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SEPT. 2025

HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

# OutSmart

## BALLOONS with BITE

DJ MORROW TRANSFORMS  
A PLAYFUL MEDIUM INTO EDGY  
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HOUSTON'S LGBTQ MAGAZINE

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Story by Olivia Flores Alvarez

Photo of the work *To Fight*, courtesy of DJ Morrow





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For this month's observance of National Hispanic Heritage Month, *OutSmart* spoke with seven local Hispanic leaders who have made their mark in Houston's LGBTQ community. Elia Chino is the CEO of Fundación Latinoamericana de Acción Social (FLAS), a vital nonprofit serving Houston's LGBTQ Latino community. FLAS clients Rita Cordero and Juan Perez describe the life-saving impact that FLAS has had in their lives.

Then we meet Javier "Javi" Simons, whose love of the music from his native Panama inspired him to begin KOQ Agency, a booking and talent-buying company that nurtures and elevates underrepresented queer artists looking to build performing careers.

Josue Rodriguez, director of community and strategy at the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston and Harris County, tells us how he drew on his own experience with homelessness to adopt an intersectional approach that considers mental health, substance use, and systemic inequities.

Linda Morales remains a force in LGBTQ advocacy more than three decades after successfully challenging a Texas law criminalizing same-sex intimacy. Now 70, she continues organizing around labor and civil rights through her *Raise the Mic* Facebook column

that encourages people to speak truth to power.

Our Heritage Month profiles conclude with Alexis Vargas talking about his career in public relations that's rooted in embracing authentic cultural awareness. Through collaborations with organizations like Theatre Under The Stars, he has helped create platforms where marginalized voices feel welcomed and heard.

This month's arts and entertainment coverage features cover star DJ Morrow, who has built a career around transforming balloons into striking works of both art and protest. His breakthrough 3,000-balloon installation at Hardy Nance Studios in 2023 explored truth and perception, earning reactions of awe and surprise. With a new installation this month at the Beer Can House, Morrow continues to challenge audiences while reimagining what protest art can be.

Then we chat with married theater directors Mitchell Greco and Brandon Weinbrenner, who have balanced love and leadership as they shape Houston's theater scene. Greco is the newly named associate artistic director at Theatre Under The Stars, while Weinbrenner holds the same title at the Alley Theatre. Both credit earlier acting backgrounds for their directing style that emphasizes collaboration, adaptability, and respect for the actors they work with.

On the local ballet scene, Houston Ballet's Ryan Williams is a 21-year-old who fell in love with classical ballet at age 12. Now performing in this month's *Rock, Roll & Tutus* at the Wortham Theater, Williams embraces the program's blend of classical and contemporary styles—including a Rolling Stones-inspired piece that will surprise audiences.

Finally, we catch up with comedian Fortune Feimster ahead of her tour appearance in Sugar Land on September 20. Her all-new hour of material draws on personal stories that manage to cross political lines and bring people together through laughter and shared experiences.

Mark your calendars for October 23, from 5:00 to 9:30 p.m., for the party of the year as *OutSmart* celebrates the winners of its **28th annual Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards** at South Beach Houston. For more details, visit [tinyurl.com/gg25event](https://tinyurl.com/gg25event).



**Greg Jeu**  
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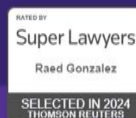
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## SCENE OUT

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The Greater Houston LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce presented Pride @ 5 mixer at Meow Wolf Houston, Radio Tave, on July 30, 2025. Pictured are **Ryan Wilson, Francés Jones, Tammi Wallace, Lorena Montez, and Jackie Aguilera.**



On July 31, 2025, Main Street Theater presented Pride Night for 30 Steps. Pictured are **Zack Varela, Chaney Moore, Faheemah Karim, Brock Hatton, and Andrew Ruthven.**



A Benefit for Kofi hosted by Mistress Isabelle Brooks and Reign Larue was held at South Beach on July 31, 2025. Pictured are **Mistress Isabelle Brooks and Silk Ganache** from *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Miss Continental Plus **Tashae Royale Sherrington**, and Miss Continental Elite **Alexis Mateo.**



The Houston LGBTQ+ Indie Authors Fair was held at the Montrose Center on August 2, 2025. Pictured are participants and friends.



On August 2, 2025, White Linen Night in the Heights was held on 19th Street and surrounding areas. Pictured are **Janet Ham, William Hyatt, Colby Weems, Dale Johnson, and Parker Harrison.**



The Diana Foundation held its August Happy Hour at the Montrose Country Club on August 6, 2025. Pictured are **Ashton Chandra, June Neidell, and Joseph Ronquillo.**



On August 10, 2025, Fort Bend County's second annual Pride Festival was held at the Fort Bend County Fairgrounds. Pictured are FBCP board members, and festival attendees.



On August 15, 2025, Stages Theatre presented Spin and Sparkle for *Honky Tonk Laundry*. Pictured are members of EPAH.



The University of Houston LGBTQ Alumni Network presented Red Dinner 6 at the Alumni Center on August 16, 2025. Pictured are **Davis Mendoza Darusman, Dr. Maria C. Gonzalez, and Roxanne Werner.**



On August 16, 2025, the Kindred Spirits annual dance was hosted by the Montrose Center at The Ballroom at Bayou Place. Pictured are some of the guests at the Kindred Spirits Dance—Ladies Night.



EPAH held its August 2025 Dinner and Elections Meeting at Maggiano's Little Italy on August 19, 2025. Pictured are (front row from left) **Randall Hendrick, Robert Lee, Michele Laprade, Dan DiDonato,** (back row from left) **Fo Garcia, Ed Holmstrom, Mike Bodin, Bob Burrell, Aaron Rublein, and Jose Cuellar.**



Judge Jerry Simoneaux's fundraising reception, Bow Ties and Brews, was held at St. Arnold's Brewery on August 20, 2025. Pictured are **Tiffany Guerra, Kent Rutter, Jerry Simoneaux, and Joel Norris.**



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# Investing on the Digital Frontier

Consider the risks of stepping into the unregulated cryptocurrency marketplace.



Bitcoin, introduced by the pseudonymous figure Satoshi Nakamoto, was the first cryptocurrency. Its design aimed to solve a fundamental issue in digital commerce: how to transfer

value without a trusted intermediary such as a bank. Bitcoin's blockchain technology—the public ledger that verifies and records transactions—was revolutionary. It created a system where consensus could be achieved without centralized authority.

From this foundation, other cryptocurrencies emerged. Ethereum, launched in 2015, introduced programmable “smart contracts” that enabled decentralized applications. Litecoin, Ripple, and more recent entrants like Solana and Cardano expanded the ecosystem. Today, thousands of cryptocurrencies exist, though only a fraction have meaningful adoption or utility.

## The Regulatory Vacuum

One defining feature of cryptocurrencies is that they are not currently regulated in the same way traditional commodities and securities are. Governments have struggled

to catch up with the rapid pace of innovation. In the United States, there is still debate over whether cryptocurrencies should be treated as securities, commodities, or an entirely new asset class. Other jurisdictions, from the European Union to Asia, are at different stages of developing legal frameworks.

This lack of regulation creates both freedom and risk. On the one hand, cryptocurrency allows for borderless transactions and innovation unhindered by traditional institutions. On the other, it exposes investors to fraud, hacking, and sudden losses without the protections that typically exist in regulated financial markets. The collapse of major exchanges like FTX in 2022 highlighted how devastating this absence of oversight can be.

## Understanding the Risks

Investing in cryptocurrency comes with unique risks:

- **Volatility:** Prices can swing dramatically within hours.
- **Security:** Investors who hold coins directly are responsible for protecting private keys. Hacks and scams have cost individuals billions in losses.

- **Liquidity:** While the largest cryptocurrencies are liquid, smaller tokens can be difficult to buy or sell without moving the market.
- **Regulatory Uncertainty:** Sudden government actions—such as bans, taxation, or new compliance rules—can impact prices and accessibility.
- **Technology Risks:** Bugs in code, network congestion, or vulnerabilities in protocols can undermine trust.

In all cases, cryptocurrency exposure should not come at the expense of foundational financial strategies, such as maintaining emergency savings, investing in retirement accounts, or holding diversified core assets like equities and bonds.

## The Role of ETFs and Diversification

One of the newer and more accessible ways to invest in cryptocurrency is through exchange-traded funds. Crypto-focused ETFs can track the price of Bitcoin, Ethereum, or even baskets of related companies and technologies.

The advantage of ETFs is that they provide exposure without requiring investors to manage private keys, navigate unregulated exchanges, or deal with the complexities of



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custody. They are traded on regulated stock exchanges, which adds a layer of investor protection and transparency.

Some ETFs invest directly in digital assets, while others focus on companies in the blockchain and cryptocurrency space, such as miners, exchanges, or hardware manufacturers. This provides investors with multiple ways to gain diversified exposure, depending on their risk appetite and investment goals.

**Comparing with Traditional Hedges**

Investors often compare cryptocurrency to traditional hedges like gold. Gold has served as a store of value for centuries, offering stability during inflationary periods and times of geopolitical uncertainty.

Cryptocurrency, by contrast, is newer and far more volatile. While it shares some characteristics with gold, it lacks the historical track record of stability.

Cryptocurrency remains a fascinating experiment at the intersection of technology and finance. It has grown beyond its origins as a peer-to-peer payment system into a speculative market watched closely by institutional and retail investors alike. Yet, its lack of regulation, extreme volatility, and technological risks mean it is far from a stable replacement for traditional money.

Because every investor's financial situation is unique, it is important to work with a financial planning professional who can help design a plan and a portfolio appropriate for your goals, time horizon, and risk profile.

*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](mailto:grace.yung@lpl.com). For more information, visit [www.midtownfng.com](http://www.midtownfng.com) or [www.midtownfng.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm](http://www.midtownfng.com/lgbtqplus.10.htm).*



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# QUEER THINGS to DO

## COMMUNITY

**Monday, September 22 - Saturday, September 27**

### Gay Softball World Series 2025

The Gay Softball World Series returns to Houston with a full slate of events, from the Opening Stampede to the closing ceremony and awards presentations.

[tinyurl.com/3zn4e5xj](https://tinyurl.com/3zn4e5xj)



ALANA CAMPBELL

## STAGE

**Friday, September 26**

### Out at the Ballet for Rock, Roll, & Tutus

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/2w3jnnnt5](https://tinyurl.com/2w3jnnnt5)



## STAGE

**Monday, September 29**

### Drag Night at the River Oaks Theatre

Get ready for an unforgettable night as Drag at the River Oaks Theatre returns—bigger, bolder, and fiercer than ever. Hosted by the one-and-only Rachel B\*tchface, this show features Houston's top drag talent. [tinyurl.com/2kf4j2h8](https://tinyurl.com/2kf4j2h8)





COMMUNITY

**Saturday, September 13**  
**Feisty Fest 2025**

The Feisty Collective hosts a parking-lot bash to celebrate its one-year anniversary, featuring drag shows, a vendors market, a bounce house, a photo booth, and more.

[tinyurl.com/3725sdzt](https://tinyurl.com/3725sdzt)



COMMUNITY

**Saturday, September 13**  
**Pup of Montrose Contest**

A highlight of the second annual Houston Pup Weekend, the Pup of Montrose Contest celebrates the 2024 Pup of Montrose's contributions and selects the 2025 Pup of Montrose in this exciting competition.

[tinyurl.com/yp55rkpc](https://tinyurl.com/yp55rkpc)

COMMUNITY

**Sunday, September 14**  
**Tony's Place presents**  
**Future Fabulous**

Tony's Place unveils its first-ever fundraiser that's not just a party, it's a portal, a shimmering rupture in the timeline, a collective act of radical imagination. Expect national drag legends and a venue that feels like the inside of a dream. [tinyurl.com/ywzc6hne](https://tinyurl.com/ywzc6hne)



STAGE

**September 20**  
**Pride Chorus Houston**  
**presents Mi Familia**

Coro Gay Ciudad de México, Mexico City's LGBTQ choir that's known for its lavish and poignant productions, will sing alongside Pride Chorus Houston for the first time.



COMMUNITY

**Saturday, September 20**  
**FLUX Houston Pool Party**

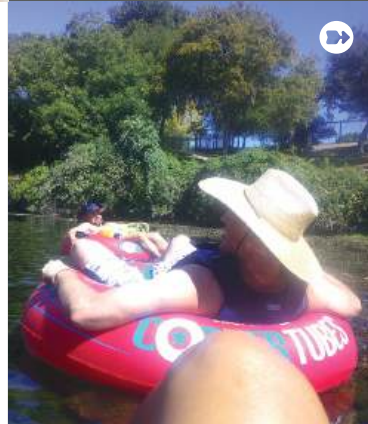
FLUX Houston hosts a free pool party at Heights House Hotel, featuring live beats by DJ TWERKSUM, free drinks all night, voter registration, and free STI testing. 100 W. Cavalcade St. [tinyurl.com/bdhcw4wy](https://tinyurl.com/bdhcw4wy)

COMMUNITY

**Saturday, September 27**  
**Houston Gaymers**  
**September 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/46bf5kzj](https://tinyurl.com/46bf5kzj)



COMMUNITY

**Thursday, September 25 -**  
**Sunday, September 28**  
**Bear Tubing Weekend**

Bear Tubing is a Texas tradition for gay bears, cubs, otters, friends, and admirers. Every year, over 300 participants gather in New Braunfels for fun, featuring a lazy float down the Comal River in inner tubes. [tinyurl.com/4adbn6e7](https://tinyurl.com/4adbn6e7)



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September 18-28



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## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

## QUEER THINGS to DO SAVE the DATES

### STAGE

**Thursday, October 2**

**Alley Theatre ActOUT for *The DaVinci Code***

Ticket holders for the October 2 performance of *The DaVinci Code* can enjoy a pre-performance mixer with music, socializing, light bites, and drinks. [tinyurl.com/4rzajj7d](https://tinyurl.com/4rzajj7d)

### STAGE

**Saturday, October 4**

**David Archuleta's Earthly Delights Tour at House of Blues**

American Idol alum David Archuleta brings his Earthly Delights tour to the Bronze Peacock at House of Blues Houston. [tinyurl.com/672wdy49](https://tinyurl.com/672wdy49)

### STAGE

**Saturday, October 4**

**Houston Pride Band presents Silk Road Journey**

Houston Pride Band kicks off its 48th season with Silk Road Journey, highlighting the impact and influence of Asian composers and culture. [tinyurl.com/mr2ye9az](https://tinyurl.com/mr2ye9az)

### STAGE

**Sunday, October 5**

**Sasha Colby Stripped II Tour**

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

### COMMUNITY

**Saturday, October 18**

**Katy Pride Celebration**

Katy Pride presents its biggest celebration yet, featuring LGBTQ-friendly businesses and organizations, live entertainment, kids' activities, delicious food, refreshing drinks, and more. [tinyurl.com/2sre6e26](https://tinyurl.com/2sre6e26)



### COMMUNITY

**October 23**

**2025 Gayest & Greatest Awards Party**

It's the party of the year as OutSmart celebrates all the winners of the 28th annual Gayest & Greatest Readers' Choice Awards at South Beach Houston. [tinyurl.com/gg25event](https://tinyurl.com/gg25event)



**Submit your events at** [calendar@outsmartmagazine.com](mailto:calendar@outsmartmagazine.com)



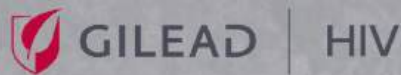


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### Bronze

Mark "Sparky" Twyford, Brian Stevens, Brian Tapia-Slacum, Ked Tedford, Eddie Domingue & Rudy Villarreal

### Rustic

Leo Serrata, Brian Hogan, Jason Prentice, Ken Estrella, Tyler Neal & Henry Guerrero, Richard Segal

### Buckle

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# LEATHER, LACE, AND LASTING IMPACT

Montrose Center's annual fundraiser channels Pride to sustain essential LGBTQ services in Houston.

by DAVID CLARKE | photos by RAUL CHAIDEZ



"We are Houston's LGBTQ+ Center. We have been serving this community since 1978, and our services are vast," says Meleah Jones, Montrose Center's director of development. "We do mental-health services, we have gender-affirming care, we provide youth services, senior services, 24-hour crisis intervention, and much more. We like to say we're like a one-stop shop for LGBTQ+ Houston for their social-services needs."

The annual Out for Good gala is the Center's largest fundraiser. "It benefits all of our programs. It helps us fuel our mission year round," Jones explains. "Last year, we raised over \$400,000 at the gala, and we're hoping to have over 800 attendees this year."

The event, timed to coincide with National Coming Out Day, is all about celebrating successes and raising awareness about the Center's mission. "It's like a traditional gala that you might think of, but with some extra fun elements," she explains. "This year, for example, we are incorporating a leather-and-lace theme. I'm sure we're going to see lots of harnesses and see-through tops. We want to celebrate our community and be out and proud even in our current time."

**WHAT:** Montrose Center's Out for Good Gala

**WHEN:** Saturday, October 4

**WHERE:** Marriott Marquis Houston,  
1777 Walker St.

**INFO:** [onecau.se/outforgood2025](http://onecau.se/outforgood2025)

## Make a Difference as a Volunteer Donor

The Montrose Center's signature gala returns, uniting Houston's LGBTQ community in celebration and support. Proceeds sustain essential services—from mental health care and gender-affirming programs to HIV prevention and 24-hour crisis intervention. Whether you attend, volunteer, or donate, your participation ensures these vital resources continue to thrive. Learn more at [onecau.se/outforgood2025](http://onecau.se/outforgood2025) or contact [development@montrosecenter.org](mailto:development@montrosecenter.org) to sign up.





## HONOREE ATLANTIS NARCISSE

### Building Wholeness, Fighting for Humanity

**W**hen Atlantis Narcisse learned she would be honored at the Montrose Center's Out for Good gala next month, she was stunned. "I think I'm still in disbelief, if that makes sense," Narcisse admits. "I have never thought about my work or anything I have done for the community as something that needed to be acknowledged. I was always just doing it for the community."

"I am introverted," she adds, "so this is like, 'Oh my God!' But I'm sure it will sink in."

This year's gala theme, Leather & Lace, reflects both toughness and transparency—qualities Narcisse knows intimately. "Leather and lace reminds me of the durability and the tenacity that I have had in order to keep going, while still allowing some parts of me to be transparent, visible, but still reclusive. In a sense, that allows me to maintain some type of autonomy and agency for myself."

Narcisse is the founder and executive director of Save Our Sisters United (SOSU), a Black trans-led organization that grew from conversations she began while working as an entertainer in Houston. "Early on, nobody was thinking about what it was like to be Black, trans, and to be able to have access to affirming things," she recalls. "The SOSU was really this call to share our shame, see our strength, and save our sisters united in the force. With that in mind, I started this conversation with trans and cis women about what it means to be a woman, because I knew the original part of the fight was cis-versus-trans."



Those dialogues evolved into a movement. "We acknowledged the things that held us apart and the stereotypes we heard about ourselves. We saw that we shared them—just in different orders—and that the things really causing the problem were the men we were dating and society," she explains. "After that, SOSU became an area to allow women and people of trans experiences to exist, and to welcome others in to work with us."

Yet, challenges remain. "We are still struggling with the performative 'taking care of trans people' instead of really taking care of trans people through hearing them and seeing them," she adds. "We should not be a second thought. We are the mothers and forepeople of the movement. So how are we a second thought?"

SOSU tackles these issues through direct aid and organizing. "We have helped people pay rent," she shares. "But the real thing is organizing, mobilizing, and removing the siloed notion that we just exist on Trans Island. I think it's time that we transition a little from self-care to include community care."

Narcisse also points to a deeper problem with how society defines trans people. "We are the only demographic of people where a medical term has become our intro into every room," she says. "If we would say, 'There goes suicidal Betty or bipolar Helen,' everyone would be offended. But no one is offended that 'trans' was meant for my medical records."

The Montrose Center has been a vital partner in SOSU's work. "They have always given us free rental space. They have collaborated with us," Narcisse explains. "We have to flip the 'me agenda' back to the 'we agenda.' If you're not taken care of, then I'm not taken care of."

Reflecting on her own journey, Narcisse urges the community to consider the long-term well-being of trans leaders. "What does it look like for me to age in the system? Where is my 401(k)?" she asks. "We must create space for elders to sit and smell the flowers, as well as watch the grass grow."

When asked what she hopes people take away from her story, Narcisse is clear: "I am a human being who happens to be trans and has given so much of myself to the community. And all I am asking the community to do is stand up so that no one person would have to sacrifice this much and not enjoy life."

Despite the obstacles, she draws hope from the next generation. "What lights me up is just seeing the newer queer and gender-expansive community walking through and being themselves. It gives me the optimistic thought that this is going to get better."



# HONOREE BRAD PRITCHETT

## Showing Up, Speaking Out, and Fighting for Texas

**W**hen Brad Pritchett learned he would be honored at the Montrose Center's gala, his reaction was simple. "You should probably be picking somebody else," he said. "I'm generally hesitant to accept any type of recognition."

This year's gala theme, Leather & Lace, highlights resilience and visibility—things that Pritchett has experienced firsthand. "I've gotten more information about the activism that exists within the leather community," he explains. "I started getting outreach from folks really involved in the leather community who want to use their positions to start doing activism and advocacy."

Pritchett's own journey into LGBTQ+ advocacy began by simply showing up. "I was one of those folks who just started showing up to everything. I knew I wanted to be more involved, so I became a member of the Houston LGBTQ+ Political Caucus," he shares. "There, people would ask, 'Does anybody know how to do this?' I would say, 'I do.' Sometimes I was telling the truth, and other times I thought, 'I'll figure it out.' That was the start of it for me, and then it transitioned into a career."

That career has now placed Pritchett at the heart of some of Texas' fiercest political battles as the interim CEO at Equality Texas. One pivotal moment came when the State targeted families of transgender children.

"When the Department of Family and Protective Services decided they were going to allow the governor and attorney general to investigate the families of trans kids, we had parents doing what you would want them to do, which is supporting their kids and listening to doctors," he recalls. "Then, you had the State weaponizing an agency against them for no reason. We were getting these reports from families about CPS investigators pulling their kids out of class and grilling them about who they were and how their parents were accepting them. It wasn't just the kids who were trans, either. It was their siblings, as well."



The impact was devastating. "We literally started seeing families becoming political refugees, where they had no choice but to leave the state to protect themselves and their kids," Pritchett says. "But just because somebody relocates, that doesn't mean they're not still a Texan."

Pritchett also credits the Montrose Center as a vital ally in this work. "Montrose Center is one of those places that I will always brag about if given the opportunity," he says. "It's their therapist support, support for young people and seniors, food pantries, health care, and more. If you're in need of something, the odds are good you'll find it at the Montrose Center. It's a crucial resource for us as a statewide organization."

Asked about today's biggest challenge, Pritchett doesn't hesitate. "Right now, it is this proliferation of misinformation, specifically against the trans community," he explains. "The State decided it was okay to weaponize the government to target families, and they're expanding that to limit the ability of trans people to exist in public spaces."


To win these battles, Pritchett says, "We have to be even louder than them and continue, at every opportunity we get, to confront the lies that they're spreading."

As for what keeps him going, he says, "I think about the community members that we get to work with. I've watched kids show up to give testimony who are now adults and still showing up to give testimony."

"Stubbornness really runs in my family, so I don't think I give up easily," he adds. "I've lived in Texas my entire life. I think we all deserve to live in a place that lives up to its full potential. No matter how bad it gets, at some point that pendulum is going to swing the other direction, and we're the ones responsible for giving it the momentum to actually make it that way."

For Pritchett, this Montrose Center honor is an opportunity to send a message. "It lets people know that no matter where you start in politics or in LGBTQ+ advocacy, there's a path forward for everybody," he notes. "I hope it lets people understand that if you want to get involved, there's a way to do it. You just have to figure out what makes sense for you."







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## PROSTATE CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

## Beyond the Diagnosis

Online support and resources are available for LGBTQ people facing prostate cancer.

by BRANDON WOLF



Each September marks Prostate Cancer Awareness Month. Approximately 1 in 8 men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer at some point in their lives.

Prostate cancer is a significant health concern, representing the second leading cause of cancer deaths in men.

While treatment can bring challenges such as changes in sexual health or urinary control, understanding options and connecting with support systems makes a critical difference. The needs of gay and bisexual men and transgender women may differ from heterosexual cisgender men, underscoring the importance of affirming, inclusive care.

Screening usually begins with a PSA (prostate-specific antigen) blood test. Results from 0.0 to 3.9 are considered typical, while a score

of 4.0 or higher often leads to further testing, such as a digital rectal exam, ultrasound, or MRI. A biopsy remains the gold standard for diagnosis.

Risk varies. African American men are advised to begin PSA testing at 40—or at 35 if they have a family history of prostate cancer. Anyone with two or more close relatives diagnosed before 65 should also start at 40. Beginning at 45, screening is recommended for all.

### The Prostate and Its Complications

Although the prostate is only the size of a walnut, it plays an outsized role: producing seminal fluid, helping propel sperm during orgasm, and regulating urine flow.

A similar structure exists in women, called the Skene's glands, but it isn't prone to cancer. Trans women retain their prostate, and while hormone therapy can shrink it, the cancer risk

remains.

One of the challenges with prostate cancer is that symptoms often appear late. Warning signs can include trouble urinating, weak flow, frequent nighttime trips to the bathroom, blood in urine or semen, erectile dysfunction, pelvic or back pain, fatigue, and unexplained weight loss.

Treatment depends on the stage and aggressiveness of the cancer. Options range from active surveillance for slow-growing cases to surgery, radiation, brachytherapy, hormone therapy, chemotherapy, or experimental treatments. Some of the newest therapies are easier to access overseas than in the U.S.

### Treatment Disparities

Most prostate cancer research has focused on heterosexual men, making disparities in care for gay men harder to track. Still, available



studies suggest important gaps remain in how treatment and support are delivered. In some cases, a physician's cultural or religious biases can affect the quality of care that gay patients receive.

Beyond medical treatment, prostate cancer survivors often face emotional challenges. Many physicians may not fully understand the sexual practices common among gay men, or the profound impact prostate removal can have on intimacy. Post-surgical support groups are typically geared toward straight men and their wives, leaving the specific emotional needs of gay men overlooked. As a result, many survivors are left without affirming spaces to process their experiences.

### Issues that Face Gay Men

In 2011, Dr. David Latini of Baylor College of Medicine studied 92 gay men with prostate cancer and identified key post-surgical challenges.

Some reported difficulty maintaining erections, with medications offering only limited help. Many had to rethink how they expressed intimacy and defined themselves sexually. Others noted reduced physical sensation or the absence of ejaculation, which can affect closeness with a partner.

Coping varied. Men in committed relationships often adapted with supportive partners, while single men faced the added challenge of explaining these changes when dating.

Latini's research also revealed resilience. With open communication, supportive partners, affirming providers, and even counseling, many men discovered new ways to experience intimacy and connection. His findings underscore that while prostate cancer changes the body, it doesn't end the possibility of a fulfilling sex life or meaningful relationships.

### Virtual Support for Gay Men with Cancer

David Horn and Todd Koser co-moderate a rare virtual support group for gay men with prostate cancer, offered through the ZERO Prostate Cancer organization. Both survivors themselves, Horn lives near Seattle and Koser in Philadelphia.

The group meets twice a month, drawing about 25 participants from across the country. "We actively make room for new folks to talk," Koser says. "It's common for them to arrive with lots of questions."

"There are many men our age who are cut off from family or live isolated lives," Horn adds. "Even those with support often aren't talking to people who truly understand. Hearing from men further along in their journey helps participants imagine a future for themselves."

Top concerns include sexual side effects,

urinary leakage, and occasional homophobia from physicians, especially in smaller communities. "In our group, men can talk openly about treatment side effects and the emotional impact," Horn says.

Newly diagnosed participants often seek perspective on surgery, radiation, or other therapies. "We don't give medical advice," Horn notes. "But men share why they chose a treatment and what they experienced."

Dating can add another layer of stress, Koser says. "Coming out as a survivor can be a source of anxiety. Although rare, some partners have left relationships after a diagnosis. Others return after treatment saying things were good for a while, and then they weren't anymore."

Sometimes, the online meetings even lead to in-person gatherings for members in the same area, creating a hybrid support system.

### Research

Dr. David Latini says reliable data on gay men and prostate cancer remains scarce. The Veterans Administration Health System added a sexual orientation marker to patient profiles years ago, but "given the climate in Washington these days, there's no way the VA would ever publish a paper using that data," he notes.

Achieving equity in prostate cancer care requires a real commitment to addressing disparities in both clinics and research. Everyone—straight, gay, bisexual, or transgender—deserves compassionate care, respect, and hope for the future.

### Support Groups and Other Resources

Support groups for gay men with prostate cancer are rare. There are three virtual groups that meet via Zoom. There is no cost to join any of the following groups:

The ZERO Prostate Cancer organization offers a support group on the first and third Sundays of each month, 12:00 noon–1:30 p.m. Houston time. To register for this group, contact Terri Likowski at [terri@zerocancer.org](mailto:terri@zerocancer.org). One can also request to be added to their email list.

The Smith Center offers a support group on the fourth Thursday of each month, 6:00–7:30 p.m. Houston time. The group is conducted in English. A second group, conducted in Spanish, is offered on the first Monday of each month, 12:30–2:00 p.m. Houston time. To register for either group, email [programs@smithcenter.org](mailto:programs@smithcenter.org).

 **Zero Prostate Cancer's LGBTQ Resources**  
[tinyurl.com/3j2knraf](https://tinyurl.com/3j2knraf)

 **Gay, Bisexual Men & Transgender Women Prostate Cancer Support Facebook Group**  
[tinyurl.com/37vr45pv](https://tinyurl.com/37vr45pv)

 **A Transgender Woman Talks about Prostate Cancer**  
[tinyurl.com/7u7dyafj](https://tinyurl.com/7u7dyafj)



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— Dr. David Latini



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## PROSTATE CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

## More Than Survival

LGBTQ prostate cancer survivors share their stories of resilience and redefined intimacy.

by BRANDON WOLF

## EARLY DETECTION IS KEY

Tripp Carter



Tripp Carter, 65, is the owner of Bradshaw-Carter Funeral Home in Montrose. In 2018, in his mid-50s, he faced a life-changing diagnosis: prostate cancer.

At the time, Carter was receiving testosterone replacement therapy through his physician for energy and overall health. Every ten days he received an injection, and as part of his care, his physician monitored his PSA (prostate-specific antigen) levels every six months.

Over time, his PSA numbers rose above 4 nanograms per milliliter—the threshold for further testing. Carter eventually underwent a biopsy, which confirmed cancer in his prostate. “That was kind of shocking, to say the least,” he recalls.

He researched urologists and selected a surgeon considered to be one of the best in the field. At first, he was discouraged to learn that the surgery might be performed by a colleague. However, after meeting with the surgeon directly, Carter was reassured that he would perform the procedure himself and be there following the surgery.

Carter also carried with him the memory of loss. In 2008, his partner, Ron Bradshaw, had died of pancreatic cancer. “One of the worst

things in the world,” Carter says, “is being wheeled into surgery without a partner. You see those lights overhead and think, ‘I could die and there’s nobody here.’”

The surgery was performed laparoscopically, and the surgeon personally checked on him afterward. In the first year, Carter saw his doctor every two months, then every six months, and later annually. Today, he returns just once every five years.

There were early challenges, including sexual function, but Carter says they were worked through. He did not experience incontinence. “I’ve worked out for more than 30 years, so my muscles were in good shape,” he explains. He also worked with staff on exercises to strengthen urinary control.

Beyond his own recovery, Carter has become an advocate. He recently joined the American Cancer Society board and last year co-chaired the Men Wear Pink campaign, where Houston ranked second out of 120 cities in funds raised for breast-cancer awareness and prevention. He will co-chair the 2025 campaign, as well.

Carter emphasizes one message above all: the sooner prostate cancer is diagnosed, the better the treatment options and results.



## A COURAGEOUS TRANS VOICE FOR CHANGE

Eve Gammill



Eve Gammill, 67, is a long-time resident of League City. A Navy veteran, she receives her health care through the Michael E. DeBakey Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Houston.

In 2015, her PSA test was normal. The next year, however, her score rose to 4.7, and by 2018 it had climbed again. A biopsy confirmed an aggressive form of prostate cancer, with a Gleason score of 9.

Gammill, a trans woman who at the time was presenting as a man, underwent surgery to remove her prostate, but her PSA remained high. “It broke my erection. That was emasculating,” she says. →





**"PROSTATE CANCER DOESN'T DEFINE YOU. IT'S A COLLECTION OF BAD CELLS IN YOUR BODY THAT YOU DIDN'T ASK FOR. THERE ARE THINGS I CAN'T CONTROL, BUT I CAN CHANGE MY MIND AND GATHER MY COURAGE."**

— Eve Gammill

Radiation followed, but even that failed to bring her PSA down.

Next, she opted for an orchiectomy (surgical removal of the testicles). When the cancer persisted, she began oncology treatment with Zytiga, a hormone therapy that reduces androgen production, which fuels prostate cancer. At last, her PSA leveled off.

In 2019, Gammill made the decision to fully transition, supported by her wife. "When my erection was broken and I thought I might only have a few years to live, I decided I was going to live authentically." She later underwent breast reconstruction and augmentation surgery.

Today, Gammill continues to take Zytiga and receives PSA testing every three months. Her score is now zero. She also keeps up with the latest research on prostate cancer in transgender women and advocates for greater study in this area.

Beyond her health journey, Gammill is deeply engaged in activism. She maintains an active Facebook network, participates in protests, and has testified before Texas legislative committees. She voices concern about bills like the so-called Women's Privacy Act, which would force transgender individuals to use bathrooms matching their biological sex. Standing 6' 2" and presenting as female, Gammill says: "If you see me in the men's room, you're going to be very disturbed."

She is also active in community service, volunteering with Sailing Angels, which takes children with special needs sailing on Galveston Bay, and with Meals on Wheels. She enjoys participating in a local book club, as well.

"Prostate cancer doesn't define you," Gammill says. "It's a collection of bad cells in your body that you didn't ask for. There are things I can't control, but I can change my mind and gather my courage."

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# A VITAL COMMUNITY ANCHOR

Founded by **Elia Chino**, FLAS has delivered culturally aware services for three decades.

by **BRANDON WOLF**



For the past 31 years, FLAS—Fundación Latinoamericana de Acción Social (Latin American Foundation for Social Action)—has been helping to make lives

better for the LGBTQ Latino community in the Greater Houston area.

It all started during the height of the AIDS crisis with one Latina woman, Elia Chino. With a deeply felt passion to help her community, she founded FLAS as a way to offer a variety of innovative, diverse, and inclusive services.

“We treat all people with respect, dignity, love, empathy, and kindness,” Chino says. “We provide services with open doors, open hearts, and open hands.” All services are provided at no cost to clients, the result of an active grant program.

Chino was born in 1962 in the small Mexican village of Agua Blanca. Her life was a challenge from the very start as she helped her parents and eight siblings. She cooked, cleaned, and walked to a local river to wash the family’s clothes.

Chino originally identified as a gay man before transitioning to her authentic gender identity in 2008. As a child, she was bullied and assaulted for her “feminine” mannerisms. She grew used to being called faggot, bitch, or gay. Even after moving to the United States, life still held enormous struggles for her—all of which she met head on, helped by new American friends and her faith.

## Responding to the AIDS Epidemic

In the 1980s, Chino volunteered at both AIDS Foundation Houston (now Allies in Hope) and

Ben Taub Hospital. She helped AIDS patients eat, drink, and go to the bathroom. She sat with them, reading the Bible and praying. Ultimately, she held them in her arms as they passed from this life.

Chino says most of those Latino gay men who died from AIDS had no contact with their families. “They were leaving their countries to have a better quality of life,” she says. “What they found here was disease and death. Many families never again heard anything about their sons who had died.”

Finally, in 1994, Chino decided to start an organization to help distribute prevention information to the LGBTQ Latino community. “There wasn’t enough information in Spanish,” she remembers. Additionally, there was “stigma, fear, taboos, discrimination and phobia.” But she was not deterred. “I never lost my faith in God.”

Chino was working at a Mexican restaurant at the time. She had one customer who usually came in three times a week. When she mentioned that she wanted to set up FLAS, he offered to give her office space in a corner of his accounting office and helped her set up a nonprofit corporation.

Chino then began doing outreach at Latino cantinas, bars, and nightclubs—all without compensation. Partnering with the Houston Health Department, she was able to stock up on condoms and Spanish-language literature.

In order to fund the efforts of FLAS, Chino approached the Education Department at Texas Southern University. The department wrote a grant titled “HIV Prevention among Hispanic Youth.” When the grant was approved, Chino was asked to be the program director. A second grant was approved, and Chino ended up working for the university from 1996 to 2003, continually growing FLAS along the way.

## A Permanent Home

In 1999, there was enough grant money for Chino to open a small office at 6666 Harwin →



Executive director Elia Chino (seated), with FLAS staff members



The FLAS walking unit in the 2025 Pride Houston parade



FLAS project director Kimberly Palacios

Drive. FLAS now had about 700 square feet of space.

Chino recalls that while doing outreach, there were some businesses that told her that there were no gay people and no AIDS in the Latino community. Some nightclub patrons would take a condom from her and then throw it away in front of her. She thought, "If I help save one life, I have done my job."

As the CEO of FLAS, Chino was asked to become part of the Houston Health Department's Community Planning Group and its Latino HIV Task Force, of which she was the chair. She was also a member of the Houston Ryan White Planning Council.

Chino often helped to raise money for funerals, cremations, and shipping bodies back home after young Latino men died of AIDS. She often held fundraisers at Inergy, a Latino gay bar, to help families pay the costs.

### Outreach Programs

The first program that FLAS undertook was to educate youth about HIV. "We had an emphasis on youth ages 11 to 21," Chino says.

FLAS never had the opportunity to go to schools, which did not allow visiting speakers to talk about sex, condoms, or HIV. "If you cannot talk about the methods of HIV transmission, you are not providing accurate education," Chino explains. So instead, she gave presentations at libraries, community centers, apartment complexes, and even churches.

FLAS now offers health screenings for HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, hepatitis C and fatty liver (which is often a sign of

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— FLAS CEO Elia Chino

alcohol addiction). Many programs deal with mental-health issues and substance abuse recovery. Individual and group therapy is available, and staff members are bilingual.

"We use a holistic approach," Chino says. FLAS even offers Zumba classes, a high-energy dance fitness program designed to be an enjoyable means of exercise and social interaction. A Re-Connect program features meditation, candles, sonotherapy and aromatherapy to promote relaxation and calm anxiety.

Through a special grant, FLAS can provide rental assistance for people living with HIV. The organization also helps clients apply for a Harris County Gold Card that provides financial assistance for essentials such as electricity, insurance, food, and health care. FLAS works with a collaborator that provides

English as a Second Language classes at low cost.

In 2017, after Chino was diagnosed with cancer, she successfully underwent chemo and radiation therapy. During this time, Hurricane Harvey unleashed its wrath on Houston. Despite being bedridden with her own health crisis, Chino's response was to start a food pantry.

In addition to its 21 full-time staff members, FLAS also uses contractors and volunteers. Their office space has grown to 10,000 square feet.

FLAS currently has an active relationship with the Mexican consulate and numerous other Latin American consulates, including El Salvador, Peru, Guatemala, and Honduras. The organization has also established relationships with universities and Houston Community College, along with other community-based organizations, health centers, and clinics.

FLAS is the fiscal agent for the Window of Health program at the Mexican consulate. A part-time staff member coordinates the program, and the consulate provides space.

To further expand their outreach, the organization has created a number of YouTube novellas on important subjects. They can be accessed at [youtube.com/@flasinc2501/](https://youtube.com/@flasinc2501/) videos.

FLAS also makes it a point to be flexible in helping clients. Staff will come in on weekends or stay later at night if someone can't be there during regular business hours.



For more info, visit [flasinc.org](https://flasinc.org).

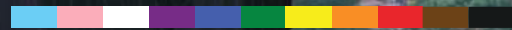


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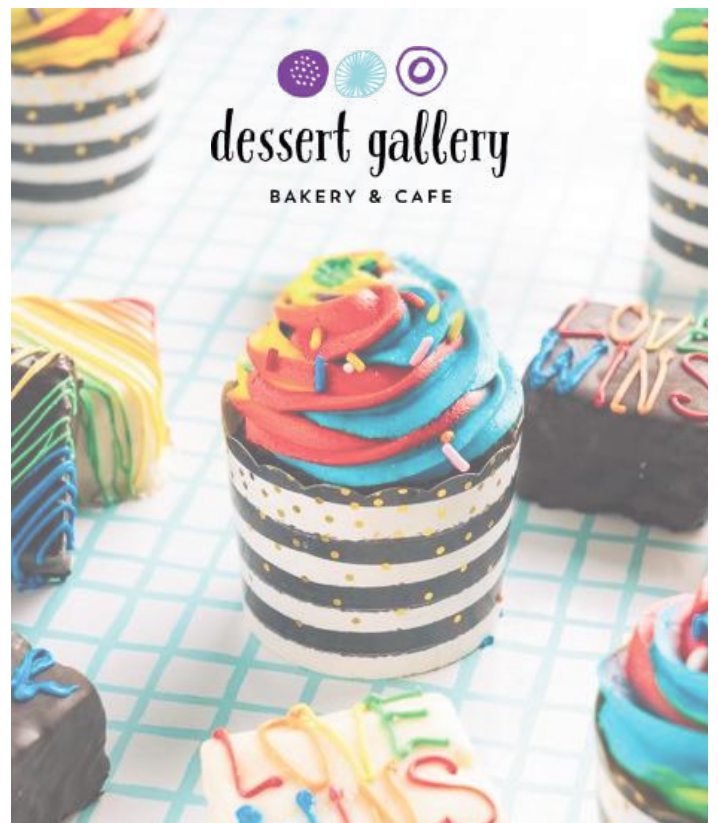
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# Volunteers at the Forefront of FLAS Pride

The parade's walking unit showcased both cultural heritage and community support.

by BRANDON WOLF



Every year, FLAS has a walking unit in Houston's annual Pride parade. This year, a large walking unit of mostly FLAS volunteers moved down the parade route—some wearing T-shirts, others passing soccer balls to each other, and a group that danced wearing colorful indigenous Mexican outfits.

Each year, FLAS sponsors a Mr. and Miss FLAS competition, and the winners take on ambassadorial roles for the organization and assist in raising funds.

In 2016, FLAS founder Elia Chino was recognized by *OutSmart* magazine as one of the top Hispanic LGBTQ

leaders in Houston. In 2022, she was honored by Televisa Univision for her service to the local community. In 2024, President Biden invited her to attend a Hispanic Heritage Month celebration at the White House.

Chino has recently been appointed to the Mayor's LGBTQ Advisory Board. "Sometimes I think that I'm dreaming," she says. "All the wonderful things that God has sent to my life."

A quick web search shows several other awards that Chino has received. While the awards are gratifying, she says that the greatest recognition is knowing that she has helped make life better for others.



**R**ita Cordero, 59, came to America from Costa Rica at the age of 17. She was part of a family of 12 children—six boys and six girls. She realized at an early age that she was a lesbian, and feeling uncomfortable about coming out, she often fell into bouts of depression.

In 1995, Cordero became an American citizen. In 2017, she broke up with a partner of 10 years after discovering her partner had been unfaithful for years. When the partner threatened her life, Cordero sought protection from the police. At the police station, an employee talked with her and asked if she was gay. When Cordero said she was, the employee recommended that she seek help from FLAS.

Cordero had never taken drugs, but she had often abused alcohol. She spent seven years at FLAS, first getting sober and then meeting with a therapist for individual sessions.

Before reaching out to FLAS, Cordero had tried twice to take her own life while in alcoholic stupors, once with a gun and a second time with pills. "FLAS gave me the opportunity to have a life," she says. "They showed me so much love and that they really cared. So I realized I needed to change, and now I'm another person."

Cordero now lives with her 94-year-old mother in the Tanglewood area, and is her caretaker. They often enjoy watching reruns of *Bonanza* and other cowboy shows.

"Anytime FLAS needs my help, I'll always be there because these people change people," Cordero says. She is always ready to speak to others who could benefit from the FLAS programs, telling them about the transformation she experienced in her own life.

**"MY FLAS THERAPIST HELPED ME A LOT WITH THE PAIN OF LOSING MY MOTHER, AND HELPED ME LEARN TO CONTROL MY ALCOHOL ABUSE. I STARTED TO GET BETTER AND FEEL DIFFERENT. I FEEL LIKE DESTINY PUT FLAS IN MY LIFE."**

— Juan Perez

## DESTINY'S CHILD

Juan Perez



**J**uan Perez, now 58, first met Elia Chino in 1999 at Inergy nightclub. She asked if he might like to volunteer with FLAS, but Perez says he was still a young man and just wanted to spend his nights dancing and partying.

The years passed, and in 2013 a neighbor invited him to attend Colores Latinos, a FLAS program whose goal is to improve the quality of life for gay Latino men over the age of 18. The program motivates participants to express their concerns openly and without fear of judgment, and to realize the importance of intelligent relationships.

Colores Latinos helps young gay men learn about safe sex, emotional control, and the realities of alcohol and other drugs. "They emphasize that it is very dangerous to mix drugs, alcohol, and sex," Perez says.

Perez remembered meeting Chino a decade and a half before. He told her that he had just lost his mother and was very depressed and had turned to alcohol. Chino suggested he begin seeing one of the FLAS therapists. "I talked to the therapist, and she helped me a lot with the pain of losing my mother, and she helped me learn to control my alcohol abuse. I started to get better and feel different," he says.

Perez has been a part of the organization ever since, working as a volunteer. He has worked at health fairs and community events and was instrumental in coordinating the first FLAS Zumba classes. At the 2014 Christmas party, he was given the organization's Volunteer of the Year award.

For the last ten years, Perez has coordinated the FLAS walking units in the annual Pride parades. This year's unit included a huge Mexican flag that was borrowed from the Mexican consulate.

Chino invited Perez to be a member of the FLAS board, and he has been serving in that role for over eight years. He also serves on an advisory group that goes out into the community to determine what the community's needs are. He then helps promote the programs that FLAS is offering.

In April of this year, Perez was one of ten scholarship recipients. He plans to use the funds to become a phlebotomist, studying at UTHealth Houston. "I feel like destiny put FLAS in my life," Perez says. And he intends to keep it a part of his life.



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# THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

Javier Simons prepares underrepresented musicians for thriving performance careers.

by IAN L. HADDOCK

Javier Simons, who prefers to be called Javi, immigrated to Texas from the Republic of Panama in 2001. A young immigrant who saw the United States of America as the land of opportunity, Javi came from a background rich in culture, food, and music. When he arrived, those are the things he missed the most in his new home. Thousands of miles away from his origin, he turned to music for soothing inspiration and a way to reach back into the culture he had left behind.

“My soundtrack was everything from Cesária Évora, Celia Cruz, Basia, Roberto Carlos, Ivy Queen, and Raúl Di Blasio to Spanish dance hall, Jamaican dance hall, salsa, merengue, bolero, and European pop,” he says. “Those rhythms weren’t just entertainment—they were survival, expression, and identity. They taught me that music is borderless and that it connects us even when we feel out of place.”

Thus began a career promoting parties and curating their soundtracks in a way that allowed talented new artists to gain exposure. Now, he is the founder and CEO of KOQ Agency, a talent buying and booking agency. KOQ’s mission is to bring together underrepresented artists alongside the most prominent artists in the world, providing a one-of-a-kind experience for audiences in venues of all sizes. KOQ provides support for everything from booking drag performers, DJs, and artists to curating Pride and other music-festival lineups.

As KOQ was building its clientele, Javi decided to strengthen the business model even more, this time by enrolling in one of the “Southern Ivies,” Rice University, to pursue a master’s degree in business administration with a focus in marketing and entrepreneurship. Through this, KOQ was accepted into the OwlSpark accelerator, a collaborative partnership between Rice University and the University of Houston that supports the next groundbreaking startups and founders. Opportunities were boundless, including working with founders and ground-level investors from

PayPal, Dropbox, and YouTube.

Graduating from the MBA program in May 2025, Javi brought all of this experience, education, and tenacity to his business. Through his educational accomplishments and intrinsic ability to understand representation, musicality, and culture, Texas-based KOQ has blossomed throughout the country as it leads a revolution to change queer artists from strictly underground and club performers to mainstream stages. “From fashion to film to music, our community has been the driving force behind so much creativity and beauty in the world,” says Javi. “Yet, too often, queer artists are the ones who receive the least recognition.”

**“FROM FASHION TO FILM TO MUSIC, OUR COMMUNITY HAS BEEN THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND SO MUCH CREATIVITY AND BEAUTY IN THE WORLD.”**

— Javier “Javi” Simons

Though KOQ has a large footprint and lots of influence, they do not shy away from supporting causes that keep it grounded. They help nonprofit organizations all over the country, including Denver Pride and Austin Pride. Forthcoming partnerships include San Francisco Pride, Vegas Pride, and Flagstaff Pride. They have also partnered with The Normal Anomaly Initiative for the Black Queer AF Music Festival. “These partnerships mat-

ter,” he says, “because they’re not just events, they’re nonprofit-led celebrations, and every dollar raised goes directly back into the community.”

Supporting community nonprofits is also personal for Javi, who sits on the board of Montrose Grace Place. “At one point in my own life, I experienced being unhoused. My daily meal was a pack of hot dog buns and weenies,” he admits. “I know the struggle firsthand, and I know how important it is to build safety and support for young people navigating those challenges. And know that *it does get better*. We just have to keep at it and work hard.”

His hard work is paying off as KOQ focuses on building up its portfolio of local artists and entertainers ready to take their next steps. Javi, a connoisseur of talent, has four tips for those who want to make it in the business:

- *Be professional.* This can’t be a hobby; artists need to treat their craft like a business, because that’s exactly what it is.
- *Know your audience* and how to connect to it. If the music isn’t genuine, people can feel that. When an artist is making work that comes from the heart, the connection with the audience is undeniable. That’s the spark we want to build on.
- *Understand that you need a revenue model for your music.* Touring, branding, negotiations—all of it requires a strategy.
- *Collaboration is key.* If an artist is professional, connected, business-minded, and collaborative, then together we can build something extraordinary.

With KOQ’s clients across the country, global influence, and connections with practically any artist you can think of, Javi is here to stay, the music will play on, and you *will* be entertained.



For more info, visit [koqagency.com](https://koqagency.com).

# A LIFE ROOTED IN ACTIVISM

Josue Rodriguez brings personal experience and strategic insight to Houston's fight against homelessness.

by CONNOR BEHRENS



For Josue Rodriguez, his mission is deeply personal, rooted in a lived journey that stretches from the border town of Matamoros (in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas)

to the complex political corridors of Houston, Texas.

Now serving as the director of community and strategy for the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston and Harris County, Rodriguez is the link between vulnerable communities and the decision-makers who shape their realities. He works closely with City and County officials to push for policies that aim to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring—especially for the communities of color that continue to be disproportionately affected.

“I have lived experience with homelessness,” Rodriguez says. “And I know firsthand how traumatic and life-changing it can be. Today, I approach homelessness through an intersectional lens, recognizing how mental health, substance use, and systemic inequities often overlap and compound.”

But to understand his advocacy, you have to start in 2004 when a young Josue and his family arrived here to settle in the Gulfton area, an immigrant-rich community in Southwest Houston.

“In many ways, my journey as an advocate began the moment we arrived in the United States,” he says. “We faced numerous challenges, many of which were made more difficult by language barriers. Like many first-generation Latino and Hispanic youth, I often found myself helping my parents navigate applications with service providers, schools, and even with everyday tasks.”→



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Those early experiences ignited a passion for advocacy in Rodriguez. It was during his senior year of high school that a lifeline came in the form of DACA (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program). It gave him a Social Security number, a work permit and, for the first time, a sense of legal identity.

Rodriguez went on to study at Houston Community College's Central Honors College and later earned a master's degree in public policy and administration from the University of St. Thomas—thanks in part to federal support made available to DACA recipients during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But it wasn't just about education. As Texas' political climate became increasingly hostile toward immigrants and LGBTQ communities, Rodriguez's activism intensified. He joined pro-immigration organizations like United We Dream and FIEL Houston. "This harsh political climate, targeting individuals like myself, my family, and my community, motivated me," he says.

His perspective is also deeply influenced by his identity as a queer Latino man. For Rodriguez, the fight for immigrant justice and LGBTQ rights is inseparable. "In the face of all this uncertainty, we must come together," he says. "We must take a moment to breathe,

## "NATIONAL HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH IS MORE THAN JUST A CELEBRATION; IT IS A TIME TO RECONNECT WITH MY ROOTS AND HONOR THE STORIES AND EXPERIENCES OF MY FELLOW LATINOS AND HISPANICS."

— Josue Rodriguez

regroup, organize, and act. We act through our votes, our political institutions, our grassroots organizing, our storytelling campaigns and, above all, through the power of our lived experiences and personal voices."

Despite his extensive résumé, Rodriguez sees his journey as far from over. Law school is on the horizon. "I believe a legal education will equip me to engage more meaningfully within the legal system, allowing me to apply my

policy background strategically, whether that means defending or challenging key legal decisions," he says. "I see a law degree as the tool that will take my advocacy to the next level."

With National Hispanic Heritage Month upon us, Rodriguez reflects on what the celebration means to him personally. "Over the years, I have come to understand how much our backgrounds, histories, and cultures shape not only who we are but also the policies that impact our lives," he says. "For me, National Hispanic Heritage Month is more than just a celebration; it is a time to reconnect with my roots and honor the stories and experiences of my fellow Latinos and Hispanics. While our community is wonderfully diverse and far from a monolith, I believe we share common struggles and dreams that can inspire meaningful policies to lift us all up."

That belief in community power—grounded in data, shaped by lived experience, and propelled by a love for his people—continues to fuel Rodriguez's work.

"Every time I have been told that I don't belong in a space," he emphasizes, "I've worked even harder to claim my place in it."

➡ Keep up with Josue Rodriguez on Instagram @josue\_s\_rodriguez.

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# SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Activist **Linda Morales** on civil rights, solidarity, and the challenges ahead for LGBTQ communities.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ

**L**inda Morales made history as part of the landmark legal case *Morales v. State of Texas*. In 1994, Morales, along with a group of other people, challenged Texas Penal Code § 21.06, which criminalized private, consensual sexual activity between same-sex adults.

The trial court declared the statute unconstitutional and issued an injunction against its enforcement. The Texas Court of Appeals affirmed the trial court's judgment before the Texas Supreme Court eventually overturned the appellate court's decision.

The case made Morales, already a well-known community organizer, famous. We caught up with her to see what she's doing more than 30 years after that groundbreaking decision.

**OutSmart: You recently celebrated your 70th birthday. You're still working on organizing labor, politics, and various community groups. And you recently launched *Raise the Mic*, a Facebook column about politics and civil rights. How has that new endeavor been going?**

Linda Morales: I believe in lifting people up, not tearing them down. That's what *Raise the Mic* is about: raising all of our voices until those in power can't ignore us. The response to *Raise the Mic* has been energizing and encouraging. I started it because I wanted to encourage people not to be afraid to speak truth to power. Too often, we think our voices don't matter, but the truth is that they do. And when we raise them together, they become impossible to ignore. That is when change happens.

So far, I've covered voting rights, LGBTQ Latino Houston history, labor rights, women's rights, attacks on democracy, and the growing threats to due process in Texas. What has surprised me most is how many people privately reach out to say, "You said what I was thinking, but I was afraid to say it." That tells me



**"TOO OFTEN, WE THINK OUR VOICES DON'T MATTER, BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT THEY DO. AND WHEN WE RAISE THEM TOGETHER, THEY BECOME IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE. THAT IS WHEN CHANGE HAPPENS."**



there's a real hunger for honesty, courage, and connection. The number of Facebook "Likes," plus people that don't or can't like us for their own political reasons, approach me and say, 'Keep writing because we look forward to your columns. You educate us about the issues.

Coming up, I want to dig deeper into the intersection of civil rights and economic justice, because whether we're talking about LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, women's, or workers' rights, it all comes down to dignity and equality.

**How do you see the state of civil rights for LGBTQ folks in Texas? What are the challenges we're facing? And most importantly, what can we do about it?**

The state of civil rights for LGBTQ+ Texans is fragile. We are living in a time where our rights are constantly under attack in the Legislature, in schools, and in our communities.

We see bills that target LGBTQ+ youth, restrict healthcare access, and attempt to erase people's identities from public spaces. These aren't just political games—they impact real lives, families, and futures.

The challenge we face is not only the legislation itself, but also the culture of fear that these attacks create. People start to feel like they need to hide who they are, and that's

**"THE STATE OF CIVIL RIGHTS FOR LGBTQ+ TEXANS IS FRAGILE. WE ARE LIVING IN A TIME WHERE OUR RIGHTS ARE CONSTANTLY UNDER ATTACK IN THE LEGISLATURE, IN SCHOOLS, AND IN OUR COMMUNITIES."**

unacceptable. What we can do about that is build solidarity. LGBTQ+ Texans cannot fight alone.

Allies, unions, faith groups, and civic organizations must link arms and refuse to let politicians divide us. We need to keep showing up, voting, organizing, and amplifying voices that are too often silenced.

**How do you see immigration, especially in Texas? Again, what are the challenges we're facing and what can we do about it?**

Immigration is part of the fabric of Texas—it always has been. Families have crossed borders for generations to seek safety, opportunity, and a better life. But instead of addressing immigration with compassion and common sense, too many of our leaders are using it as a political weapon. Immigrant communities are scapegoated, criminalized, and dehumanized.

The biggest challenge is the lack of real solutions. People want safety and order at the border, but they also want dignity and fairness for families, workers, and children. What we can do about it is push for comprehensive reform—policies that are humane, realistic, and rooted in economic justice. Texas should be leading the nation in finding solutions, not fueling division. We need to keep reminding folks that immigrants aren't the problem. They are part of the solution and part of the future of this state.

**Finally, is there anything you especially want OutSmart readers to know?**

I want your readers to know that they are not alone, and they are not powerless. The attacks we face are designed to make us feel isolated. But when we come together, we are unstoppable. Know your rights, use your voice, and never underestimate the power of solidarity.

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## CARVING OUT NEW SPACES

**Alexis Vargas** redefined his PR career by embracing authentic cultural awareness.

by CONNOR BEHRENS  
photo by ALANA CAMPBELL

**A**lexis Vargas has made it his mission to carve out a powerful niche in public relations—one that centers and celebrates Latino and LGBTQ communities through intentional storytelling, representation, and meaningful partnerships.

But his journey didn't actually start in PR.

"I actually used to work with *Houstonia* magazine," Vargas says. "Everything from fact-checking and creating content online, working with the lifestyle editor, the editor-in-chief—it was phenomenal. And it was just so wonderful, but I knew I always wanted to be a publicist."

Vargas says that to do this work right, it was vital to experience it from the inside. "It was imperative for me to start within the media before coming to this side of things."

After transitioning into PR, Vargas hit the ground running with major national accounts: Ford Latino, JPMorgan Chase Bank, Walmart, and Microsoft. But despite the scale and prestige, a bigger mission began to emerge, and his work took on new meaning.

"Long story short, the pandemic hit, and it really broadened my eyes to the type of publicist and human I wanted to be on this earth with this mission. I started realizing that I was working with a lot of wonderful Latino communities here in Houston that introduced me to so many different realities and worlds," he says. "And I was like, OK. Awesome. I see the power that I have as a publicist." →

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For Vargas, that meant moving away from cookie-cutter multicultural marketing and toward authentic, community-centered outreach. “There are so many aspects to us that cannot be encapsulated into a one-way approach,” he says. “A lot of people think, ‘Oh, we just gotta translate it into Spanish and launch it.’ But that’s not how it works.”

That commitment to nuance and cultural understanding led Vargas to partnerships that deeply resonated. One of the most impactful has been with Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS), a regional theater company based in downtown’s Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. “I pitched myself to the theater,” he says. “I said, ‘Hey, I am starting The Latinx Publicist. This is what I have been doing, and this is where I’m going with you.’”

That was four years ago, and since then, Alexis has helped build bridges between the theater and Latino communities through dynamic programming, audience engagement, and media collaboration.

“We’ve been creating wonderful opportunities for our media, community leaders, and different communities, inviting them into spaces where maybe in the past they haven’t felt welcome,” he says. “It’s just been so awesome being part of that change.”

**“A LOT OF MARKETING PEOPLE THINK, ‘OH, WE JUST GOTTA TRANSLATE IT INTO SPANISH AND LAUNCH IT.’ BUT THAT’S NOT HOW IT WORKS.”**

— Alexis Vargas

As National Hispanic Heritage Month approaches, Vargas reflects on the deeper meaning of the moment and his Salvadoran roots. “It means so much to me. In Mexico, they honor and remember the people who came before us. I feel the same way during these months of celebration—we honor the people who have paved the way. We just celebrated Pride, and it was so delicious this year in Houston. I wore a traditional indigenous costume in the parade. I felt like a Disney princess. So queer, so open, so spirited. And it was powerful to honor both my queerness and my Latinidad.”

It’s not lost on Vargas that this kind of visibility was once unimaginable. “Growing up, I saw a close mentor and friend who is the VP of marketing and community for a major communications company—a queer Latino man in power,” he recalls. “And I thought, ‘How powerful is that?’ Now I look at myself and I think, ‘A younger version of me would be proud.’ Amidst the chaos, we are still becoming what we once dreamed of.”

So what’s next for Vargas? “This year has been transitional. I’m shedding versions of myself,” he notes. “I’m on the route of becoming. Returning to school at Rice University has opened up numerous opportunities for me. I’m studying different philosophies, social and environmental sciences, and exploring literature from around the world. I just took a social-justice course, and it’s been healing to learn that the pendulum always swings.”

Vargas is now dreaming forward. “Right now, you’re meeting this version of me—the publicist,” he says. “But I can’t wait for you to meet the future version of me. I’m en route.”

 Keep up with Alexis Vargas on Instagram @latinxpublicist.



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# BALLOONS WITH BITE

Artist DJ Morrow's balloon sculptures offer a surprisingly sharp commentary on our world.

by OLIVIA FLORES ALVAREZ | PHOTOS courtesy of DJ Morrow

**D**J Morrow is a serious artist who uses a decidedly unserious medium: balloons.

Morrow uses the same balloons that clowns and buskers use to make dogs and giraffes. But he creates fine art and, in particular,

protest art.

"I first started doing the balloons with the fine-art bent as just a way of processing emotional things that I was going through, and heavy things I was dealing with around 2019," he says.

A "straight-ish, very gender-nonconforming" man with a nonbinary poly-partner, Morrow made *The Entertainer*, a balloon sculpture of a sad Pagliacci, on a lonely Valentine's Day in 2019. That marked a new approach for Morrow. A memorial to his late sister quickly followed. Reactions to both pieces were encouraging. And then COVID-19 hit, and art exhibits came to a screeching halt.

It wasn't until the 2023 ArtCrawl exhibit at Hardy Nance Studios that Morrow was able to exhibit in person. His immersive installation *Messengers* was a groundbreaking work featuring three figures, each a self-proclaimed messenger of truth.

A dark, almost menacing piece, *Messengers* employed some three thousand balloons and took more than two weeks to assemble.

Reactions to *Messengers* ranged from awe and amazement to surprise. "Surprise is a tool in an artist's toolbox, especially when you're approaching topics that can be thorny and things that people don't like to think about," says Morrow. "It's something that I'm very cognizant of, and I take full advantage of it. I want to create a message, whether it be a deeply political message or a socially conscious message portrayed in a different way in an

unexpected medium. I think the work also demands a response just due to the unexpected use of the medium itself."

Morrow's most recent exhibit was *Ode to a Falling Star*, an inflation group show at the Locker Room in New York City. The work laments America's descent into fascism—a topic that's bound to generate conversation. "I've had a lot of heated discussions with other artists about the role of art," says Morrow. "I've heard that art should be about documentation and how we see the world and providing a lens to view it from. And it should not necessarily be objective, but purely subjective in the sense of, 'This is my perspective, and I'm not trying to demand something from the viewer.' But I think we live in very demanding times, so I don't think that it's possible to make art that is truly reflective of our current situation without it also demanding something of the viewer. If you can look at society without being motivated to do something about it, I don't know what kind of world you're living in. I don't have any delusions of grandeur that my art is the thing that people need and that will change the world, but I don't want to be the only person doing this. I want to be one of the 10,000 artists who are raising their voices and radicalizing people and showing them that you can fight for change."



Viewers can see Morrow's newest installation, *The Fount of Our Despair*, which he describes as "a cool, spooky fantasy scene," this month at the Beer Can House. For more info, visit [balloonsinbold.com](http://balloonsinbold.com)

**WHAT:** "The Fount of Our Despair" installation  
**WHERE:** The Beer Can House, 222 Malone  
**WHEN:** September 19–21  
**INFO:** [full.orangeshow.org](http://full.orangeshow.org)



Artist DJ Morrow and his punk-rock inspired balloon dog





Morrow's *The Feasting of Jephthah* installation from 2022



The 2025 transient balloon installation *Ode to a Falling Star*



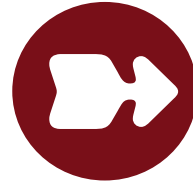


Brandon  
Weinbrenner (l) and  
Mitchell Greco

## DIRECTING DUO

Married directors **Mitchell Greco** and **Brandon Weinbrenner** bring vision and partnership to Houston theater.

by STE7EN FOSTER



Mitchell Greco and Brandon Weinbrenner don't just share a home—they share the same title. Both are associate artistic directors shaping Houston's stages:

Greco, newly appointed at Theatre Under The Stars, and Weinbrenner at the Alley Theatre. They first met at the Alley when Greco was performing in *A Christmas Carol* and Weinbrenner, then an assistant director, insisted on being noticed. Eleven years later—seven of them married—they've built parallel careers while building a life together. This season, Weinbrenner directs the world premiere of *The Body Snatcher* while Greco brings *White Christmas* to TUTS, proving that art and romance can thrive in tandem.

### Ste7en Foster: How did you two meet?

**Mitchell Greco:** We met at the Alley back when I was still a performer. I was in a version of *A Christmas Carol* and Brandon was the assistant director.

**Brandon Weinbrenner:** At first he was totally oblivious to me. Didn't understand why I was talking to him. I had to be very direct with him at one point.

### OS: How long have you two been a couple?

**BW:** We've been together eleven years, and we've been married for seven.

**MG:** I think eight. Wait.

**BW:** Seven.

**MG:** We started dating in 2013. I'm not good at math, so whenever that was. We got married in 2018 at the Alley in the same room we met.

### OS: So for all the sticklers in the room, that's seven years. And what are your exact job titles for each of you?

**BW:** Associate artistic director of the Alley Theatre.

**MG:** I was associate artistic director for years at Stages and just started that same position at TUTS two weeks ago.

### OS: Scoop!

**MG:** Yeah, this is brand new. But I've been involved in directing at TUTS for a while. Theatre Under The Stars gave me my very first professional job when I was in college. I thought then, and I still do, *This is like Broadway. This is magic.*



**OS: What's up next for each of you?**

BW: I'm doing *The Body Snatcher* on the Neuhaus stage at the Alley Theatre, and it's a world premiere about grave robbing by Katie Forgette. She's a Seattle-based playwright who also wrote *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily* that I did three years ago. Mitchell is doing *White Christmas*.

MG: I think the holidays are a magical time, and I think bringing this classic story onstage to Houston, using Houston performers for Houston audiences, is just magical—I think something only TUTS can do in that way. This giant, old-fashioned musical with the original Irving Berlin score, full orchestra, Broadway sets—that's the kind of work I'm drawn to, these random expressions of joy that I think Theatre Under The Stars does so well.

**OS: How did the theater bug bite you?**

BW: My mom. Quote me on that because—

MG: She'll cry.

BW: She'll cry. She'll appreciate that. My mom is a theater gal, always has been. That's what she majored in in college. I have a twin sister, and while the sister did sports, my mom put me in drama class. So ever since I was young, I was doing plays. And I was the bossy, know-it-all kid, so the director role fit me very well.

**OS: And you, Mitchell?**

MG: I grew up in a small town in central Texas about an hour from Austin, in a family where they loved college football, they loved hunting, they loved fishing. And that is so not like me. And my parents were so wonderful and supportive. "That's okay if that's what you don't want to do. But what *do* you want to do?" So I turned to choir and then that turned into theater. I got into it as a way to express myself. I had a stutter growing up, so theater was my speech therapy. I never had a stutter on stage saying lines. And so it was a way, especially as a kid, that I could learn how to communicate and express myself.

**OS: First date?**

MG: Our first date was Hay Merchant.

BW: Yeah, may she rest in peace.

**OS: Who proposed to whom?**

BW: I proposed to him. Mitchell lived two years in Portland, Oregon. So when we got together we liked going back to Portland. It's a great biking city. We were on our fourth trip

**"THEATRE UNDER THE  
STARS GAVE ME MY FIRST  
JOB IN COLLEGE.  
I THOUGHT THEN, AND  
I STILL DO: THIS IS  
LIKE BROADWAY.  
THIS IS MAGIC."**

**— Mitchell Greco**

to Portland and I had decided that this was going to be the trip that I proposed to him. I knew I wanted to put something on his finger. But we don't wear a lot of jewelry, you know? In my mind, the ring was for the wedding. I didn't want to get him a ring, but I wanted to put something on his finger. So I was like, *I can get him a keychain and then I'll put something meaningful on the keychain.*

So that found its way to being a bottle opener that I had engraved. And if there's a bottle opener, I've gotta give him something to open. So I got him his favorite beer and put it my bag.

So we get to Portland and I'm immediately like, "Let's get on our bicycles and go for a bike ride." I was just so anxious. And he was, "We just got here. Why doesn't he just want to relax?" But still I'm like "Okay, let's go bike riding downtown." Because I have this whole thing planned. So totally nice, right? So smart. So as we're biking there on the Burnside Avenue Bridge and it's like 90 degrees and it's five o'clock and there's traffic, I'm like, "You know, we could really use a beer right now. Here's a beer, let's whet your whistle." And we stop on the bridge.

MG: And I'm hot and going, "What is happening?"

BW: And I say something like, "Well, you need a bottle opener to open that beer." And he's like, "Yes, I do!" Then I go and I get the little keychain that's in the box and I get down on one knee to give him the keychain and propose to him. And he opens the box, and it's empty. So Mitchell's first words to me were, "What the fuck?" But then I found the keychain and he said, "Yes, and it's too hot here." And then we went to a tiki bar.

**OS: Do you compare notes a lot, since you**

**both have the same job but at different theaters?**

BW: Always.

MG: Yeah.

BW: Why not? It's the greatest resource. Mitchell's work is great. This is someone with great taste, a great eye. I value his opinion more than anyone else's.

**OS: Would you say you're both actors' directors?**

BW: Talking to an actor about their work—about their approach to the character—is equal parts fascinating and integral to shaping the choices they make that go into a cohesive production. The show doesn't exist without them. They're the ones out there every single night. The director's work is not directly on display every night, but rather indirectly. My job is to influence, to guide the actors in their performance, the designers and their design for the production and, honestly, the audience and their experience, right? So it's so much less about me than it is about the people who are present every night. And that's why I think I'm an actor's director.


MG: Ditto. I come from a similar background in that I was an actor first and then I switched to directing. But I have done acting, and I respect it. Being onstage and in a rehearsal room as an actor is a very vulnerable thing to do. And so I like to lead with that in mind. These are artists who are putting themselves on the line and opening themselves up to criticism. They're bringing something personal to the space. I mean, these are human beings. We're all working to put on a show, but them? You have to be very mindful of that, and not abuse the trust that actors have in their directors.

I think the one thing that directing has taught me, which has been useful in life, is to roll with the punches. You can plan your production, you can do all the meetings, you can try to work through every scenario, but when you get into the room, something has happened and you have to learn to be flexible and roll with it. I think it's that adaptability. It's that willingness to go with the flow, because the show must go on.

**OS: Seems like the perfect line to end this conversation on. Thank you both!**

BW: No, thank *you*.

MG: Thank you. This was fun.

 For more info, visit [alleytheatre.org](http://alleytheatre.org) and [TUTS.org](http://TUTS.org)

# Ballet with an Edge

Houston Ballet's Ryan Williams takes the stage in *Rock, Roll & Tutus*, blending classical technique with rock-and-roll attitude.

by ZACHARY MCKENZIE | photos by ALANA CAMPBELL



The undeniable feeling of knowing what you were born to do is one that few people get to experience. For Ryan Williams, a corps de ballet dancer with the

Houston Ballet, an innate talent and a desire to dance has always been woven into his life story. Williams is set to perform at the Wortham Theater Center in *Rock, Roll & Tutus*, a mixed program that blends classical and contemporary styles—including one ballet set to recognizable hits from a beloved rock band.

“Every year, my parents would watch the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade on TV. Since the age of three, I would memorize the Rockettes and Broadway numbers. Eventually my parents were like, ‘We need to put this guy in dance classes,’ the Phoenix native recalls. “I started out as a jazz, tap, hip-hop, contemporary, and recreational competition dancer. By the age of 12, I really fell in love with the art of classical ballet.”

The 21-year-old strives for perfection in his craft, the result of many years of hard work. “I came to Houston Ballet for a summer intensive in 2017, and they offered me a short-term stay in 2018,” he says. “In 2019, I came back for the Academy program, and this is

now my fourth season in the company.”

“It’s been so cool to have Julie Kent as one of our co-artistic directors. She’s been a ballet icon for so many years, and to get that one-on-one coaching from her has been incredible.”

Williams moved to Houston in 2022 and has fallen for the city’s arts and food scenes, along with all the cultural goodness that the inner loop has to offer. From a young age, he had Houston in his sights. “Houston Ballet has always been a dream company of mine ever since I stepped into classical ballet training.” He explains the gravitational pull classical ballet has on him by pointing to the human connection he feels with his onstage partners. “Being in the Academy and watching the company for so many years, seeing how all the male dancers were so in tune with how to partner with all of these women, was so inspiring.”

*Rock, Roll & Tutus* is performed in four acts. “There are four different pieces,” Williams explains, “which is very fun and challenging for all the dancers involved. I cover all the pieces, so I’ve had to learn all four. It’s been really fun to dive into each aspect of them because of how different each piece is. It’s a mix of everything under the sun that you would want to see from a ballet production.”

Among the four ballets is ISHIDA’s *what*

*i was thinking while i was waltzing*, a dance originally choreographed by famed choreographer Brett Ishida for a Houston performance in 2024, which included Williams. Thinking back to that ballet, Williams reflects, “It’s been an easier transition than I would have thought, but it’s also been fun because I’ve had the opportunity to explore different things inside of the piece that I wouldn’t have thought of or tried before.” A goal for the company has been to honor the original choreographic process while giving audiences a fresh performance. “How do we amplify this structure into something more, since it’s already been done here?” Williams ponders. “I’ve put so much work into one-upping myself from the last time, which has been a really fun challenge.”

Another piece in *Rock, Roll & Tutus* is *Rooster*, a contemporary dance set to eight classic Rolling Stones tracks. “My dad is a huge rock music lover, so of course I knew the music of the Rolling Stones,” Williams says. “The blending of classical ballet into a rock aspect comes very second nature for me. I grew up performing two-and-a-half minute pieces to pop songs, so to have this outlet to do something similar has been so fun for me and for everyone—especially because the movement style is a bit more contemporary.” Rounding out the production are *Illuminate* and *Viet animo*, which combine to create a truly unique ballet experience.

“This program offers a little taste of everything. You will have the Rolling Stones songs set to a movement style you usually don’t see from the Houston Ballet dancers,” Williams says. “Then you get a more contemporary European-style type of dancing choreographed by Jacqueline Long, one of our dancers and choreographers. There’s a classic Stanton Welch 40-minute ballet piece with tutus, pointe shoes, partnering, and more. It’s a roller coaster of all different styles. The different aspects of dance inside of this one program are so different from other ballets we put on, and audiences are really going to love it.”

**WHAT:** Houston Ballet’s *Rock, Roll & Tutus*  
**WHEN:** September 18–28  
**WHERE:** Wortham Theater Center  
**INFO:** [tinyurl.com/bde27afk](https://tinyurl.com/bde27afk)

Houston Ballet corps de ballet dancer Ryan Williams and first soloist Danbi Kim performing in Stanton Welch’s *Maninyas*

PHOTO BY ALANA CAMPBELL (2025), COURTESY OF HOUSTON BALLET





**"THE TENSION COMES FROM NOT  
KNOWING WHAT'S REAL AND  
WHAT'S IMAGINED — THAT'S  
WHERE THE STORY GRIPS YOU."**

— Ryan Williams

Houston Ballet Corps de Ballet dancer Ryan Williams rehears-  
ing Brett Ishida's *what i was thinking while i was waltzing*.

# Serving Up Laughs

Comedian **Fortune Feimster** brings her comedy tour to Sugar Land on September 20.

by ZACHARY MCKENZIE | photo by TODD-ROSENBERG



**F**ortune Feimster, the comedic force who effortlessly blends Southern charm, side-splitting humor, and one-of-a-kind charisma, is bringing big laughs to Smart Financial Centre in Sugar Land on September 20. With her *Takin' Care of Biscuits Comedy Tour*, Feimster looks forward to bringing her trademark storytelling style of comedy to Houston audiences and sharing some much-needed laughs with her fans.

"We're still in the early part of this tour, but I'm so excited to come to Houston!" Feimster shares. The comedian, known for her roles on *Chelsea Lately*, *The Mindy Project* and, more recently, Netflix's *FUBAR*, is quick to assure her Houston audience that they're in for a

comedy set that is fresh out of the oven. "For people who watched my last Netflix special *Crushing It*, this tour is all-new material," she says. "That's the first thing I get asked: 'Is this already on Netflix?' It's not. Every time I start a new tour, I do a brand-new hour."

Feimster, who recently completed a successful run as a guest host on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, explains that her comedy is informed by her real-life experiences—the good, the bad, and everything in between. "This tour is reflective of what's happening in my life," she says. "A lot of fun, silly stories. I'm dipping into my childhood again, sort of reminiscent of my *Sweet and Salty* special." Crowd feedback for the tour has been overwhelmingly positive, according to the artist. "It's a fun show and I've been hearing from people how much they are

loving it. That makes me feel really good, and I'm excited to get out there to Sugar Land."

A consummate professional, Feimster masterfully balances navigating personal hardships with bringing laughter to the masses while on tour. "There's a lot happening in my personal life, so I'm certainly being tested on that right now," she admits. "It definitely makes it tricky when you get terrible news about your mom and it's your job to go out and be happy and silly." In May of this year, Feimster announced via Instagram that her mother—a celebrity in her own right, having appeared on tour and in various projects with the comedian—was diagnosed with a "rare and very aggressive cancer." "In the beginning of the tour, that was tricky. It's almost like stepping into the ring like, 'Alright, we gotta



**"MY FANS HAVE REALLY BEEN GETTING ME THROUGH THESE HARDER TIMES. WHEN I GO TO DO MY JOB, IT ENDS UP BEING A TREAT—SOMETHING I LOOK FORWARD TO AND A NICE DISTRACTION FROM ALL THE OTHER THINGS."**

— Fortune Feimster

get your adrenaline going.' Now I feel like I've sort of evened out and I can enjoy these kinds of things."

The stage offers a refuge for Feimster. "I love going out there, telling jokes, and hearing the feedback," she says. Thanks to her fans and some much-needed rest, the actress is back and better than ever. "The fans have really been getting me through these harder times, so when I go to do my job, it ends up being a treat—something I look forward to, and a nice distraction from all the other things. I took some time off during the summer, and I'm welcoming getting back to these shows."

A native of North Carolina, Feimster is no stranger to being a queer person in a red state—and she doesn't shy away from booking venues in those places on her tours. However, with today's political climate at an all-time pressure point, her role as a comedian has never been more important. "I've always sort of been like, 'This is me. This is my story.' But there's always a sense of purpose when things are tougher, rights are being threatened, and people don't feel good about the state of things," she explains. "You feel an extra bit of responsibility to do more to bring levity and represent positivity for our community."

"Having grown up in the South, I'm so used to it. I know that even within those areas, there are many people who aren't ultra-conservative and want to see entertainers come through that think like them." Her playful humor lends itself to Feimster's overall comedy goal of inviting others to her table, as opposed to alienating fans. "I'm not trying to be mean or trash on people. I'm just living my life and telling my story. I'm happy that people are resonating with it, and I definitely have no desire to shy away from conservative places, because I think they need these voices more than ever."

Feimster's modus operandi has always been to create a space for all to enjoy her comedy, and particularly folks who may not always find themselves occupying the same spaces together. "There are people that might come with a friend, and I'm able to open some of their eyes," she says. "When you start telling your own story, and people can relate to that story, it makes the differences between us feel a lot smaller. I think that's sort of the beauty of stand-up. I'm telling everyone exactly who I am and what I've been through. A lot of people watch that and go, 'Oh, I've been through that. I know that feeling.' That's kind of what's missing right now in our bubbles. We're too focused on all the differences we have."

A case study in how hard work pays off, Feimster reflects on her career and offers advice to the next generation of queer standups: "I always tell people that if I can do it, truly anyone can do it. I'm from a town of 12,000 people, so the fact that I'm in this position is wild," she says with a laugh. "It's the result of naiveté in my early days, thinking 'I'm gonna go to LA and let's see.' That was followed by a lot of hard work. If it's something that you feel passionate about trying, then do it and just be you. Tell your story. Be authentic to who you are. Don't try to be somebody else."

**WHAT:** Fortune Feimster's Takin' Care of Biscuits Comedy Tour

**WHERE:** Smart Financial Centre, Sugar Land

**WHEN:** Saturday, September 20, 7:00 p.m.

**INFO:** [tinyurl.com/yac9w8kd](https://tinyurl.com/yac9w8kd)

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Ryan Russell (l) and Michael Waligura

## AN EAST TEXAS DELIGHT

**Ryan Russell and Michael Waligura's**  
intimate Nacogdoches wedding felt like home.

by **DAVID CLARKE**  
photos by **JESS GOLDEN PHOTOGRAPHY**



Ryan Russell and Michael Waligura's love story started with that familiar "brrrup" notification sound. In Michael's own words, the couple is a "Grindr success story."

The two first messaged on January 1, 2021, and wasted no time meeting in person. "We went on our first date January 3rd," Ryan says. "Brunch turned into lunch, turned into dinner, turned into a stop at Memorial Park. And then we were like, 'Well, let's go see Hermann Park.' And then it was 11 p.m. at Velvet Taco. So it just never ended."

The marathon date set the tone for their relationship. "I'd say I just felt very at home and very comfortable just from our very first date," Ryan remembers.

"We were able to have fun and laugh from the very beginning," Michael agrees: "It felt like I knew him for a long time, and I had just met him two days ago."

Ryan says he had a defining moment before that night was even over. "We were driving to Velvet Taco, crossing over the bridge on I-10, looking down Shepherd, and you could see the Houston skyline. I just had this overwhelming feeling. I thought, 'Oh, we're getting married.' I didn't yet know that I loved him, but I knew that I would."

Michael's realization came more gradually. "I finally knew that he was the one whenever it was just so natural. I couldn't see myself with anyone else," he adds. "Our relationship just grew from friendship to a loving relationship."

That mutual certainty led to an unconditional engagement while vacationing in Florence, Italy. Ryan popped the question on a hill overlooking the city. His romantic surprise was spoiled slightly by a visible photographer sitting on a bench, and Ryan's heartfelt book he made that documented their relationship. "It's like whenever you open up a birthday card and there's money that falls out, but you have to read the card first," Michael jokes. "Then he got on one knee and asked me to marry him." In lieu of a ring, Ryan presented Michael with a Cartier watch.

The couple married on October 19, 2024, in Ryan's hometown of Nacogdoches, Texas. "I think we were the biggest gay wedding that Nacogdoches has ever seen," Ryan says.

Michael laughs, "Yeah, it was small. Like 75 people."

Rather than a formal ballroom bash, Ryan and Michael envisioned a candlelit backyard dinner party. "We knew we didn't want a big, crazy, dancing-all-night wedding. That's just





not us,” Ryan explains. “It turned out very intimate, very personal to us, and honestly better than we could have imagined.”

Their creativity was on full display. “We basically deconstructed a lot of our house and took it to Nacogdoches,” Michael says. “We’ve collected so many things over the years that we wanted to incorporate at the venue.”

They served tres leches cake, Michael’s favorite, in family casserole dishes and chocolate chip cookies packaged in bags printed with the face of their English bulldog, Arnold. Guests even got a custom *New York Times*-style mini crossword, a nod to the couple’s friendly competition with word games. “We did all of the calligraphy ourselves,” Ryan notes. “We designed our wedding invitations, printed them, and even made the cookie bags.”

The décor glowed under countless candles as guests enjoyed a Southern menu of champagne and fried chicken, shrimp and grits, and mac and cheese. “People raved about the food,” Michael says of The Fredonia Hotel’s catering team, led by events director Morgan Rogers. “They really went above and beyond.”

The wedding day itself unfolded with unusual calm. “We were very relaxed. We literally went antiquing before,” Ryan says with a smile. “We actually bought a lamp at an antique store that we then used at the wedding.”

For Ryan, one of the most moving moments came as the couple walked into the reception. “We know not everybody in our community is this lucky to have 75 of their friends and family not just attend but support and celebrate them,” he says. “That view of seeing all the

people that loved us really sticks out.”

Michael remembers the warm glow as night fell. “Whenever the day turned into night, the candles just illuminated the entire place. It was just a pretty sight to see everyone aglow.”

Later, the celebration took a playful turn when guests jumped into the pool, joined by the grooms—after a quick wardrobe change, of course. “It was just very untraditional,” Michael says. “It was exactly what I wanted.”

Ryan, who served as the wedding planner, credits close friends and family for helping bring the event to life. “It was fun. It was like my hobby for the whole year leading up to it,” he says.

The couple’s chosen vendors also made a big impact. Their longtime friend Chelsea Deitering officiated the ceremony, Both Bloom Studio created vibrant floral designs, and Jess and Trish of XO Golden Photo captured every moment while advocating fiercely for LGBTQ couples. The Fredonia Hotel provided the food, venue, and personalized service, while the couple hosted a casual welcome party at Red House Winery with pizza from Revolution Road Pizza Co. Custom suits came from Suitesupply, their wedding rings from Zadok

Jewelers, and they exchanged Cartier watches during their engagement. Michael received his while the couple was on vacation in Florence, Italy, and Ryan received his during a trip to New York City.

Reflecting on their do-it-yourself approach, Michael says, “That’s just how we are. It wasn’t a low-budget wedding. We’re just so creative. My little trusty printer printed out every cookie bag. I made the Arnold logo on my iPad. Ryan designed everything on Canva.”

Ryan adds, “We really did a lot of it ourselves. The biggest expenses were just food and the venue.”

Now that the wedding planning is behind them, Ryan jokes that he’s looking for a new project. Michael has an idea: “I said take on one client a year and just do it big.”

Until then, the couple is savoring married life and memories of a wedding weekend that was as unique as their love story. “It really, truly felt like we had 75 people over to our house,” Ryan says.

“Just the best party,” Michael agrees.

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By LILLY RODDY

# Eclipse Season Arrives

Virgo stands at the center of change  
as two eclipses spotlight the mutable signs.



This is going to be an active and busy month. We have two eclipses this month, with the Lunar Eclipse on the 7th and the Solar Eclipse on the 21st. Both eclipses will be impacting the mutable signs of Pisces, Virgo, Sagittarius, and Gemini. We may experience delays and blocks in

the very beginning of the month, as well as on the 20th, 23rd, and 24th. Flexibility counts on these days. Good days this month are the 12th, 13th, 15th, and the 19th. Days of tension are the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 7th, 17th, 18th, 20th, 21st, 23rd, and the 24th. The 20th through the 24th will be an extra-tense time. People will be expressing their views more vigorously this month!



## ARIES (Mar. 21-Apr. 19)

You are continuing to feel the push/pull energy. One part wants to look to the future, and the other part over-analyzes the options and you get stuck in not making decisions. This month you are paying attention to your work routines, health, and exercise programs, and working on making your life simpler. You are more reactive to your environment as you address the things you normally ignore! This is a good month to focus on your smaller projects and feel competent. Larger projects may feel overwhelming. In the latter part of the month, relationships become your topic. Partners may need more support as you listen to their anger and frustration. This will be a good time to make sure that you and your partners are working toward the same goals.

## TAURUS (Apr. 20-May 20)

There continue to be changes in your career path as your company works to improve its financial position. This will have you rethinking your current position and what you need to do—starting something on your own, retiring, or even relocating for a better position. This is a creative month for you, and that should help increase your options for all your decisions. This is also a better time to be with children, as they can help you see the world as a more hopeful place. In the latter part of the month, you are interested in improving your workplace by replacing worn equipment and updating your internet connections. After the 22nd, relationships can be more tense and will require your attention. This can be a very good time to renew bonds or, if you are single, put yourself out there! This is also a good time to start an exercise program to help release some tension.

## GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

Change is your middle name with the planet Uranus just entering Gemini. This is a strong reinventive, creative force that can make you feel trapped and/or

or bored with your current life choices. You may feel you have to cut ties and move forward on your own. This will impact your home, family, partnerships, and career directions. As the month opens, you are more communicative about your views and feelings, and not really holding back. This is also a time when your home is a place of rest and retreat. Family does hold your interest through the beginning of the month. You may also need some repair or replacement there as well. In the latter part of the month, you are ready for a break, as you are paying more attention to your health and work stress.

## CANCER (June 22-July 22)

This is a time of big ideas, personal growth, improving your education, and working with international companies. As the month begins, you are working to get your life organized, things fixed, and trying to add some order to the chaos you have been experiencing. You are more clear in your communications and are paying more attention to the details. There are some options with your current career choice. You may be looking for a whole new field, starting something on your own, or even considering retirement. You are wanting something that fulfills a deeper spiritual part of you. In the latter half of the month, home and family, the natural parts of Cancer, become more important. It may be your job to step in and be the family peace-keeper. Your temper is shorter, and you won't tolerate as much!

## LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

Challenging energies are making you rethink your relationships, career path, where you live, and what changes you want to make to improve your life and yourself. This can be a great time for downsizing, visiting your therapist, relocating, and shifting your career direction. As the month opens, you are paying more attention to your resources and how to improve them. This can be a tense time in partnerships, as

you are more concerned about how others treat you. You will be more reactive and will take what they say personally. You will also need more reassurance in your partnerships to renew the trust. In the latter part of the month, you are getting your house in order. This can be a time of home repairs or improvement. Family will be more demanding; don't be afraid to step in and take the correct action.

## VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

You are currently rethinking your career path, or your position as the stay-at-home parent. You may have worked yourself out of a job, or you may just need something that really stimulates your passion. This also impacts your relationships and where you live. You are looking to have more freedom of choice in your life by eliminating the needless obligations you have committed to in the past. This can also impact your sleep, as this energy keeps your mind very active. This can be great for creative solutions, but may also keep you mentally working overtime. Watch your spending, especially in the first three weeks of the month, as your impulse spending is strong. In the latter half of the month, you are paying more attention to finances, looking into loans or credit card transfers. It's a busy month!

## LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 23)

As the month begins, you are partially in a rest-and-retreat mode, and you are ready to act on your desires. You may have to budget your energy so that you don't overdo it. After the 23rd, you are back to your normal self! There are lots of career opportunities this year. You could be getting a promotion or taking on a new leadership role. Partnerships remain tense. You are dealing with the push/pull energy in the sky. A part of you wants to leave; a part wants to stay to improve the partnership; and another part feels stuck! It may be winter before these issues are resolved. In the latter part of the month, you are ready to act. Be sure



to watch your impulse spending after the 20th. You are more likely to go for what you want! Friends can be very supportive, especially in the first half of the month. You will need some down time in all this. Make sure you have a place to retreat!

#### SCORPIO (Oct. 24–Nov. 21)

In the beginning of the month, you are more socially involved and busy with your work. This is a good time for team building, community support groups, and connecting with friends. You will need time for rest and retreat, as you are becoming more sensitized to your environment and not as able to ignore things. This is a better month for travel, expanding your perspectives, and improving your education. As well, you are more interested in a larger world view. You do get a boost of energy when Mars, planet of action/reaction and survival, enters your sign on the 22nd for a 44-day visit. This is a very good time for improving your health, taking on new projects, and standing up for yourself. Your patience and tolerance may be low, but we are getting a more unfiltered version of you! UBU!

#### SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22–Dec. 21)

Career activity is very strong this month. You may be looking to improve your current situation or take on a leadership role. This also applies if you are the stay-at-home parent. You are looking to redefine your role. Friends and professional support groups can be very helpful this month, providing you with contacts and opportunities. As a mutable sign, you are also under a

strong influence to reinvent yourself. You are looking for something that connects to your passion and not just your work. You will find obligations and demanding people harder to tolerate. You are wanting to have more freedom of choice and lighten some of your burdens. If you have children, they may be having a difficult time moving forward in their lives. This is also a good time to turn some of your hobbies into more of a business.

#### CAPRICORN (Dec. 22–Jan. 19)

You are going through a period when your foundations are being tested. Family issues may have you rethinking where you live, adding a challenge to your partnerships and your current career path. You will not feel as connected to what used to drive you. You are definitely looking at alternatives. This is a good time to have a business meeting with your partner and make sure you are both pulling in the same direction. You will be expressing your views about work and life more vigorously. And as with the other cardinal signs of Aries, Cancer, and Libra, you are making some shifts. At work, you will want to take on a leadership position because you have a better way to do it! In your relationship, your partner is wanting to grow and step out of their previous choices. It's a busy month!

#### AQUARIUS (Jan. 20–Feb. 18)

Pluto, our dwarf planet, traveling through your sign. Pluto is associated with death and rebirth, which most often manifests as breaking out of your cocoon and

transforming into a butterfly. You are going through a process of letting go of the past, clearing the negative energy from your life and redefining your sense of purpose and direction. You may have periods of low energy and feeling depressed as you mourn the past. But you are also looking forward to what things can be. As with the other signs, this is impacting your identity, partnerships, your career, and your home and family. As the month begins, you are in an introspective time and may need more time to yourself. By the end of the month, the tensions will lessen. This is a better time for travel or just stepping away from your routines.

#### PISCES (Feb. 19–Mar. 20)

Changes at home are making you rethink your major decisions and choices in your life. There are big changes going on in your family and with your home. At home, you could be remodeling or looking to relocate. This can also interfere with your sleep as it keeps your brain engaged. In the early part of the month, partners can be very helpful. This can be a time to renew those bonds. If you are single, this is a better time for meeting new people! You are paying much more attention to your finances. This can be a time to explore your investments or even put yourself on a budget. As well, this can be a good time for refinancing or exploring alternative resources. In the latter part of the month, you are paying more attention to the masks we all wear. We are seeking out those we can trust.

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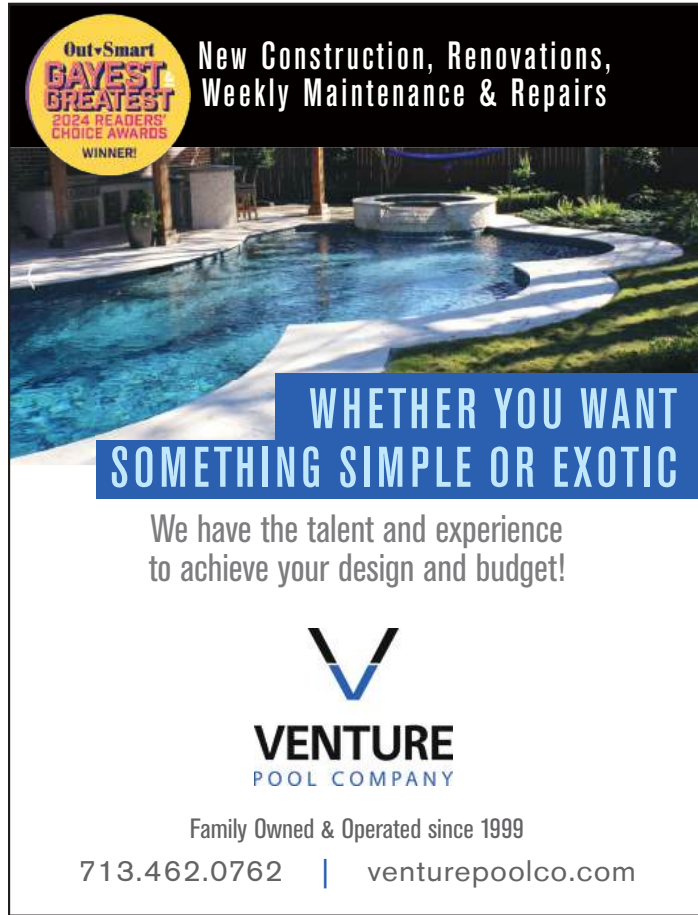


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# Living la Vida Loca

Catalina Seymour-Alexander's showgirl presence comes with a Latin flair.

By SAM BYRD



When Catalina Seymour-Alexander takes the stage, she does not sizzle—she scorches. The showstopping diva is part runway model and part hot-stepping dancefloor assassin. Make no mistake, she's no chorus girl; she's a bona fide Latina leading lady with high kicks that can make a Radio City Rockette blush and pirouettes that will leave a gyroscope jealous. Find out more about this whirling, twirling star.

## Pronouns?

In drag: she/her. Out of drag: he/him.

## Hometown? Houston

## Drag birthday? October 7, 2022

## Story behind the stage name?

I was visiting a good friend of mine in Lubbock, and of course there was always talk of doing drag but never any action. It just so happened that there was a new apartment complex being constructed, and the name on the complex was The Catalina West. Immediately it clicked, and we decided on that day that whenever I did drag, my name would be Catalina.

## What does Hispanic Heritage Month mean to you?

I am very proud of being a Mexican American and being seen, especially in the current political climate we are in. To be Hispanic is to be proud. Siempre bella. Siempre Latina.

## Describe your performing persona.

Catalina is a Latin showgirl with all of the kicks, splits, tricks, and dips. I am influenced and inspired by all of my Spanish culture and heritage and the empowering women in my life, and I try to showcase it through my drag and performance style.

## What's on your bucket list?

Owning my own dance studio.

## Share details about your outfit.

It is inspired by my Hispanic heritage and made by Laisha LaRue.



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## Most memorable moment as a performer?

Winning my first pageant and having my mom there to see me.

## Thoughts about legislation restricting drag performances?

I think they're completely focused on the wrong thing, and should be worried instead about the people in office.

## Do you have a drag family?

I am blessed to be a part of two insanely talented drag families. My mothers are Iris Seymour and Mulan Alexander.

## What would people be surprised to know about you?

I grew up riding horses.

## What is your secret talent?

I can train and break a horse. I worked in equine rehabilitation and rescue, and my job was to assess and train the horses to get them adopted into forever homes.

## What have you learned from drag that you use in everyday life?

To carry Catalina's confidence in every part of my life and be unapologetically gay.

## Life mantra?

If you don't do it for yourself, then nobody else will.

## What advice would you share with your younger self?

Don't be scared to be yourself. Life will get difficult, but you can push through because things will get better. Be there for your family, and they will be there for you.

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

They are some of the most powerful and unique people. We have always been here, and we won't be going anywhere.

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

Celine Dion, because she is my all-time favorite diva.

## What got you interested in drag?

Being able to perform again! I am a trained dancer and was missing the stage, so being able to perform in drag has given me the opportunity to showcase my talents again.

## Any titles or pageants under your belt?

Miss Gay San Antonio Latina 2024, and Miss Gay Rio Grande Valley America 2025.



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