

WINDY CITY TIMES

VOL 38, NO. 2
FEB. 23, 2023

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IMPORTANT FACTS FOR BIKTARVY®

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

(bik-TAR-vee)

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WINDY CITY MEDIA GROUP,
5315 N. Clark St. #192, Chicago, IL, 60640 U.S.A
(MAILING ADDRESS ONLY)

VOL 38, NO. 2

FEB. 23, 2023

COVER CREDITS:

MAIN STORY: *The Damned Club*, by Alice Austen, 1891

Photo of Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo by Marcello Orselli; photo of Stephanie Skora courtesy of Skora; photo of Manuel Hernandez courtesy of Hernandez



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Girl, I Guess author STEPHANIE SKORA discusses the impact of her voter guide

BY MICHELLE ZACARIAS

Stephanie Skora, co-creator of the Girl, I Guess (GIG) voter guide, has always loved election season. Some of her earliest childhood memories entailed watching the results of the infamous 2000 presidential election between George W. Bush and then-Vice President Al Gore.

Skora's interest in politics is in fact one of the few things for which she actively gives credit to her parents.

"We were a working-class family," she recalled. "Whenever we needed the extra money, my mom would work as an election judge." Even Skora's elementary school "mock elections" left an impression, which is why, when it came time to attend college, she decided to pursue a political science degree at the University of Illinois.

From the start, Skora has been drawn to the drama and workings of electoral politics. It wasn't until she moved to Chicago in 2015, however, that she became immersed in the inner workings of municipal and general elections.

The conceptualization for the voter guide came after a Facebook post made by co-creator (and retired GIG co-writer) Ellen Mayer. At the time, Mayer was working as an editor for South Side Weekly and was heavily involved in the coverage of election cycles.

Skora remembers the post asking, "Wouldn't it be cool if somebody made a voter guide for leftists and progressives, then we can get everybody to turn out without having to deal with people's feelings about whether or not voting is colonialism?"

Skora messaged Mayer immediately and encouraged her to push forward with the idea. The pair then teamed up to draft the first GIG guide for the 2018 Democratic primary. Although Skora claims the first version of the guide was not up to her current standards, it nevertheless became popular among leftist circles, close friends and organizing acquaintances.

"The order wasn't coherent," she recalls. "We didn't cover all the races. It was just the stuff that we thought was interesting."

Skora and Mayer were nonetheless confident

the guide would be a good resource to combat low voter-turnout, particularly for working-class individuals who didn't have time to do intensive electoral research.

It wasn't until the 2018 midterm general election that the popularity of the GIG voter guide really took off, making its way beyond the demographics of leftist spaces. That second edition was also when the Girl, I Guess brand was codified, and became the permanent identifier for the voter guide. In addition to making its way onto Reddit threads, Skora and Mayer received plenty of local news coverage, including a feature from the Chicago Sun-Times.

Skora realized the magnitude of the guide's impact after a Northwestern professor studying judicial retention elections reached out to GIG: "He said in the nicest way possible, y'all fucked up my research." That professor noted a spike in voter participation during the 2018 judicial election, estimating that 4% of Cook County voters had utilized Girl, I Guess in their polling decisions.

Although the research and drafting take several weeks (Skora admits to using up her paid time off to binge-write), the process begins long before election season takes off.

Skora explained, "I like to follow local politics, I follow state politics. I follow federal politics. This is just something that I pay attention to in my everyday life."

Skora's attuned political observations and community relationships drive many of her final endorsement decisions; she is frequently familiar with candidates long before she begins her election evaluations. "When I'm getting ready to write, I have an idea of who I'm looking for anyway. So I'm able to just do a deep dive into their donors and their policies without having to start from scratch when I'm looking into their campaign."

Skora has developed a grading rubric to evaluate candidates seeking endorsements and establish consistent metrics. The 2019 Municipal Guide used a "Red Light, Yellow Light, Green Light" system for alderperson races—with green serving as



Stephanie Skora.
Photo by Ally Almoro

an endorsement and red being "candidates that you should not vote for under any circumstance, or are significantly inferior to the endorsee." It is not uncommon for people to reach out directly to Skora, or respond online, if they are unhappy with an endorsement, or lack thereof.

When asked how she feels about going from a relatively unknown local organizer to "political influencer," Skora said she is still surprised, adding, "What is really wild to me is that the guide has gotten to the point now where it's like helping swing elections."

Skora cited Hoan Huynh, who is currently representing District 13 in the Illinois House of Representatives, as an example. Huynh caught Skora's attention during the 2022 General Election, bestowing him with the highest GIG endorsement, a "golden shrug." The endorsement resulted in additional press coverage for Huynh and gave him a competitive edge over his opponents, who Skora had not reviewed favorably. In the end, Huynh won with 45.2% of the vote.

Despite her undeniable influence, Skora has faced criticism for candidates she's supported in the past. On other occasions she's faced backlash for not endorsing popular Democratic candidates, especially those predicted to win by their party. To this note, Skora reminds people that the guide is meant to be a resource: "I'm not trying to be

a kingmaker in local elections or anything. The voter guide is a turnout tool."

Although GIG users have rapidly expanded, the overall aloof and sometimes gossipy tone of the guide has remained consistent. In fact, since the creation of the guide Skora has rarely ever remained neutral about anything political, which she said is a reflection of both her values and Chicago's political landscape: "This is Chicago—If you think somebody's a clown and corrupt, we're gonna call them a corrupt clown."

Skora insisted she doesn't villainize "good candidates" over singular mistakes, adding that—while politicians and candidates hold an incredible amount of power and have a lot of responsibilities—at the end of the day, "They're just people."

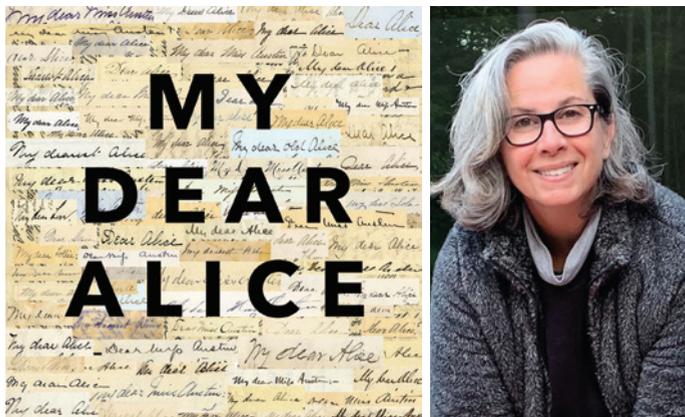
As someone who takes pride in calling herself an anarchist, Skora conceded that progressives won't be voting their way to a revolution anytime soon. But she maintained that it is their civic responsibility to use every tool in the toolbox to create the best conditions possible in the fight for liberation.

"We can elect people who are on our side, or who are part of our movements," Skora said. "There are genuinely good people who want to help create a more just world."

Hidden History

Pamela Bannos brings the life of 19th-century lesbian photographer to new audiences

BY ANDREW DAVIS



Artwork for the podcast series *My Dear Alice* (left), a project by historian Pamela Bannos (right).
Courtesy of Bannos

Photographer
Alice Austen at
age 22 in 1888.
Courtesy of
Pamela Bannos



Few people outside of New York may know about 19th-century photographer Alice Austen (1866-1952)—but author/historian/Northwestern University professor Pamela Bannos wants to change that.

Bannos recently completed a podcast series about Austen, *My Dear Alice*, which she based on hundreds of letters now housed at the Alice Austen House museum in Staten Island, New York (Austen took more than 8,000 photographs over the course of her life). The letters were given to the museum 40 years after they were discovered by the family who had moved into the home Austen had been evicted from in 1945, when she was 79.

"I discovered the letters because I was invited to do a Vivian Maier talk at the Alice Austen House," Bannos said. (Maier was a 20th-century photographer who took thousands of photos, mainly of Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles.) "Christina Allegretti, who's still with the place, took me on a tour of the place and even showed me where they still had the darkroom [Austen] used. She didn't show me the letters, but I said, 'This is very interesting.'"

Bannos eventually was taken to the room where the letters were. "I didn't read them then. They let you take photos with your phone, however. They were behind mylar so there were reflections and there were boxes. This was in 2018 and I was still overwhelmed giving book talks, so I shelved it until the pandemic. In the spring of 2020, I had all these files and I transcribed the whole letter collection, which they didn't know I was doing.

"I'm always interested in uncovering history," Bannos said, noting she first became aware of Austen's work while living in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1980. "It's interesting that I do these obsessive projects. I wrote that Vivian Maier book,

which was a whole other situation."

Austen's life was one full of peaks (finding the love of her life, Gertrude Tate), valleys (losing her wealth in the stock market crash of 1929) and travel, with excursions taking her to many places such as Chicago, where she visited the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

"She visited and photographed it," Bannos said. "There's been this urge to give her more credit as a photographer. She's not in the canon because she did this as a hobby and didn't really sell her work. But I discovered she sold photographs at this exposition."

And Austen definitely had her own style of photography, at least in terms of process. For example, at that exposition, "so many people went there and photographed it because photography was becoming more accessible—little pocket cameras and things. But she was shooting with glass plates and everything was a production. That was an arduous process."

When asked what surprised her about Austen, Bannos listed several items. "The surprise was, first, that she was selling her photographs," she said. "The fact that she was making money from the photographs was something that had not been focused on, historically speaking.

"I was more surprised by what I was learning about the culture of the time, and I was probably learning more about these women who were writing to her than [about] Alice herself—but that was obviously the point. I was surprised by all these women who never got married and that there wasn't more talk about anything than everyday things—except then Daisy [friend and gymnast Daisy Elliott] comes in and that there is such a thing as desire.

"What I liked was discovering the full picture as these letters are coming at her. Austen, like Vivian Maier, was a hoarder—and that was really



Trude & I masked, short skirts, 1892.
Photo by Alice Austen, courtesy of Bannos

helpful. But I was surprised at how thoroughly I was able to put the story together. I was also surprised that this archive existed, and that it ended up at the house 40 years after she left. I was surprised to see handwriting all over from children. I was really enamored of the women who wrote to her; the personalities of those women became a lot clearer.”

My Dear Alice helps bring Austen and the people who wrote the letters to life—and makes things more engaging by using actors (students

from Northwestern). Bannos admitted that she encountered many obstacles in putting the podcast together, ranging from casting to time management to her own voice changes.

“I auditioned all these Northwestern theater students; I got 30 auditions back,” she said. “All the voices started sounding the same after a while, [but] I ended up picking people who sounded different from each other. And I was still writing the script while I was still recording it. And a friend of mine with a short attention span

kept falling asleep while listening to the recordings—so I added more music and sound effects to bring it to life.”

Of course, no discussion of Austen would be complete without discussing the queer aspects of her life, from being with Tate to the photos Austen took of her women friends, who often dressed in men’s clothing for the images.

“I don’t love that there are no letters from Gertrude from that period, but I love that there’s a picture from the time that they met,” said Ban-

nos, who’s part of the LGBTQ+ community herself. “I found the waterfall that’s in the photograph.”

And what did Bannos think Austen would make of contemporary photography? “I think [Austen] was very curious about people and making photographs,” Bannos said. “She, like Vivian Maier, would be out in the street”—but probably not using a cellphone.

To listen to the My Dear Alice podcast series and learn more about Austen, visit <https://mydearalice.org/>.



The Darned Club, 1891.
Photo by Alice Austen, courtesy of Bannos

Manuel Hernandez.
Courtesy of Hernandez

A portrait of Manuel Hernandez, a man with dark hair pulled back, wearing glasses and a dark blue suit jacket over a white shirt. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a soft-focus, light-colored architectural setting.

ALMA's Manuel Hernandez takes on new executive director role

BY ANDREW PIRROTTA

ALMA—which stands for Association of Latinos Motivating Action—was established in Chicago in 1989, making it one of the oldest Latinx LGBTQ organizations in the country. After over three decades of operation, the organization last summer hired its first executive director, Manuel Hernandez.

A New York native, Hernandez began as a math educator, then moved into higher-education administration; he has worked on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in a number of different capacities, among them at Hampshire College (Massachusetts) and University of Chicago.

Windy City Times recently spoke with Hernandez regarding his new position at ALMA.

Windy City Times: What's been the biggest difference for you living here in Chicago versus New York?

Manuel Hernandez: I would say the everyday hustle and bustle of New York can be overwhelming, even for a New York native, [and] especially compared to Chicago. I like to say that New York is a lot of everything in a little place, whereas Chicago is a little bit of everything in a lot of space ... I love Chicago. I visited Chicago several times before I decided to move. February makes it exactly four years.

WCT: How did you find out about ALMA?

MH: I was actually recommended by several

individuals from Chicago. ... At the time, I was a little hesitant. I wasn't too sure ... I've been doing non-profit work for over a decade. So, I just did it. I thought, I'm only 30 years old. I had the [needed] experience, but still doubted myself slightly. But then I just went for it. I kind of threw my hat in the ring, thinking if something comes out of it, great. If not, then I'm ok. I went through the process and, in the very end, got the offer.

WCT: How is it working with organization members at your age? How has it been being this young leader?

MH: So far it has been pretty good. I haven't

had any negative experiences yet in this current role.

I have in the past had assistant director and associate director positions—my very first associate director position was when I was about 25 or 26 years old. That experience was tough, because I was constantly being told that I didn't know what I was talking about when I definitely did know what I was talking about. But in this role, I haven't encountered any issues of any kind with being too young. I've actually been praised for being in the position I am with being so young, because I bring in a new perspective, which I think is great for any organization. To have someone young and kind of vibrant and

bringing in new ideas is something that is great for an organization, especially one that has been around for 34 years. ... ALMA wants to include the voices of young adults and youth, and I feel with bringing me in I can use that to my advantage and tap into those communities.

WCT: Regarding the intersectionality of the Latinx and LGBTQ communities, could you speak a little bit of your own experiences?

MH: In my experience there is an added layer. I was raised extremely religious. I was raised Pentecostal Christian. So being queer, and Latinx, living in a religious home was extremely difficult. And many times, [when] growing up, even when I left the church, I still battled internal struggles. When I present myself, do I consider myself Latinx and then a gay man, or a gay man and then Latinx? I actually heard an interview not too long ago from a Black, gay reverend. And the question was, how do you identify or present yourself first? And he gave a response that stays with me now. And it is, "I identify with what you experience of me first."

So, if you experience me as a gay man first, then that's how I identify. If you feel that you identify with me as a Latinx man, then that is what I am at the same time. So, I don't have to choose. Because I am all of these things. But that took years for me to process with the baggage of being raised in a religious home.

I always felt that my queerness and my faith were at odds with each other. I may not identify as Christian, but I have faith and I have my own belief, and I'm reconciling my queer identity and my spirituality, just like with my Latinx identity. They can all exist—even though with the Latinx community there is a lot of homophobia. So being able to reconcile those identities and know that I can coexist internally. It took many years, and as a young adult it was a struggle, finding that acceptance of who I am. That's something we grow up with as queer people. How do I accept myself when society demonizes me for being me?

WCT: What are some things that you are really liking that ALMA is doing right now, and what are some of the larger, long-term steps you see for the future?

MH: What I truly like about ALMA is the engagement with the community. An organization that has been around for so long has created a strong relationship with the community. That's something that I value and love, because the community is going to show up. So creating that relationship is something that I truly value about the organization—and the fact that ALMA has almost informally created this environment for leadership development and helping our community leaders take that next step in their lives and careers and ambitions. Thinking about the long term, I want to formalize that, to create a leadership development academy that formalizes the leadership development we do informally. That's the big plan for the future.

See almachicago.org.



Asians and Friends MARKS LUNAR NEW YEAR

BY VERNON HESTER



TOP PHOTO: Doing The Bunny Hop at Bunny New Year with Angel Abcede (right).

ABOVE LEFT: Asians and Friends president Frank Batusic greets the crowd.

ABOVE RIGHT: Posing at the start of Bunny New Year at Chengdu Impressions Restaurant.

RIGHT: Friends celebrating the Lunar New Year at Bunny New Year.

Photos by Vernon Hester

Asians and Friends Chicago (AFC) hosted its annual Lunar New Year dinner and celebration on Feb. 7.

The event, which celebrated the Year of the Rabbit, took place at Chengdu Impressions restaurant, 5900 N. Broadway, and featured a red carpet experience that included drag bunnies, tongue-in-cheek musical performances, an exotic dinner and a raffle. Entitled "Bunny New Year," the event marked the group's first in person event in three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

AFC was formed in 1985 and, according to its website, was started by friends "who wanted to provide a supportive, non-threatening environment for gay Asians."

Additionally, the website notes: "The purpose of AFC is to bring together gay people who are interested in developing a greater understanding for the culture of Asian and Asian Americans and in developing friendships through social, cultural, and educational activities."

Spokesperson Angel Abcede said, "The group is an entry way for queer gays in Chicago, and serves as a welcome mat for people coming in from outside."

Bunny New Year got off to a raucous start with club members both greeting one another in bunny ears and posing with a bevy of drag performers on the red carpet. After the dinner and raffle, members participated in a musical extravaganza featuring the "bunnies" performing songs such as "The Carrot Song," "The Bunny Hop" and a heartfelt "My Bunny Valentine" from AFC President Frank Batusic.

See afchicago.org.



Keep on TROCKIN'



Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo performs Swan Lake.
Photo by Marcello Orselli

All-male ballet troupe mixes culture and comedy

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Performer Duane Gosa admits that going to the ballet can sometimes be intimidating for some audiences. But he is quick to reassure that the audience for his particular dance troupe—New York City-based Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo or, the “Trocks”—has nothing to worry about.

“It’s a fun show,” Gosa, a Chicago native who now calls Brooklyn home, explained. “This show really opens [ballet] up to all audiences—all types of people, demographics, ages. It becomes something you can easily enjoy and easily understand.”

The Trocks visited Chicago in February, appearing at the Auditorium Theatre downtown.

Gosa dances two key roles in various performances: ballerina Helen Highwaters and danseur Vladimir Legupski. There is always kind of a meta aspect to a Trocks show, since Gosa and his colleagues are interpreting the roles of performers interpreting their dance roles.

“It feels a little bit more light-hearted,” Gosa said. “If you do make a mistake in a rehearsal, you’re not so anxious about trying to cover it up. Maybe that mistake can turn into something that works onstage. You can take those mistakes and

use them, or try to act your way out of it, rather than trying hard to hide something.”

Director Tory Dobrin describes a Trocks performance as “very high-level dancing and very high-level comedy...The most important element is for the audience to enjoy themselves—and they usually do.”

The Trocks hadn’t performed at the Auditorium in many years, so Dobrin assembled a greatest-hits program from the Trocks’ repertoire for the February performance.

As director, it is Dobrin’s job to set the tone for the Trocks’ performances and performers. He

admitted that it's not an easy job managing a troupe with myriad personalities and sensibilities, but he likened the Trocks' organization to a "mom-and-pop store," with just a handful of individuals responsible for numerous logistical duties.

Dobrin matches new performers with their names and dance personae. Usually when a dancer is hired, there is not enough time for them to develop their own characterizations, so Dobrin has a veritable stock company of characters to choose from.

"I have a library on my computer," he explained. "I go through and I kind of feel out who that person is, and I pick a name that suits them. We bring in new names all the time, but I like to keep the older names around too. I'm really into the continuity of the past into the present. ... I talk a lot about the past and where we're coming from so that the younger generation of dancers know that it didn't just start with them—[the Trocks] started in 1974."

Dobrin began as a performer with the Trocks in 1980.

"It's kind of indicative of my personality—I'm someone who just kind of goes with the flow," he said. That year, he was in a dance class with someone who'd danced with the Trocks and knew that the troupe was looking for performers for a tour in South America. "I went and I was hired—it was as simple as that."

Dobrin added, "My aunt was a PR person in Los Angeles and did their PR [there]. ... So I was aware of the company already, and the tour in South America was super-fascinating."

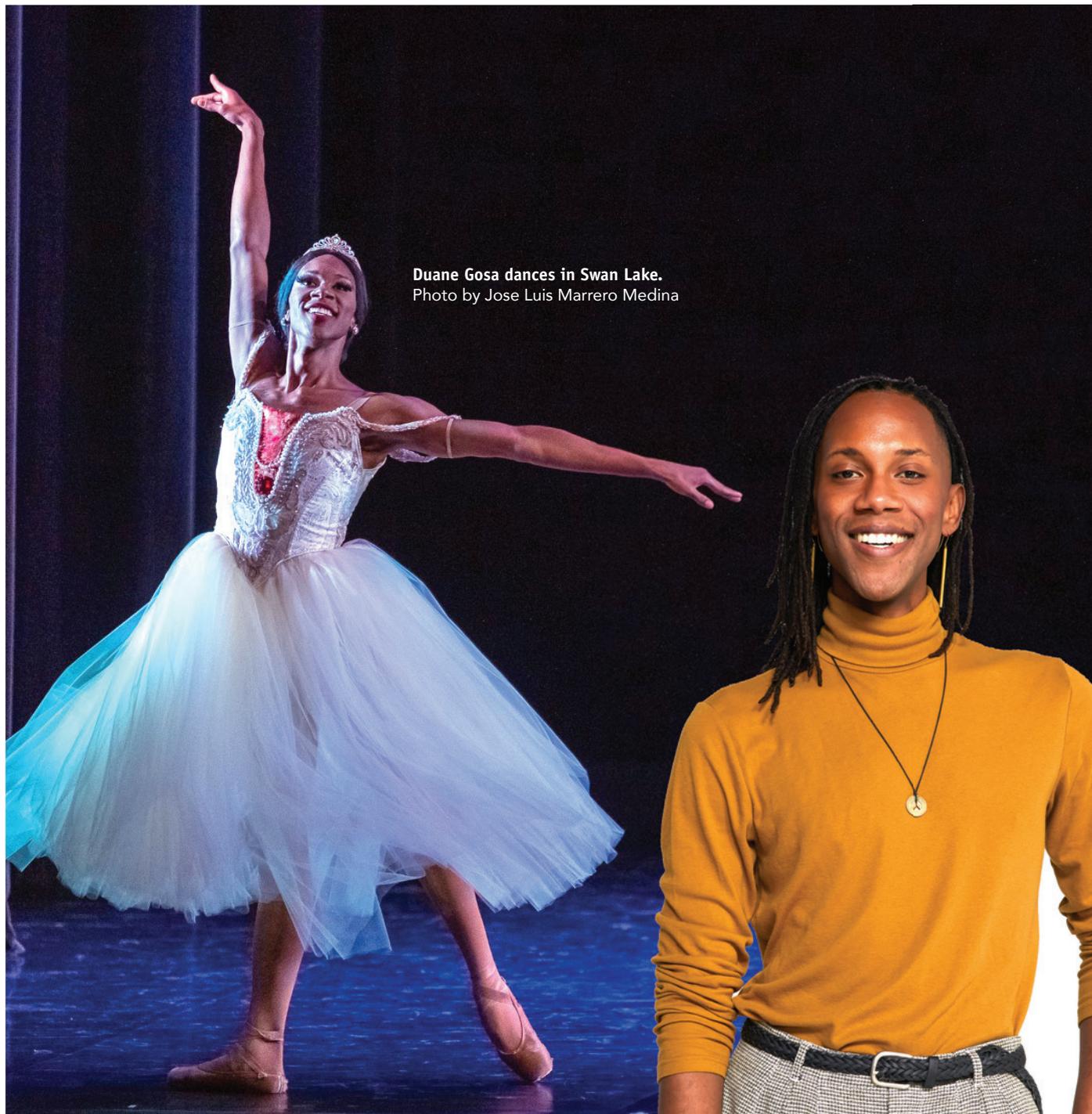
Gosa came to the Trocks about 10 years ago. He had been dancing in New York for several years and had in fact stopped doing ballet because "I was really over the role of a traditional male dancer. I felt like I didn't have the characteristics and qualities to be that great at it—I wasn't that strong."

But he was tempted to audition for the Trocks when he saw an opening come up, and he was quickly hired.

"I looked forward to being in a queer space," Gosa recalled. "Growing up in dance, you are around a lot of females, so you don't really have that kind of space to connect with people. I remember being really excited to work in a queer male environment."

At the time of his hiring, Gosa was also excited for the chance at full-blown drag. "Everyone has done it for Halloween...It's close, but not close enough. I knew I could do that better. I was excited to be in an environment where people are really skilled at this...I've changed so much being in a group like this."

He called Helen Highwaters a mix of Lucille Ball and Regina King: "She is very subtle—not over-the-top—but somebody who commands your attention with a variety of facial expres-



Duane Gosa dances in Swan Lake.
Photo by Jose Luis Marrero Medina

sions. She is also Black—trying hard to be a Black ballerina on the stage."

He likened Vladimir Legupsky, meanwhile, as a "macho Disney prince"—someone who parodies the cavalier masculine dancer's qualities Gosa years ago had been made to feel he was lacking. Legupsky has "a big, puffed-up chest, and is really arrogant, with a coiffed wig," he said.

Shortly before the February performance, Gosa was eagerly anticipating returning to Chicago. He was born in the Windy City, and though he left at a young age, he spent numerous summers there as a youngster.

"I have so much family there who hasn't had a chance to see me perform, so I'm really excited to be there," he said.

Duane Gosa.
Photo by Zoran Jelenic

Woman-owned FAMILY TREE RESALE shop helps Chicagoans in need

BY CARRIE MAXWELL



Browsing the racks of Family Tree Resale (left) and the store's exterior. Interior photo by Zoelle Nagib; exterior photo from store's Facebook page

When Elizabeth Basa opened Family Tree Resale shop in 2009 at 5066 N. Lincoln Ave. in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood, her mission was "to build an environmentally sustainable shop centered on helping those in need in the local community" in an inclusive way.

Basa's mother raised her on thrift shopping in Chicago during the '70s, so Basa developed a "thrill of treasure hunting for a great deal." Now she wants her shoppers to get that same thrill, as well as, for those in need, a helping hand.

"I envisioned a win-win-win place that would be a fabulous thrift experience for our shoppers, friendly to the planet, and help people who needed free clothing and other goods," said Basa. "Since opening, the plan has remained intact, and over the years, we have built a substantial network of schools and charities that partner with us through our community voucher program."

The community voucher program was inspired by the help Basa's mother, who struggled with mental health issues, received when Basa was growing up. Basa's mother got support from a local thrift shop give-back program which helped sustain their family. Basa now wants to do the same for others.

Local schools and organizations are given Family Tree's free community vouchers, which are then in turn passed on to families in need. Families or organization members with the means to do so are simultaneously encouraged to donate. Basa called it "a sort of ecosystem or cycle of resources that ties the communities to Family Tree, and vice-versa."

Vouchers come in \$20 increments and are given to each of the partnering local schools or

charities in \$200 to \$800 increments per quarter. The voucher money given out to each entity depends entirely on the amount of donations the store receives from each partnering local school or charity.

"They can pick out whatever they need like any other customer," said Basa. "Since it began, we have serviced thousands of families. We do not have an exact number, but we do know we have donated back over \$260,000 in vouchers."

Among the partnering schools and charities are Chicago Public Schools—Budlong, Waters, Peterson, Jamieson, Ravenswood, Stone Academy, Bateman and Chappell—as well as Truman College, St. Matthias and St. Hilary's School. Charities include Heartland Alliance, The Friendship Center, Syrian Community Network, Apna Ghar, Swedish Hospital, Rohingya Culture Center, The Children's Place, EZRA, Friedman Place, Refugee One, Parish for St. Matthias and Queen of Angels (St. Vincent De Paul), World Relief and Common Pantry.

Basa believes that her voucher program is the only one that services public schools anywhere in the United States. She added that the most popular items people seek out are clothing and home décor items.

"We also have a fantastic kids' department and a large jewelry selection people love," said Basa. "watching each item find a new use when it leaves our store feels great. I enjoy expressing my creativity at work, and I genuinely enjoy working with my co-workers."

She has employed LGBTQ+ people since the store's founding, and told Windy City Times that she "would be happy to learn if there is something we can do" in terms of outreach to the LGBTQ+ community.

"I am happy to work for Family Tree, where I can help neighbors help their neighbors through the community voucher program," said Family Tree Resale Community Outreach Coordinator Hillary Moon, who identifies as pansexual. "It is a good feeling to be a part of the change I wish to see in the world and participate in mutual aid."

"People ask about things you find going through donations, and the items themselves are definitely interesting, but sometimes the story they tell is more so," said Family Tree Resale staff member Sean Selbach. "The postcards, mugs, shirts and books they do not want or have a need for, why it could be. Even photographs and old notes. It is like a little window into their lives, being with them for a second without actually being with them, but I guess the short answer is, a Star Trek: The Next Generation uniform costume with com badge and ranking pipes included."

In terms of Family Tree's green model, Basa said that her resale shop is a way to prevent goods from entering the waste stream when items get thrown in the trash in lieu of being reused by other people. They also use non-toxic cleaners and products as well as recycle in multiple ways.

She added, "Our name, Family Tree, is based on the fact that we are one human family, and in our neighborhood, we are like branches of the same tree. Our aim is to be a bright spot for everyone in our community, respecting and welcoming everyone with open hearts and being a place where everyone can feel comfortable, which of course, includes our LGBTQ+ neighbors."

See familytreeresale.com/.



Family Tree community outreach coordinator
Hillary Moon.
Courtesy of Moon

At 'FIRST(ISH)' Producer Ashley Flowers speaks on "honest" representation

Sight

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Ashley Flowers—a producer, co-creator and actor in the short film *First(ish) Date*, now in pre-production—wears many creative hats. She also has an extensive resume working with stage and film props as well; Flowers has been working this television season on background props for the NBC drama “Chicago Med.”

“That includes all the ID badges and stethoscopes, for example, that the background actors use,” Flowers explained. “I also help with the directors’ chairs. It’s really nice, because I am used to being the propmaster, the person who’s all in charge and with all the responsibilities. It’s nice to be able to breathe and say, ‘Okay, not all of this is on me right now.’”

But Flowers, who only recently moved to Chicago from California, has set her sights on getting some of her own projects into gear.

“I’ve gotten to the point in my career where I just want to make my own stuff, because I’m not seeing what I want to see,” Flowers explained. “As a lesbian, I’m wanting to see those queer characters, and I’m wanting to see non-problematic queer stories. I thought, ‘It’s not really happening as much as I want, so I’m just going to kind of do it.’”

In early 2022, Flowers had her initial idea, a film about two women on a first date. She met Erica Romero, an actor and improvisation performer, and the two set about embellishing the storyline. Molly, whom Flowers would eventually play, is excited and anxious about her first date with Jess (Romero), whom Flowers described as “a more avoidant character, who uses sarcasm to hide her trauma.”

She added, “We wanted to show how emotionally vulnerable two women can be on a first date. We have that old joke about ‘U-Haul lesbians.’ Why do we have that? Because our dates can be anywhere from six- to 72-hours-long.”

Another character, Dirty Molly, is also there to embody Molly’s anxieties, literally bringing her face-to-face with the insecurities she lives with every day.

“[Dirty Molly] is there the entire date, judging what Molly is doing,” said Flowers, who is now running an online fundraiser to help pay for various production costs.

“We’re scheduled to film at the beginning of



Ashley Flowers.
Courtesy of Flowers

March,” she said. “We’ve got our director, our [director of photography], our sound person. We’re solidifying our locations next. So far, everyone who’s been hired is part of the LGBTQ community, which is amazing.”

She said the costs were going towards location rental, equipment rental and paying cast and crew.

“I truly believe that you need to pay people properly,” Flowers said. “There’s this huge belief in the industry that, ‘Oh, you can do it for free.’ It’s like, ‘No, people have lives—pay them for doing this.’ I’m not going to pay myself because this is a passion project, but if I’m bringing somebody on, they should be paid.”

She produced two “no-budget” short films for friends in California, which gave her the confidence to launch *First(ish) Date*. Flowers had no inclination to direct the new film, adding, “I have such respect for people who can direct, and I know that’s not where my talent lies. ... I’ve been very blessed to work with some amazing producers and directors with my prop and acting careers, who really helped and guided me.”

A native of Indiana, Flowers ended up in the Windy City because of a relationship.

“Being a typical U-Haul lesbian, love brought me here,” she said. “I met my wife online through friends, and she was living in Chicago. She came out to visit me—we were just friends. And then, ‘Oh you make complete sense for me.’ Then, long-distance dating and I finally thought, ‘You know what, there’s film in Chicago, I’m just going to move and see what happens.’ My best decision yet.”

She’s observed that Chicago’s production community is fundamentally different for Los Angeles’.

“In L.A., it’s almost over-saturated—there’s a million projects, but when you try to get on one, there’s somebody already there, since there are so many people,” Flowers said. “Here, it’s a smaller community and it’s about who you know, which is nice, because I feel like we have built this little family. You always know somebody on the next shoot that you go to.”

The fundraiser for *First(ish) Date* is at <https://givebutter.com/firstishdate>.

PRIDE JOURNEY: Jacksonville, Florida

BY JOEY AMATO



Jacksonville lights up at night. Photo courtesy of Visit Jacksonville

The last time I visited Jacksonville, I was probably in my early-mid 20s and living in Orlando. It was a very long time ago. I was eager to visit again as I know much has changed in the city since the early 2000s.

Getting around and where to stay

If you are ever planning on visiting Jacksonville, I would highly recommend renting a car. Jacksonville is the largest city in the country by land mass, and many of its popular attractions are spread out, especially if you want to get a good idea of all the city has to offer.

I decided to stay downtown for this trip, as much of my itinerary was within a few miles of the city center. **The Residence Inn Downtown Jacksonville** is a beautiful property located within walking distance to some of the city's attractions, great restaurants, and a block from one of Jacksonville's popular LGBTQ nightlife spots, **Incahoots**. The bar offers some incredible drink specials, so be sure to check their social media before you go. It is also the place to catch a fabulous drag show while in town.

What to do and eat—when you're on a budget

I wanted to make the focus of this trip about budget travel. Many times, people tend to not visit certain destinations, or travel at all, because they think it isn't affordable. Before setting out on my Jacksonville adventure, I did some research and discovered some restaurants and attractions that are not only affordable, but also some of the most highly recommended in the city.

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, and the Residence Inn offers a compli-

mentary breakfast for guests, but if you are in the mood to try out a local breakfast spot, head to **Cool Moose Cafe**. I met my friend there and we both had a delicious meal for around \$10. Everything was scratch-made and the service was wonderful.

Next, head over to the **Cummer Museum of Art**, which offers free admission on the first Saturday of each month. I visit so many art museums that sometimes they can become monotonous, but this museum happened to be exhibiting two very cool exhibitions during my visit. The first was *The Age of Armor*, an incredible collection of dozens of pieces of armor dating back hundreds of years. Most of the pieces in the collection were of European descent but there were a few pieces from other civilizations.

Another interesting exhibition is a display of movie posters from Norman Studios. Jacksonville was a filmmaking hotspot prior to Hollywood, with 26 movie companies calling Jacksonville home during the silent movie era. In the earliest years, Black actors and actresses were only cast as extras in films—studios were mostly catering to white audiences. Richard Norman purchased the Eagles Studio complex and went on to create one of the top production companies featuring prominently black cast members. Unfortunately, Norman was forced to close his studio during the Great Depression, but his legacy can be seen in this wonderful exhibition at the museum. The Norman Studio building itself is the last known silent film studio still standing in Jacksonville, and efforts are underway to make it into a museum.

For a quick lunch, head over to **Arepa Please**, just a few blocks from the museum. Try their signature Pabellon arepa, which contains shredded

beef, sweet plantains, queso blanco, and black beans. It was delicious and filling, but didn't break the bank.

I always like to visit local art galleries when I travel. On the way out to Jacksonville Beach is **Gallery 725**, one of the top galleries in the city. The gallery was showcasing the works of the late animator Ron Campbell, which included artworks based on the Beatles Yellow Submarine and the Beatles Saturday morning TV cartoon series—as well as Scooby Doo, Smurfs, Rugrats, Jetsons, and Flintstones.

The gallery also features works from internationally renowned pop artists Peter Max and Roy Lichtenstein among other artists.

Jacksonville's beaches are beautiful and not as crowded as South Florida's so I would recommend spending the morning or afternoon exploring the area, which also includes **Atlantic Beach** and **Neptune Beach**. You'll find a ton of wonderful seafood restaurants in the area as well.

Catty Shack

The highlight of my trip was a visit to **Catty Shack Wildlife Sanctuary**, which provides a safe, loving and forever home to endangered big cats. The sanctuary's mission is to educate the public about their plight in the wild and in captivity. The sanctuary is home to a variety of big cats, but the majority of the residents are tigers. While most of them have their own individual space, the siblings share an enclosure.

I was most intrigued by the black leopard. I don't think I've ever seen one before. Khala Hala was born at Catty Shack Ranch on June 16, 2004. She was happily positioned on her perch and made eye contact with every visitor who passed

by her enclosure.

Catty Shack is undergoing a large expansion which will include some additional large enclosures to give the cats more room to roam and play.

Shopping—when you're not on a budget (and a few more eats)

If you are in the mood to do some shopping during your stay, head to **St. Johns Town Center**, a beautiful outdoor shopping experience featuring a variety of retailers ranging from Tiffany and Louis Vuitton to Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware. There are many dining options available there, including a great Mediterranean fast-causal chain called Cava, but if you are looking for a local option, head back downtown and try **S & R Dim Sum**, which is located not too far from Memorial Park. I ordered the shrimp dim sum, as well as the sweet and sour chicken, and both were wonderful. I especially liked the chicken dish, as it was only lightly breaded and sautéed rather than deep fried like in other Chinese restaurants.

For one last cocktail in Jacksonville, head to **Park Place Lounge**, just a short five-minute drive from downtown. Park Place boasts an extensive Happy Hour from noon-7p.m., and you can mingle with the locals on their outdoor patio.

If you are looking to escape the harsh winter but avoid the crowds of other beach cities, then Jacksonville is a great option. The city provides a variety of indoor and outdoor activities for every budget. **River City Pride** will take place in November, so there is more than enough time to make your Jacksonville pride plans.

Enjoy the Journey!