration work. She developed a relationship with them, and she had this vision for doing performance and experimental art."

If you are unfamiliar with The Orange Show, you are not alone. Uber drivers and Houstonians often have no idea what this folk museum and brightly colored tribute to kitsch is, but The Happening has put the place firmly on the map with its monthly shows. Whit muses, "We're on our 32nd show now, so when you

FAVORITE
PERFORMANCE
ART CREATOR:
ANDREW WHIT

BEST
PERFORMING
ARTS ORGANI-
ZATION

multiply the math out, and you think about how many artists and how many audience members came to the Orange Show for their first time through the doors of The Happening as an active program, that's really something very special. The Orange Show is really blossoming. It's like a big orange blossom now!"

When asked how he describes his role, Whit responds, "Now I work as the creative director, which I absolutely love. I've been doing it for over a year now, and it's amazing to get to collaborate with so many artists each month. I also usually host the event. In the past, The Happening would have rotating hosts. But in an effort to allocate more of the budget for the performing artists, I took on the hosting position myself."

The Happening is a unique experience every time. "No two Happenings are ever the same," says Whit with a shrug. "To describe The Happening as one event would be really hard, but I can give you an example of what a recent Happening was like. We had a witch's circle, and then a photo shoot. There was an album release, and then a cardboard puppet show! Then we had Dr. Aisen, who is an experimental artist and also a medical doctor who designs medical equipment, get up on stage and play experimental music. In between songs, she pulled out a syringe and injected these two pearls with something that was unknown to the audience. Then at the end of the show, we found out that she had married two female eggs together and inseminated them. You can bring people in for kind of a surprise experience—they're there for one thing, but then they can be introduced to another."

Contemplating how The Happening has become so much a part of the fabric of the community, Whit says, "Art is queer. It's strange in nature; strange people do it. Think about the kind of person who would make a cardboard puppet show and spend time doing that! I would never go so far as to say that you have to be queer to be an artist, but it helps. It's a historically safe environment. It's always artists and queers together. Whatever you want to think about art history, they've always been married together. The Happening wasn't conceptualized as a queer event, and it's not marketed as a queer event. It's just a byproduct of who's reaching out and who the movers and shakers are right now in our cultural landscape."

The Happening at The Orange Show is definitely happening, and it's certainly one of our Gayest & Greatest events!

 For more information,
visit orangeshow.org/thehappening

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SCAN FOR
LISTINGS

HEALTH & BEAUTY

Duewa “Kaya” Spicer

Infinite Zen Therapy focuses on queer empowerment.

By BRANDON WOLF



Duewa “Kaya” Spicer, 51, who identifies as queer and nonbinary, is a licensed clinical social worker and certified sex therapist who founded Infinite Zen Therapy in 2018. Spicer’s boutique practice is dedicated to honoring the complexities of human experiences, particularly those that are frequently ignored or stigmatized. Their therapeutic philosophy focuses on examining areas such as desire, loneliness, and personal boundaries, thereby fostering opportunities for meaningful self-awareness and transformative growth.

Infinite Zen Therapy is inspired by the concept of Zen, with an emphasis on finding peace amid life’s chaos. As a queer nonbinary individual, Spicer is acutely aware of the need to cultivate tranquility, especially in today’s dark environments that feel hostile and unsafe. They advocate for embracing vitality and joy, which might mean attending a sex party, sharing intimacy, or engaging in self-pleasure. This inclusive perspective is reflected in Infinite Zen’s commitment to celebrating erotic energy, kink, non-monogamy, and the diverse spectrum of human identity and relationships.

Spicer’s approach is rooted in the belief that no one is broken; instead, everyone is continually becoming. They view therapy as a process of reclaiming pleasure, freedom, and a belief in one’s wholeness. They aim to provide a shame-free, pleasure-centered space that is rich in inclusivity. They welcome gender, erotic, and relational diversity. Clients are encouraged to be curious, explore what feels good, and heal from past wounds by reconnecting with their bodies and communities as sources of joy.

Central to Spicer’s work is helping people understand the intersections of desire, pleasure, identity, and relationships. They pride themselves on slowing down the therapeutic process, allowing clients room to reflect,



process, and grow. Spicer acts as a guide rather than a “healer” by helping clients navigate their beliefs and narratives surrounding sexuality, intimacy, sexual function, and pleasure. Many clients experience deep emotional releases, realizing their identities and desires are valid and worthy of acceptance. Spicer normalizes these experiences, helping clients embrace their sexuality and the happiness that comes from connecting with their bodies.

Spicer also focuses on demystifying and destigmatizing sexual interests and fantasies. When clients share unconventional desires—such as wanting to embody a puppy—Spicer responds with acceptance and reassurance, reminding them that these feelings are not unusual. This affirming approach helps clients feel seen and understood, fostering a sense of belonging and permission to explore their authentic selves.

Spicer’s journey into sex therapy was inspired by childhood experiences, notably the influence of Dr. Ruth Westheimer, a sweet television personality known for her candid and accepting discussions about sex. This openness contrasts sharply with Spicer’s upbringing in a conservative Sunni Muslim household where sexuality was rarely discussed. Motivated by Dr. Ruth’s example, Spicer became a frequent library visitor, exploring books about

sex, anatomy, and psychology—a pursuit they kept secret from their mother.

Identifying as a tomboy from a young age, Spicer challenged traditional gender norms, preferring activities like climbing trees and playing with bugs. After leaving home at 17 and coming out as queer at 19, Spicer found community in local gay bars and gradually developed a deeper understanding of their gender identity, coming out as nonbinary at 43.

Spicer believes life is a continuous journey of becoming, with each individual constantly evolving. This perspective shapes Infinite Zen Therapy’s therapeutic approach and its supportive environment.

On World Mental Health Day, October 10, Spicer uses social media to remind people they are not alone, and to promote self-care. They emphasize the importance of reconnecting with friends, family, and community, as well as encouraging the pursuit of pleasure in everyday moments. Spicer likens this to savoring ice cream—fully experiencing its flavors and sensations—and urges clients to embrace these “mmm” moments as often as possible, highlighting the value of slowing down and cherishing simple joys.

For more information, visit infinitezentherapy.com/about

FAVORITE LGBTQ PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATION

The Diana Foundation

Finalists: Krewe of Olympus, Bunnies on the Bayou, Houston Bears

BEST COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

University of Houston

Finalists: Rice University, Sam Houston State University, Texas Southern University, University of Texas-Austin

BEST COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Houston Community College

Finalists: Lone Star College-Houston North, Alvin Community College, San Jacinto College

BEST COMMUNITY IMPACT TECHNOLOGY PARTNER

Premier Wireless

Finalists: Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Comcast

BEST LOCAL LGBTQ NEWS SOURCE

OutSmart Magazine

Finalist: Montrose Star

BEST LOCAL LGBTQ ONLINE RESOURCE

OutSmart Magazine

Finalists: First Christian Church Katy, JD Doyle Archives, Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce

BEST NATIONAL LGBTQ NEWS SOURCE

The Advocate

Finalists: Out, Queerty, Rachel Maddow

BEST NATIONAL LGBTQ ONLINE RESOURCE

The Trevor Project

Finalists: JD Doyle Archives, Equality Texas Foundation

FAVORITE MEDIA ALLY

Houston Public Media (PBS/NPR)

Finalists: KHOU 11 News, Houston Chronicle, Houston Press, ABC13 News Houston, Free Press Houston

BEST POLITICAL ADVOCACY GROUP

Trans Education Network of Texas (TENT)

Finalists: First Christian Church Katy, The Montrose Center, Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus, ACLU of Texas, Equality Texas Foundation, Lambda Legal,

BEST SENIOR ADVOCACY GROUP

LOAF (Lesbians Over Age Fifty)

Finalists: AARP, The Law Harrington Senior Living Center

FAVORITE COMMUNITY & ALLY LAW FIRM

Katine Nechman McLaurin LLP

Finalists: Boudreaux & Hunter & Associates LLC, Law Office of Trey Yates

FAVORITE CORPORATE SUPPORTER

IN HIV & COMMUNITY WELLNESS

ViiV Healthcare

Finalists: Gilead Sciences, PURE for Men, MISTR

FAVORITE CORPORATE SUPPORTER

IN MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS EQUITY

Menninger Clinic

Finalists: MAC Cosmetics, Methodist Hospital

FAVORITE FOUNDATION PARTNER

FOR HOUSTON'S LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Houston Endowment

Finalists: H-E-B Community Giving, Texas Impact Funds, Kinder Foundation →



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DRINKS & SPIRITS

Chanel Chowdhury

The former sports-bar server finds queer community behind the bar at Pearl.

By CONNOR BEHRENS



Chanel Chowdhury never expected bartending to become her passion. Years ago, she was just a server at a sports bar, not yet knowing that bartending would soon change her life.

"Eventually, I was trained to bartend," she says. "I immediately fell in love with it. It made me more social, and I loved getting to discover all kinds of fun cocktails I could make. I'm very passionate about helping people find their new go-to drink."

But it wasn't just the drinks. It was the people, the connections, the way she came out of her shell one shot at a time. That journey

led her to Pearl Bar, one of the last remaining lesbian bars in Texas.

"Even before I worked here, Pearl was a safe space for me," she says.

Chowdhury was recently crowned Favorite Female Bartender in OutSmart's 2025 Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards. She explains that the award couldn't have happened without the support of her team at Pearl.

"I'm so grateful for this award," she says. "And shoutout to the best boss, Julie Mabry, for creating such a welcoming space. This is honestly such an amazing validation. It really healed that inner queer child inside of me. Young Chanel would be so proud. I am so

unapologetically queer, and I'm so grateful for this award!"

At Pearl, Chowdhury has become part of the bar's heartbeat, helping to keep its legacy alive while pouring shots and shaking drinks. "We deserve more lesbian bars in the US," she says, "but I'm so grateful Pearl is surviving and thriving."

Chowdhury's passion for community is just as strong as her love for mixology. On Wednesday nights, the bar comes alive with drag-king shows, a personal favorite of hers. The themes change weekly—from nostalgic '90s nights to spooky horror themes—and Chowdhury curates themed drink menus to match.

"It's such a blast," she says. "We put on a hell of a show every Wednesday!"

Then on Thursdays? A whole different kind of magic.

"Julie, our amazing owner, makes a hell of a steak for Steak Night," Chowdhury says. "And then there's *free* drag bingo and, yes, dildo races. It's wild. You've gotta come see it for yourself!"

But it's not all laughs, games, and cocktails. For Chowdhury, bartending is also about connection. One night, she met a fellow "desi" (South Asian) lesbian at the bar. "We started chatting about life and what it was like growing up lesbian and Muslim," she says. "I told her it had been years since I'd had a homemade Bengali or Indian meal."

A few weeks later, that same woman brought her a plate of home-cooked food. "It was such a sweet moment, and it was delicious," Chowdhury says.

Outside the bar, Chowdhury is just as vibrant. Her house regularly hosts intense board game nights with friends who take competition as seriously as she does. "We can go for hours," she says.

She also loves reading, true-crime shows, anything a little spooky, and camping. "I keep a tent in my trunk at all times, just in case!" she says. Clearly the kind of person who is always ready for adventure.

Chowdhury's love for her community doesn't stop at the bar. She actively supports organizations like The Trevor Project, Tony's Place, The Montrose Center, and DeQH (Desi Queer Helpline).

As for the future? Chowdhury says she will continue being unapologetically herself and helping keep the spirit of Pearl alive.

"Long live Pearl Bar," she concludes. "And here's to hoping for more lesbian bars to open across Texas and the US. If you haven't been to Pearl yet, come by. We'll make you feel right at home."

For more info, visit pearlhouston.com.

FAVORITE HEALTH EQUITY CHAMPION AND CORPORATE SUPPORTER

Gilead Sciences

Finalists: Texas Pride Impact Funds, Kinder Foundation, Moody Foundation, ViVi Healthcare, Wells Fargo

FAVORITE HOSPITAL SUPPORTER FOR THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Houston Methodist

Finalists: Memorial Hermann Health System, Harris Health System, MD Anderson Cancer Center, HCA Houston Healthcare

FAVORITE HIV/AIDS SUPPORT ORGANIZATION

AIDS Healthcare Foundation (tie)

Legacy Community Health (tie)

Finalists: Avenue 360 Health and Wellness, PWA Holiday Charities, The Montrose Center, Allies in Hope, ACCT, AmistadesHTX by Legacy, Wellness Bar by Legacy

FAVORITE HOUSTON CORPORATE LGBTQ DIVERSITY GROUP

Amegy Bank LGBTQ BRG & Allies

Finalists: HP, Emerson Automation Solutions, Rice University Pride Professional Network Committee, United Airlines, AIG Pride

FAVORITE LGBTQ (NON-BENEFIT) EVENT OF THE YEAR

Halloween Fantasy Ball

Finalists: NLA-Spring Iniquity, Katy Pride Birthday Party, Pride In Business Awards-Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber, AmistadesHTX by Legacy Anniversary Event, Brazoria County Pride, Transparent Closet-FCC Katy

FAVORITE LGBTQ BENEFIT EVENT OF THE YEAR

Bunnies on the Bayou

Finalists: Montrose Center Pride Brunch, Krewe of Olympus Ball, The Diana Awards, FCC Katy Transparent Closet Drag Bingo, NLA-Spring Iniquity, Brazoria County Pride's Project Love Gala, ERSICSS Coronation, Pride In Business Awards, Trot 4 Trans Visibility, Out for Good Gala (Montrose Center), Red Dinner Gala-UH LGBTQ Alumni Association

FAVORITE LGBTQ SOCIAL GROUP

Krewe of Olympus

Finalists: The Diana Foundation, National Leather Association-Houston, First Christian Church Katy, Houston Bears, EPAH, AmistadesHTX by Legacy, UH LGTBQ+ Alumni Association, Trans & GenderQueer Houston (TGQH), Out at the Rodeo

FAVORITE LGBTQ SPORTS CLUB OR LEAGUE

Stonewall Sports

Finalists: Space City Pride FC, Space City Rugby, Montrose Softball League Association, Pride Sports, Lonestar Volleyball Association

FAVORITE PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAM

Houston Astros

Finalists: Houston Dash, Houston Rockets, Sugar Land Space Cowboys, Houston Dynamo, LOVB Houston Volleyball

FAVORITE NATIONAL LGBTQ ORGANIZATION

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Finalists: National Leather Association-Houston, Human Rights Campaign, Lambda Legal, LGBTQ Victory Fund, The Trevor Project, The Diana Foundation, Transgender Law Center

FAVORITE PLACE TO WORSHIP

Bering Memorial United Church of Christ

Finalists: First Christian Church Katy, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Resurrection MCC, St. Peter United Church of Christ, Unity of Houston, St Paul's United Methodist Church, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Houston-Museum District Campus

FAVORITE TRANS SUPPORT ORGANIZATION

Trans Legal Aid Clinic Texas

Finalists: Transparent Closet-FCC Katy, TENT, The Montrose Center, The Mahogany Project, Parents of Trans Youth, Save Our Sisters United

MOST SUPPORTIVE CHAMPION LAW FIRM FOR EQUALITY

Vinson & Elkins

Finalists: Haynes and Boone, Kirkland & Ellis LLP, Norton Rose Fulbright, Katine Nechman McLaurin LLP

LOCAL BUSINESS MOST SUPPORTIVE OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Frost Town Brewing

Finalists: DragSpace, Sesh Coworking, Like Minds Communications, BB's Tex-Orleans, The Feisty Collective

NATIONAL BUSINESS MOST SUPPORTIVE OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

Penzeys Spices

Finalists: Shell USA, Silver Eagle Distributors, Lush Cosmetics, Service Corporation International →

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DINING OUT

FAVORITE NEW RESTAURANT

City Cellars HTX

Finalists: Travelers Cart, The Kennedy, Baso, Jane and the Lion Bakehouse, Montrose Country Club

FAVORITE 24-HOUR RESTAURANT

Katz's Deli

Finalists: House of Pies, Poppa Burger, Dot Coffee Shop

FAVORITE BAGEL SHOP

New York Deli & Bagels

Finalists: Hot Bagel Shop, Jeff's Bagel Run

FAVORITE BAKERY

Dessert Gallery Bakery & Cafe

Finalists: Cinnamaniac, Paige's Wee Bakery, Sweets by Syd, Koffeteria, Fluff Bake Bar, Sinfull Bakery, Leona's Bakeshop, Three Brothers Bakery

FAVORITE COFFEE SHOP

Cavo Coffee

Finalists: Forth & Nomad, Slowpokes, Black Hole Coffee House, CasaEma, Antidote, The Doshi House, Bohemeo's, Siphon Coffee, Koffeteria

FAVORITE COFFEE & COCKTAIL BAR

Maven Coffee + Cocktails

FAVORITE COFFEE ROASTER

Cleo Roasting Co.

Finalists: Amanecer Co. - Marlen Mendoza, New Heights Coffee Roasters, XELA Coffee Roasters, Slowpokes, CasaEma, Un Caffe

FAVORITE BARBECUE

The Pit Room

Finalists: Killen's, Willow's Smokehouse & Tavern, Truth BBQ, Brookstreet BBQ, Pinkerton's Barbecue, Gatlin's BBQ

FAVORITE BARISTA

Greg Deal

Finalists: Peter Bui, Dalton-Xela, Rosie Lucio, Felix Guerrero-The Kennedy

FAVORITE BREAKFAST SPOT

Baby Barnaby's

Finalists: The Phoenix, New York Deli & Bagels, CasaEma, Kojak's, Mo' Brunch+Brews

FAVORITE BRITISH

Red Lion British Pub

Finalists: The Phoenix on Westheimer, Rudyard's

FAVORITE BRUNCH

The Phoenix

Finalists: City Cellars HTX, New York Deli & Bagels, Bar Boheme, CasaEma, Koffeteria, Churrasco's, Gloria's Latin Cuisine, The Kennedy

FAVORITE CAJUN

BB's Tex-Orleans

Finalists: Lotus Seafood, Ragin' Cajun, Eugene's, Eunice, Kiss

FAVORITE CENTRAL/SOUTH AMERICAN

Gloria's Latin Cuisine

Finalists: Churrasco's, CasaEma, Flor Y Miel, La Fogata Restaurant, Alora

FAVORITE CHINESE

The Rice Box

Finalists: Cooking Girl, Ambassador Chinese Restaurant, Auntie Chang's Dumpling House, Mala Sichuan Bistro, Heights Asian Cafe

FAVORITE COOKING CLASS

Cooking with Chef Tae

Finalist: Well Done

FAVORITE CUBAN

El Rey Taqueria

Finalists: ZZ Taco, El Meson

FAVORITE DELI

Kenny & Ziggy's New York Delicatessen

Finalists: New York Deli & Bagels, Nielsen's Deli, Ploughman's Deli & Cafe →

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Crofoot MD Clinic and Research Center – Winner

Best Pharmacist

Gulnar Shahid – Finalist

Best Pharmacy

Walgreens Pharmacy at Crofoot MD – Finalist

Best Male Physician's Assistant

John Chapman – Winner

Best Male Nurse Practitioner

Derek Smith – Winner

Best Female Nurse Practitioner

Tatianna Mai – Winner

Best Male Nurse Practitioner

Kendrick Clack – Finalist

Best Female Physician

Dr. Maya Halliburton – Finalist

Best Male Nurse

Bert Zumaya – Finalist

Best Male Nurse

Adam Sirico – Finalist



DINING OUT

Cleo Roasting Co. and Cavo Coffee

Vivian Nguyen and William De Lorenzo's business is a West University staple.

By DAVID CLARKE



Houston's coffee lovers have been buzzing over Cleo Roasting Co. and its sister café, Cavo Coffee, crowning them as the winner of Favorite Coffee Roaster and Favorite Coffee Shop, respectively, in 2025's Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards. At the heart of both victories is a shared mission of making coffee about building a community, and not just providing our daily caffeine fix.

For Cleo Roasting's head roaster Vivian Nguyen, better known as Vi (they/them), coffee is both a craft and a calling. "I source my coffee seasonally, making sure that everything is in season and fresh. As the head roaster, my role involves sourcing and profiling the green coffee, which means creating the roasting profiles for espresso, filter coffee, and single-origin coffees," Vi explains. "Also, I host cuppings, or tastings.

"Then I lead my team in doing the production roasting, so we're turning green coffee brown and highlighting the characteristics of the coffee itself."

Founded in 2018, Cleo has become a West University neighborhood fixture. "We are a local roasting company on Bissonnet at Kirby," Vi shares. "We're very community-oriented. We are a big staple in West University, and we are just here to serve our community coffee, waking up our neighborhood one cup at a time."

That sense of responsibility extends to sourcing practices, which purposefully depend heavily on women producers. "I believe that women coffee producers need to be highlighted," Vi emphasizes. "Our industry is male dominated, from producers all the way down the chain to being a barista. I don't know many roasters here in Houston, or at all, who aren't men. There's so much hard work that goes into growing coffee, and I think it's important to share the love. All of the money that we invest in our green coffees makes a huge impact, all the way back to the countries of origin."

Cleo's commitment to sustainability also sets them apart. "Our product comes in renewable packaging," Vi says. "Our retail bottles can be returned empty for a dollar off the next

bottle of coffee. It is something that is important to us, as we don't want to put more waste in this world than what we are already doing."

Next door at Cavo Coffee, general manager William De Lorenzo sees the connection between Cleo's ethical roasting and the café's mission of community care. "Probably about 90% of our staff are in the LGBTQ community," he notes. "We really focus on making it obvious that we are a safe place for queer people. We have Pride flags hanging around the shop, and we're all pretty queer. We host events for queer people."

Recognition from *OutSmart* readers left William in shock. "It means that we are doing the right thing and we're visible to the people who it's important for us to be visible to. I feel like we're a little blip on the radar in Houston coffee. There's so many great coffee shops, and I don't really know of any other queer-run ones, honestly. But it tells us that we're headed in the right direction."

For customers, the connection between Cavo and Cleo is tangible. "Our clients really like that they can literally turn their head to the left from the register and see where their coffee is coming from," William said. "They like that they can watch it being produced, and they like that it's traveling just 15 feet to get into their hands."

Both Vi and William see these *Gayest & Greatest* honors not as accolades, but as affirmations of their deeper mission. "I want to put us out there as a safe space for queers to gather, to enjoy a good-ass cup of coffee, and just to turn off for five seconds," Vi says.

William echoes that sentiment. "Cavo is an extension of our living room, basically, and we treat it like that. Everybody is welcome here," he adds. "We have sat while guests cried on our shoulders because of big life events. We don't make the business the forefront. It is about the community connection and the community involvement, and making sure that the people on the other side of the counter don't feel like they're just a wallet."

In Houston's ever-growing coffee landscape, Cleo Roasting Co. and Cavo Coffee stand out not just for what's in the cup, but for the care behind every pour.

 For more info, visit cleoroasting.com and cavocoffee.com.



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**OutSmart
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2025 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS
WINNER!**

Best Female Immigration Attorney

FAVORITE DESSERT

Dessert Gallery Bakery & Cafe

Finalists: Cinnamaniac, Sweets by Syd, The Bake Happening, Fluff Bake Bar, Michael's Cookie Jar, Leona's Bakeshop, Cake Fine Pastry, Eazy As Pie Bakery

FAVORITE DUMPLINGS

The Rice Box

Finalists: Auntie Chang's Dumpling House, Wanna Bao, Dough Zone Dumpling House-Houston Midtown

FAVORITE FOOD TRUCK

Umbrella Fellas

Finalists: Pixi Dust, Tacos Laguna, Best Street Tacos, Think Tacos, Tasty Arepa

FAVORITE HAMBURGER

The Burger Joint

Finalists: Burger Bodega, Lankford's Grocery & Market, Champ Burger, Moon Tower Inn, Boo's Burgers, The Toasted Coconut, The Kennedy, Umbrella Fellas

FAVORITE HOT DOG

The Burger Joint

Finalists: Umbrella Fellas, Moon Tower Inn, YoYo's Hotdog, Barnaby's Cafe

FAVORITE GREEK

Niko Niko's

Finalists: Aladdin Mediterranean Cuisine, Ekkos Deli, AL Quick Stop

FAVORITE INDIAN

Cowboys and Indians Indian-Tex Fusion and Cocktails

Finalists: Pondicheri, Aga's Restaurant & Catering, Musaafer

FAVORITE ITALIAN

Riva's

Finalists: giacomo's cibo e vino, The Spaghetti Western, Carraba's, Mimo, Maggiano's, Marmo, Bollo Woodfired Pizza

FAVORITE JAPANESE

Ninja Ramen

Finalists: Oishii, Uchi, Kata Robata, Izakaya Wa, Osaka Japanese Restaurant

FAVORITE SUSHI

Kata Robata

Finalists: Uchi, Hando, Oishii, Handies Douzo, Katami

FAVORITE MEXICAN

Tacos Doña Lena

Finalists: Alma Latina, Candente, Chapultepec Lupita, Original Ninfa's on Navigation, La Mexicana, Cochinita & Co., El Tiempo Cantina-Westheimer, Spanish Flowers, CasaEma, Pappasito's Cantina, Teotihuacan Mexican Cafe, Hugo's, La Tapatio Mexican Cafe

FAVORITE MIDDLE EASTERN/MEDITERRANEAN

Aladdin Mediterranean Cuisine

Finalists: Amir's Pop-Up Kitchen, Aga's, Fadi's, Dimassi's Mediterranean Buffet, Rumi's Kitchen, Kasra Persian Grill

FAVORITE LGBTQ CATERER

210 Fusion Cuisine

Finalists: Chef Victoria Island Hop Catering, Event Elementz, David Alcorta/Churrasco's, Dessert Gallery Bakery & Cafe

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ CHEF

NaTosha Chef Tae Barber

Finalists: Monica Pope, Luis Chen, Adriana Maldonado-The Kennedy, Gregory Montelaro, Diego Chiarello, Henry Lu

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ-OWNED RESTAURANT

Tacos Doña Lena

Finalists: Koffeteria, Salt & Sugar, Barnaby's Cafe, The Kennedy, The Montrose Country Club

FAVORITE LUNCH SPOT

Tacos Doña Lena

Finalists: Barnaby's Cafe, ALMA Latina in the Heights, CasaEma, ChopnBlok, Paulie's, Cafe Brasil, New York Bagel, Moon Tower Inn, Aladdin Mediterranean Cuisine

FAVORITE TEA

McHugh Tea Room

Finalists: Mai's Restaurant, Fuji Tea, Mercantile, Ten Yen Tea & Herbs, path of tea

FAVORITE PIZZA

Star Pizza

Finalists: Bambolinos, Nonno's, Tiny Champions, Luna Pizzeria, Pizza Birra Vino, Romano's Pizza, Gristworkz

FAVORITE PLACE FOR A ROMANTIC DATE

Nobie's

Finalists: The Kennedy, Tiny Champions, Baso, Mimo, Plume, The Post Oak Hotel

FAVORITE RESTAURANT FOR A FOOD HAPPY HOUR

Postino Montrose

Finalists: The Montrose Country Club, Tiny Champions, Winnie's, Federal Grill, Jethro's Cocktail Lounge, Marmo

FAVORITE RESTAURANT FOR AFFORDABLE EATS

Tacos Doña Lena

Finalists: Barnaby's Cafe-Fairview, Alma Latina, Tacos A Go Go, Cantina Barba, Cali Sandwich & Pho, Auntie Chang's Dumpling House

FAVORITE RESTAURANT FOR ELEGANT DINING

Brennan's of Houston

Finalists: Nancy's Hustle, The Kennedy, Baso, Bludorn, Morton's, Tony's

FAVORITE RESTAURANT FOR OUTDOOR DINING

City Cellars HTX

Finalists: Southern Yankee Crafthouse, Moon Tower Inn, Elliott's Table, Brennan's of Houston, Verde Garden, Betsy's at Evelyn's Park

FAVORITE THAI

Street to Kitchen

Finalists: Nidda Thai Cuisine, Street Food Thai Market, Khun Kay, Rim Tanon, Kin Dee, NUA Thai, Thai Bistro, Thai Tail

FAVORITE STEAK HOUSE

Morton's

Finalists: Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar, Brenner's on the Bayou, Saltgrass Steak House, Pappas Bros. Steakhouse, Steak 48, Hillstone (Houston's on Kirby), Ruth's Chris Steak House, Churrascos, Chama Gaúcha Brazilian Steakhouse

FAVORITE SEAFOOD

Field & Tides

Finalists: Truluck's, Little's Oyster Bar, Clark's, Brennan's of Houston, Connie's Seafood, Eugene's, Kiss, Voodoo Queen Daiquiri Dive, Goode Company Seafood

FAVORITE STEAK NIGHT AT A BAR/CATERING

Ryan Grimes-Knives in Water

Finalists: Pearl Bar, JR's Bar & Grill-Chef Gregory Montelaro, Bobcat Teddy's Icehouse, Pimlico

FAVORITE VEGETARIAN/VEGAN

Hobbit Cafe

Finalists: Korny Vibes, Mo' Brunch + Brews, Somas Semillas, green seed vegan, Ginger Mule, Trendy Vegan

FAVORITE VIETNAMESE

Mai's Restaurant

Finalists: Huynh Restaurant, Cali Sandwich & Pho, Miss Saigon Cafe, Moon Rabbit, Lua Viet Kitchen, Simply Pho, Oui Banh Mi, Pho Saigon

FRIENDLIEST RESTAURANT STAFF

ALMA Latina in the Heights

Finalists: Barnaby's Cafe, Rivas, Nobie's, Baby Barnaby's, Baso, Tacos Doña Lena, Kiss, The Montrose Country Club

DRINKS & SPIRITS

BEST COCKTAIL

Ripcord

Finalists: South Beach Houston, Two Headed Dog, Cecil's Pub, Pearl Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket, JR's Bar & Grill, Anvil Bar, George Your Country Sports Bar, Catbirds, Michael's Outpost, The Kennedy

BEST BAR FOR MOCKTAILS

JR's Bar & Grill

Finalists: Pearl Bar, Anvil Bar, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, Two Headed Dog, The Montrose Country Club, Axelrad Beer Garden, Plume

BEST HAPPY HOUR

Ripcord

Finalists: JR's Bar & Grill, Cecil's Pub, Pearl Bar, Tony's Corner Pocket, George Country Sports Bar, Michael's Outpost, Little Danny's Go Fly a Kite

BEST MARGARITA

Ripcord

Finalists: Alma Latina, La Tapatia Mexican Cafe, JR's Bar & Grill, Pearl Bar, Cecil's Pub, Spanish Flowers, El Tiempo Cantina, La Mexicana, Michael's Outpost, Two Headed Dog, Verde Garden, Pico's, Plume, The Flat

BEST BLOODY MARY

George Country Sports Bar

(Gary Mears on Sundays)

BEST NON-ALCOHOLIC BEER & SELTZER SELECTION

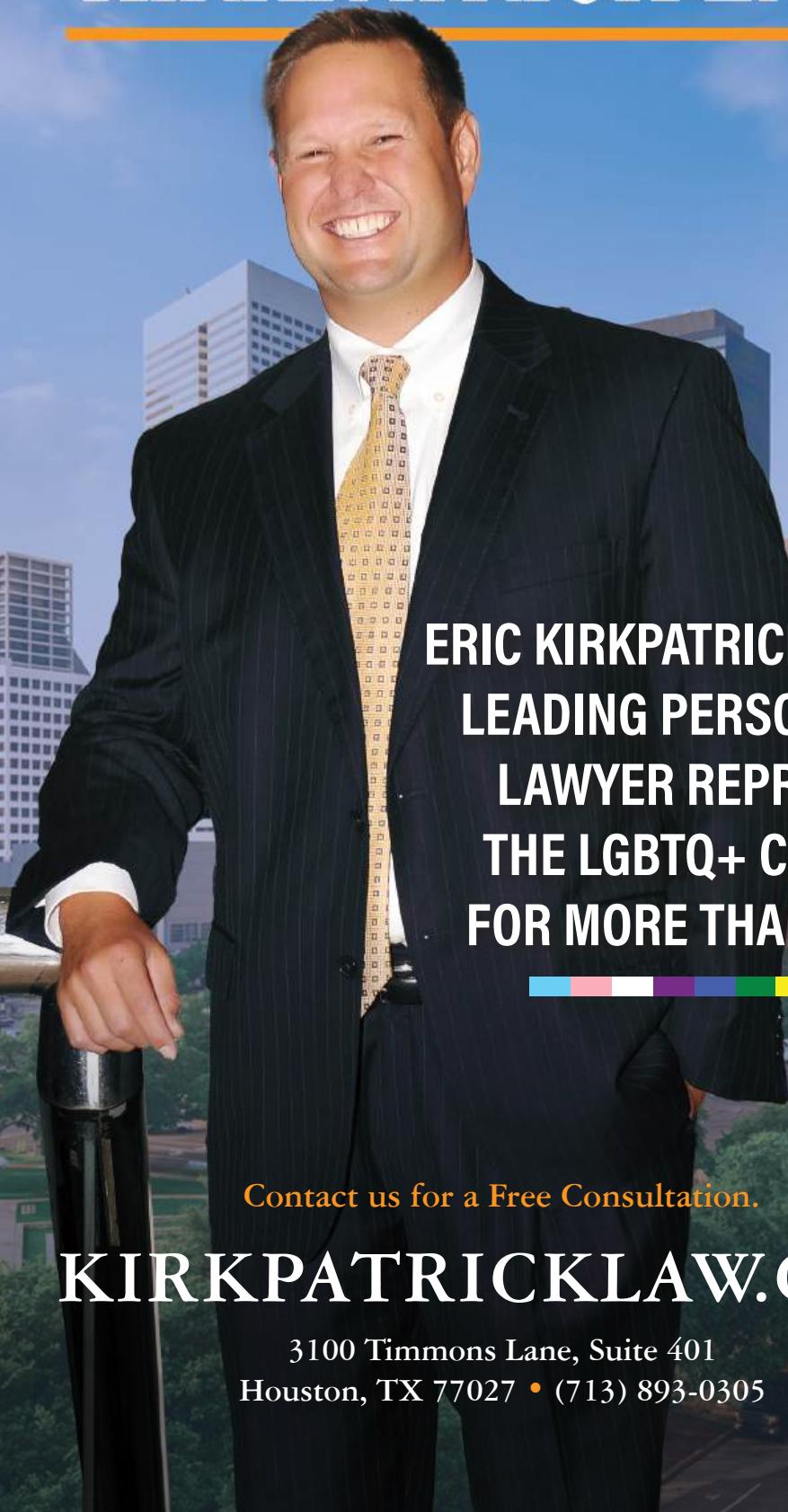
West Alabama Ice House

Finalists: JR's Bar & Grill, Birdie's Den, Neon Boots Dancehall & Saloon, Plume, Montrose Country Club →

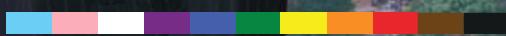
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DINING OUT

City Cellars HTX

Daniel Wolfe's East End restaurant features a prime skyline view.

By KAREN LOVELADY



Executive chef Antonette Wright



In the vibrant culinary landscape of Houston's East End, City Cellars HTX is celebrating being named the Favorite New Restaurant and Favorite Restaurant for Outdoor Dining by *OutSmart* readers in this year's Reader's Choice Awards. The restaurant also secured a finalist spot for Favorite Brunch, solidifying its reputation as a must-visit dining destination.

For owner Daniel Wolfe, the restaurant's location near Buffalo Bayou is the perfect backdrop for its success. "I first created the concept of City Cellars without knowing how everything would come together. The name, the scenery, the location—you couldn't ask for a better home run," Wolfe says. He literally stumbled upon the spot that would become their new home by dropping a map pin on a vacant lot and telling his broker, "Hey, figure out who to get in touch with. I want a tour."

The new location offered not only a stunning skyline view (which executive chef Antonette Wright calls her favorite part of the job), but also the flexibility to build a custom kitchen. "We designed the kitchen the way we wanted, instead of having to retrofit," Wolfe explains. This meticulous planning ensured consistency for a team that is dedicated to serving food that will "taste the same every single time," regardless of who is in the kitchen.

At the heart of City Cellars HTX is a commitment to scratch-cooking and robust flavor, a philosophy that Chef Wright traces back to her childhood. She started cooking as a child, learning by feel from her mother and grandmother, whose signature dish was lemon meringue pie. That family favorite is still a work in progress in the City Cellars kitchen.

Today, Chef Wright describes her culinary vision as a blend of "Cajun Southern brunch with a couple of worldly touches from my travels" and a steadfast commitment to quality. "If she wouldn't serve it to her mama, she's not going to put her out on a plate that comes out here," Wolfe proudly notes.

"I like to joke around and say the only thing we don't make here is the mayo and ketchup," Chef Wright says, estimating that the kitchen is about 85% scratch in order to deliver a superior dining experience.

The brunch menu is a particular standout, with items like their massive Brunch Charcuterie Board. "It's a massive board, 46 inches by about 14 inches wide. It's designed to turn your head when you see it come out of the kitchen," says Wright, noting that it takes two servers to carry it to the tables.

Wright, who has a degree in hotel and restaurant management and culinary arts training from HCC, takes pride in her unique creations. She took six months to perfect the recipe for the bourbon bacon jam on their beef

and bacon sliders, and she loves to cook with alcohol when making creations like the rum glaze on her jerk salmon.

For Wolfe and Wright, the Reader's Choice awards are a sign that their efforts to support the community are being recognized.

"Personally, it's my first time getting an award like this. Being a part of the community and being recognized as a member of the community, it touched my heart a little bit," Wright shares. "Professionally, I feel like it's very important. I know we're going to reach a lot of people in the community. Working with Daniel, who is an ally of the LGBTQ community, is really nice. Everybody here is free to be themselves."

Wolfe sees supporting the community as a foundation of the City Cellars business model. "Small business owners are the backbone of a community," he states, pointing to the restaurant's policy of supporting various LGBTQ causes. They have also received a Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce GrubHub grant for two years in a row.

"I think that for business owners, highlighting the community is often a talking point. But actually walking the walk is what I really try to focus on. We're going to walk the walk, and this award is just the proof of the pudding. That's what we say, and we mean it."



For more info, visit citycellarshtx.com.

FAVORITE
RESTAURANT
FOR OUTDOOR
DINING

FAVORITE
NEW
RESTAURANT

FAVORITE BRAND OF LIQUOR

Tito's

Finalists: Jeppson's Malört, Campari, Becherovka, Fireball

FAVORITE LOCAL BREWERY

Frost Town Brewing

Finalists: Bad Astronaut, Saint Arnold Brewing Company, Eureka Heights Brew Co., Gristworkz, Equal Parts Brewing, No Label Brewing Co., Under the Radar Brewery

FAVORITE LOCAL CRAFT BEER, CIDER, OR SELTZER

Frost Town Brewing

Finalists: Bad Astronaut, Eureka Heights Brew Co., Moon Tower Inn, City Orchard, Gristworkz, 8th Wonder Brewery, True Anomaly Brewing Company, Under the Radar Brewery

FAVORITE NATIONAL BRAND OF BEER, CIDER, OR SELTZER

High Noon

Finalists: NUTRL, Bud Light, White Claw

FAVORITE FEMALE BARTENDER

Chanel Chowdhury-Pearl Bar

Finalists: Holly Whitaker-Cecil's Pub, Kayla Davidson-Frost Town Brewing, Brooke Lightfoot-Two Headed Dog, Jysselle Trevino-Crocker Bar, Brittany Blackwell-Bar 5015, Crystal Murley-George Your Country Sports Bar, Mary-JR's Bar & Grill, Krissy Kris-Rich's Houston, Kiana-Plume

FAVORITE NONBINARY BARTENDER

Joshua Chipley

Finalists: Rowan Blair, Nick Robinson-South Beach, Mauricio Wright-South Beach

FAVORITE MALE BARTENDER

Brian Duhon-South Beach

Finalists: Joseph-Ripcord, Tony Delmoe-Frost Town Brewing, Nick Robinson-South Beach, Wilbert Williams-Birdie's Den, Mykey Whitney-Tony's Corner Pocket

FAVORITE PLACE FOR DRINKS ON A FIRST DATE

Ripcord

Finalists: Cecil's Pub, Pearl Bar, Bar Boheme, Alma Latina, George Your Country Sports Bar, The Montrose Country Club, JR's Bar & Grill, Barcelona, Postino Montrose, 13 celsius, Camerata, Cecil's Pub, Postino Heights

FAVORITE WINE BAR

JR's Bar & Grill

Barcelona, Postino Montrose, 13 celsius, Camerata, Cecil's Pub, Postino Heights

BEST DIVE BAR

Lei Lo

Finalists: Two Headed Dog, Little Dannie's Go Fly a Kite, Grand Prize Bar, Poison Girl, Sassafras, PI's Sports Bar, Trash Panda Drinking Club

BEST BAR FOOD

Piggy's

Finalists: JR's Bar & Grill, Voodoo Queen

DRINKS & SPIRITS NOMINEE YOU'D LIKE TO SEE:

BEST UNINTENTIONAL GAY BAR

TK Bitterman's

HEALTH & BEAUTY

BEST BARBERSHOP

Smokin' Mirrors Barbershop

Finalists: Golden Edge Barbershop, Bangerz Chop Shop, Henry's on Richmond, Steady Hands

BEST BARBER

Electa Hazenstab

Finalists: Geno O'Quinn, Kian Kismet, Jonny Lackey, Jay Infinity's Queer Cutz, J. Bookie, KV-Hellrazr, Taylor Leven

BEST FEMALE HAIR STYLIST

Deah Fisher-Balance Salon

Finalists: Taylor Leven-Smokin Mirrors, Allison Outlaw-Spectrum Studios, Dana Wendell-Booked Salon, Tameka Yoakum Lacy-Envy Me Beauty, Gabriela Alegria-Beautique Salon and Spa, Celina Carcamo

BEST MALE HAIR STYLIST

Kip Schexnaydre

Finalists: Anthony Skoog, Nathan Martinez-HSG Salon, Geno O'Quinn, John Rubio, Christopher Trevino-Christopher Wayne Hairdressing, Carlos Carrillo

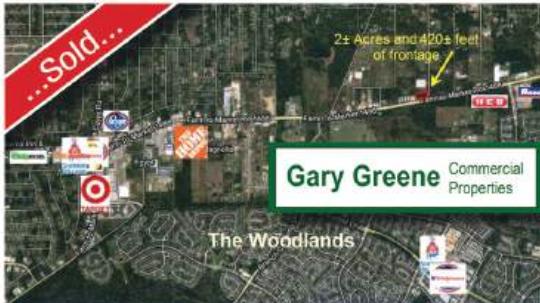
BEST NONBINARY HAIR STYLIST

Katie Roome

Finalists: Alecia Farrar, David Bamford, Amy Holt →

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FAVORITE HAIR SALON

Balance Salon @ Salon Lofts

Finalists: Green Apple Salon, Smokin' Mirrors Barbershop, HSG Salon, Spectrum Studios, Hue Hair Lounge, Therapy Hair Studio, Nu-Cuts

BEST NAIL SALON

D'Limo Nail Lounge

Finalists: Montrose Nails, Color Theory, Therapy Hair Studio, Green Apple

BEST NAIL TECHNICIAN

Chelsea Garcia

Finalist: David Perez

BEST CHIROPRACTOR

Dr. Trevor Hurtig

Finalists: Dr. David Mason, Dr. Hurta Airrosti, Dr. Matt Arnold, Dr. Fernando Franco

BEST COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES PROVIDER

Legacy Community Health

Finalists: CrofootMD, Planned Parenthood, Avenue 360 Health and Wellness, AIDS Healthcare Foundation, The Montrose Center

BEST PHARMACIST

Tram Nguyen

Finalists: Shane Goulas, Gulnar Shahid, Kevon Aloysius, Scott Read

BEST PHARMACY

HEB-Montrose (tie)

Legacy Pharmacy (tie)

Finalists: Walgreens Pharmacy at CrofootMD, Scott Read Pharmacy, AHF Pharmacy-Houston Binz

BEST COSMETIC SKIN CARE CENTER

The Skin Renewal Center

Finalists: The Next Chapter Cosmetics, Complete Dermatology, Skin Renaissance Laser Center, ACPS, SkinCeuticals SkinLab by Dr. Roth

BEST AESTHETIC PHYSICIAN

Dr. Patrick McNamara

Finalists: Dr. Paul Fortes, Dr. Sanaz Harirchand

BEST COSMETIC SURGEON

Dr. Robert Peterson

Finalists: Dr. Paul Fortes, Dr. George Washington, Dr. Sanaz Harirchand, Dr. Ashley Steinberg

BEST DERMATOLOGIST

Dr. BJ Gill

Finalists: Dr. Dani Applebaum, Dr. Anthony Linfante

BEST FEMALE DENTIST

Dr. Cynthia Corral

Finalists: Dr. Terri Alani, Farias Dental at Memorial Heights, Dr. Robyn Waring

BEST MALE DENTIST

Dr. Austin Faulk

Finalists: Dr. Marcus De Guzman, Dr. Sam Carrell, Dr. Alex Barrera-Avenue 360, Dr. Cory Logan, Dr. Angel A. Roman

BEST FEMALE EYE DOCTOR

Dr. Nancy Lo

Finalists: Dr. Juliet Farmer, Dr. Sheryl Pickering, Dr. Morgan Jones, Dr. Sheena Garner

BEST MALE EYE DOCTOR

Dr. Paul Lovero

Finalists: Dr. Stewart Zuckerbrod, Dr. Huy Pham, Dr. Bimal Patel, Dr. Evan Mapes

BEST NONBINARY EYE DOCTOR

Sheena Garner

BEST FOOT DOCTOR

Dr. Vanessa Barrow

Finalists: Dr. Ellen Roberts, Dr. Laura Zaka

BEST FEMALE MASSAGE THERAPIST

Robin Mack

Finalists: Kasie Tedrick, Daisy Guzman, Tamia Anderson, Cherrise Taylor

BEST FEMALE MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST

Denise O'Doherty

Finalists: Angelica Ramos, Faith Northern, Larneka Lavalais

BEST FEMALE NURSE

Kay McCunnis-BeYoutiful Anti-Aging Studio
Finalists: Sandy Stacy-Avenue 360/Omega House

BEST FEMALE NURSE PRACTITIONER

Tatianna Mai
Finalist: Maggie White

BEST FEMALE PHYSICIAN

Dr. Julia Kovacs
Finalists: Dr. Maya Halliburton, Dr. Jessica Zweiner, Dr. Natalie Vanek, Dr. Anna Fields

BEST MALE PHYSICIAN

Dr. Gordon Crofoot
Finalists: Dr. Abel Flores, Dr. Octavio Barrios, Dr. Chad Scott, Dr. Rocco Richards, Dr. James Carroll, Dr. Rolando Maldonado

BEST FEMALE PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT (PA)

Arbelia Roman

BEST MALE PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANT (PA)

John Chapman
Finalist: Brian Seabolt

BEST OB/GYN

Dr. Damla Karsan (tie)
Dr. Olga Swanson (tie)
Finalist: Dr. Erica Giwa

BEST FERTILITY CLINIC/SURROGACY SERVICES

CCRM Fertility of Houston
Finalist: Dr. Nola Herlihy-RMA Houston

BEST GYM

Barry's Houston
Finalists: Third Ward Jiu-Jitsu and Self-Defense, CrossFit Central Houston, Tellepsen Family Downtown YMCA, Body 3 Personal Fitness, EōS Fitness, Houston Gym

BEST MALE PERSONAL TRAINER

Andrew Hayes
Finalists: Robert McNeil, John Villarreal, Christopher Lucas-Spenga, Andrew Diaz

BEST FEMALE PERSONAL TRAINER

Mandy Trichell
Finalists: Danielle Sampey-Lazarus House, Amanda Garza

BEST NONBINARY PERSONAL TRAINER

Cherrise Taylor
Finalist: Exy Mars

BEST CYCLING STUDIO

RYDE
Finalists: SPENGA Houston Montrose, Duo Houston

BEST MAKEUP ARTIST

Melissa McKinney-Sorelle Atelier
Finalists: Jason Palermo, Amore Monet, Maria Rodriguez, Lucky Cat Beauty by Aubrie Layne

BEST MALE MASSAGE THERAPIST

Derek Stone
Finalists: Freddy Saldana, Dean Daugherty, Jeffrey Saldana, John Villarreal, Ryan Fugate

BEST MALE MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST

Ty David Lerman Counseling
Finalists: Daniel Garces, Kamone Hyman, Matt Carrillo, Justin Bustamante, Stephen Parks, Ks Stanley

BEST MALE NURSE

Jason Hicks
Finalists: Bert Zumaya, Andrew McCleary, Adam Sirico, AJ Sarabia, Aaron Matthews

BEST MALE NURSE PRACTITIONER

Derek Smith
Finalists: Kendrick Clack, Paul Simmons, David Cupit, Greg D. Cupit, Manny Vasquez

BEST MEN'S HEALTH CLINIC

Crofoot MD Clinic and Research Center
Finalists: Wellness Bar by Legacy, Village Medical-Post Oak, Legacy Community Health-Montrose Clinic

BEST NONBINARY MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST

Riot Stanley
Finalists: Tae Moon, Casey Kaiser, Hawk Owsley

BEST MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST/PSYCHOLOGIST

dr. ks stanley
Finalists: Denis "Woodja" Flanigan, PhD, Alejandro Cubria, Daniel Garces, Steven Parks

BEST MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE

Southwest Psychotherapy Associates
Finalists: Ember and Moon Counseling, Legacy Community Health, The Montrose Center, Ajana Therapy & Clinical Services, Vada Counseling, Houston Heights Therapy

BEST MENTAL HEALTH THERAPIST/PSYCHIATRIST

Dr. Daniel Garza
Finalists: Dr. Chad M. Lemaire, Dr. Frank Y. Chen, Dr. Laura Davison, Dr. Chandler Self

BEST WOMEN'S HEALTH CLINIC

Legacy Community Health
Finalist: The Rose

BEST NONBINARY SEX AND RELATIONSHIP THERAPIST

Duewa "Kaya" Spicer

BEST PHYSICAL THERAPIST

Roy Rivera
Finalists: Huzeifa Tayabali-Wilson, Tyler Humphrey

BEST TATTOO ARTIST

Julian Solis
Finalists: Avery Foshee, Asher Diangelo, Megan Medina, Sarah Bobby, Miss Miranda Quinn, Yaniel Mieres

BEST NONBINARY MASSAGE THERAPIST

Cam Stodghill

BEST TATTOO PARLOR

Technicolor Tattoo
Finalists: Stubborn Anchor Studios, Delusional Tattoo, Houston Heights Tattoo & Piercing, Wesche Tattoo, 713 Tattoo Parlour, Ella Tattoo

BEST URGENT OR EMERGENCY CARE CENTER

NeuMed (tie)
Memorial Hermann Urgent Care (tie)
Finalists: Elite Hospital Kingwood, Houston Methodist Emergency Care Center →

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LEGAL & FINANCIAL SERVICES

Eric Kirkpatrick

His compassionate approach to injury law is informed by a broad legal background.

By BRANDON WOLF

Eric Kirkpatrick, 49, has received this year's Favorite Male Personal Injury Attorney award, a recognition of his expertise and dedication to advocating for his clients. Throughout his career, Kirkpatrick has become a dependable advocate for individuals affected by car accidents, truck crashes, and workplace injuries, driven by his mission to help people recover from life's unexpected hardships. "People reach out to us when they're hurt," he says. "We do everything we can to help them get back on their feet."

Kirkpatrick's legal perspective is informed by experience on both sides of the courtroom. For a decade, he defended insurance companies and their clients but found the work increasingly unsatisfying, noting that insurers often treated claimants coldly. "People were just seen as another claim, not as individuals with real lives that had been disrupted," he recalls. Realizing he was "on the wrong side of justice," Kirkpatrick decided to represent individuals instead of corporations.

Empathy is central to Kirkpatrick's practice, and he understands the hardships that clients face after an injury. "When someone is injured on the job due to someone else's negligence, it's not just an injury. They often lose their job, their health insurance, and their lives can fall apart." Coming from a working-class family—his father a police officer and his mother a Walmart employee—Kirkpatrick relates personally to his clients' struggles.

In 2014, he opened his own practice to help individuals stand up to powerful insurance companies. "I'd rather represent the person who was injured and needs someone to fight for them," he says. His goal is to level the playing field and secure the compensation his clients need for recovery and justice.

Kirkpatrick's commitment to his clients goes beyond legal victories; he believes in build-



PAUL R. DAVIS PHOTO

ing genuine relationships. He visits clients' homes and meets their families, making sure they feel seen as people, not just cases. "By the time a case is over, my clients feel like family. I keep in touch—even texting them on their birthdays," he shares.

At his firm, the environment is personal and collaborative. "When you come to me, I'll sit down with you to review your case and introduce you to the team who will be collaborating with you," he explains. This supportive approach helps clients feel comfortable and empowered during challenging times.

As an openly gay man, Kirkpatrick is particularly attentive to the unique needs of LGBTQ clients. Many seek out his firm for its respectful and understanding atmosphere. "We deal with sensitive issues, including medical records and privacy concerns. Some clients may be HIV-positive or not want their sexual orientation disclosed. I make sure to protect their privacy and keep such information out of cases whenever possible. It's important that every client feels safe and respected."

Kirkpatrick's advocacy extends beyond his own practice. He has been active in the Stonewall Law Association of Greater Houston

since 2014, is a member of the Houston Bar Association, and serves on the board of the LGBT Caucus of the American Association for Justice. He also serves as a board member for both the Texas Trial Lawyers Association and the Houston Trial Lawyers Association, demonstrating ongoing leadership and commitment to the legal community.

Family is central to Kirkpatrick's life and work. His husband, Mitch, is a paralegal who manages the office, and their Maltipoo, Sadie, brings comfort to both staff and clients.

Looking back, Kirkpatrick is grateful for a career that allows him to make a difference. "I love what I do, and I'm thankful that I have the freedom to choose the cases I take on," he reflects.

"Making a positive difference in people's lives is what drives me. Every case is a new opportunity to learn new facts, solve legal puzzles, and stand up for people who need someone in their corner. Through compassion and expertise, Eric Kirkpatrick continues to make a meaningful impact—one client and one case at a time."



For more info, visit kirkpatricklaw.com

BEST YOGA STUDIO

Black Swan Yoga in the Heights

Finalists: Ranch HTX, The Atrium, Lake Houston Family YMCA, Ashé Yoga Collective

FAVORITE FEMALE DENTAL HYGIENIST

Jacquelyn Clemmer-Montrose DDS

Finalists: Chriszelda Luna-Bayou City Smiles, Melissa Baez-Montrose DDS

HOSPITAL CHAMPION MOST SUPPORTIVE OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY

MD Anderson Cancer Center (tie)

Memorial Hermann Hospital (tie)

Finalists: Houston Methodist Hospital, HCA Houston Healthcare

BEST FLORIST

Andrew Liebig Designs

Finalists: Robert Shipman Flowers & Events, In Bloom, Javier Jimenez-The Golden Leaf, Kirksey Gregg, The Ranch Houston

BEST FURNITURE STORE

Native Citizen

Finalists: Texas Mattress Makers-Downtown Houston, Living Spaces, Ikea

BEST FURNITURE STORE ON A BUDGET

IKEA

Finalists: America's Best Furniture Store

BEST GARDENING/NURSERY SUPPLY

Joshua's Native Plants & Garden Antiques

Finalists: Dirt Bag, Buchanan's Native Plants, Another Place in Time

BEST LANDSCAPING COMPANY/LANDSCAPER

Hunter's Tree Service

Finalists: Always In Season, Texas Mulch Masters, Fire + Flora Landscape Design

BEST POOL COMPANY

Hidden Cove Outdoors

Finalist: Venture Pool Company

BEST PLUMBER

Metro Plumbing and Backflow (tie)

In the Loop Plumbing (tie)

Finalist: Apollo Mechanical Plumbing

BEST HEATING & AIR CONDITIONING COMPANY

Air Energy

Finalists: New Horizons, Steve's Heating & A/C, Newport Air

BEST HOME FURNISHINGS STORE

Eklektik Interiors

Finalists: The Guild Shop, Native Citizen

BEST HOME SECURITY COMPANY

Pro Fix Pc Computer & IT Services

Finalists: Smith Thompson Security, ADI

BEST HOUSE CLEANING COMPANY

Maid for It

Finalist: Natural Care Cleaning Service

BEST MALE INTERIOR DESIGNER

Raymond Valdez

Finalists: Anthony Stransky, James Hunter, Emmanuel Leventis Interior Design

BEST FEMALE INTERIOR DESIGNER

Kathy Anderson

BEST FEMALE INSURANCE AGENT

Klarisa Madrigal-State Farm

Finalists: Stephanie Mier, Sabrina Marie Calvillo, Ayesah Alam, Christyna Lewis

BEST MALE INSURANCE AGENT

Lane Lewis

Finalists: Jason Palermo, Jeremy Henry, Patrick Torma →

HOUSE & HOME

BEST CHRISTMAS DECORATOR

Raymond Valdez

Finalists: Always in Season, Lisa Barth, Walker Chancey

BEST ELECTRICITY PROVIDER

MP Energy & Consulting

Finalists: BKV Energy, TXU Energy, Just Energy

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LEGAL & FINANCIAL

BEST BANK

Amegy Bank

Finalists: Truist, Frost Bank, Prosperity Bank, Wells Fargo Bank, PNC Bank

BEST BUSINESS ATTORNEY

Cameron Rivers

Finalists: Megan Daic, Charles Hunter, Daniel Lee

BEST CREDIT UNION

Houston Federal Credit Union

Finalists: Cy-Fair Credit Union, First Community Credit Union, Gulf Coast Educators FCU, Primeway Federal Credit Union

BEST CRIMINAL DEFENSE ATTORNEY

Mekisha Walker

Finalists: David Maly, Dulce Toledo, Stephen Aslett, Charles Hunter

BEST ESTATE PLANNING ATTORNEY

Coleton W. Mayo

Finalists: Shelby Perrin, deborah lawson, Mitchell Katine, Your Legacy Legal Care, Peggy S. Bittick, James Cuellar

BEST FEMALE FAMILY ATTORNEY

deborah lawson

Finalists: Vicki Venza, Peggy Bittick

BEST MALE FAMILY ATTORNEY

Sam M. (Trey) Yates

Finalist: Daniel Lee

BEST FEMALE ACCOUNTANT

Melony Pope

BEST MALE ACCOUNTANT

Richard Rosario

Finalists: John Thayer-TPS Thayer, Joseph Werle-Crunch Consulting, Craig Felderhoff, Gary Gritz

BEST FEMALE BOOKKEEPER

Annette Clarabut-Tidy Bookkeeping

Finalist: Olivia does your books

BEST MALE BOOKKEEPER

Gary Gritz

BEST FEMALE FINANCIAL PLANNER/ADVISOR

Grace Yung

Finalists: Christyna Lewis, Britt Kornmann

BEST MALE FINANCIAL PLANNER/ADVISOR

Richard Dickson

Finalists: Fo Garcia, Josh Beasley, Gilbert Rodriguez

BEST HUMAN-RIGHTS ATTORNEY

Brian Klosterboer

Finalists: Chelsea Klumppace, Luis Ruiz, Ana Maria Schwartz, David Maly, deb lawson, Kathleen Wiesenthal

BEST MALE IMMIGRATION ATTORNEY

Raed Gonzalez (tie)

John Nechman (tie)

Finalist: Luis Ruiz

BEST FEMALE IMMIGRATION ATTORNEY

Ana Maria Schwartz-Schwartz Immigration Law

Finalists: Amanda Vilanova-Gonzalez Olivieri, Damaris A. Chavez

BEST LABOR & EMPLOYMENT ATTORNEY

Emma Brockway

Finalist: Amanda Vilanova

BEST LGBTQ FUND MANAGER

Doug Smith

BEST FEMALE PERSONAL INJURY ATTORNEY

Jessica Rodriguez-Wahlquist

Finalists: Lena Laurenzo, Schechter, Shaffer & Harris LLP

BEST MALE PERSONAL INJURY ATTORNEY

Eric Kirkpatrick

Finalists: Lucas Walker, Lionel Sims, David Miller

BEST MALE PROBATE ATTORNEY

Jeff Watters

Finalist: Coleton W. Mayo

BEST FEMALE PROBATE ATTORNEY

deborah lawson

Finalists: Shelby Perrin, Peggy Bittick, Your Legacy Legal Care

BEST TRANS COMMUNITY LEGAL ORGANIZATION

Trans Legal Aid Clinic of Texas

BEST VOLUNTEER ATTORNEY GROUP

Stonewall Law Association

of Greater Houston (tie)

Trans Legal Aid Clinic Texas (tie)

PETS

BEST DOGGIE DAY CARE

Dogtopia of Houston-West Alabama St.

Finalists: Wag'n World, Dog BnB,

The Green Bone, Molly's Mutt House,

Demi's Dog House, Jackson's Place

Unleashed Pet Resort & Bakery,

Rover Oaks Pet Resort, Peace Love Dogs

BEST FEMALE VETERINARIAN

(MOBILE VET CLINIC)

Dr. Leslie Jenkins-

Rockin' Pets, Rollin' Vets

BEST FEMALE VETERINARIAN

Dr. Kristy Kyle-Bayou City

Veterinary Hospital

Finalists: Dr. Danielle Rosser-West Alabama Animal Clinic,

Dr. Meredith Perry-Montrose Veterinary, Dr. Sarah Lane-Oak

Forest Veterinary, Dr. Kristen Olson-Greenway Animal Clinic

BEST MALE VETERINARIAN

Dr. Eric Cagle

Finalists: Dr. Richard Clive, Dr. L.D. Eckermann

BEST VETERINARY CLINIC

Montrose Veterinary Clinic

Finalists: Bayou City Veterinary Hospital,

The Urban Vet, The Cat Doctor, West Alabama Animal Clinic

,Oak Forest Vet Clinic, Rockin' Pets Rollin' Vets,

Westbury Animal Hospital

BEST PET EMERGENCY CARE CENTER

Vergi 24/7

Finalists: Gulf Coast Veterinary Specialists, Veterinary Emergency Group, Sunset Animal Hospital

BEST PET FOOD OR TREATS

Three Dog Bakery

Finalists: Baked Bones, Patsy's Pet Market, The Doggie Express Gourmet Treats & Cakes

BEST PET GROOMING SERVICE

Pet Bar in the Heights

Finalists: City Paws Grooming, Aussie Pet Mobile, Wag'n World, Molly's Mutt House

BEST PET PARK

Ervan Chew Dog Park

Finalists: Gene Green Dog Park, Congressman Bill Archer Dog Park, McWilliams Dog Park in Hermann Park

BEST PET WALKING AND PET SITTING SERVICE

Jackie Hirschman in the Heights (tie)

Strut and Sniff Pet Services (tie)

Finalist: WAGS Dog Walking + Pet Sitting

BEST PLACE TO ADOPT A PET

Citizens for Animal Protection

Finalists: Houston Humane Society, BARC Animal Shelter and Adoptions, Friends For Life, Houston SPCA, K-9 Angels, VEG

BEST PLACE TO BOARD YOUR PET

Dogtopia of Houston-West Alabama St.

Finalists: Wag'n World, Dog BnB, Molly's Mutt House,

Demi's Dog House, Peace Love Dogs,

Rover Oaks Pet Resort, The Green Bone

BEST PLACE TO BUY PET SUPPLIES

The Doggie Express

Finalists: Molly's Mutt House, Patsy's Pet Market, Pet City Houston

FAVORITE PET-FRIENDLY RESTAURANT/BAR

Axelrad Beer Garden (tie)

West Alabama Ice House (tie)

Finalists: Cecil's Pub, Hearsay Levy Park

ARTS

BEST ARTS CENTER

MATCH (Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston)
Finalists: The Orange Show, Galveston Arts Center, Lawndale Art Center

BEST COMMUNITY PERFORMING ARTS ORGANIZATION

Pride Chorus Houston
Finalists: Houston Pride Band, The Catastrophic Theatre, The Coronation Theater, MATCH (Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston), Station Theater

BEST LGBTQ COMMUNITY PERFORMING ARTS GROUP

Pride Chorus Houston

Finalist: Houston Pride Band

BEST LOCAL EQUITY THEATER COMPANY

Stages
Finalists: Rec Room Arts, Alley Theatre, 4th Wall Theatre Company, The Coronation Theater, Queensbury Theatre

BEST COMMUNITY THEATER

The Catastrophic Theatre
Finalists: The Coronation Theater, Dirt Dogs, The Garden Theatre, Station Theater

FAVORITE REGIONAL EQUITY THEATER

Theatre Under The Stars
Finalists: Stages, Alley Theatre

BEST DANCE COMPANY

Frame Dance
Finalists: 67ate, Diversity in Dance, Houston Ballet, Urban Souls, Houston Contemporary Dance Company

FAVORITE PERFORMANCE-ART CREATOR

Andrew Whit
Finalists: Mitchell Greco, Sofia Silueta

BEST PERFORMANCE ARTS ORGANIZATION

The Happening (Orange Show)
Finalists: Rec Room Arts, Performing Arts Houston, The Coronation Theater, Arts Advocate Inc., Lighthouse Productions, Experimental Action

FAVORITE FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHER

Lyn Sullivan
Finalists: Larry Garmezy, Janice Bond, Fikry Botros

FAVORITE LOCAL CHOREOGRAPHER

Chad Fontenot
Finalists: Adam Castaneda, Travis Prokop, Gavin LeMaire

FAVORITE LOCAL DANCER

Adam Castaneda
Finalists: Ryan Delacruz, Travis Prokop, Gavin LeMaire, Isabella Vik

FAVORITE LOCAL FEMALE COMEDIAN

Janan
Finalists: Timely Rain, Flawless Oz, Vivian Rose, Emily Peacock

FAVORITE LOCAL FEMALE FINE ARTIST

Afsaneh Aayani
Finalists: Hannah Bull, Katharine Ligon, Maryam Lavaf

FAVORITE LOCAL MALE FINE ARTIST

Matt Fries-Moon Papas
Finalists: John Slaby, Robin Baker, Trá Slaughter, Hugo Regan

FAVORITE LOCAL NONBINARY FINE ARTIST

T Lavois Thiebaud
Finalists: Janavi Folmsbee, Irina Anikouchine

FAVORITE LOCAL FEMALE ACTOR

Tamarie Cooper
Finalists: Miika Stewart, Christina Wells, Mai Le, Elizabeth Bunch

FAVORITE LOCAL MALE ACTOR

Joshua Figueroa
Finalists: Dillon Dewitt, Mark Ivy, Kyle Sturdivant, Lucio Nieto, Marco Camacho →

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FAVORITE LOCAL NOBINARY ACTOR

Abraham Zapata

Finalists: T Lavois Thiebaud, Clarity Welch, Mak Fontina

FAVORITE LOCAL MALE COMEDIAN

Jack Keller

Finalists: Austin Faulk, Ku Egenti, Mackenzie Jewell, David Merritt

FAVORITE LOCAL NONBINARY COMEDIAN

George Brito

FAVORITE LOCAL SCULPTOR

Lenie Caston-Miller

Finalists: Patrick Renner, Joe Hale Haden, Ian Gerson, Bridgette Mongeon

FAVORITE LOCAL LGBTQ MUSICIAN

Jay Ariean

Finalists: Jonathan Craft, Kam Franklin, Amar Monroe, Nathaniel Cook

FAVORITE LOCAL MUSIC DIRECTOR

Alli Villines

Finalists: Jonathan Craft, David York

FAVORITE LOCAL THEATER DIRECTOR

Tamarie Cooper

Finalists: Jason Nodler, Matt Hune, Zach Dailey

FAVORITE FEMALE LOCAL PAINTER

Hannah Bull

Finalists: Stephanie Gonzalez, Katharine Ligon

FAVORITE MALE LOCAL PAINTER

Hugo Regan

Finalists: Wood Fancher Anthony, Jim Hill, Ryan Fugate, Trá Slaughter

FAVORITE LOCAL VISUAL ARTIST

Ruben Ramires

Finalists: Jeremy A. Teel, T Lavois Thiebaudt, Wood Fancher Anthony, Hugo Regan, Matt Fries-Moon Papas, Alex Ramos, Kill Joy

BEST ART GALLERY

Archway Gallery

Finalists: Insomnia Gallery, RobinWood Art Studio, Artechouse, Heidi Vaughan Fine Art

FAVORITE LOCAL MUSEUM

Menil Collection

Finalists: Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston Museum of Natural Science, Holocaust Museum Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston Museum of African American Culture, Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

FAVORITE LOCAL POET

T Lavois Thiebaud

Finalists: Stephen Schwei, Tiffany Scales, Keagan Wheat, Ethan Michelle Ganz

FAVORITE LOCAL PUPPETEER

Io-fi puppets + stuff

Finalists: Kill Joy, Afsaneh Aayani

AUTO

BEST AUTO BODY SHOP

RMS Auto Care

Finalists: E and E Automotive Services, Manriquez Collision & Mechanic Shop, Sport Performance Auto Body, Viking Automotive

BEST AUTO MECHANIC

RMS Auto Care

Finalists: Montrose Automotive, Ronnie Jackson Mercedes, Tech Auto Maintenance

BEST MOBILE AUTO REPAIR/SERVICE

Dion & Manny's

Finalist: Viking Automotive

BEST CAR WASH/AUTO DETAILING

Mister Car Wash

Finalists: Aqua Hand Car Wash, Brandon Ramos

BEST CAR SALESPERSON

Tony McClelland

Finalists: Lisa Priest, Travis (Baker Nissan)

BEST DOMESTIC AUTO DEALERSHIP

Central Houston Cadillac (tie)

Planet Ford (tie)

Finalist: Planet Lincoln

BEST IMPORT AUTO DEALERSHIP

Advantage BMW Midtown

Finalists: Joe Myers Mazda, Toyota World, Audi Central Houston, Fred Haas

SHOPPING & SERVICES

BEST COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER

Víctor Contreras—Close Your Eyes Photo

Finalists: Photography Studios, Soneja Creative, Davis Mendoza Darusman

BEST COMMERCIAL VIDEOGRAPHER

Davis Mendoza Darusman (tie)

Trent Wittenbach (tie)

Finalists: Julian Alexander-Julian's Creations

BEST COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY

Mad Hat Maven Creative

Finalist: Like Minds

BEST COMPUTER REPAIR SERVICE

Pro Fix PC Computer & IT Services

BEST COPY/PRINT SHOP

Copy.com

Finalist: Signs Xpress

BEST CREATIVE AGENCY

Casa Layfield

Finalists: John Donato—VAST Marketing Group, Mad Hat Maven Creative, Like Minds Communications, Black Sheep Agency, Love Advertising, RadHype Creative Consulting, Clarified Communications

BEST MARKETING AGENCY

John Donato—Vast Marketing Group

Finalists: REFUGE Marketing & Consulting, Like Minds Communication, Mad Hat Maven Creative

BEST EXECUTIVE RECRUITING FIRM

Integrus Solutions/Gary Woods

Finalist: Relate Search

BEST FUNERAL SERVICES

Bradshaw-Carter Memorial

& Funeral Services

Finalists: Morales Funeral Home, Dignity Memorial, A Community Funeral Home

BEST GROCERY STORE

H-E-B

Finalists: Trader Joe's, Kroger, Sprout's Farmers Market

BEST SPECIALTY FOOD STORE

Phoenicia Specialty Foods

Finalists: Central City Co-Op, B&W Meat Market, Henderson & Kane, District Market Green Grocer, Dr. Delicacy

BEST JEWELRY STORE

Silverlust Jewelry

Finalists: NG Jewelry, Zazzy Box Fine Jewelry, Zadok Jewelers, Tenenbaum & Co., Womxn on the Moon

BEST LEATHER STORE

Eros 1207

Finalists: Sir Rat Leather, Hollywood Super Center, The Montrose Forge

BEST LIFE COACH

Nathan Herrington

Finalists: Tiffany Scales, April Coghill, Miriam Lopez-SeqqMore, Devan Ford

BEST ASTROLOGER

Lilly Roddy

Finalist: Kevin Casey

BEST LIQUOR STORE

Spec's Wines, Spirits & Finer Foods

Finalists: Total Wine & More, King Cole Liquor

BEST LOCAL CLOTHING DESIGNER

Julius LaCour-King Underwear

Finalists: Mell Gambo—Pride Threads, Sarah Miller—Magpies and Peacocks, Israel Cruz—MANBUNS, Burly Bottom Designs

BEST LOCAL RESALE OR THRIFT STORE

Out of the Closet

Finalists: The Guild Shop, The Blue Bird Circle, Charity Guild Shop, The Cottage Shop, Second Blessings Resale Shop

BEST MEN'S CLOTHING STORE

Stylesbear.com

Finalists: Pride Threads, King Underwear, Hollywood Super Center, Boot Barn—Hwy. 290, mosesthemogul.com, OG 713

BEST WOMEN'S CLOTHING STORE

Pride Threads

Finalists: Jubilee, Magpies and Peacocks, Saks Fifth Avenue

BEST ONLINE CLOTHING STORE

Stylesbear.com

Finalists: Pride Threads, King Underwear, The Feisty Collective, Magpies and Peacocks, Matty Made Me, MANBUNS

BEST PLACE TO BUY EROTIC PLAYTHINGS

Eros 1207

Finalists: Electric Love, Hollywood Super Center, Adam & Eve, Sir Rat Leather

BEST PLACE TO BUY EYEWEAR

Montrose Eye Care

Finalists: Smith's Opticians, Eyebar Houston, Spectacles, Eye Gallery Houston

BEST PLACE TO BUY/RENT A COSTUME

Electric Love (tie)

CostumeWorx (tie)

BEST PR AGENCY

Like Minds Communication

Finalists: John Donato—VAST Marketing Group, Mad Hat Maven Creative

WEDDINGS & EVENTS

BEST PLACE TO POP THE QUESTION

Disney World

Finalists: Home Depot, Houston Audubon, Disney Land, Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary, Provincetown

BEST PLACE TO RENT/BUY FORMAL WEAR

Men's Wearhouse

Finalist: David's Bridal

BEST WEDDING/EVENT LIVE MUSICIAN OR BAND

Harmony Strings

Finalist: Commercial Art

BEST WEDDING OFFICIANT**Rev. Diane McGehee**

Finalists: Rev. Heather Tolleson, John Donato, Gabriel Swift, Tiffany Scales, TJ Liebowitz, Monica Branch, Donald Wyatt, Rev. Ashley Dellagiacoma

BEST WEDDING/EVENT CAKE BAKERY**Dessert Gallery (tie)****The Bake Happening (tie)**

Finalists: Angel_CakeChef, Leona's Bakeshop, Cake Fine Pastry, Sweets by Syd, Eazy As Pie Bakery, Susie's Cakes

BEST WEDDING/EVENT CATERING FIRM**Barbie's Bites**

Finalists: Chef Jace (@jace8te), 210 Fusion Cuisine, Churrasco's, Leona's Bakeshop, Event Elementz, Island Hop Catering, Chef Adam's Kitchen, Cafe Natalie, City View Catering

BEST WEDDING/EVENT DJ**DJ Crazy V**

Finalists: DJ London, DJ Cheeks, DJ Val, DJ TNT, DJ Rocabye

BEST WEDDING/EVENT FLORIST**Andrew Liebig Designs**

Finalists: Robert Shipman Flowers & Events, Tamika-The Ranch Houston, Javier Jimenez-The Golden Leaf, 19eleven Events

BEST WEDDING/EVENT PHOTOGRAPHER**Nikolas Tsakiris-Photography Studios**

Finalists: Jamie Hardin Photography, Victor Contreras-Close Your Eyes Photo, Alexander Cross, Chandrayee Soneja, Davis Mendoza Darusman

BEST WEDDING/EVENT PLANNER**Robert Shipman Flowers & Events**

Finalists: Andrew Liebig Designs, Event Elementz, Alexander Tharp-Wyatt, Blissful Balloons

BEST WEDDING/EVENT VENUE**Bering Memorial United Church of Christ**

Finalists: First Christian Church Katy, 1940 Air Terminal Museum, Nouveau, St Paul's United Methodist Church, The Ranch Houston

BEST WEDDING/EVENT VIDEOGRAPHER**Houston Unscripted Productions (tie)****Julian's Creations (tie)**

Finalists: Pablo Escobar Photography, Photography

BEST LGBTQ CRUISE COMPANY**Aquafest Cruises**

Finalists: Cruise Planners-Peter Weeks, VACAYA, Olivia Cruises, Virgin Voyages, Atlantis Events, Pied Piper

BEST LGBTQ LAND TOUR COMPANY**Brand g Vacations (tie)****VACAYA (tie)**

Finalist: Purple Light Vacations

BEST LOCAL HOTEL**Hilton Garden Inn-Medical Center**

Finalists: Hilton Americas-Houston, Heights House Hotel, The Whitehall Houston

BEST LOCAL HOTEL BAR**Hotel Zaza****BEST LOCAL HOTEL POOL****Marriott Marquis****BEST LOCAL HOTEL RESTAURANT****Xochi at La Colombe d'Or Hotel****BEST LOCAL HOTEL SPA****Hilton Americas-Houston**

Finalists: The Galvez, Hotel ZaZa

BEST LOCAL PET-FRIENDLY HOTEL**Heights House Hotel**

Finalists: Hilton Garden Inn-Medical Center, Magnolia Hotel, Blossom Hotel

BEST PLACE FOR A STAYCATION**Margaritaville-Lake Conroe**

Finalist: Hilton Americas-Houston

FAVORITE FLIGHT ATTENDANT**Acianna Thompson-Southwest Airlines**

Finalist: Ramone Davis

FAVORITE LGBTQ TRAVEL DESTINATION**Ireland**

Finalists: Puerto Vallarta, Amsterdam, San Francisco, Ogunquit (Maine), Wimberley (Texas)

FAVORITE LGBTQ-FRIENDLY CAMPGROUNDS**Rainbow Ranch Campground**

Finalists: Grizzly Pines, D-Ranch Retreat

FAVORITE PLACE TO TAKE OUT-OF-TOWN VISITORS**Ripcord**

Finalists: POST Houston, Club Houston, Barcode, Cecil's Pub, The Hobbit Cafe, Houston Museum District,

BEST LOCAL LGBTQ TRAVEL AGENCY**Cruise Planners-Peter Weeks**

Finalists: Concierge Travel,

Niki B Cruiselady**BEST TRAVEL INSURANCE SERVICES****AAA Travel Insurance**

Finalist: Travel Guard

TRAVEL & VACATIONS**BEST AIRLINE****Spirit Airlines**

Finalists: Southwest Airlines, United Airlines

BEST HONEYMOON DESTINATION**Ireland**

Finalists: Hawaii, NYC, Tulum, San Pedro

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A MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCE

Jess and Trish Golden hiked up a mountain trail in Washington State for their intimate wedding.

by DAVID CLARKE
photos by JESS GOLDEN PHOTOGRAPHY



Jess (l) and Trish Golden



When Jess and Trish Golden met on Hinge, neither expected that a last-minute swipe would change the course of their lives. “I was literally

inside the app’s settings and about to delete it, and I get this notification. I see her face, and then I was done,” Jess recalls. “I literally told my best friend, ‘I think this woman is going to either destroy my life entirely—and I’m going to let her—or she’s just forever. And I have not even spoken to her once.’”

That instant spark was mutual. “That night, Jess pretty much messaged me and said all these things like, ‘Hey, this is what’s going on in my life.’ And I replied, ‘Ditto,’” Trish says with a warm laugh.

Jess, 37 (they/them), grew up in Galveston, while Trish, 36 (she/her), was born in the Philippines and moved to Houston at age 12. Today, they call suburban Humble home. Both brought the weight of previous marriages to men into their new relationship, which made openness feel essential from the start.

“It’s always been something that’s definitely scared a lot of people away,” Jess says of their brutal honesty. “But after some deep therapy, I was like, ‘What’s the point? I just need to be real with everything, everyone, and myself.’”

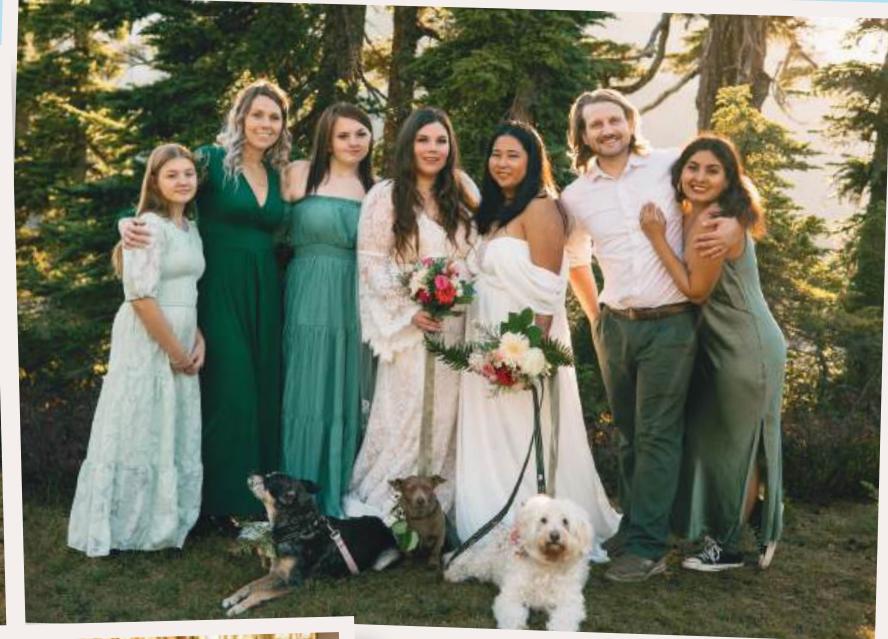
“Jess was just honest from the get-go,” Trish adds. “So I was like, Oh wow, there’s no hiding in this person. I appreciated that.”

Their first date came together almost by accident. “We planned to have our first date on a Friday,” Trish remembers. “It just happened that we were both free on Thursday. So we decided to meet up at Flower Child in The Woodlands.”

After dinner, Trish visited Jess’s apartment, where she met the dogs and got an early glimpse into the shared life to come. It wasn’t long before they both realized that something deeper was forming.

“The first time I actually felt it in a physical sense was when I had to go to Galveston for an engagement session,” Jess says. “She had a normal job. And as a photographer, when do I work? On weekends. So I said, ‘If you want to hang out, you’re going to have to come work with me sometimes.’ Just the fact that she was willing to come to work with me, be my assistant, and just be all in made me think, ‘Yeah, I’m in love with you.’”

“That’s when I felt it, too,” Trish agrees. “I saw how much you cared about your clients and other people. And then I thought, ‘I can only imagine how much you would care about the person you love.’”



By 2023, it was time for double proposals. “For a year straight, I pretended to propose to her nonstop because I’m really bad at lying,” Jess admits. “It was basically me pretending so I could prep myself to hide the ring and get ready to propose.”

On Marriage Equality Day, after photographing dozens of couples at the Travis County Clerk’s office, Jess finally popped the question. “I started getting down on one knee, and she said, ‘What are you doing? No, stop,’” Jess laughs. “This whole time, I had been pretending. And then she realized it was real because there was a ring that time.”

Once they had arrived home that evening, Trish wasn’t about to let Jess have the last word. “Jess went out to CVS, and then I set up the apartment with candles,” she recalls. “I’m more intimate when it comes to those things. So I did it in a more private way in our apartment with candles.”

The couple’s wedding ceremony was on September 22, 2024, at Artist Point in Washington State. “We got married on that mountain,” Jess explains. “I chose it because we’re artists, and we had to hike to our little spot. It was beautiful.”

The day felt serendipitous. “It was supposed to rain that day, so we were like, ‘Oh, we should move it.’ Then it turned out it was a perfect day because by the afternoon, the sun peeped out,” Trish recalls.

“It literally started casting this beautiful golden light on us as soon as we started,” Jess adds. “We had all of our dogs with us. They walked us down the aisle.”

Their photographer and close friend Erica Bonorden, along with her husband, Tom (who officiated), were both an integral part of their special day. Jess’ sister and her children rounded out the intimate group.

Their wedding was filled with unique details. “I’m a Pokémon nerd,” Jess admits. “In the actual ceremony itself, Tom included some Pokémon references. That was super-cute.”

They also sourced flowers from a Seattle market, designed floral collars for their dogs, and drove their self-built van named Ghosty from Texas to Washington. “That was also an adventure in itself,” Trish adds, “just taking off work for two weeks and driving from Texas to Washington.”

After exchanging vows, the newlyweds cooked dinner for their guests. “My favorite part was coming back to the Airbnb and cooking dinner in our wedding dresses for Erica, Tom, my sister, and her two kids,” Jess says. “We made ‘Marry Me Chicken.’”

“I thought that was very unique,” Trish adds, “to make our own food for our own wed-

ding for our own guests.”

As people who work in the wedding industry, the couple offers some advice to others. “Find vendors and people that actually support you, number one,” Jess emphasizes. “Number two: do what *you* want, because at the end of the day you truly can have a meaningful experience that feels like you—versus trying to please the masses.”

For Trish, the joy is in repetition. “I tell Jess that I would marry her anywhere, any time, no matter how many times she wants to get married. We’ll renew our vows, probably eventually at Dolomite.”

At the heart of their story is a celebration of authenticity. “Once you truly just unmask yourself and realize that you’ve never been too much and you never were too little, you can truly find healing in the people that accept you. And it’s okay to have boundaries for the people who don’t accept you,” Jess reflects.

Theirs is truly a love rooted in honesty, adventure, and joy—and a special passion for climbing mountains.



GAY SOFTBALL WORLD SERIES PLAYERS PARTY AT 713 MUSIC HALL SEPTEMBER 22, 2025

Houston welcomed thousands of athletes this September as host of the Gay Softball World Series (GSWS), the nation's largest annual LGBTQ sporting event organized by the North American Gay Amateur Athletic Alliance. The week kicked off with the Opening Stampede at 713 Music Hall, where players from across North America mingled to DJ Easton's high-energy set. Host Nina West channeled Dolly Parton,

while Miss Gay America 2024 Dessie Love-Blake brought the crowd to its feet. Three anthems—Black, US, and Canadian—underscored the night's spirit of inclusion. Council Member Mario Castillo welcomed teams with a proclamation from Mayor John Whitmire. The evening also honored the Montrose Softball League Association and their four-decade legacy of promoting queer athletics in Houston.



OutSmart's Bar Guide is now on your phone! Scan here to check out our directory of LGBTQ bars and clubs in and around Houston, including your favorites in Galveston, Huntsville, Spring, and College Station. Whether you're a local or a visitor, we've got you covered with this updated guide to the best LGBTQ-friendly spaces.

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Libra Season Sets the Tone for October

Planetary changes inspire growth, truth-telling, and balance.



With the sun moving through Libra (the sign of harmony, balance, and reflection) this month, relationships and balance in our lives is strong. We are more thoughtful as we are prioritizing our sense of self-care and personal safety. We will all be more compassionate, especially by mid-month. Although the sun starts the month in Libra, it enters Scorpio on the 22nd. Mercury exits Libra and coasts into Scorpio on the 6th and Sagittarius on the 29th. Our ideas are flowing. Venus begins in Virgo, but soon enters Libra, her home sign, on the 13th. We are shy in Virgo but more outgoing in Libra. Mars travels through Scorpio, his home sign, all month. We keep our guard up with Mars. Good days this month are the 8th, 14th, 25th, 29th, and 30th. Extra-busy days when we need to pay more attention are the 1st, 4th, 6th, 7th, 11th, 13th, 17th, 19th, 23rd and the 24th.



ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

As you start the month, relationships are the main topic for you. You are rethinking your past actions and choices. This can be a time when you may feel that you are "stuck" and can't move forward either way. Some of this remains strong through March of 2026. You remain open to others' points of view, but you are listening closely to understand their core motives despite their outward appearances. You are also reviewing your current career path and rethinking that as well! There are changing conditions with friends and business associates. This can be a very good time to network and increase your connections with people who share your views. In the latter part of the month, you are paying more attention to people's actions and attitudes. You see through to the truth much easier.

TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

You are continuing to make changes in your life relating to your career, where you live, your partnerships, and yourself! As the month begins, you are more aware of your working conditions, as well as your relationships with fellow workers. You are wanting to improve and detoxify your workspace. This can be a very good time to update your home office, as well. For some, this can be a time to start your own thing, and for others it may be a time to cut back or even retire. You are tired of the old ways of doing things, and you need some new motivation and interest. In the latter part of the month, you are much more direct with others, especially those with whom you have an established relationship. This can be a good time to renew your bonds or choose to travel a different path.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

With Uranus (the planet of freedom of choice) in your sign, you are looking for things that really interest you. Uranus often pushes back against tradition and obligation, and this is impacting you in all areas of life—self, home, relationships, and career. It's easy to feel bored and trapped with Uranus, which gives you the motivation to change. This month, you are looking

to be more personally creative, have more fun, and enjoy the company of your children. This can also be a good time to take what you enjoy doing and making that your business! In the latter part of the month, you are paying more attention to your health, speaking up, and improving your work conditions. You may feel more pressured, as you may experience a time restraint to get your work completed. Relationships will be an important topic in November.

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

Home, family, and emotional and financial security are highlighted this month for you. This is an important time to spend with family. This is a great time for family reunions, creating your own family, and making your home a more peaceful place. Some of you may be remodeling or even relocating. Emotional harmony and balance is what you are expecting. This can be a very good time for upgrading your education, expanding your communication outlets (via social media or podcasting), and writing a book. In the latter half of the month, you are more creative. You will want to make an investment of time and money into something you really enjoy. This could also be an alternative career path for the future. This is a year of opportunities, so don't miss them!

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

Overall, you are continuing to revise all parts of your life. This will impact family, career, and relationships. You may be clearing out things and detoxing yourself. Relationships may take on more importance and may help you see yourself more clearly. You are paying more attention to your daily life, how things affect your direction, and expressing your views more and more. Although you always try to be nice and polite, you are still wanting to get your message across. You are not as patient with your comments as you have been. Getting your finances in order is also important, and you may be looking for ways to cut back or get rid of unnecessary expenses. At home, you are doing some repairs or cleanup. There could be troubles

in the family, but you will continue to address that through the end of the month until it is solved.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You Virgo folk are also reviewing your life choices, from career to where you live and who you are partnering with. This may make some of you start your own business, change your partnerships, and even relocate. This is a restless time for Virgos, and you may have extra mental activity that keeps you from resting as well as you usually do. Finances are a primary concern this month. This is a better time for investments, obtaining a loan, increasing your resource base, giving yourself more credit for the work you do, and setting up a budget. You don't mind spending the money, but it must be a long-term investment. Relationships are better this month, as people are more open to you. This is a better time to market yourself and your skills. You have been more direct in your communications, and that will continue through the middle of next month. If they don't get it, you are ready to do it yourself!

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

This is your yearly personal cycle, your birthday month—always a time of review and looking at new goals for the next year. This is the month to make yourself the most important person in your life. Health and work routines are important topics this month. You have been working to make your workplace more comfortable and more peaceful. A home-office situation is better for you now than it had been before. This is also a great month to start any kind of health or exercise plan. In partnerships, you are more open to talk about making things smoother—business or personal. In the latter part of the month, finances take the spotlight. Your impulse spending is still strong. You may be reviewing your investments or exploring ways to make more money and cut back on expenses. You are also more aware of people's motives in the latter part of the month. Make sure you have a place where you can retreat!

SCORPIO (Oct. 24-Nov. 21)

This is an interesting month of diverse energies. On your yearly cycle, this is normally a time of rest and retreat, stepping back and having some personal time for yourself. However, Mars, the ruler of Scorpio, is traveling through your sign. Mars is the planet of action, so you may be trying to do two different things at the same time. Certainly the focus of the month is *you*, so it's a great time to focus on your needs and allow others to take care of themselves. You may have times when you can push ahead and other times when you must retreat. You are more in touch with the spirit world this month. This can be better for soul work, past-life regression, and considering what the universe wants from you. Make sure you have time for your own creativity and sense of play!

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

In the first part of the month, you are more social, connecting with friends and colleagues and helping your community to improve. Home and family issues have resurfaced again. You may need to be looking at downsizing, relocating, or finding something that fits your needs. You may feel that you are in a push/pull time of uncertainty. This energy will be around until March of 2026. You will have more clarity after the end of November. Relationships are flowing more this month. This is a great time to advertise your services, explore a raise or promotion. The latter part of the month is the time for some rest and relaxation. This is a

better time for self-care and enjoying some down time. In the beginning of November, you will get a big boost of energy to get you moving!

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

This has been a time of indecision for you. You can clearly see what needs to be done, but you can't seem to get yourself in gear to make it happen. And this is impacting all the important areas of your life such as career, relationships, and where you live. Career activities, in particular, are highlighted this month. This is a time for you to take a leadership role in some of your activities. You may also be looking to change career directions, start something on your own, or cut back and focus on things you really enjoy. In the latter part of the month, you are more active with your friends, colleagues, and business organizations. This can be a very stimulating experience that opens you up to new ideas and perspectives. Relationships continue to improve, although you are somewhat undecided about where it is going. You will be clearer at the end of the year.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

As with many of the other fixed signs—Leo, Taurus, and Scorpio—you are going through a time when you are looking at career, relationships, and home and wondering which area you are going to clean up first. From now until December, you are making progress in these areas. Your tolerance for difficult relationships is over. If you aren't happy, you are considering taking action. You

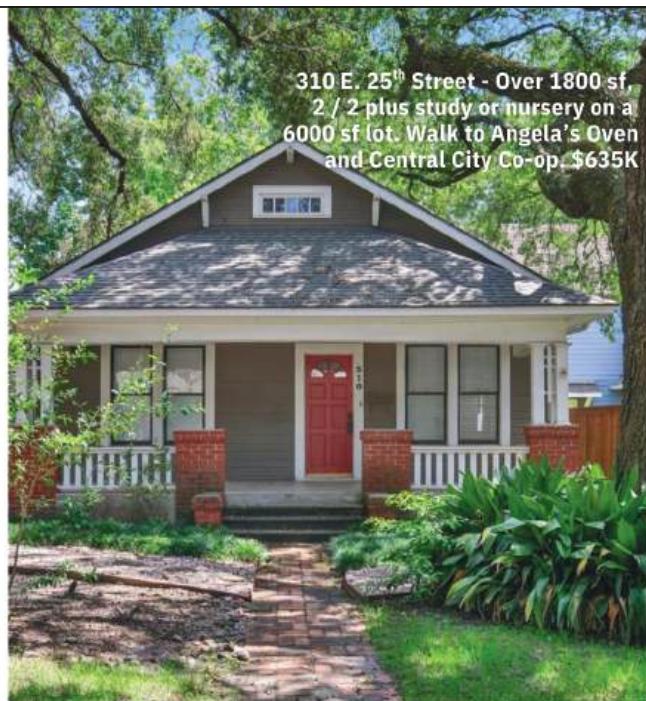
are in a more philosophical mood as the month begins, and you are just looking at the bigger picture and assessing. In the latter part of the month, you are more direct and determined. You will want to take a leadership role at work. Your tolerance and patience is very low, and you are ready to let others know about it. This is more of a social time for you that is better for travel, international business, and promoting your services. It is also a better time for exercise to burn off some of this extra energy so you can sleep better!

PISCES (Feb. 19-Mar. 20)

As this month begins, you are back into your indecisiveness, pondering the best action that you might take. There are the long-term plans you are considering. This can affect your career, your relationship, and your personal boundaries. In the first part of the month, you are exploring the deeper side of commitment, trust, and safety in relationships. This is also a good month to get a handle on your finances, investments, and debts. In the latter part of the month, you are ready for a break. This is a better time for travel, continuing education, and working with an international business. At the end of the month and in early November, you get a big boost of energy and will be connecting with people from your past during that time. You are ready to act, and your tolerance is low!

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BEST NEW DRAG KING

By SAM BYRD



It's that age old question: Where's the beef? It turns out, it's right here in Houston with entertainer Beau Vine. You'd better Moo-ve over, because this king is trotting up the ranks with more fanfare than a Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo trail ride. He was named *OutSmart* magazine's "Best New Drag King" this year, and for good reason. He's sexy and domineering, and when he seduces you it may be hard to keep your calves together. Find out more about this prizewinner below.

Pronouns? He/Him

Inner Avatar? A chill cow

Hometown? Houston or Conroe

Drag birthday? November 6, 2024

Story behind the stage name?

Beef is my favorite protein, and cows are my favorite animal, so I wanted to play into that part. Sir Loin was taken, so I had to figure something out.

What got you interested in drag?

A local competition, S.L.U.T.S., run by Iris Seymour. I was just a supportive observer when one of my friends was a competitor. It looked like something I'd want to do.

Describe your performing persona.

Not too different from myself—goofy, playful, a bit dense, and decently energetic. And one could say bull-headed.

Ultimate goal as a performer?

To blow up, then act like I don't know anybody! But actually, to be able to perform and put myself out there in a way I'm proud of. Like I want to do big things, but I want to be happy with what I'm putting out consistently.

Thoughts about legislation restricting drag performances?

To be absolutely real, I think it's cringe.

Targeting such a small group of people for no reason is stupid, and I think lawmakers should really put their focus on something worthwhile for their constituents—like health care, food, and natural disasters.



Follow Beau Vine
@beau_vinehtx
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What are your favorite hangout spots?

My house, Ripcord, and various parks.

Share about your drag family?

My drag father is Juecee and my mother is Mari Jane. They're really cool people. Definitely check them out.

Describe your aesthetic.

Part '70s rocker, part cow, part cowboy. It varies, for sure.

What's your must-have clothing accessory or prop?

Usually a hat of some kind, but also a small silver chain that my best friend gave me in 2021. I don't go a single day without it.

What advice would you share with your younger self?

Keep on doing what you're doing, little dude. You'll figure it out.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

Probably that I used to be a mime. That doesn't come up too often.

Any advice for up-and-coming performers?

Do what is going to make you happy, and never stop learning. Only you can improve yourself.

What do you do in your downtime?

I play video games, D&D, board games, and read. A lot of my hobbies are really nerdy.

Your dream job as a child?

I wanted to be a chemist up until middle school, when I switched to being a chef.

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

Probably a hot mango cobbler with ice cream on top, 'cause I like to have a classic vibe with a twist.

What is your secret talent?

Being able to speedrun Minecraft. Most of my skills and talents are known or on display. I mean, I can also walk in hooves—but not heels.

Where do you normally perform?

It varies based on the week, month, day, and hour. The best way to find me is to follow my socials because I post all of my performances.

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