

► TOWARD A CURE: DR. CROFOOT'S RESEARCH ADVANCES THE FIGHT AGAINST HIV Pg. 40

OutSmart

NOV. 2025

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

THE RAINBOWS THEY TRIED TO ERASE

GOV. ABBOTT'S CROSSWALK REMOVAL
ORDER RALLIES PROTESTERS
AND OFFICIALS TO STAND FIRM
AGAINST CENSORSHIP Pg. 32

PLUS

THE MURAL THAT FOUGHT BACK

Nicky Davis turns
loss into art at
Korny Vibes Café

Pg. 28



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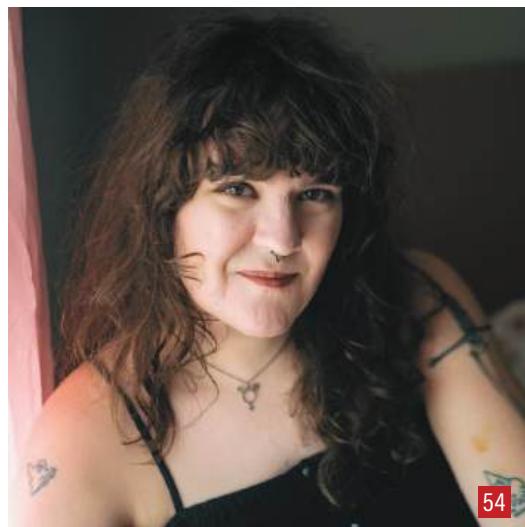
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OutSmart
HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2025

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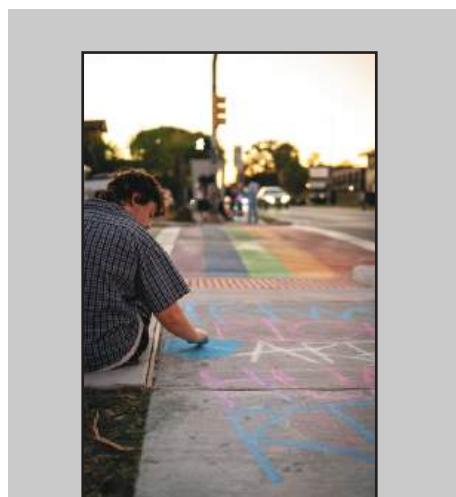
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THE RAINBOWS THEY TRIED TO ERASE

Gov. Abbott's crosswalk removal order rallies protesters and officials to stand firm against censorship.

Story by David Clarke

Photos by Nora Dayton @nora.dayton

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We begin November with the sad news of beloved astrologer Lilly Roddy's passing. A guiding presence in Houston's LGBTQ and spiritual communities, Lilly shared her wisdom in our pages since 1989—from *Uptown Express* and *Health & Spirit* magazines to her many years with *OutSmart*. Her Sign Out column became a reader favorite, offering insight and connection for decades. As we honor her remarkable legacy, we welcome local astrologer Kevin Casey, whose two decades of experience will continue Sign Out in the months ahead.

On our November cover, we feature a community news story by David Clarke and Brandon Wolf, with exclusive photos by Nora Dayton. They examine the removal of Houston's rainbow crosswalk at Taft and Westheimer following Governor Greg Abbott's statewide order banning "non-standardized" crosswalks. City and county leaders condemned the move as censorship and an attack on local control. In response, artist Nicky Davis brought the vivid rainbow colors back to Montrose with a new mural at Korny Vibes Vegan Café—an act of resistance and joy.

In observance of World AIDS Day on December 1, we spoke with Dr. Gordon Crofoot, who has stood at the forefront of HIV treatment, research, and advocacy for over four

decades. His Houston clinic has played a key role in the research and development of Lenacapavir, helping guide this breakthrough medication to FDA approval and making a major impact on HIV prevention and treatment.

In theater news, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* opens this month at Houston's Rec Room, merging minimalist staging with bold theatricality to explore themes of suffering and renewal that still resonate today. And looking ahead to the Houston Ballet's dazzling production of *The Nutcracker*, we talked with company member Gretel Batista as she prepares for her debut in the role of Clara.

Our Gayest & Greatest profiles spotlight State Senator Molly Cook and photographer Lyn Sullivan. Cook, Texas' first openly queer senator, uses her platform to challenge anti-LGBTQ policies. Sullivan, an artist and advocate, earned international recognition for her *Never Forget* photo series on the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, now archived in Paris.

For our Pride in the Media feature, we spoke with *Houston Chronicle* culture reporter Gwen Howerton, a proud Texas native and trans woman who remains determined to stay in the state despite the onslaught of anti-trans legislation coming out of Austin. As a full-time reporter, Howerton spotlights LGBTQ voices often overlooked by mainstream media.

Hundreds of guests packed South Beach Houston last month for our annual Gayest & Greatest Awards celebration, honoring the people, organizations, and businesses that make Houston's LGBTQ community shine. Special thanks to our host Ernie Manouse and to our sponsors: Bayou City Smiles, Legacy Community Health, Premier Wireless, BeatBox, and South Beach. You can view event photos and videos at tinyurl.com/OSMGandG2025.

As we head into the holidays, we're deeply grateful for your continued support. You keep *OutSmart* magazine and the OutSmart Foundation thriving—amplifying LGBTQ voices and stories that matter most.

If you believe in independent, community-driven journalism, please consider donating to the OutSmart Foundation. Your support keeps queer media visible, strong, and local.

From all of us at *OutSmart*, thank you for standing with us—and with Houston's LGBTQ community. We wish you a joyful, safe, and meaningful Thanksgiving.



Greg Jeu
Publisher



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for LGBTQ News and Media**

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Why are we asking you to donate to the OutSmart Foundation?

Your support empowers the LGBTQ community through essential journalism, helping OutSmart Media thrive in a rapidly evolving media landscape. Your tax-deductible contribution expands our newsroom, compensates dedicated journalists, and invests in the latest media technology. It also funds internships for future writers committed to social justice.

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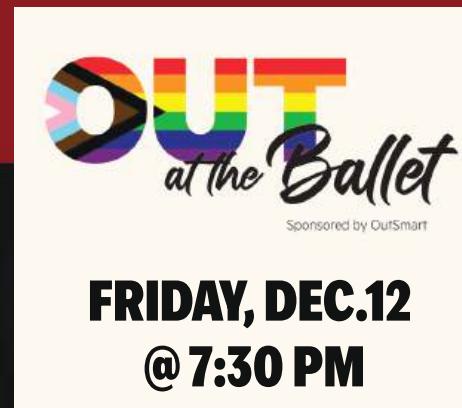
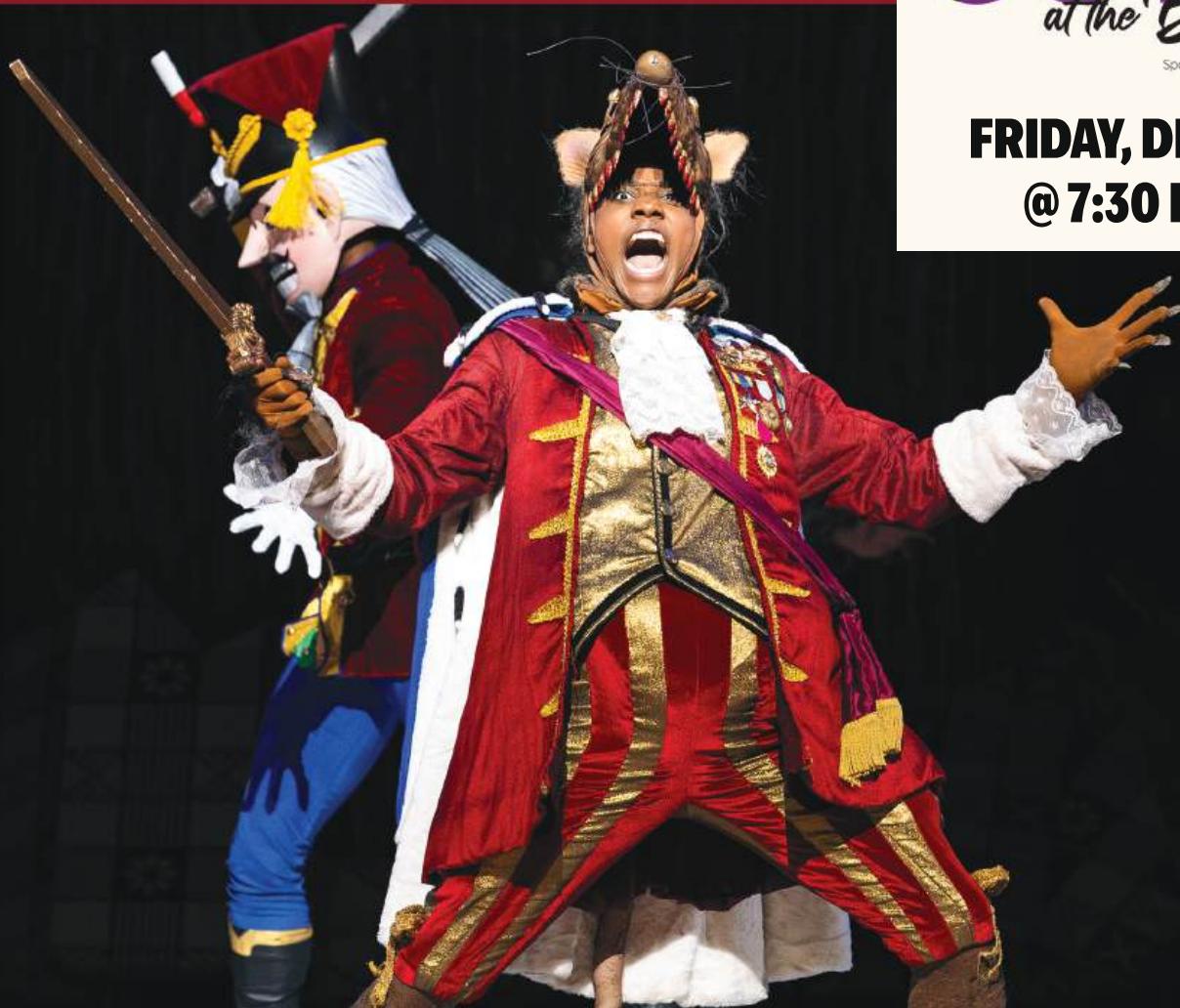
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SCENE OUT

Photos by
DALTON DEHART AND CREW



Houston Business Action to End HIV, a Health Action Alliance initiative, held a chapter meeting at Hilton Garden Inn-Home2 Suites on August 30, 2025. Pictured are **Mario Harper** and **Stan McDonald**.



On October 2, 2025, ActOUT at the Alley Theatre featured The Da Vinci Code. Pictured are **Deborah Moncrief Bell**, **Brian Riedel**, and **Mary Helen Merzbacher**.



Tony's Corner Pocket celebrated its 19th anniversary on October 3, 2025. Pictured are **Tony Vaccaro** and the performers.



On October 8, 2025, the Montrose Center hosted the 2025 OUT for Good Gala: Leather and Lace at the Marriott Marquis. Pictured are **Atlantis Narcisse**, **Brad Pritchett**, and **Avery Belyeu**.



On October 9, 2025, the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber held Chamber Community Conversations with members of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Pictured are **Katherine Perez**, **Stephen Miranda**, **Ruth Lopez Turley**, **Dylan Simburger**, **Dan Potter**, and **Tammi Wallace**.



Here Forever and Today with Sol Diaz-Peña, an art workshop for liberation, care, and resistance to surveillance, was held at the Montrose Center on October 11, 2025. Pictured are **Kevin Nguyen**, **Erika Mei Chua Holum**, **Chelby King**, **Sol Diaz-Peña**, **Jake Margolin**, **Connor Hart**, and **Stephani-Nicole Leota**.



On October 11, 2025, the UH LGBTQ+ Alumni Network presented Coming Out Monologues at Los Robles Bar & Grill. Pictured are board member **Chris Goldman**, president **Davis Mendoza Darusman**, **Jennifer Correa**, **Guill Garza**, **Holly Harris**, director and board member **Frank De Oro**, and **Chris Krause**.



On October 14, 2025, Council Member Abbie Kamin joined other elected officials and community members at the Montrose Crosswalk to protest Governor Abbott's attack on local communities. Pictured are elected officials and community leaders.



The Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce held its 3rd Thursday Breakfast Community and Connections: LGBTQ+ History Month Special Edition at Cadillac Bar & Grill on October 16, 2025. Pictured are **Dalton DeHart**, **Tammi Wallace**, and **JD Doyle**.



On October 16, 2025, a reception for Jovon Tyler, candidate for City Council At-Large Position 4, featuring special guest Rep. Ann Johnson, was held at the John Ross Palmer Art Studio. Pictured are **Jovon Tyler**, **Rep. Ann Johnson**, and **John Ross Palmer**.



Families with Pride 2025 was held at Discovery Green on October 18, 2025. Pictured are elected officials, organizational participants, and community members.



Houston Art Weeks Pop-Up Exhibit and Sale, presented by the StellaNova Foundation and the Montrose Center, was held at the Montrose Center on October 18, 2025. Pictured are **Connor Hart**, **Avery Belyeu**, **Doug Harris**, **Deasa Turner**, and **Meleah Jones**.

Testing is Caring



Favorite HIV/AIDS
Support Organization—Winner

Best Community Health
Services Provider—Finalist

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

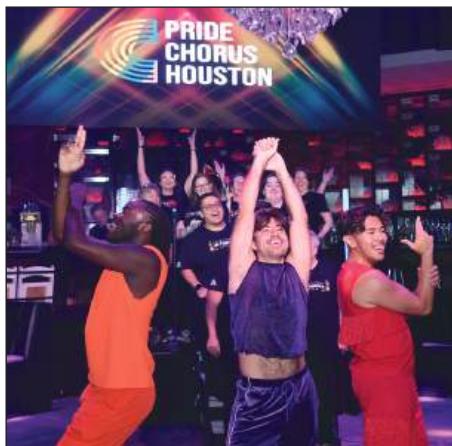
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OUTSMART MAGAZINE GAYEST AND GREATEST 2025 READER'S CHOICE AWARDS CELEBRATION OCTOBER 23, 2025



Hundreds of guests filled South Beach Houston for *OutSmart* magazine's 28th annual Gayest & Greatest Awards celebration, honoring the people, organizations, and businesses that make Houston's LGBTQ community shine.

The evening opened with a performance by Pride Chorus Houston, winner of *Best Community Performing Arts Organization* and *Best LGBTQ Community Performing Arts Group*, setting a confident tone for the night. Their vibrant mashup, "¡Fiesta!"—featuring songs by Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin, Bad Bunny, and Selena—brought the crowd to its feet. Later, the Houston Pride Band presented a fine program that showcased these talented musicians.

The night's soundtrack was curated by DJ Atreyu Frausto, house DJ for South Beach Houston and JR's, who kept the energy high

between performances. Emmy Award-winning host Ernie Manouse—also a 22-time Gayest & Greatest honoree and cohost of *Hello Houston*—led the program with humor and heart. Houston Public Media, where Manouse cohosts, was also named *Favorite Media Ally of 2025*.

More than 100,000 votes were cast for over 2,500 nominees this year, representing the diverse individuals, organizations, and businesses that enrich our community. The winners rose to the top thanks to the enthusiastic support of *OutSmart*'s readers.

Floral designs and a photo wall by Javier Jimenez of The Golden Leaf provided a stunning backdrop. Guests enjoyed bites from Postino Montrose, tacos from Churrascos, and desserts from The Dessert Gallery Bakery and Café, with colorful candies from Sour Strips adding a playful touch.

Signature cocktails were created by Brian Duhon of South Beach, Chanel Chowdhury of Pearl Bar, and Joshua Chipley of JR's,

each bringing creative flair to the bar. GTX Productions coordinated the evening's production seamlessly.

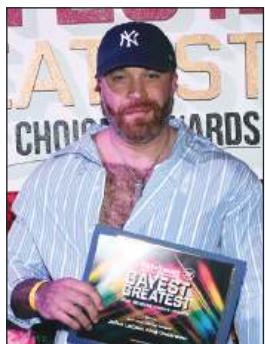
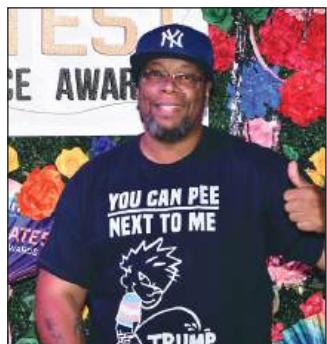
Performances by Barry Mii Dandy, Queen Persephone, and Delulu kept the audience cheering, celebrating Houston's vibrant drag community.

OutSmart's community marketing manager, Aaron Rublein, presented the Unicorn Awards to sponsors Bayou City Smiles, Premier Wireless, Legacy Community Health, and South Beach Houston, honoring their ongoing support of Houston's LGBTQ community.

Proceeds from the event benefited the *OutSmart* Foundation for LGBTQ News & Media, a nonprofit supporting local queer journalism and storytelling.

As the party ended, guests lingered to celebrate connection, creativity, and appreciation for all of the Gayest & Greatest winners and finalists who were honored throughout the evening.





OutSmart GAYEST & GREATEST 2025 READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Photos by DALTON DE HART and CREW



THANK YOU, HOUSTON!

OutSmart magazine extends heartfelt thanks to our readers, supporters, and sponsors for making the **28th annual** **Gayest & Greatest Awards** an unforgettable celebration of Houston's LGBTQ community.

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It's Not Too Late to Save for Retirement

In your 40s or 50s? Learn how small changes and smart planning can get you back on track.



If you're between 45 and 60 and have recently realized that you may be behind on saving for retirement, you may feel a wave of concern or even panic.

You might be thinking, "I should have started sooner," or "How am I going to catch up now?" If so, take a deep breath. You're not alone—and more importantly, you're not out of time.

Many people in their late 40s, 50s, or even early 60s have competing financial priorities: paying off a mortgage, supporting children through college, helping aging parents, covering healthcare expenses, or recovering from earlier financial setbacks. It's common to get to midlife and recognize that retirement is suddenly much closer than it seemed just a decade ago. The key is what you do next.

It's Not About Blame

One of the biggest reasons people find themselves behind is simple: most of us were never taught how retirement saving works. Financial literacy has not been a part of school curricu-

lums for many generations. Concepts such as compounding, tax-advantaged retirement plans, employer matches, Roth vs. Traditional IRA accounts, and future income planning are rarely discussed in classrooms.

So if you feel behind, understand this is not a moral failing. It's often the result of a lack of early guidance. Moving forward with knowledge and intention is what matters now.

Start with \$50 to \$100 per Month

When you feel far behind, small numbers may feel insignificant. But consistency compounds over time. For example, saving just \$100 per month with a moderate annual return can accumulate meaningfully over a 10- to 15-year period. The goal at first is not perfection, but rather *momentum*.

If you need to start at \$50 per month, do it. Making saving a non-negotiable line item in your budget builds a habit that you can increase gradually. Think of this stage as "turning on the faucet." Once the water is flowing, it becomes easier to increase the flow.



Leverage Your Job's Retirement Plan

If your employer offers a 401(k), 403(b), or SIMPLE IRA, your participation can be one of the fastest ways to build up retirement savings. If you aren't currently enrolled, take that step as soon as possible. If your employer offers a matching contribution—such as 50% of your contributions up to a certain percentage—try to contribute at least enough to get the full match. That's additional money that will automatically be working for your future.

Already contributing to a retirement account? Consider increasing your savings rate by 1 or 2% whenever you receive a raise. If you get a 3% pay raise and increase your retirement contributions by 1%, you still receive a net increase in take-home pay while also accelerating your progress toward retirement.

Reduce Spending and Debt

Your budget may be stretched in your late 40s and 50s, but there are often areas where spending can be optimized. Consider reviewing your recurring subscriptions, dining and entertainment spending, or unused services. Freeing up even a few hundred dollars per month can be meaningful.

Using this cash flow to pay down high-interest debt is often one of the best next steps. Credit card debt, for example, carries interest rates that can significantly erode financial progress. Paying it down may improve your long-term cash flow, allowing you to redirect those dollars into retirement savings later.

Make Catch-Up Contributions (Age 50+)

If you're age 50 or older, IRS rules allow higher annual contributions to retirement accounts through "catch-up contributions." This is an intentional provision designed to help individuals who may be behind. Even if you can't immediately max out contributions, increasing them gradually as your financial breathing room improves may make a meaningful difference over the next decade or more. →

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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



For example, adding just a few extra thousand dollars per year in your 50s can improve your retirement readiness over time.

Rethink Your Timeline Expectations

If your retirement timeline feels tight, consider whether a few adjustments might improve your path. Options may include:

- Working a few extra years (if health and career satisfaction allow)
- Transitioning into part-time work during early retirement
- Considering phased retirement if your employer offers it
- Adjusting lifestyle expectations based on needs rather than luxuries

Extending your working years even slightly can reduce the number of retirement years you need to fund, thus giving your investments more time to grow and delaying withdrawals to ease the pressure on savings.

Visualize an Annual Retirement Income

It's common to think about retirement savings as a dollar goal (e.g., "I need \$500,000 or \$1 million"). But it may be more practical—and less overwhelming—to think in terms of *replacing* income. Ask yourself: How much income will I need each month (or year) to cover essentials and discretionary expenses?

This shift in thinking often helps people feel more in control. From there, you can create strategies using Social Security, employer pensions (if applicable), retirement accounts, and possibly part-time income to bridge any gaps.

A Financial Professional Can Help

Trying to catch up without a plan can feel like driving without a map in unfamiliar territory. A financial-planning professional can help you:

- Understand exactly where you stand today
- Prioritize between debt repayment and retirement contributions
- Determine how much you can save today, and then find ways to ramp up your retirement contributions
- Create tax-efficient strategies for your savings
- Plan for realistic retirement timelines and income sources
- Hold you accountable and make adjustments as life changes

Having a clear, actionable roadmap may help reduce stress and keep you focused on progress rather than fear.

Remember: You Still Have Time

Feeling behind doesn't mean your retirement dreams are over. It simply means it's time to

take focused, intentional action. Whether you begin by contributing \$50 a month, increasing your 401(k) deferral, or planning your debt-payoff strategy, each step you take now increases your control over your financial future.

You don't have to do this alone. A financial planning professional can help you sort through your options, build a strategy that fits your life, and help you move from uncertainty to purpose-driven progress.

Today is not too late. It's your turning point!

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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The Houston Cinema Arts Festival returns this month with a dynamic lineup of screenings, performances, and events across multiple venues, all tied together by this year's theme, "Here." The theme invites audiences to reflect on what it means to be present and to be shaped by lived experiences, memory, and ever-changing landscapes.

Queer-themed cinema is well

represented this year, with films that offer intimate portrayals of resilience and courage. Highlights include *Dreams in Nightmares* (Nov. 6, MFAH), in which three Black queer femmes embark on a lyrical road journey toward truth and chosen family, and *Perpetual Adolescent* (Nov. 9, The Deluxe), a tender exploration of grief, memory, and healing as estranged siblings reunite over the holidays.

My Chest Is Full of Sparks (Nov. 11, The Deluxe) follows two sisters reconciling with loss through video letters that bridge continents, revealing the emotional distance and connection that define family.

Closing out the festival's queer lineup is *S/HE IS STILL HER/E: The Official Genesis P-Orridge Documentary* (Nov. 14, River Oaks Theatre), a powerful portrait of the pioneering artist Genesis P-Orridge, whose boundary-breaking work reshaped understandings of identity and gender roles.

By celebrating diverse voices and cinematic experimentation, the 2025 Houston Cinema Arts Festival promises to remind audiences that "being present" is as much about reflection as it is about new discoveries.

tinyurl.com/3s5mbyb2



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COMMUNITY

November 13-16**Houston Ballet Nutcracker Market**

The 45th annual Houston Ballet Nutcracker Market is a four-day holiday shopping extravaganza. Browse through a curated selection of holiday goods, gourmet treats, stylish apparel, unique jewelry and gifts. tinyurl.com/wwnjx7t3



COMMUNITY

Sunday, November 2**The Diana Foundation Country Brunch**

Miss Angel's annual brunch features BBQ, open bar, live entertainment, and community spirit—all while supporting Tony's Place and Out for Education. tinyurl.com/mr3rynau

COMMUNITY**Saturday, November 1****7th Annual Barry White Birthday Party**

Join in the fun and honor Barry White, who was born on Galveston Island. Food, drinks, music, and more! Proceeds benefit Access Coastal Care of Texas. Lucky Lounge, 9th and Seawall Blvd. at noon.

tinyurl.com/4emj44zy

COMMUNITY**Friday, November 7****Avenue 360's****Voices for Hope Gala**

This year's gala honors the founding dentists of the Bering Omega Dental Clinic and leaders from the Executive & Professional Association of Houston (EPAH). Funds raised will benefit Omega House, the first AIDS hospice in Texas.

tinyurl.com/yhfm2ub

COMMUNITY**Saturday, November 8****The Montrose Center****Health Fair**

Everyone is welcome at the Montrose Center's Pride in Your Health Fair, a fun-filled day celebrating LGBTQ health and wellness. This free event brings together everything you need for better health under one roof.

tinyurl.com/3wttzpd8

COMMUNITY**Tuesday, November 11****Cheers & Queers****Italian Wine Tasting**

SERCA Wines hosts Cheers & Queers, an evening of wine tasting and networking featuring the more exotic wines of Italy.

tinyurl.com/2hn9vve6

**COMMUNITY****Friday, November 14****Allies in Hope Annual Ball**

Allies in Hope's gala recognizes those who have made significant contributions in the fight against HIV. Proceeds fund Camp Hope for children and families, Stone Soup food assistance, and clinic services for uninsured individuals.

tinyurl.com/4r6fntpp

COMMUNITY**November 21****Holiday Food Drive**

The Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber Foundation hosts its annual Holiday Food & Supply Drive to benefit Tony's Place, a vital resource for LGBTQ homeless youth.

tinyurl.com/3nmtknsm

COMMUNITY**Friday, November 21****The Mahogany Project - SoulGiving 2025**

The closing event of Black Trans Empowerment Week, SoulGiving is a chance to come together, share a meal, and celebrate community with love and intention.

tinyurl.com/mvrat45v

COMMUNITY**November 16****Trans Legal Aid Clinic**

Volunteer clinic attorneys will assist in updating your name and/or gender marker on your identifying documents.

tinyurl.com/29jczurh

COMMUNITY**Saturday, November 22****Houston Gaymers Meetup**

The Houston Gaymers' monthly meetup is the place to make new friends while playing your favorite games. Every major system is represented with the latest titles.

tinyurl.com/ye7bcdh

COMMUNITY**Thursday, November 27****H-E-B Thanksgiving Day Parade**

Houston's beloved holiday tradition promises to be bigger and better than ever, with more elaborate floats, dazzling performances, and non-stop energy and fun for the entire family.

tinyurl.com/3sehzba

NIGHTLIFE**Saturday, November 29****Disco Turkey 2025: Up, Up & Away**

This fun holiday tradition is back with an expanded host team. Disco Turkey celebrates what matters most: laughter, singing, and dancing in a space where people who might not normally hang out together can celebrate the holidays.

tinyurl.com/23hhfmfa

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QUEERTHINGS to DO SAVE the DATES

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

STAGE

Saturday, December 6

Houston Pride Band's Evergreens & Icicles

The Houston Pride Band's holiday concert reflects the beautiful diversity of our city with a cozy concert featuring holiday music sure to please everyone. tinyurl.com/5n75up2m

COMMUNITY

Saturday, December 6

Annual Tree Lighting and Concert

Reliant presents this festive annual event that begins with the Mayor's annual countdown to the holiday tree lighting, followed by a holiday concert experience that captures the joy of the season. tinyurl.com/34jdeej3

COMMUNITY

Sunday, December 7

Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus Brunch

The Caucus hosts its 16th annual Equality Brunch celebrating the organization's 50th anniversary. Funds raised will support get-out-the-vote initiatives for next year's midterm elections. tinyurl.com/3pkzn2d

STAGE

Thursday, December 11

MainStreet Theater's Pride Night

Main Street Theater hosts a pre-show Happy Hour and SingOUT Cabaret before the performance of Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon's *Georgiana and Kitty: Christmas at Pemberley*. tinyurl.com/5n6f328x

STAGE

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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A New Mural Honors the Lost Rainbow Crosswalk

Artist **Nicky Davis** and **Korny Vibes Café** have created a vibrant rainbow mural just steps from the ill-fated crosswalk.

by **BRANDON WOLF** | *mural photos by NORA DAYTON*



Over the past few weeks, a decade-old rainbow crosswalk at Taft and Westheimer has been in the news—both locally and nationally. The crosswalk was originally created as a memorial to Michael Alex Hill, a 21-year-old waiter who was struck and killed while riding his bike through the intersection. “It was a tribute—a reminder of a life lost, a symbol of safety, and a celebration of community,” Charles Swan explained in a recent Facebook post.

After Metro finished repaving Westheimer recently, they had carefully repainted the crosswalk’s rainbow stripes. At that point, Texas Governor Greg Abbott threatened to withhold state transportation funds for Houston if the City didn’t remove all art that reflected “political ideologies” from its streets. Metro responded by repaving the intersection.

A Generous Artist’s Offer

After Houston’s rainbow crosswalk was removed, local muralist Nicky Davis posted a comment on an online *Houston Chronicle* article, offering to paint a free rainbow-themed mural for any nearby business. The community quickly suggested the Korny Vibes Vegan Café, located at the intersection facing the crosswalk. Davis reached out to the owners, and they were thrilled with his proposal.

Designing the mural proved emotionally challenging for Davis. He wanted to capture the anger over the crosswalk’s removal and the supportive spirit of the surrounding neighborhood. He decided to fill the mural space with as many rainbows as possible.

Davis completed the mural in just four hours, using spray paint to create a cheerful scene with fluffy clouds and multiple animated rainbows with playful expressions, including one that is sticking its tongue out. That rainbow could be interpreted as a cheeky response to Governor Abbott’s decree.

Davis’ intention was to uplift those who felt a loss from the crosswalk’s removal. “I hope it



Local muralist Nicky Davis

makes people feel happy when they see it, and that it brings some comfort to people who lost their symbol," he says. While painting, Davis received an outpouring of support from passersby, with people clapping, honking, waving and stopping to thank him for his work.

A Houston native and longtime ally of the LGBTQ community, Davis, 45, has painted murals across the city for more than 15 years. He holds an art degree from the University of Houston and was originally trained as a studio artist, but discovered street art after experimenting with spray paint.

Davis' signature style combines vibrant colors, playful characters, and pop surrealism, making his murals recognizable landmarks throughout Houston. His work spans from music festivals and warehouses to collaborations with major brands like Red Bull and NASA.

Despite widespread recognition, each mural feels personal and is crafted to surprise and delight all who encounter it. Davis's installations embody a spirit of joyful rebellion, inviting viewers into imaginative worlds filled with bold colors and whimsical imagery. His art can be found at venues such as Bad Astronaut Brewery, where he hosts a monthly graffiti show, as well as the Jamail Skatepark and numerous other locations across Houston.

From Food Truck to Corner Café

Sharouq Zabarah, 34, co-owner of Korny Vibes, recalls the business's humble beginnings as a food trailer in 2019 before moving to its current location at 403 Westheimer a year later. Zabarah became vegan in 2017 after watching documentaries about the meat and dairy industries, which inspired her to live without harming animals. An elementary



Sharouq Zabarah,
co-owner of Korny Vibes

school teacher at the time, she saw a lack of vegan options in Houston and wanted to create a business offering plant-based alternatives.

Korny Vibes was founded to make vegan eating accessible, especially for people transitioning from traditional fast food. "We wanted to create vegan versions of fast food so people could enjoy familiar flavors without animal products," Zabarah explains.

Their menu started with vegan Mexican comfort foods like empanadas, expanded to more Mexican dishes, and eventually included American classics such as vegan fried chicken made from soy. Diners can enjoy vegan shakes, burgers, onion rings, fried pickles, and other treats.

The co-owners are allies of Houston's LGBTQ community, and their cafe has received multiple *OutSmart* Gayest & Greatest honors, which the community votes on each year.

The café had been fortunate to have the well-known rainbow crosswalk at their doorstep. Zabarah and her co-owner loved the vibrant symbol and often used it as a point of reference for potential visitors. Zabarah was disappointed by its sudden removal, feeling that something vital to the community had been lost. She believed it was important to act rather than accept decisions made by others.

Muralist Nicky Davis' offer to create a rainbow mural was accepted with enthusiasm by Korny Vibes' co-owners, who fully embraced the idea. Zabarah describes the mural as uplifting, saying, "It just makes you happy. It feels like you're entering a wonderful, magical place full of love."

"IT JUST MAKES YOU HAPPY. IT FEELS LIKE YOU'RE ENTERING A WONDERFUL, MAGICAL PLACE FULL OF LOVE."

— Sharouq Zabarah

For more info, visit kornvibeshtx.com and nickydavis.com

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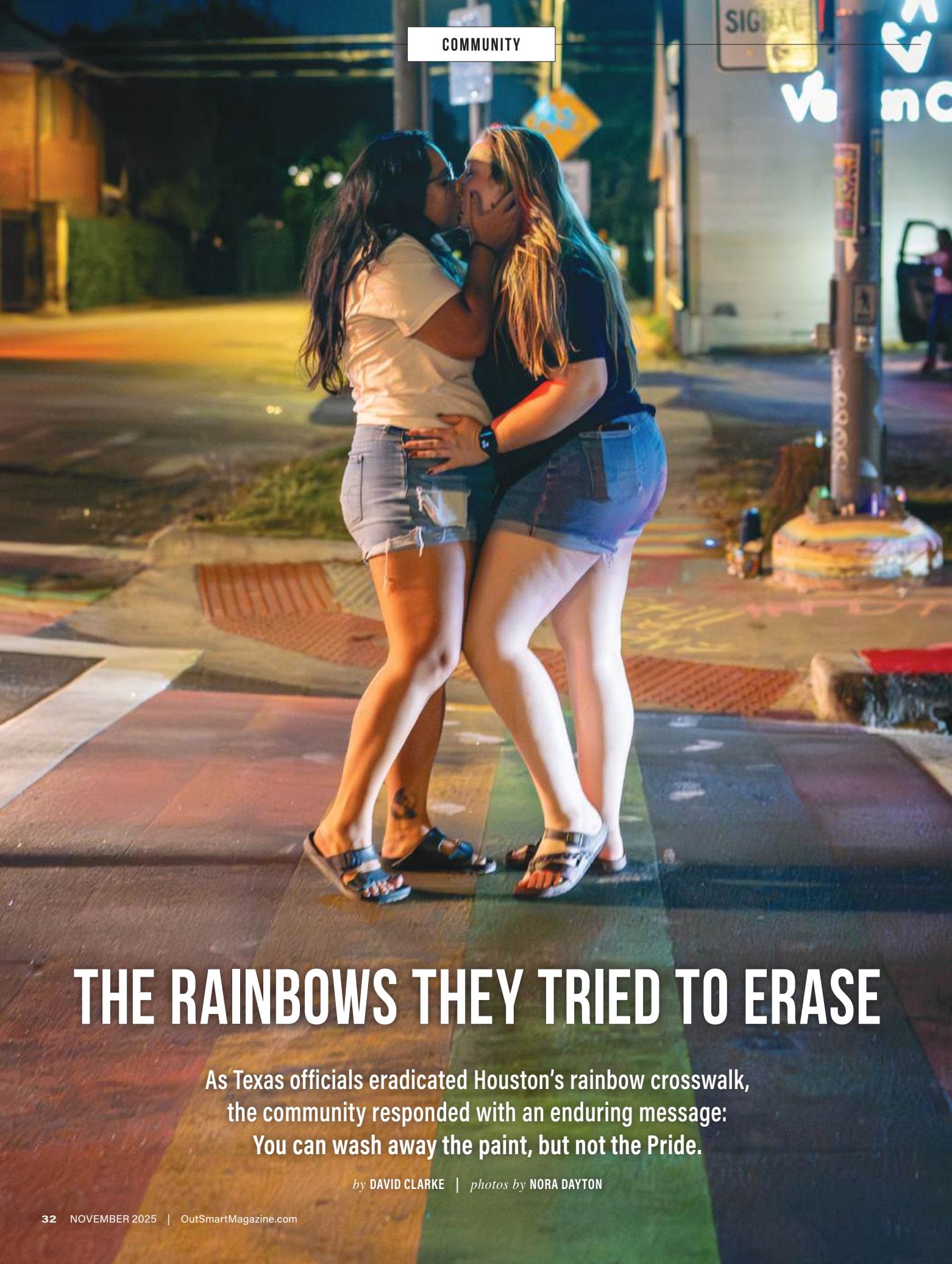
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THE RAINBOWS THEY TRIED TO ERASE

As Texas officials eradicated Houston's rainbow crosswalk,
the community responded with an enduring message:
You can wash away the paint, but not the Pride.

by DAVID CLARKE | photos by NORA DAYTON



In the still hours before dawn, the rhythmic hiss of power washers filled the Montrose air. As streetlights reflected on wet pavement, the once-vivid bands of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple began to fade under jets of water and chemical solvent. The quartet of rainbow crosswalks at Westheimer and Taft, which had been a beloved symbol of remembrance and visibility, were being stripped away, stroke by stroke, under an order from Governor Greg Abbott. Watching in disbelief, members of Houston's LGBTQ community gathered on the sidewalks, some in silent grief, others chanting through tears. "They erased our paint, but they will not erase our Pride" was their refrain.

Commissioner Lesley Briones echoes that conviction. "As a proud native Texan who now has the opportunity to serve as one of the Harris County commissioners, I'm deeply saddened, disappointed, and upset," she says. "Rather than focusing on fixing the electricity grid, on disaster response and recovery, on economic opportunity, on affordability—on all the things that actually matter to people—they're fixated on our crosswalk. It's under the pretext of safety, although I would challenge that as simply a pretext. If they were really focused on safety, Texas has some of the most dangerous roads in the country."

For Briones, the order cut deeper than policy. "It hurt my heart," she states. "I believe

our equality, liberty, and respect are inherently interconnected. When you erase one community, you're sending a message that anyone's rights can be next."

Governor Abbott's directive, issued in mid-October, ordered the removal of all "non-standardized" crosswalk designs across the state. So rainbow crosswalks, once viewed as benign symbols of Pride and remembrance, suddenly found themselves branded as violations. The claim was "safety," though Abbott's administration offered no data to support that. As Briones noted, if safety were truly a concern, the state would be addressing the decades-long record of traffic deaths on Texas highways, and not the paint colors at an intersection.

State Senator Molly Cook, who represents the Montrose area, didn't mince words. "We learned about it when everyone else did, when the governor issued his decree," she reveals. "Those rainbow crosswalks were put in as a safety measure. For the governor to then claim that he's removing it for safety is, of course, a lie. It's censorship. It's offensive to remove them. It's a waste of money. It's shocking, honestly."

The order "fits squarely within the governor's obsession with ideology and culture wars," Cook explains. "His intent is clearly not safety. This is absolutely just a political stunt—a waste of taxpayer dollars," she continues. "He's also now traveling around the county saying he's going to reach into his ungodly war

chest and turn Harris County deep red. All of this is happening at the same time."

Cook notes that in this political environment, even truth and governance have become partisan acts. "It's not new. The Republican Party certainly is no longer the party of small government. We've seen the erosion of our local control, but even more than that, the ability of localities to serve diverse populations. This insistence on restricting local governments' ability to collect revenue while sending down unfunded mandates is punishing cities like Houston and Harris County for being progressive and inclusive."

To City officials, the crosswalk removal was not just a symbolic loss. It was a direct assault on local authority. Council Member Abbie Kamin, who represents Montrose, described her immediate reaction in one word: "Shameful."

"It's shameful and cowardly," Kamin says. "Unlike other cities who are taking a stand, we are capitulating." While she could not confirm the extent of the city's prior communication with METRO, Kamin said council members "were told they would be notified prior to the removal so that we could support the community during this difficult time and make sure that there was transparency in the process."

Instead, the removal came abruptly, and was followed by the arrests of the early-morning protesters who gathered in opposition. Kamin was one of the officials who worked to ensure those charges were dropped. "We will continue to make sure that we're doing everything we can to stand up and protect our community," she adds. "We will not stop pushing back."

When asked if the City could have done more to protect the crosswalks, Kamin didn't hesitate. "Absolutely. Other cities are taking steps to not only protect their crosswalks, but to protect local rights and local control," she explains. "If this keeps up, local control is not going to exist here."

Council Member Mario Castillo, Houston's only openly LGBTQ member of City Council, shared Kamin's outrage. "While it wasn't in my district, I take this seriously because I want the community to know that they have someone they can go to if they ever need support. To see one of our memorials come under scrutiny, and then demand that it be removed, I take that seriously as well. Visibility matters. To see it come under attack is very disheartening."

"Look at what could come next," Castillo continues. "Look at what groups could be targeted next. Now that we have State leadership emboldened and targeting different groups of Texans, it's a horrible precedent. These are our elected leaders, and they're coming after the people they represent." →



On October 19, Houston's LGBTQ community rallied in Montrose after the state erased the city's rainbow crosswalks.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY DALTON DEHART

Local officials who gathered in protest of the crosswalk removal included (l-r) Texas State Representative (District 145) Christina Morales, State Representative Lauren Ashley Simmons, Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis, County Commissioner Lesley Briones, City Council Member (District H) Mario Castillo, Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce CEO Tammi Wallace, City Council Member (District C) Abbie Kamin, Houston City Controller Chris Hollins, and Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee.

He adds that the crosswalk's removal underscores the importance of continued civic engagement. "We can't afford to disengage," Castillo emphasizes. "Every time we show up, whether at Council meetings, at rallies, or at the ballot box, we remind them that we're not going anywhere."

In the wake of the crosswalk removal, Houston's LGBTQ community has mobilized. Chalk rainbows and other symbols of inclusion appeared overnight across Montrose sidewalks. Messages like "You Can't Erase Pride" and "Still Here. Still Queer." were scrawled on pavement as signs of the community's continued strength, resilience, and solidarity. For those who protested, it wasn't just about art. It was about being truly seen.

That grassroots energy gives Briones hope. "It reinforces my conviction. It's the power of the people that is the change. Harnessing our collective community voices—that's what's going to create a better tomorrow."

Dr. Blake Ellis, the chief talent and communications officer for Harris County Precinct 4, viewed the moment through a historian's lens. "From this most recent crosswalk controversy, especially if you go and read the comments online, it's clear there are still a lot of Texans who don't understand our community," Ellis points out. "Many of the fights that we thought were settled are now back on the table. Everyone needs to become an activist. Everyone needs to understand something about LGBTQ+ history, and everyone needs to



embrace the word that drove our movement early on: visibility."

Ellis sees Houston and Harris County as being on the front lines of the fight for democracy. "We are bigger than 26 states," he explains. "When we take a stand, it resonates. We are making progress in the context of a state government that is firmly committed to pretending that the LGBTQ+ community does not exist. So when we celebrate, when we fight back, when we take a stand, it matters."

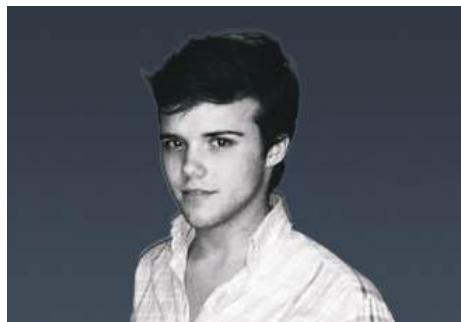
He's quick to remind Houstonians that the struggle for equality is cyclical. "It's never linear," he mentions. "We move forward, we're

pushed back, we rise again. That's the history of our movement. We can't afford to think of any victory as permanent. We have to protect it every single day.

"If there are any kids reading this, please know that no matter what the governor of Texas says or does, you can come to Houston, Texas and you will find a welcoming community. You will find elected leaders not just celebrating you, but fighting for your rights and your dignity," Ellis adds. "There is hope on the other side of what you may be dealing with. You've just got to get to Houston and Harris County." →



At an October 19 chalk-art event organized by Davis Darusman, community members filled the sidewalks surrounding the removed crosswalk with messages of Pride and solidarity.



Created in 2016 to honor Michael Alex Hill, a 21-year-old waiter who was killed at the intersection by a hit-and-run driver, the rainbow crosswalks stood as a testament to love, inclusion, and the power of remembrance.



From the Capitol to City Hall, officials like Cook and Briones understand the fight isn't just about one intersection. "It's part and parcel," Cook says. "We just see relentless attacks with absolutely no data behind them. The goal is not safety. The goal is to scapegoat vulnerable communities and posture for the next election."

"When you elect people who are discriminatory in nature, this is what happens," Briones agrees. "When you elect people who champion equality, then you get very different outcomes. I hope that those who are angry, sad, and disappointed will put that into action as community voices, as community leaders, and—at the end of the day—vote."

As outrage turns into organizing, Houston's local officials are seeking ways to transform loss into opportunity. "This may be a setback, but it's not the end," notes Castillo. "We're going to continue to figure out ways that we can support the LGBTQ+ community. I'm committed to that. The mayor has stated his commitment, as well. We will continue to fight back. We will continue to support the folks that make our city great."

The City's creation of an LGBTQ+ Economic Empowerment Coordinator position, announced just days after the removal of the rainbows, underscores that commitment. Castillo also revealed that there are also discussions about a Montrose heritage district "that would allow for memorials and monuments to be placed across the neighborhood." The initiatives, he said, represent Houston's longstanding tradition of turning resistance into renewal. "We're resilient," he declares.

"We've been attacked before, and every time we've come back stronger."

Briones also emphasizes tangible County action. "We started the LGBTQIA+ Commission for Harris County in 2023," she adds. "We have volunteer experts, leaders, and activists giving us actionable recommendations on how to make Harris County even more inclusive." She also pointed to valuable initiatives like LGBTQ liaisons in the sheriff's office, as well as inclusive law-enforcement training. "Representation matters," she explains. "Approximately 22% of the individuals I've appointed to serve in my precinct have been a part of our LGBTQIA+ community."

For Senator Cook, the fight is both personal and political. "You cannot kill queer joy, certainly not in Montrose," she affirms. "I'm so proud of the people who are refusing to be erased, who are refusing to accept this and saying, 'We're going to put a rainbow everywhere we can.' Feel your feelings, get up tomorrow, and think about what you're going to do to keep our community moving forward."

"Joy is a fine initial act of resistance," Ellis reminds us. "But we must also act collectively. Hold on to your hope, because if you still have that, they haven't won yet."

As dawn breaks over Montrose these days, chalk rainbows bloom across the intersection where the paint was stripped away. The color fades with each rainfall, but the message endures: You can scrub the streets, you can silence the symbols, but Houston's Pride, resilience, and collective heart remain indelible. And the whole nation is finding inspiration in that heart as this drama continues to unfold.

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Remembering Lilly Roddy, Houston's Beloved Astrologer

The longtime *OutSmart* contributor is remembered for her insights, courage, and decades of guidance to Houston's LGBTQ and spiritual communities.

By RICH ARENSCHIELDT



Lilly Roddy, longtime Houstonian, astrologer, teacher, and contributor to *OutSmart* magazine, died suddenly of a heart attack on October 14, 2025.

Born on June 29, 1952, Lilly was well known to *OutSmart* readers for her monthly astrological column, published since 1989. She was regarded as the preeminent astrologer in Texas, recognized nationally and internationally for her astrological interpretations and for instructing hundreds of students in the science and art of astrological interpretation.

Lilly and her partner, Yvonne Carroll, lived together for 28 years. Lilly's unique perspective on her place in the world was informed by her transition, taking place long before "trans" issues occupied the national prominence they have today.

Lilly and Yvonne met in the 1990s, having separated from their respective partners and eventually creating a life together, jointly confronting numerous challenges related to Lilly's transition—none of which, in retrospect, were consequential to Yvonne.

"Lilly was truly unique," Yvonne says. "She was bisexual, having had both straight and gay relationships and being married, before she transitioned. None of that history mattered to me. Because, from the moment I laid eyes on her, I loved this person."

As expected, individuals responded to "Lilly" in a variety of ways. "She lost a lot of friends and her family left, rejecting her and hurting her deeply," Yvonne says. "In spite of that, Lilly simply moved forward. She was an activist in the gay community, in the trans community, and in every group she's been part of throughout her life."

"During her transition, I accompanied her to meetings, appointments, and to her surgery. It's a fairly slow process, and she did all that was required at the time: doctors, psychiatry, hormone therapy, everything. For her, it was especially difficult. Before her transition, she had worked very seriously on developing her masculine self, earning a third degree in martial arts. We actually met while 'he' taught martial arts. Lilly eventually 'transformed' and was much happier, being able to live as her true self."

"Even though I felt very inadequate to the task, I did my best to love her through it all," Yvonne says. "Lilly became involved in the transgender community and enlightened people, lecturing to university students and many others."

Lilly became interested in astrology, becoming obsessed with the discipline and studying it intensely. This led to a 40-year career, one where she became an accomplished expert and mentor.

Maurielle Laurenne, a fellow astrologer, was a friend and student of Lilly's for 15 years. A former corporate consultant, Maurielle now works as an executive coach, utilizing astrology as a self-awareness system to guide business professionals.

"Lilly is recognized as the preeminent astrologer in Houston and throughout Texas," Laurenne says. "Her reputation was earned through years of study, examination, and instruction of others. People couldn't wait to refer her to others, join her classes, read her columns, or watch her YouTube videos. She changed lives and enhanced people's experience—prompting her rise to leadership in the field."

Maurielle met Lilly the same way many people did—through an appointment for a reading. "I knew nothing about astrology but had

questions about my life. I was referred to Lilly, and during our consultation, I was immediately impressed with her expertise. Without knowing me, she began sharing things about my life that were precise, accurate, and helpful. I remember being so impressed by the ability of a stranger who, using simple astrological information, was able to give me such a clear sense of direction and hope. This information empowered me to make choices for what was coming next in my life."

"WE OFTEN REALIZE THAT SOMEONE POSSESSES TRUE EXPERTISE BY THE WAY THEY MAKE US FEEL, AND HOW THEIR IMPACT CHANGES OUR LIVES FOR THE BETTER. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT LILLY DID."

— Maurielle Laurenne, astrologer and student of Lilly Roddy

"Every human asks existential questions," Maurielle says. "Why am I here? What is my purpose? What am I supposed to do next to make life meaningful? Lilly gave me answers that no therapist could. She clarified things I had wondered about for years. I left that initial consultation wanting to study astrology."

At that time, Lilly no longer taught beginners but made an exception for Maurielle. "I kept insisting that I wanted to learn from her and she kept pushing me away. Fortunately, she eventually relented. I sat in the back of her classroom and listened, eventually staying in Lilly's classes for years."

"Lilly was, first and foremost, a teacher and a mentor, and I will forever be a student of hers," Maurielle says. "She took me under her wing as a mentee, an apprentice—someone she was guiding through the human experience. She also treated me as a friend, welcoming me into her private life."

Yvonne recalls Lilly's passion about astrology as well. "Astrologers need to have strong mathematical skills—something Lilly possessed. She was initially going to study genetics in college and had taken many math and science courses." This attribute enabled her to comprehend numerology, charting, and the varied calculations that were required. "She did readings for people all over the world," Yvonne says. "Brazil, Norway, Argentina,

the United Kingdom, and Ukraine. All of her clients loved working with her. I have hundreds of letters from people expressing their appreciation for her talents."

Lilly not only excelled at the technical aspects of astrology but also grasped the finesse necessary of the art form—knowledge required to interpret and provide nuanced astrological information.

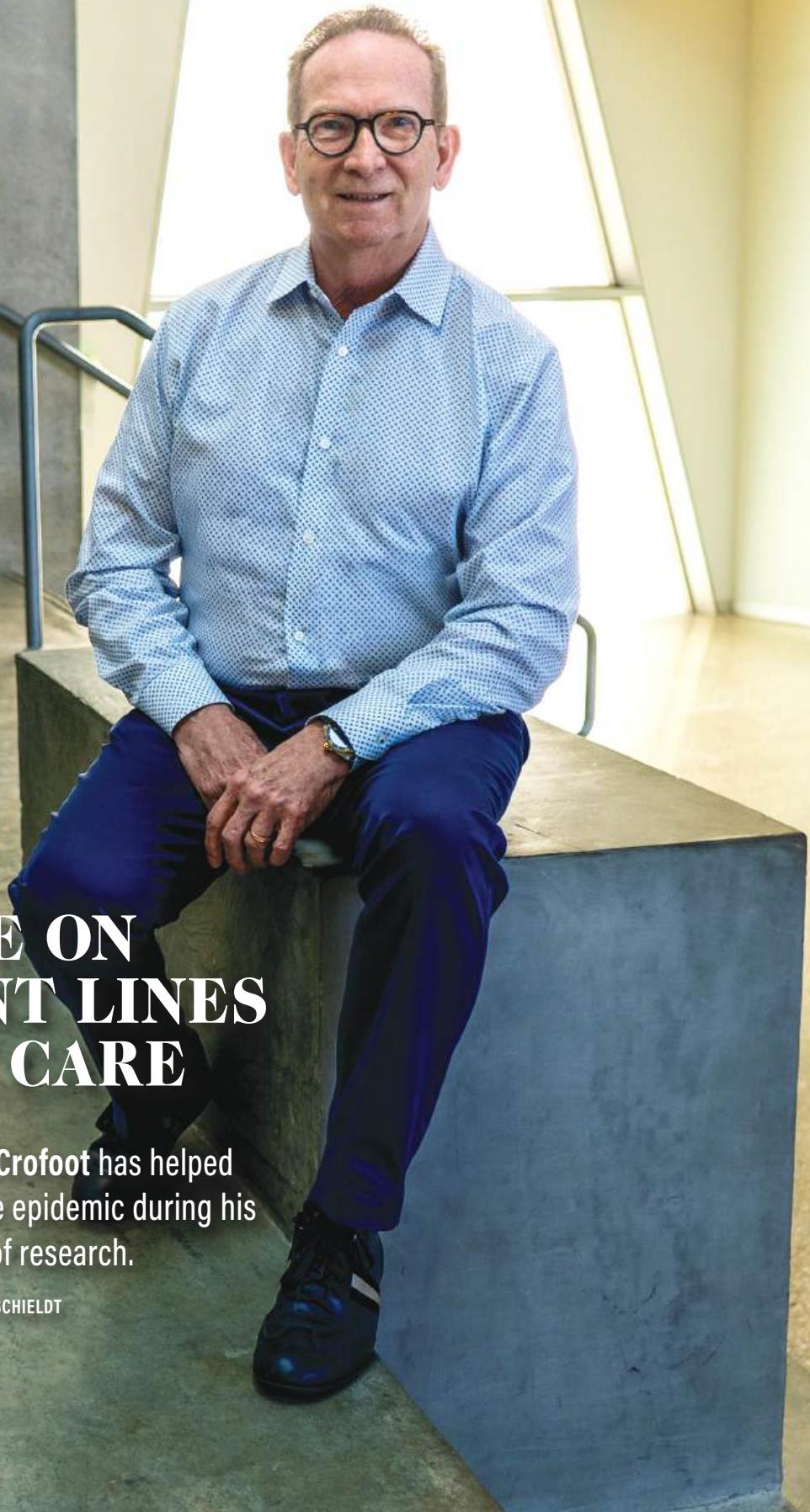
"She wrote various columns for decades," Yvonne says. "This helped her to become increasingly intuitive and thoughtful about the distinctions within astrology, understanding it more deeply with each passing year. After 40 years of practice, she simply became better—it became instinctive."

"I've had to go through her appointment book and call people that she had scheduled readings with," Yvonne says. "That's been difficult. After living with her for so long, it will be a huge adjustment for me. I'm a thinker, a quiet person; Lilly was the active one in our partnership. She could remember every joke she'd ever heard and could make *anybody* laugh. She didn't judge a soul, even though the entire world judged her. She was generous with her time and knowledge, always wanting to give people the most accurate information about themselves. She could speak in public on a moment's notice without any fear—she always wanted to 'wow' people, and usually did. She was active among professional astrological groups here in Houston and in other places, providing information, education, and leadership."

Astrology student Maurielle summarizes Lilly's lifelong influence: "We often realize that someone possesses true expertise by the way they make us feel and how their impact changes our life for the better. That's exactly what Lilly did. Her guiding principles were honed through years of study, interaction with others, and serious self-examination. She had the courage to live in exceptional truth. It defined who she was, not only as an astrologer but as a soul and a human being. Lilly was courageous and faced fear in a way that most of us wish we could. Rather than diminishing her exceptionalism, she leaned into it—by her choice of profession, lifestyle, and relationships. She was more honest than most of us will ever be."

Yvonne echoes a similar sentiment: "Lilly touched so many people. Her energy level was immense—you could feel it radiating from her—bursting from her. I will miss that more than anything."

 A celebration of Lilly's life will be held on December 6 from 2-4 pm at the Montrose Center.



A LIFE ON THE FRONT LINES OF HIV CARE

Houston's Dr. Gordon Crofoot has helped change the course of the epidemic during his four decades of research.

by RICH ARENSCHIELDT



Dr. Gordon Crofoot, one of Houston's preeminent HIV medical practitioners, has been treating HIV-positive individuals, performing groundbreaking research,

and informing the world about the disease for over four decades. "Even before medical practitioners knew what it was, we were treating it," Crofoot says. "In 1975, we were losing patients to pneumonia for reasons we didn't yet understand. The impact of HIV infection wouldn't be known until the discovery of the virus and the first blood test became available."

Crofoot once tested 1,000 people during a 30-month period. "I kept those results in a handwritten notebook," he says. "This protected patients, their jobs, their insurance, and their families."

Parisian Dr. Luc Montagnier discovered the virus in 1984. Prior to that, says Crofoot, "We didn't have a name for it, and our main concern was we didn't know how it was transmitted. As a gay male, I was worried about the risk of acquiring it from my patients. Even when the test was available in 1985, I waited eight months to test myself."

Thus began an adventure for the young physician—one not without risks, challenges, and sacrifice. "I've had federal agents show up at my door," Crofoot says, "investigating what they thought were illegal prescriptions for medications unavailable in the US. Somehow, I escaped arrest."

Other barriers originated from within the medical community itself. "I was told by one hospital administrator not to admit HIV-positive patients," Crofoot says. "I tendered my resignation, called another facility, and received admitting privileges for myself and four other colleagues the very next day."

As the epidemic grew in scope and seriousness, Crofoot shifted his focus away from general medicine and opened his own practice. "I went out on my own in 1980. I've always wanted to be creative, and fortunately I worked with a group of very good physicians. We ran our clinic together, collaboratively. Physicians practicing today are constrained by established standards of care and are very closely monitored. I've never wanted to be in a situation where I was told 'No, you can't do that,'" Crofoot says.

HIV testing was still unavailable in 1980, but physicians were seeing a constellation of opportunistic infections and severely immunocompromised patients. For Crofoot, this work became personal. "My first and second partners both died of HIV. I knew that I wanted to care for patients, not just give test results. From a medical perspective, this disease was interesting and challenging," he says.

The previously uninteresting fields of immunology and virology had suddenly sprung to life. Researchers and physicians—and especially a nationwide cohort of gay doctors—became intensely curious about the pathology and treatment of HIV.

"We didn't know much about the science of the immune system," Crofoot says. "We realized it was a viral illness, but we didn't understand it, and there were no drugs to treat it. Buyers clubs and other groups started going out of the country to find medication to treat the secondary infections. A young doctor now would never think to rent a bus, teach grandmothers how to cross the border into Mexico, get experimental drugs, hide them in their boots, and teach others how to take them. We did all of that!"

"I WANTED TO DO CLINICAL, HANDS-ON MEDICINE. THEN SUDDENLY, WE HAD PATIENTS WHO BECAME VERY SICK, AND THE ONLY TREATMENTS WE COULD ACCESS WERE EXPERIMENTAL. SO I WAS FORCED INTO RESEARCH TO GIVE THEM THE BEST CARE POSSIBLE."

—Dr. Gordon Crofoot

In 1998, the Montrose Clinic (now Legacy Community Health) asked Crofoot to be its medical director. At that time, the clinic was focused on the diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections as well as HIV testing. Crofoot was intrigued, thinking the work would be engaging and interesting. "I wanted to work towards running a nonprofit clinic like a private doctor's office," he says.

Crofoot's major accomplishment came when he launched the Ryan White Title I program for newly diagnosed individuals, creating a new model for community-based HIV chronic care, now the primary activity of a much larger and enhanced clinic.

Decades later, Crofoot now inhabits a radically transformed clinical landscape. He currently manages the Crofoot MD Clinic, which is focused on LGBTQ healthcare; the Crofoot MD Foundation, which advances medical research, accessibility, preventive care, and cutting-edge technology; and Crofoot MD Research, a national leader in innovative medical research.

Through his participation in more than 200 clinical trials (for every single approved HIV medication), he has established himself as a thoughtful and ingenious practitioner. Through the Crofoot MD Research Center, he is again at the forefront of HIV treatment as a clinician and author for the novel capsid inhibitor Lenacapavir. Crofoot has been involved in the research and development of this drug since its 2015 FDA Phase One protocol, administering the first injection of Gilead Sciences' new molecule into someone with HIV.

"I initially never wanted to go into academic research, present a lecture, author a paper, →



PHOTOGRAPH BY DALTON DEHART

On March 29, 2025, the Crofoot MD Clinic and Research Center team joined the *Trot for Trans Visibility* 5K at Frost Town Brewing, supporting community health, LGBTQ+ pride, and trans advocacy.

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or get more letters behind my name," Crofoot remembers. "I wanted to do clinical, hands-on medicine. Then, suddenly, we had patients who became very sick, and the only treatments we could access were experimental. So I was sort of forced into the realm of research in order to provide my patients with the best available care."

As more drugs entered the treatment pipeline, Crofoot's clinics became experts in the mechanisms and methodology of clinical trials and research. "We have been highly involved in the approval of, and access to, new medications," Crofoot says. "It's been increasingly more exciting to be involved in the process. It's a very difficult area of medicine, but we've been able to do it very well."

Crofoot has been involved in the development of capsid inhibitors since their discovery. "It's interesting how research that was done eight years ago gets shelved and then reappears," he says. "Capsid inhibitors were difficult to manufacture, and there's been a lot of study on them. The chemist from Gilead and I discussed this drug for hours one night in San Francisco at the principal investigators' meeting for Lenacapavir."

"I administered it to the first patient in the world seven and a half years ago at my little research center. I was thinking, 'This has never been given to someone with HIV, but it could be a wonderful treatment.' I was anxious to do it, and I was *definitely* going to be involved in the study."

Research for any new drug has to answer two distinct questions: firstly, is the drug safe? Secondly, is the drug efficacious? "We discovered that Lenacapavir was safe," says Crofoot, "and we subsequently found that it was effective for a very long time, with only two doses per year at six-month intervals—something that was simply amazing."

Crofoot soon after co-authored an article in *Nature* magazine, which led to the drug's approval by the FDA. The journal *Science* named the approval of Lenacapavir its 2024 Breakthrough of the Year.

"Now we have an 'every-six-months' drug—that sounds great," Crofoot says. "It became evident, as with other antiviral drugs, that monotherapy treatment with Lenacapavir wasn't effective, that it had to be combined with other agents in order to prevent the development of resistance." Even with that limitation, Crofoot asserts that Lenacapavir still represents a milestone in HIV treatment.

Subsequently, Lenacapavir was investigated around the world as a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)—that is to say, a preventive treatment for HIV infection. It evidenced astonishing effectiveness among men, transgender individuals and, importantly, among pregnant women. "For the FDA to seriously



Mayor Sylvester Turner joins Dr. Crofoot and Team CrofootMD to lead AIDS Foundation Houston's 2022 Walk to End HIV. Over 3,000 participants came together in support of local HIV prevention and care.

consider a new usage, they need data and a published manuscript from a highly peer-reviewed journal," Crofoot says. "I was co-author of an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*—exactly what was required. Two months after publication, the FDA fast-tracked approval.

As with every new HIV treatment discovery, access and cost always present significant challenges worldwide. "Gilead is already working to develop generic licensing in developing countries, but in the US, there's still a financial barrier. They've been developing economic guidelines to help with access, but it's still difficult," Crofoot says.

Epidemiological benefits from this treatment are immense, especially within the gay MSM community. If an entire generation of sexually active individuals could take this drug, it has the potential to be revolutionary. In order to "break" the epidemic, physicians need a way to prevent a person from acquiring HIV, a way to effectively suppress the virus in a person with HIV, and a way to prevent a person from transmitting HIV to someone else. Each of those components is now available.

"Preventive programs—PrEP—will prevent anyone from getting HIV," Crofoot says. Lenacapavir represents a significant level of protection for HIV-negative individuals. Additionally, he indicates, there are numerous drug combinations to ensure viral undetectability, preventing transmission to others. "If we can achieve both of these things, you are finally hearing the 'cure' word," Crofoot says.

At the recent 2025 International AIDS Society conference, the World Health Organization recommended injectable Lenacapavir

as PrEP for HIV infection. This, combined with expanded access to rapid HIV tests, could radically shift the trajectory of the epidemic worldwide.

"Unfortunately, we're not able to access these components in much of the world right now," Crofoot says. "Ninety-two percent of HIV treatment in the world is funded by America's PEPFAR program. Much of that has been halted by recent political action and the subsequent dismantling of international aid infrastructure."

As a result, entire nations are now completely cut off from treatment. This means infected men can't get medication, increasing transmissibility, and women cannot get PrEP, multiplying their own susceptibility to HIV. Without maternal medications, 33% of children born to HIV-positive mothers will contract HIV. Additionally, if both parents remain untreated, they will eventually leave children orphaned. "We saw this exact situation in the 1980s," Crofoot says.

In spite of this, Crofoot remains optimistic about the future. "Recently, the World Health Organization removed HIV from its list of fatal diseases," he says. He also compares current treatments to a preventive "near vaccine" for HIV. "It's not a vaccine, I can't call it a vaccine, but for the first time we are in sight of a cure."

At 77, having practiced medicine for 51 years, Crofoot's life is full of professional and personal successes. He decided, late in life, to father and raise two young sons with his husband of 20 years. "Love and science," he believes, "are both about the future."



For more info, visit crofootmd.com.



ANGELS RETURN TO A CHANGED HOUSTON

Tony Kushner's epic
Angels in America is reimaged
on Rec Room's intimate stage.

by DAVID CLARKE
Photos by TASHA GOREL

Angels in America cast members Meg Rodgers (l) and Wesley Whitson

When *Angels in America* opens at the Rec Room this month, Houston audiences will witness something both monumental and intimate. The Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning two-part play by Tony Kushner hasn't been professionally produced in Houston in more than three decades. For co-directors Matt Hune and Sophia Watt, bringing this seven-hour epic to life inside Rec Room's 60-seat space is both a challenge and a calling.

"It's such a layered piece when you take the two plays together as one," Hune says. "The sheer fact of the imagination involved and just what this play would be like in our space marries with how we're always looking for the stories that don't seem, at face value, to quite fit. How can we blow up our space, blow up the story, and use the limitations and confines of what we have to work with to get more creative?"

For Watt, the decision feels both political and spiritual. "Things feel politically pretty unstable at this moment in time, and that can be pretty scary and pretty intense," she says. "I was really interested in plays that fought back against that and provided a roadmap of hope, challenge, and rigor in the face of systems that want to eradicate you. *Angels* seemed to fit the bill."

That urgency—political, emotional, and human—anchors the pair's approach. "We kept going back to the thought that this is ultimately an epic about what it's like to change," Hune adds. "The stages of change are discomfort, suffering a death of some kind, and then whatever newness happens. It's not comfortable. There is suffering. I think the big picture, culturally, often feels like we're in this change, so how do we move forward?"

Staging only the second professional Houston production of Kushner's masterpiece is definitely an immense undertaking. "It's daunting," Hune admits.

"Deeply intimidating," Watt quickly adds. Still, their sense of reverence for the piece has fueled the rehearsal room. "It feels sacred," Hune says.

"It's sacred in the theater canon," Watt agrees. "There's a reverence to it, for sure. It's such a big story, and there's so much meaning attached to it. I think all the artists in the room treasure this text. Everyone has this feeling of, 'I can't believe I get to do this.' It's intimidating, and yet it's extraordinarily playable. In a bizarre way, there's a simplicity to that excellence."

Rec Room's 60-seat venue may seem an unlikely home for a work of such scope, but the directors see it as a return to the play's roots. "It started out in a place not much bigger than Rec Room," Watt notes, referring to the play's original run at San Francisco's Eureka Theatre. "Reading about *Angels*' inception and how they had to get inventive has been helpful."

Her love of Brechtian theater also shapes the duo's minimalist approach. "Tony Kushner is riffing off of so many Brechtian principles," Watt explains. "That lends itself really well to a space like ours—the different ways you can frame the play, and the ways in which seeing the means of production allows you to evaluate our production, as well as to feel its impact."

"That said, we are busting out walls in our theater," Hune adds with a grin. "We wanted to play with scale, so when does it get confined, and when do we see the outer limits? We're not shying away from the idea that we are in a theater and seeing the bones of the theater."

Hune and Watt have worked together at Rec Room for years, and that familiarity informs their process. "Structurally, although we're both directing each part, it's like, 'Okay, I'll have my lane in *Millennium Approaches*, and Sophia is focused on *Perestroika*,'" Hune explains. "It's a very collaborative thing. It feels more like we're workshopping it and seeing what comes from it."

"Because we've worked together for so

long, we know we have similar aesthetic and artistic values," Watt adds. "And weirdly, the flip side of that is you get comfortable disagreeing. It's not a new relationship, so it's going to be okay."

Her admiration for Hune's "big inventive gestures" is matched by his appreciation of Watt's attention to detail. "In terms of getting to the microscope and the nit and grit of 'What is this moment? What's underneath this moment?' I love seeing that work," Hune says.

For both directors, Kushner's portrait of America in the Reagan era reverberates loudly in 2025. "We're now in this ridiculous moment where the governor has ordered Houston to get rid of the rainbow crosswalks in Montrose," Hune says. "All of this is still so freaking charged in terms of queerness. It's still relevant."

"This government and political system just extraordinarily and very intentionally failed a group of people because they decided those people were marginal and unimportant," Watt digs deeper. "Looking at this current political moment of either intentional neglect or intentional aggression from a government towards different populations feels deeply relevant to me." Yet, at the center of our shared current tragedy, she finds hope. "The core of these plays is the extraordinary character of Prior, who just continues to fight for life and continues to fight with hope. That gives me so much strength."

"Prior doesn't choose comfort," Hune adds. "He ultimately goes through it. That's one of the most powerful messages of the play—the importance of doing the hard things."

Both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* are being rehearsed simultaneously by the company, which is rather unusual.

"It's a treat because most of the times when these shows are done, they're done in separate rehearsal processes," Watt explains. "We're tracking the whole arc, and that's been really cool."

And yes, for those interested, there will be marathon days. "We'll have dinner in between," Hune promises.

For Watt, that shared experience between artists and audiences is the ultimate reward. "Bringing people together to present this play, to sit in judgment and to witness, that interests me," she says. "That's where love and justice meet."

Hune nods in agreement. "Sometimes we have to do the hard things that are uncomfortable. But actually, they help us in the long run. And not just us, but also the greater good."

WHAT: *Angels in America*:

Millennium Approaches and *Perestroika*

WHEN: November 8–December 20, 2025

WHERE: Rec Room Arts

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Info: recroomarts.org/angels-in-america



Matt Hune and Sophia Watt,
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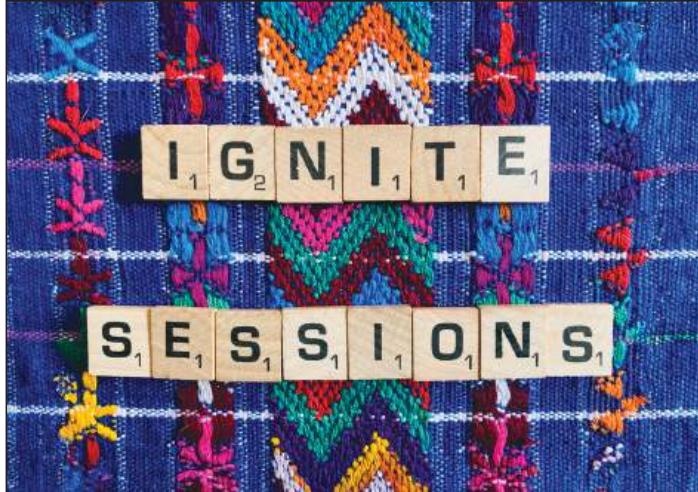
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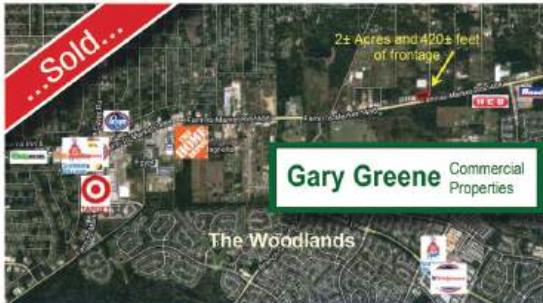
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‘The Nutcracker’ Lives On

The Houston Ballet’s holiday classic keeps company member **Gretel Batista** on her toes.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ

photos by LAWRENCE ELIZABETH KNOX



There’s a trick to watching Houston Ballet’s Christmas extravaganza, *The Nutcracker*. The first half of the show is all glitter and spectacle. It’s aimed at the kids in the audience, wowing them with lots of “Did you see that?” moments.

The second half, when most of the younger audience members have fallen asleep in their seats, is aimed at the adults in the audience. There are endless pirouettes, impressive leaps, and a huge array of international characters.

Choreographed by Stanton Welch, Houston Ballet’s co-artistic director, this production of *The Nutcracker* is in its ninth year. Set to the music of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the classical ballet follows Clara, a young girl at a huge holiday party where she’s given an exquisite nutcracker that comes to life and takes her to the Land of Sweets on a magical adventure.

The role of Clara will be performed by various members of the company, including Gretel Batista. The 32-year-old corps de bal-

let member, now in her seventh season with the Houston Ballet, identifies with the “plus” segment of the LGBTQ+ community. “I’m a unicorn,” she laughs.

Dancing in *The Nutcracker* is a rite of passage for ballet dancers. Starting at age five or six, they are angels or mice with the singular task of bourréeing across the stage (taking quick, teeny, tiny steps) or cheering on the Rat King.

Slightly older children dance in the party scene in the first act as guests. They continue there until they are perhaps selected to play the role of Clara or the Prince, as well as the guests in the second act.

“I remember when I first got to be a Sugarplum; it was a dream come true for me,” says Batista. “When you’re a little girl, you’re on the side of the stage. You dream of the day when it will be you dancing Clara.”

The students at the Houston Ballet Academy are cast in the production as young as six years old. “They’re very serious,” Batista says.



Houston Ballet’s corps de ballet member Gretel Batista as Clara in Stanton Welch’s production of *The Nutcracker*

“They’re so excited and nervous to be around the company members. They’re so disciplined and so serious about their roles. They’re little professionals already. They have to audition. I think it’s amazing for them to go through an audition process at such a young age.”

This season, Batista plays some ten characters. Along with Clara, she’s the grandmother, a snow flurry, and both a Chinese and a Spanish dancer, among others.

“Because we do so many shows, it keeps it fresh,” says Batista. “And it’s fun to do different roles. Every performance, there are kids in the audience who are seeing *The Nutcracker* for the first time. They’ve never seen it before, and we want it to be magical for them. By doing different roles over the run of the show, we keep it fresh and fun—for both the audience and dancers.”

As the student dancers age and increase in skill, they rise up the ranks in the cast. “It’s interesting to see the growth from year to year,” says Batista. “When the casting comes out, you go to the board to see what role you have, and each year, it’s different. You grow into your new roles. Each role becomes special because you were looking up to it for so many years before you got to dance it. All your energy goes into that role, making it the best you can.”

The Nutcracker season is intense for the entire Houston Ballet family. Backstage craftspeople—from wig makers to costume designers and makeup artists, musicians to lighting and set crews, and dozens of dancers—are all involved. “It’s exhausting; it’s like a marathon,” says Batista. “When you count the full rehearsals and performances, it’s more than 40 shows. With rehearsals, it’s a two-month process. So yes, it’s lots of fun, but it’s a lot of work, too!”

Asked if she has any special holiday traditions to celebrate Christmas, Batista laughs and says, “I rest! Christmas is the only day off that we have during *The Nutcracker* season, so I rest.”

WHAT: Houston Ballet’s *The Nutcracker*

WHEN: November 28–December 28, 2025

WHERE: Wortham Theater Center

INFO: Visit houstonballet.org



"EVERY PERFORMANCE,
THERE ARE KIDS IN THE
AUDIENCE WHO ARE
SEEING *THE NUTCRACKER*
FOR THE FIRST TIME.
WE WANT IT TO BE
MAGICAL FOR THEM."

— Gretel Batista

PEOPLE

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State Senator Molly Cook

Houston's first out queer senator is ready for the fight ahead.

By **DAVID CLARKE**
Photo by **FRANK XAVIER**



When *OutSmart* magazine readers voted State Senator Molly Cook as their 2025 Gayest & Greatest award winner for Favorite Local Female Politician, it marked

more than just a personal milestone. For Cook, the recognition was both a celebration and a mandate to keep fighting for the community she proudly represents.

"It's just an absolute honor," Cook says. "I've said this many times before, and it's just true every day: our community is under attack. But Houston and Harris County are a stronghold. After some of the worst legislative sessions, absolute onslaughts, Houston and Harris County chose to pick two new queer organizers to send to Austin to fight for us—State Representative Lauren Ashley Simmons and me."

"We've never had an out queer senator before," she notes. "Of course, we've had Barbara Jordan, who's an absolute icon and hero, and it's an honor to follow in her footsteps every second of every day. But being out and queer really does mean something on the Senate floor."

That visibility has sparked important, sometimes uncomfortable conversations. "I've had colleagues come up to me and say, 'Well, I hope you don't think I think of you any differently now,'" Cook recalls. "And I got to say, 'I'm not sure of that because of the policies that you support and the way that it hurts me, my friends, and my community.' And so to be able to look folks in the eye and say, 'You're going to have to deal with us,' is really important."

It's that unflinching honesty that has defined Cook's career, from the chaos of an emergency room to the floor of the Senate chamber. "At the very, very least, you should expect your lawmakers and your elected public servants to tell the truth," she says. "I'm an ER nurse. We're pretty fearless. You've got to get the job

done regardless of the resources that you have, and you've got to keep people safe. And I think speaking up and telling the truth is the bare minimum that we should be doing."

That straightforwardness also fuels Cook's advocacy for better representation. "When other folks look around and think, 'Should we elect someone who is progressive, someone who is young, someone with a nose ring, someone who's out and queer?' the answer is an easier yes because of the work that we've done," she says. "It is just really joyful for me to show up and do a fantastic job every day for my constituents."

Her approach to politics is rooted in integrity and accessibility. "I think being honest and authentic about policy positions really matters," she explains. "It's important for me to turn down money that I shouldn't be taking. We're committed to continuing grassroots fundraising and not accepting money that would potentially change my heart or make me a different person."



State Senator Molly Cook invites Houstonians to attend her upcoming town halls and provide input on legislative priorities.

Cook likes to draw inspiration from the people she serves. "Most of my heroes are fellow organizers and the queer community here in Houston and Harris County," she emphasizes. "I just see people waking up every day believing in a better world, taking the necessary steps to make that happen, fighting against adversity, and choosing hope—even as things seem to be getting worse in front of us."

Her connection to Houston's LGBTQ community remains central to her work. "Every relationship has changed in a really good way since taking office," Cook says. "People in the state government pick up the phone when I call, which is not something that would have happened all the time as a volunteer organizer. But the love is the same, and the companionship and community has only gotten richer and deeper."

Self-awareness, she adds, is key to sustaining that energy. "I always tell young candidates, the most important thing before you run for office is knowing yourself and loving yourself," she says. "It takes a dozen people to be a senator. We have an incredible team, and I really, really care for them. Recognizing that it's *us*, and not just me, is huge for all of us—and for our mental health and sustainability."

Looking ahead, Cook remains focused on the work. "There are so many priorities. We'll be focused heavily on transportation and healthcare, and on real safety," she says, "making sure that we are strategic, playing offense, and have a vision."

Above all, she remains deeply grateful to *OutSmart* readers and the local community that fuels her purpose. "Thank you so much," she says. "I hope I made you proud. We are not slowing down. We are only picking up speed, I promise. I'm with you in this fight, and we'll keep it going until we win."



For more info, visit mollyfortexas.com.



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CHOOSING HOPE."

ARTS

Lyn Sullivan

Photography as a lifelong practice of seeing, feeling, and advocating for others.

By BRANDON WOLF

**FAVORITE
FINE ART
PHOTO-
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Lyn Sullivan's journey is a powerful testament to creativity, resilience, and advocacy. As the winner of the 2025 Gayest & Greatest award for Favorite Fine Art Photographer, Sullivan is celebrated for her artistic excellence and meaningful connections in the LGBTQ community. Her leadership extends to the business sector as senior vice-president at Alamo Title Company, which won for Favorite Title Company—further highlighting her influence and impact in Houston.

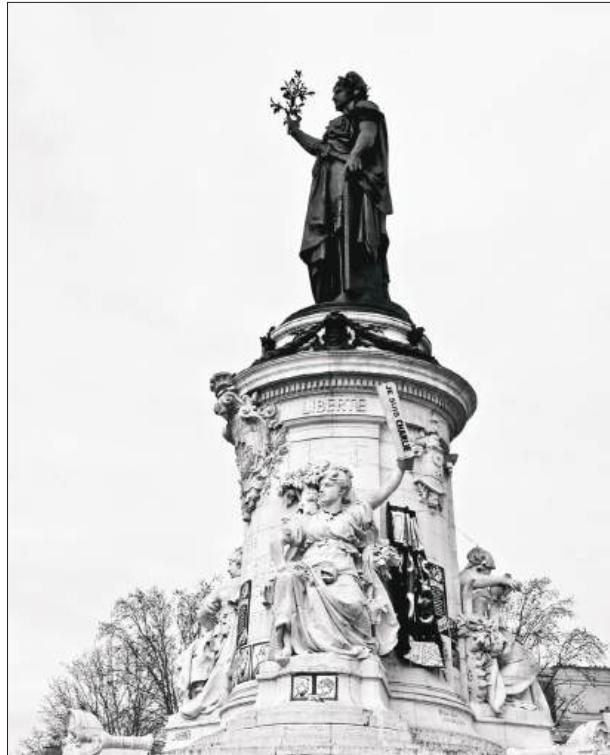
Originally from St. Louis, Sullivan moved

to Houston in 1977 and quickly became a passionate ally and advocate within the city's LGBTQ community. Now 70, she has built a life defined by family, service, and unwavering support for marginalized groups. As both a mother and grandmother, Sullivan's advocacy is deeply woven into her personal and professional lives as a champion for LGBTQ inclusivity and support.

Her dual identity as both artist and business leader shapes her career. "I've been an artist all my life, but I've been in the corporate world all my adult life. I was an art major

who also took economics courses," Sullivan reflects. This blend of creativity and business acumen allowed her to pursue her passion for art without the financial struggles many artists face, never becoming a "starving artist." Her home studio serves as a sanctuary for her creative work, providing a space that is both personal and inspiring.

Sullivan's artistic interests began with art competitions in elementary school. Regardless of where she lived, she remained actively involved in the arts by creating her own work and supporting community art initiatives.



From the *N'oubliez Jamais* series



From the *Vortex of Existence* series



From the *Cafés to Chateaux* series

“LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO BE INFLUENCED. THAT IS WHAT I STRIVE TO DO.”

—Lyn Sullivan

Today, her artwork is part of private collections nationally and internationally, underscoring the broad appeal of her creative vision.

Sullivan's artistic reach spans the United States, with exhibitions spanning the continent from Provincetown to the West Coast. Her French heritage has also influenced her work and provided meaningful connections. One of the most poignant chapters in her career occurred during a visit to France shortly after the November 13, 2015, terrorist attacks in Paris that killed 130 people and injured hundreds more. Moved by the tragedy, she captured photographs reflecting the grief and resilience of the French people. Twenty-five images from this series, *Never Forget*, are now permanently preserved in the Archives of Paris for educational and research purposes—a significant honor that cements her role in visual storytelling and collective memory.

Her professional life has also provided unique opportunities for mentorship and growth. In June 2005, Sullivan attended a

business conference in New York City hosted by a major financial magazine and had the rare chance to have lunch with legendary journalist Barbara Walters at an intimate table for four. “One hour with Barbara Walters was a master class in gracious mentorship,” Sullivan recalls, noting how Walters’ attentiveness is an important part of her approach to leadership. Through family connections, she also visited the home of Connie Chung and Maury Povich in New York’s iconic Dakota building. All of these experiences have enriched her perspective and reinforced the importance of relationships and mentorship.

Sullivan’s commitment to community service goes far beyond the arts. She was honored in October 2025 with the Spirit of Courage Award by the Nancy Owens Breast Cancer Foundation for her longstanding support of breast cancer research. When Sullivan was diagnosed with breast cancer recently, early detection proved lifesaving. After surgery and five weeks of radiation, she

was able to avoid chemotherapy. She continues to advocate for education and awareness about early detection, making this cause deeply personal and vital for her.

Travel is another cherished aspect of Sullivan’s life. She visits Italy and spends time near the French border a couple times a year, working remotely while reconnecting with her French family and Italian friends. These journeys nurture her creativity and keep her grounded in the global community she values.

When asked about her guiding principle, Sullivan shares, “Listen with the intent to be influenced. That is what I strive to do.” Reflecting on today’s political climate, she offers a message of hope: “Love is stronger than hate.” Her story is one of artistry, advocacy, and inspiration—a life dedicated to making a meaningful impact through both her work and her example.



For more info, visit lyn-sullivan.com



After growing up and finding community in Texas, *Chron* culture reporter Gwen Howerton has no plans on leaving, despite the growing anti-trans legislation sweeping the state.

"I was born and raised here—this is my home, and there are a lot of great things to love about Texas," Howerton says. "I want to leave on my own terms, not because some people don't like who I am."

Originally from Fort Worth, Howerton, 25, moved to College Station early in their childhood and lived there until graduating

from Texas A&M University. It was here where Howerton found community and began sharing their trans identity with others.

"I suddenly had all of this freedom to be myself, and I met a really supportive group of people," Howerton explains. "I decided that I was never going to be quiet about who I am and what I stand for."

While a student, Howerton was a DJ for Texas A&M's college radio station where she discussed politics and other topics. That enabled Howerton to connect with their hometown and cultivate a passion for news media. "I feel like that experience showed me a lot of cool queer people in places that you don't expect."

Persisting in Spite of the Odds

Reporter Gwen Howerton is working to create more trans representation in the media.

by MARTIN GIRON
photo by CHARLOTTE HARRINGTON

Although Howerton had only been to Houston on occasion for Houston Pride, she had the opportunity to relocate to Bayou City after receiving a work opportunity with *Chron*, a digital newsroom that branched off of the *Houston Chronicle* in 2012. Originally working in non-editorial roles, Howerton eventually pitched the idea of writing for *Chron* last summer when Texas announced it would stop allowing trans individuals to update their driver's license gender markers.

"I went to our culture editor, Abigail Rosenthal, and expressed that the story was really meaningful to me because I had just gotten my documentation changed not that long before,"

Howerton recalls. "I felt like there wasn't a lot of coverage on what people were going through and what it was going to impact, so I wrote a story on it and that made me realize that I wanted to be a reporter who focuses on queer community in Texas."

The story Howerton wrote on the end of gender marker alterations for trans individuals became the foundational piece that pushed her to continue writing stories. Since then, Howerton has regularly contributed to *Chron*, and in June of this year, she was promoted to become a full-time culture reporter.

In that new reporting position, Howerton has explored what it means to be both a contributor to the media and a trans woman. She notes that there are tensions that exist when people encounter trans journalists and question the relation between their identity and the stories they are writing.

"I think there are a lot of people who get away with injecting their own framing into a story—nobody bats an eye when it's a man doing it," Howerton notes. "However, if a trans or queer person wants to write a story about trans people that isn't doom and gloom, we have to fight for that sometimes because there's an extra step of having to prove why the story matters."

"I WAS BORN AND RAISED HERE—THIS IS MY HOME, AND THERE ARE A LOT OF GREAT THINGS TO LOVE ABOUT TEXAS. I WANT TO LEAVE ON MY OWN TERMS, NOT BECAUSE SOME PEOPLE DON'T LIKE WHO I AM."

—Gwen Howerton

Howerton's position as a trans woman working within media is fairly unique. She notes that there are many qualified trans writers, reporters, editors, and photographers who are not able to establish a career in journalism. The ones that do make it are often labeled as activists in a way that flattens the perception of their work.

"Contrary to what a lot of people think, I'm not trying to push an agenda," Howerton explains. "I'm trying to tell a good story, and that means treating the people I talk to with respect, asking difficult questions, and navigating the push and pull of creating a piece

of media with multiple people in an unbiased way."

In spite of these challenges, Howerton expresses pride in being a journalist from Texas. She says Houston, in particular, has proven to be more than just a city with incredible cuisine. "I can see there is so much queer history here and so many people making an impact and building a really great community."

"I have always loved an underdog, and I think Houston feels like an underdog in a lot of ways," Howerton observes. "Realistically, it shouldn't exist from an urban planning or environmental point of view, but I think it persists in spite of itself. It's a place where everybody has an opportunity to be somebody, and I think it's going to keep being that."

In addition to pursuing an interest in film photography, Howerton will continue to find interesting stories about LGBTQ communities in Houston and throughout Texas. "I want to see my community humanized in media. I've found a lot of great people here, and I think that's what Houston has and will continue to offer."

 To keep up with Gwen, follow her on all socials at @kissphoria. View her photography at @gwenimage on Instagram, and read her news stories on Chron.com.

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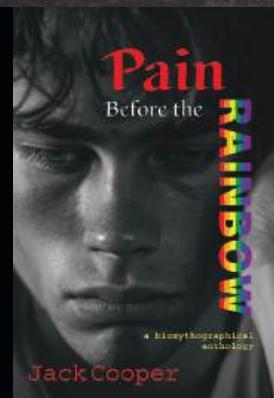
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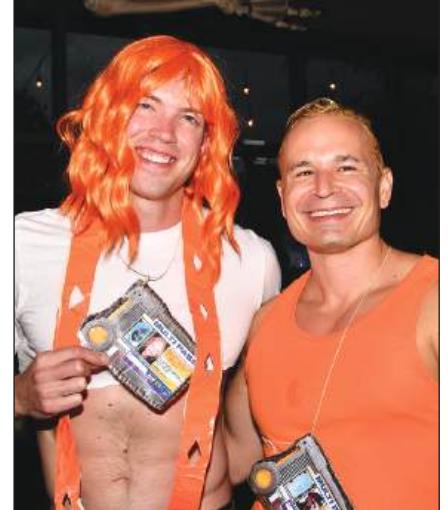
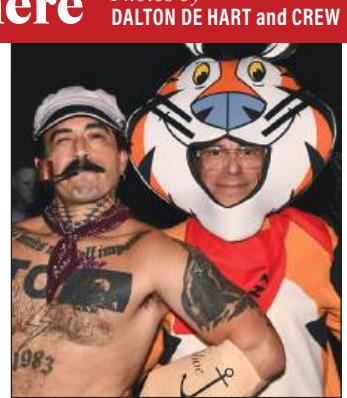
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Houston's most anticipated costume celebration returned October 25 as the 44th Annual Halloween Fantasy Ball took over South Beach Houston, welcoming hundreds of guests in an explosion of creativity, color, and community spirit. Hosted by DJ Chad Guidry and organized under the direction of Robert Wallace, the event reaffirmed why it was awarded both *Best Dance Party* and *Favorite LGBTQ (Non-Benefit) Event of the Year* by *OutSmart* readers this year.

The crowd embodied fantasy in every form—glittering gods, gothic priests, sequined superheroes, and duos in matching latex, lace, and leather. The photos captured by community photographer Dalton DeHart tell the story best: dazzling group costumes, mischievous smiles, and the unmistakable joy that was on full display.

Since its debut in 1980, the Fantasy Ball has stood as one of Houston's longest-running queer traditions. Wallace, who revitalized the event after a pandemic-era lull, attributes its success to its authenticity. "We've tried not to make too many changes," he says. "It's a

space where people can just have fun and be creative together."

Under the neon lights and pulsating beats by DJ Guidry, guests packed the South Beach dance floor—some staying well past the official end time. Wallace believes the party's appeal lies in its inclusivity and simplicity: "There's no fundraising aspect. It's just about joy, connection, and community."

The Fantasy Ball's legacy now spans four decades, built by a dedicated roster of hosts and supporters who have kept its magic alive. "This is their party," Wallace says. "They're really dedicated to making it a success."

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RUNNING INTO ROMANCE

Brian Klosterboer and Chris Grochowski had a surprise first date at a fateful 10K race.

by DAVID CLARKE

photos by PEDRO ESCOBAR PHOTOGRAPHY



When Brian Klosterboer showed up for what he thought was a date in 2017, he didn't expect to meet his future husband. He and Chris Grochowski both laugh when telling the story.

"Our friend, Robby Guthart, is the person who introduced us," Brian recalls. "We both moved to Houston in the summer of 2016. Chris started his PhD program in human genetics at Baylor College of Medicine, and I moved here to clerk for a federal judge after law school. I thought I was going on a date with Robby, but right before, he texted to say he was bringing a friend. That friend turned out to be Chris."

The two hit it off quickly, though not in the way either of them expected. The night they met, Chris mentioned that he had to leave early because he was running a 10K the next morning. "Then Brian said, 'Well, I'm also running a race tomorrow morning,'" Chris laughs. "So we left and I said, 'I guess I'll see you at 7:00 a.m.' That 10K ended up being our first date."

Houston soon became their shared playground. "We were both new to the city and didn't really know anyone," Chris says. "So a lot of our early relationship was exploring Houston together and forming new friend groups."

Brian fondly remembers their "Cultural Thursdays" dates where they'd take advantage of free museum nights. "We would go to the MFAH, the Menil, do pub trivia at Griff's, go to Axelrad, different art galleries. It naturally happened where we hung out more, just the two of us. By our fifth date, we were cooking together at home."

By May of that year, their relationship had become official. "Chris has a very severe dairy allergy," Brian says. "Our very first time hanging out, I brought Domino's pizzas, not realizing he couldn't eat any of them. So for his birthday, I went all out and made everything dairy-free. A couple weeks later, Chris asked me to officially be his boyfriend."

The couple's bond deepened in an unexpected way later that year when Hurricane Harvey hit. "That was the first full week we spent together," Brian recalls. "We sheltered in place for the entire week. Thankfully, we were fine, but it was a good test of our relationship. We could get along very well for a whole week and still support each other through that stressful time."

"It's easy to be in a relationship when everything is going fine, but it's things like Hurricane Harvey, the winter freeze, and the pandemic that show how you support each other," Chris agrees. "Going through those events strengthened our relationship and made me sure that this was someone who understood the world in same the way I did."

Brian works as an attorney for the ACLU of



Texas, and Chris is now a professor at Baylor College of Medicine, where he researches human genetics. Both are deeply engaged in the community, from volunteering for Beto O'Rourke's campaigns to staying active in the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus.

"I really love Chris's love for other people and our broader community," Brian says. "Early on, he founded a book club and named it Book Club Houston, partly as a pun on Club Houston, the old bathhouse. It's a predominantly gay—but not exclusively gay—book club that's been going now for eight years."

When it came time to propose, Brian wanted something unforgettable. "We were taking a trip with friends to Mexico City," Chris says. "We planned to do a sunrise hot air balloon over the Teotihuacán pyramids. Most of the people on the trip knew he was popping the question. I didn't. At first, I thought he was kneeling down to tie his shoe, and I was like, 'We're in a hot air balloon, you don't need to tie your shoe!' But then he proposed, and I was shocked and thrilled."

Fast forward to October 4, 2025, when the two exchanged vows at Houston's Julia Ideson Library, a downtown architectural gem that married their love of books, history, and community.

"The library was just so meaningful," Brian says. "All the different tables were named after books we'd read about Houston, including *Lot* by Bryan Washington and *1981* by JD Doyle. We even featured some of the authors' works at the wedding."

Their officiant, Omar Rouchon, a Presbyterian minister and member of their book club, made the ceremony especially personal. "It felt really meaningful for Omar to officiate

because he's known us almost the entire time we've been together," Chris says. "He could speak to our relationship in a way that someone we'd ask randomly just couldn't."

The celebration spanned three days. "Friday night, we rented out Angel Share, the same bar where we first met," Brian says. "Our friend Robbie gave a speech about how I thought I was on a date with him. The owner, Mary Ellen Angel, even designed a special cocktail menu for us."

Their wedding planner and florist, Robert Shipman (who recently won *OutSmart's* Gayest & Greatest award for Best Wedding Planner) made sure every detail was flawless. "We had a minute-by-minute schedule, and everything went exactly to plan," Chris says. "Robert perfectly executed our vision, including trees as table centerpieces. He's phenomenal."

The theme reflected both of their professions. "We had a law-and-genetics motif," Brian says. "Even the cake, by Jodycakes, followed that idea. It was entirely dairy-free because of Chris's allergy."

Live music came courtesy of Harmony Strings, a group they discovered through *OutSmart's* Gayest & Greatest listings. "I played viola growing up," Brian shares, "so I wanted live string music. They even customized and

arranged Beyoncé and Miley Cyrus' 'I Want You to Want Me' for us to walk in to."

The night also included a special performance by drag artist Brigitte Bandit, one of Brian's clients from his work with the ACLU of Texas. "It was really meaningful for her to perform," Brian says. "Texas passed a law essentially banning drag, and we sued. So having her there performing Dolly Parton numbers was a highlight."

Catering was handled by Churrascos, which ensured every dish was 100% dairy-free and clearly allergy-labeled. "That was really important to me," Chris says. "They did an incredible job."

Photography was by Pedro Escobar, with video captured by Brian's uncle and sister. "Pedro was great, and we love that so many of our vendors were part of the LGBTQ+ community," Brian says.

Looking back, both agree that the best part of the weekend was seeing their worlds come together. "It's so cool to see people from all walks of your life in one place. Friends from high school, college, grad school, and co-workers," Brian says. "Those moments are so precious."

"It was surreal," Chris nods. "All of our worlds collided in the most joyful way."



FAMILIES WITH PRIDE 2025 AT DISCOVERY GREEN OCTOBER 18, 2025

Families in all their beautiful diversity gathered at Discovery Green in downtown Houston for the 2025 edition of Families with Pride, a celebration of love, inclusion, and community. Hosted by Houston City Council Member Abbie Kamin in partnership with the Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce, the event welcomed attendees of all ages for a morning of connection and support.

The gathering offered family-friendly activities and a strong show of unity from elected officials, community leaders, and law enforcement representatives. From a kids' costume contest to the Proud Puppy Pawty and Pride Story Time,

the park was filled with moments that reflected the heart of Houston's LGBTQ community and its allies.

Families with Pride highlighted the many ways family is defined—and the importance of making public spaces inclusive for everyone. In a time when LGBTQ families face increasing scrutiny and legislative threats, the event served as a reminder that visibility, support, and joy are acts of resistance and resilience.

Scroll through the gallery to see how families, advocates, and leaders came together in celebration of community and the beautiful diversity that defines it.





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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The November 5 full moon occurred in the earthy sign of Taurus. Full moons occur every month when the sun and moon are in opposite signs at the exact same degree. For this particular lunation, the sun will be at 13 degrees Scorpio, meaning the moon will be in the opposite sign of Taurus at 13 degrees. Full moons are linked to completion, manifestation and illumination. What was once hidden can now be illuminated during a full moon. In astrology, the moon is linked to emotions, so when the moon is full we can feel like our emotions are full and overwhelming. Full moons are the perfect time each month to get honest about how you're feeling.

TAURUS ZODIAC FACTS

Element: Earth, the element that focuses on results, the practical and the material.
Planetary Ruler: Venus, the Roman goddess of love, romance and beauty.

Cosmic House: The 2nd House, the angle on the astrological wheel that deals with money, possessions and self-worth.

Crystals: Emerald, peridot and prehnite are some of the crystals you may want to carry or work with during this full moon.

Modality: Fixed, meaning this is a sign that anchors and stabilizes situations. Sometimes fixed signs can become stubborn.

TAURUS FULL MOON & THE ELEMENTS

Earth Signs—The earth signs (Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn) are right at home with this full-moon energy. **Taurus**, you're in the spotlight; it's all about you. This full moon is about the way you project yourself out into the world. You may decide to do something to change your appearance in some way. **Virgo**, this full moon illuminates the part of your chart that deals with travel; maybe it's time to plan a trip. You may be rethinking some of your beliefs and philosophies about life. **Capricorn**, the part of your chart dealing with self-expression and creativity is highlighted. This full moon has you thinking about what you want to create or express in your life.

Water Signs—The water signs flow well with an earthy full moon. **Pisces**, this full moon illuminates the part of your chart that deals with communication. Since Taurus rules the throat, what is it you need to communicate, Pisces? **Cancer**, the full moon in Taurus illuminates the part of your chart that deals with friendships, groups and your hopes and wishes. You may be rethinking some of your friendships while also considering your long-term hopes and dreams. Maybe it's time to start a vision board. **Scorpio**, this full moon is all about your relationships. Are you looking for love? Do you want a relationship right now? A Taurus may play an important role in your life.

Manifestation Meets Reality Under the Taurus Full Moon

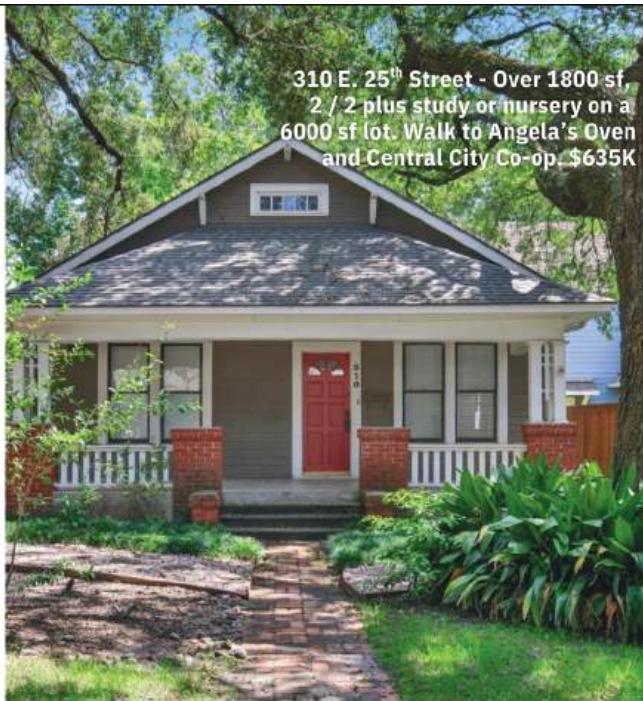
Grounded yet illuminating, this lunation bridges Scorpio's passion and Taurus' craving for stability.

By KEVIN CASEY

Fire Signs—The fire signs struggle a bit with an earthy full moon. You could find earthy energy smothering and suffocating. **Aries**, this full moon has you focusing on your finances and your self-worth. Have you been selling yourself short lately? **Leo**, this full moon illuminates the part of your chart that deals with career: promotions, recognition or maybe a new job. It's time to take center stage and show the world your talents and abilities. **Sagittarius**, the full moon in Taurus lands right in the part of your chart that deals with your everyday routines, work and health. It's the perfect time to clear the clutter and get organized. Rethinking exercise and your diet is also at the top of the list.

Air Signs—The air signs are best pleased with the earthy element. An earthy full moon can feel boring and plodding to air signs. **Libra**, this full moon lands in the part of your chart that deals with joint finances and death. No, Libra, no one is dying but there's probably something or someone that might need to go. What needs to "die" in your life: a habit? a situation? **Aquarius**, this full moon lights up the part of your chart that deals with home, real estate, family and emotions. Time for a move? Maybe a family situation that's plagued you for some time finally gets resolved. **Gemini**, this full moon casts you into the deepest part of your chart that deals with spirituality, psychic experiences, and self-reflection. I know it's a large ask, Gemini, but maybe it's time to slow down, take a day off, and just be; you and those around you will be glad you did.

COMPASS



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Continuing a Celestial Legacy

Kevin Casey takes the helm of *OutSmart's* astrology column.

Following the passing of beloved astrologer Lilly Roddy last month, *OutSmart* is honored to welcome Kevin Casey as the new voice behind the magazine's astrology column, *Sign Out*. With a gentle spirit, sharp insight, and more than two decades of experience, Kevin brings his own unique blend of intuition and practicality to the skies—continuing Lilly's cherished legacy of cosmic guidance for the Houston community and beyond.

Kevin's journey into the metaphysical began in 1991, when he was introduced to the spiritual text *A Course in Miracles*. Its teachings on forgiveness, perception, and love opened the door to a lifelong curiosity about the unseen dimensions of life. By 1992, that curiosity led him to astrology, where he found a symbolic language for understanding human

experience and spiritual evolution.

Since 2007, Kevin has been a professional reader at Houston's renowned Body Mind & Soul bookstore, offering astrology, numerology, and tarot readings. Over the years, he's developed a reputation for his compassionate approach, blending practical insight with spiritual depth to help others navigate life's transitions with greater clarity and purpose.

With 26 years of experience, Kevin views astrology as both an art and a spiritual tool—a way to illuminate the patterns that connect us to ourselves and to the universe. As he steps into his new role, Kevin invites readers to explore astrology not just as prediction, but as *reflection*—a path toward self-understanding, healing, and empowerment.

Connect with Kevin at popastrology.com or on Instagram @popastrology.


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Reign LaRue reigns supreme at South Beach and JR's.

by SAM BYRD | photo by VICTOR CONTRERAS



When Reign LaRue thinks about her younger self, her advice would be, "keep being the little superstar that lives within you, because one day it's going to save you. Your existence will inspire and bring joy to others. Keep dancing!" So far, that advice has held true as Reign is now a mainstay on Houston's drag stages. Read on for more about this captivating queen.

Pronouns?

I personally don't care about pronouns. Call me whatever you like.

Hometown?

Born and raised in Houston.

Drag birthday? August 18, 2018

Is there a story behind your stage name?

I wanted a one-word name like Beyoncé, so I googled synonyms to *queen*. *Loyal* and *Reign* stuck.

What got you interested in drag?

My partner, Lupe Salas, introduced me to drag. He was in love with Bianca del Rio. We went to watch her live at South Beach in 2014, and the rest is history.

Describe your performing persona.

I'm always giving you a concert. It's an experience. My goal is to make you feel something, whether that's feeling sexy, happy, confident, or something in between.

Have you ever had a defining moment in your life?

Just recently, I competed for the title of Miss Gay Texas USofA At Large and it was a life-changing experience. It challenged me physically, mentally, and emotionally. I have a dream to become a part of the legacy that has raised me into the queen I am today. I may not have won the crown, but it's only just the beginning and I am not a quitter.

Most embarrassing moment on stage?

Hmm, that's a tough one because I truly do know how to laugh at myself. If I fall or stumble, I make it a moment and keep it pushing.



Most memorable moment as a performer?

There have been so many, but my favorite has to be my first performance. I wore no lashes because I forgot them at home, and I had no dance tights on, but I won a So You Think You Can Drag contest against Mistress Isabelle Brooks. Clock that tea!

What's your ultimate goal as a performer?

Through the art form of drag, I get to release my thoughts and feelings, which then inspires others. I hope to uplift people and turn my pains into gains.

Thoughts about legislation restricting drag performances?

I think they are worried about the wrong things when there are so many other challenges to tackle in our world. I believe our government is focused on things that they are afraid of. The LGBT community has been around for many years, and I highly doubt we are going anywhere anytime soon.

Do you have a drag family? If so, tell us about them.

I am a part of the LaRue family here in Texas. My mother is Laisha LaRue and my grandmother is Layla LaRue. I am also a part of the Ross family. My second drag mother is Chloe Crawford Ross. My third drag mother is living legend Kofi.

What was your dream job as a child?

I've made my dream job somewhat my reality. I fantasized about being a pop star, and in my own little way, I became that.



Any advice for up-and-coming performers?

Sometimes things are better left unsaid. Choose peace. Stay out of drama. Kill them with kindness.

Where do you normally perform?

As the entertainment director of JR's and South Beach, you can find me there pretty frequently—Sunday and Wednesday nights at South Beach, Monday and Tuesday nights at JR's. I am also on cast at Houston's Best Drag Brunch at Bar Boheme.

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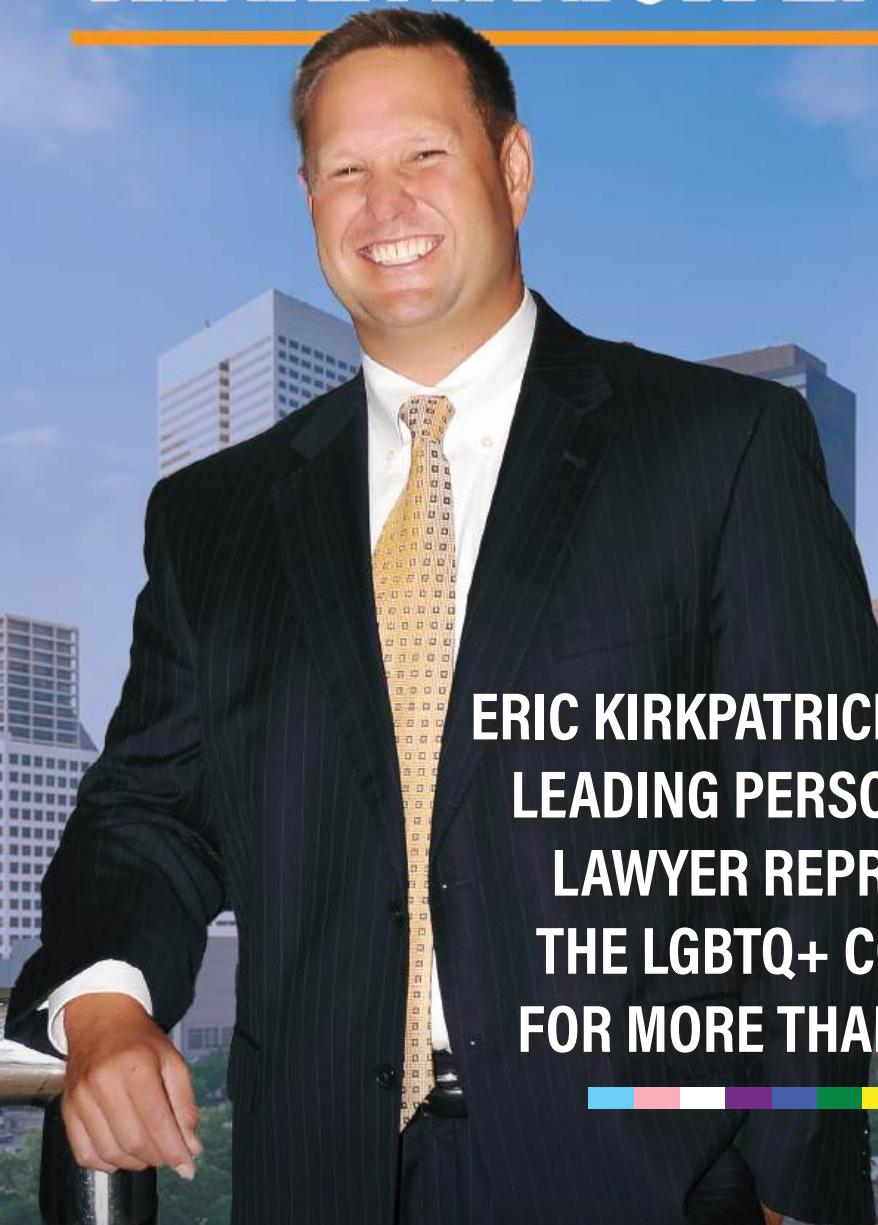
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