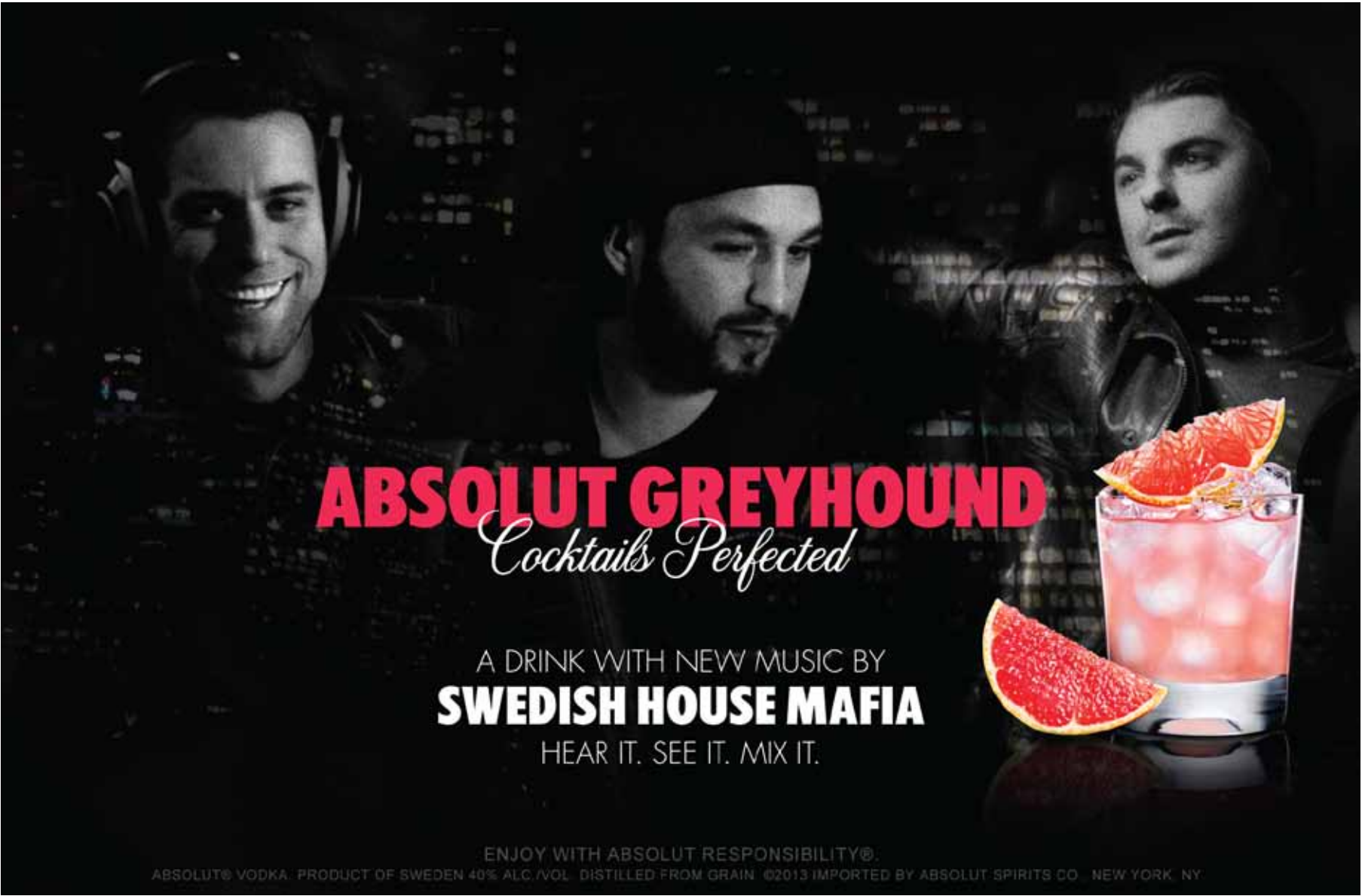






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LETTER



INTERVIEW

EXESORE

By Will Guess

Images courtesy of Eyesore

XXXXXXX, better known as the street artist Eyesore, has been coloring the city of Houston with his drawings for over 10 years. In the art world, graffiti and street art is like the kid who didn't pay attention in class, the one who never followed the rules, the one who made up their own rules instead. As far as prominent people in the Houston graffiti scene, Eyesore is one of the most well-respected artists in the city. His drawings involve extremely intricate and detailed lines, making it hard not to take a second glance when you see one of his pieces pasted up somewhere around town. Hell, he even took time out of his busy schedule to do the cover art for this very issue. FPH got the rare privilege enough to sit down with Eyesore to talk about his creative process, what makes street art relevant, and his purpose.

Walk me through your creative process.

I am inspired by the beauty of my friends and family, but also by the people that have changed my way of thinking like authors, artists, and musicians. They deserve to be acknowledged and not forgotten. It's my way of communicating the things I have learned and think are relevant within the community. I also draw nature and animals and the frailty of life [to show how] intricate and amazing this life we have is and that these are the important and serious aspects of my craft. On the other hand, there are the less serious influences with vintage monster comics, Halloween, '90s underground death metal, horror movies, and early graffiti and art culture. These were the things I was into growing up, and I thought it would be fun to mash them all together and see what people got out of them when I put them up. Some of these drawings take hours or days to complete. Once I am satisfied with the image, I burn it to a screen and print it on whatever I can find—stickers, posters, shirts, and found objects. Then I send them out into the world for people to enjoy or hate.

What sets you apart from other street artists?

I am very proud of Houston's street art and graffiti culture, past and present. There

are so many diverse styles coming from all sorts of backgrounds, and I am just glad to be a part of it. Give Up, Failure, Chicken Boy, Gonzo, Fukito!, Yar!, VERBS/MEAT, JEWS, JADE, VIZIE, NEKST, and the rest of DTS/GY. In the beginning, these artists just amazed me with their talent and determination for getting up. I truly believe they changed the way Houston thought about graffiti and street art for the better. Today's street art and graffiti is just as amazing: ACK!, DUAL, ETOMS, Cutthroat, WEAH, Wiley, and 2:12 are all completely original and different in their own ways, and getting to know and work with them is always fun. We all have our own styles, but mine is all drawing and illustration-based. I have loved to draw for as long as I can remember and it's the medium I feel most comfortable with getting up. The silk screening is the most effective way to transfer my drawings to paper and stickers, then apply them to the streets.

Why is street art relevant?

All art enriches communities and brings color, life, and culture to our city. It's connected to the people who live there, and it is a unique part of OUR home. My only wish is that it helps inspire creativity and thought. I have met so many great people through what we do that I wouldn't have met otherwise, and their support and encouragement makes street art relevant.

For you personally, what is the intrinsic value or purpose of putting up art illegally?

I just like adding my images to the city. I don't worry about the legal issues of what I do. I truly believe that what I am doing is having more of a positive effect on everything.

What emotions, if any, are you trying to provoke when people see your art?

I hope they have a positive reaction. I am not trying to ruin anyone's day. I guess I'm trying to change their perception of advertising versus graffiti and street art or history versus gentrification. We can't move forward culturally if we are constantly erasing the past. What is an eyesore to the people of Houston?

FPH

By Michael Pennywark

HUMANS ARE DRAWN to the close examination of the self that we see represented every day in the mirror. It's not surprising then to discover that self-portraits have been a staple of many artists' work since ancient times, and painters such as Rembrandt and Van Gogh are well known for their contributions to the genre. Our very idea of self is tied up with the image we see reflected in the mirror—a thought that, for me, usually precedes an existential crisis after making the rookie mistake of staring at myself in the mirror for two hours every time my neighbor talks me into trying his ginger mint mushroom tea. Luckily, I can take comfort in the knowledge that I am probably just regressing into some form of Lacanian mirror stage and everything will be fine when I go back to looking at the pretty lights.

Of course, a much better way to reflect on those greater philosophical questions surrounding the self is to take a stroll down to the MFAH starting July 14th and check out their exhibition, *Self, Model, and Self as Other*. The exhibition will feature about 50 photographic self-portraits from the MFAH photography collection—spanning more than a century and revealing the different innovative approaches to the genre. While the development of the camera has made it easier to create one's self-portrait, it can also be a more honest or revealing medium and as Anne Tucker, curator of the show, reminded me, it can also be intentionally obscuring or misleading. Ultimately it is a vision of the self and the world that the artist has chosen for us.

So what draws an artist to the self-portrait? Tucker offers the following response: "Many, if not most, of the artists and photographers I have known have a deep self-awareness. They may not use that to make images of themselves but they see themselves physically and see themselves in the context of their culture and its issues." She also took the time to break down the show's title to help further explain:

SELF

"Some portraits are intended to be revealing about themselves. Robert Frank, Edward Steichen, Yasuhiro Ishimoto, George Krause, and Nicola Costantino all include some element that identifies them as photographers or for Constantino, as a sculptor." Other artists use the genre



Kimiko Yoshida, Japanese, born 1963
The Divine Bride Praying. Self-Portrait, from the series Intangible Brides
 2003 | Chromogenic print
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase with funds provided by Photo Forum 2004 | 2004.1669
 © Kimiko Yoshida

Self, Model, and Self as Other
 July 14 - September 29, 2013
 MFAH - Beck Building, Ground Floor
 5601 Main Street

John Coplans,
Self-Portrait: Back with Hands Above,
 1984 | Gelatin silver print, ed. #3/12
 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection
 © The John Coplans Trust

to address issues, using their own bodies and faces: John Coplans examines the aging male body, Jen Davis looks at weight issues, Kurt Weston—blindness, Robert Mapplethorpe—death, Adrain Chesser—AIDS, and Jan van Leeuwen—the Holocaust.

MODEL

It isn't always convenient or affordable for an artist to use another person as a model, so using oneself is a great way to cut costs and potentially remove the frustration of having to direct another person. Some examples from the show include Blythe Bohnen's documented exercise to move her face in measured directions and Cindy Sherman's photographs which, while not about herself, are all of her.

SELF AS OTHER

As Tucker explains, some artists "use their own visage to convey their vision of others, such as Drtikol's posing as Christ on the cross or Anne Roland covering half of her face with a photograph of the face of Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother.'" "Kimiko Yoshida is posing as a nun in her series on brides in different cultures," Tucker continues. Of course, there might also be other motives for the way they choose to represent themselves to the viewer. "Some are projecting a self-image: Edward Curtis posed in a dashing hat, Horst P. Horst gaining stature from posing with Gertrude Stein, Josef Sudek posing with two good friends and colleagues, Jaromir Funke and Adolf Schneeberger," Tucker says. "Some might be projecting how they presume they are seen or how they want to be seen. In that vein, some glamorize; others do not. Taxi driver Ryan Weideman's 'Self Portrait with Transvestite' is not a flattering picture. Quite a number of the photographers hide their faces behind masks, scrim, mirrors, and other devices."

Some of the highlights of the show include a self-portrait of Mapplethorpe taken just months before he died, showing him posing with a skull-topped cane, Francesca Woodman posing with fox-glove flowers, a series of pictures of Cindy Sherman by herself and of her by others, and Birgit Jürgenssen in a fox mask.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go reevaluate those Facebook photos I posted of myself last night. **FPH**

ART IS GOOD, GORE IS BETTER

WHEN (what is now considered a horror classic) *Maniac* came out in 1980, it caused an uproar throughout the country because of its extreme violence. The movie about a serial killer who scalps his prey was literally responsible for mobilizing groups that took out billboards protesting the movie. There's even a Siskel & Ebert clip of the duo debating the film where Siskel damns it (he walked out), and Ebert defends it on the principle of censorship.

On a cumulative basis, the original *Maniac* is probably gorier than the remake, which is an extremely scary and brutal affair itself. Director Franck Khalfoun admits that audiences today "have become anesthetized to movie violence." Speaking to *Free Press Houston* via a phone interview, Khalfoun recounts how the original *Maniac* "was one of the horror films that desensitized audiences."

Khalfoun's version incorporates the original plot but relates events with a more subjective point of view, allowing the audience to see things as Frank Zito sees them. Elijah Wood plays Zito, a role originally written and performed by Joe Spinell. Obviously Wood is slightly smaller in stature than Spinell, a regular face in movies during the '70s and '80s and perhaps best remembered for his role in *The Godfather* films. Yet Wood, Frodo Baggins himself, previously played a serial killer in *Sin City*, so it's not so much of a stretch as a revelation that Wood steals the show with a deep rendering of the psychic pain Zito carries from childhood trauma.

Khalfoun, originally from France, has collaborated with Alexandre Aja for twenty years. Khalfoun played a role in Aja's film *Haute Tension* (2003) which, let's face it, is a go-to title for horror films of the last decade. Additionally, the DP of *Haute Tension*, Maxime Alexandre, also shot *Maniac*. "We shot it with the Epic RED camera using Cooke

lenses," adds Khalfoun. "What we were trying to achieve was to immerse the audience in a layer of darkness."

Zito takes the scalps and places them on mannequins that decorate his apartment. Each victim becomes his new girlfriend that he subsequently regulates to a corner of his living space. "Hair is the one part of the human body that doesn't decay," Zito drones. "Dolls are creepy," comments Khalfoun about the set design that shows rows of mannequins in Zito's pad. "It's like their eyes are open but they're dead eyes. This is a guy who worships false idols."

Many of the scalplings are depicted with brute force. "We were very practical on the effects," Khalfoun notes. "Ninety-nine percent of the effects are prosthetics and real applications. The audience is more in touch with what they're witnessing." However, he admits that for the opening murder they had to use CG. "How else could you show a knife go through a woman's neck and end up inside her mouth?" Khalfoun says.

When asked about the levity on the set, Khalfoun chuckles and says, "We can be getting technical things ready for hours to film 15 seconds, but when you pull it off, it's funny because it's functional." Khalfoun also points out the contribution of special effects firm KNB and Greg Nicotero for providing the surplus of scalps.

Maniac opens in July exclusively at the Alamo Drafthouse Vintage Park location. Khalfoun will attend screenings the opening weekend and take part in post-screening Q&As.

DVD slight return

While *Understanding Art: Hidden Lives of Masterpieces* (Athena, 6/18) sounds like a pedantic affair, the result is actually the opposite. Not exactly treading on CSI territory yet with an unmistakable taste for mystery and

forensic investigation, this five-part British series (259 minutes on two DVDs) shows you the paintings of five great artists in a manner not readily available to the average bear.

Shot over a period of five years (2006 – 2010), filmmakers Stan Neumann and Juliette Garcias attended a yearly powwow at the Musée du Louvre where art experts view the work of a single artist. Only for this unique event, the canvases are removed from their frames and set and instead displayed studio style, on an easel. The graphic design of the five episodes is modeled after the art of Saul Bass.

The five artists under the scope are Raphael, Rembrandt, Poussin, Watteau, and Leonardo. Some of the documentation covers restoration techniques and the wide range of modern tools such as X-rays, microscopy, and even chromatography to see into the painting. In some cases, the art on display has been painted over a pre-existing painting. Then there's the delicate art of revealing forgeries.

Can you imagine how many Rembrandts have proven to be fake in the last hundred years? The Louvre has seven of Da Vinci's known 15 paintings. Here we see "Mona Lisa," "Virgin of the Rocks," and "La Belle Ferronniere" up close and personal.

The episode that really takes on a procedural tone revolves around Poussin's "The Flight into Egypt" (c. 1658). The painting was bought by brothers in the '80s who suspected it was a Poussin and yet the seller thought otherwise and it sold for 1.6 million francs with a starting bid of 80,000 francs (\$85, 286). A lengthy court case consequently ensued with the result that the painting was to be returned to the owner who eventually sold it to a museum for millions more. Fascinating, educational, and never boring, *Hidden Lives of Masterpieces* should occupy a place on your shelf. **FPH**

By Michael Bergeron

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By Will Guess

With another successful FPSF behind us, I'm assuming (and hoping) that all of you are well-rested. With summer heating up, so are the shows for the month of July. Let's keep it going.

John Mayer, July 12

Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion

The "Your Body is a Wonderland" guy has come a long way. He's gone from being the good-guy pop star to the bad boy, I-fucked-every-hot-celebrity-you've-always-dreamed-about-sleeping-with, blues guitar god. Not an easy feat, but somehow Mayer is able to pull off both personas surprisingly well. Armed with a new album after a lengthy hiatus, Mayer is back to take what rightfully belongs to him—his place as one of the guitar greats. When you talk about the phenomenal ax players of the past, at some point, you have to slip Mayer's name in. He has played alongside many of the biggest names in blues music. Some people can play guitar really well and some people can write great songs, this guy does both seamlessly. If you've never seen him play live, do yourself a favor. He's stunning.

Black Sabbath, July 25

Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion

It's been 45 years since Sabbath emerged from Birmingham, England, forever changing the mood of rock music everywhere. Since then, the band has been through ups and downs, lineup changes, and their fair share of controversy. Yet, after it all, they're back with a new album, 13, and a tour to go along with it. When the announcement of an all-original reunion came out, I was ecstatic, but what seems too good to be true usually is, and in this case, it was a contractual dispute with drummer Bill Ward which led to the demise of the original lineup. Still though, I held out hope for the new album. Former Rage Against the Machine drummer Brad Wilk filled the huge shoes of Ward, and in my opinion, did a fantastic job. With Rick Rubin producing, it's hard to go wrong. Black Sabbath will go down in history as one of the greatest bands of all time. Don't miss them while you still have the opportunity to see three-fourths of the original lineup.

The Dillinger Escape Plan, July 27

House of Blues

When DEP emerged onto the hardcore/punk scene in 1997, no one really knew what to think about them. With erratic blast beats, crushing guitars and drums, and a vocalist with seemingly nothing to lose, DEP plays a style all their own. No one has been able to copy or recreate what they do in any shape or form. With the release of Calculating Infinity in 1999, the band completely changed the game. Now, 14 years later, I don't think anyone expected them to still be around AND still be putting out phenomenal music. They have consistently progressed as a band with every album—each one different from the last. With their new release, One of Us is the Killer, DEP has done it again. After hearing the first track, my jaw dropped to the floor. It is chaos and intensity captured through sound and they amp it up even more when they play live. Don't stand too close though, you might get burned by the singer's fascination with spitting fire.

Fitz & The Tantrums, July 11 at Fitzgerald's

Everclear, Live, Filter & Sponge, July 14 at Proof Bar + Patio

Wiz Khalifa & A\$AP Rocky, July 26 at Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion



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By K.M. Anderson

Pusha T / My Name Is My Name

(G.O.O.D. Music/Def Jam)

Since his days in Clipse, Pusha T, a progenitor of drug rap, has concocted tales of pharmaceutical profits, mishaps, and consequences, all the while demonstrating himself as one of the finest lyricists of this particular era. My Name Is My Name is his first official release as a G.O.O.D. Music artist, despite having released Fear of God II in 2011 and the excellent Wrath Of Caine mixtape earlier this year. What can one expect? Darkness and menace. Pusha T, even at his most humorous, is all terror. The album features production from Kanye West, Swizz Beatz, Don Cannon, Pharrell Williams, and Nottz. The first single "Numbers On The Boards" is a rumble in the jungle. If the music industry is Sal's Pizzeria, this is the trashcan through the window. It's gonna be a hot summer.

Daughn Gibson / Me Moan

(Sub Pop)

Daughn Gibson's last album, All Hell, followed a theme — all the songs were similarly paced, evoked feelings of loneliness and loss, and were delivered in Gibson's baritone style. The album's narrative colored the canvas with tales of forgone lovers, ungrateful children, and searches for salvation. With Me Moan, Gibson has returned with a similar aesthetic (samples), but the songs are more upbeat (rhythmically) and the instrumentation is more lush (possibly the result of Sub Pop, new label steez). Gibson's signature baritone in tow, the song "Reach Into The Fire" is more optimistic in contrast to All Hell, but an underlayer of vulnerability remains. Daughn Gibson may follow a narrative, but as long the story satisfies, I will remain for the ride.

Kanye West / Yeezus

(Def Jam)

I stated at the beginning (or end) of last year that the only album I was anticipating for 2013 was from Kanye West. Yeezus is an album informed by everything including trap rap, house, reggae, r&b, industrial, and Wu-Tang era hip-hop, just to name a few. It is ultimately a rap album ("Bound 2," "Send It Up," & "On Sight") but there are other sounds, too. "I'm In It" is incredibly raunchy and goes from darkly sensual to reggae to aggressive downtempo in less than four minutes. The album is only 40 minutes long and all 40 minutes are action. Sonically, it's an adventure. Kanye is conflicted, contradictory at points, but fascinatingly brave. He doesn't have to make a challenging album, but still he does. It poses questions about fame, materialism, love, race, and culture in a way that is genuine to someone established enough to have a valid opinion. Whatever egocentric tendencies West may have, this album justifies.



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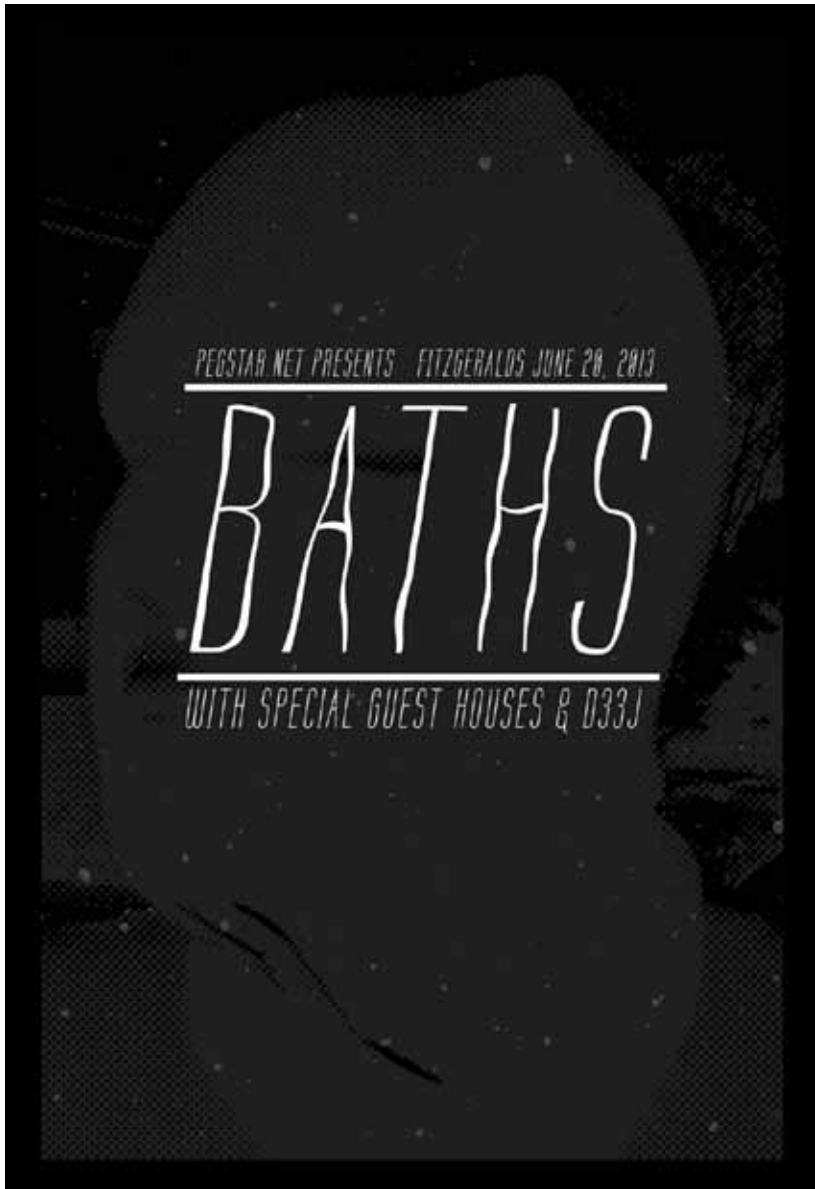
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INTERVIEW: DOOMSTRESS ALEXIS

By Rob McCarthy

Photos by Qu Griffin (Griffin Wing Studio) and Lana Brandon

MUSIC



DOOMSTRESS ALEXIS IS ALWAYS BUSY. Whether she is working hard on finishing a new album or performing as the vocalist and bassist with her doom metal band, Project Armageddon, booking and hosting shows, running Houston's Doom Brigade, fashion designing and modeling, or just working her day job, Alexis is always hustling and making moves. Never content to keep the status quo, she's been shaking things up in the metal community both locally and abroad, and her story is as unique as it is inspiring. She is so inspiring, in fact, that our mayor declared July 5, 2013 as Doomstress Alexis Day. FPH had an opportunity to talk with Alexis about the future of Project Armageddon, Doom Brigade, and her other endeavors.

What was your first experience with metal?

I had an older brother who was into metal and rock. I was like five or six and I just remember flipping through the album sleeves and being so enthralled with the art and titles and the imagery. Going to first grade singing Judas Priest and all that. Still so vivid in my head.

The Houston Press Music Awards recently nominated you for best female vocalist. How does that feel?

Getting nominated for best metal band was a great feeling in itself but being nominated for best female vocals just goes beyond words, personally. This is a historical precedent that exceeds myself. It also helps in one of my biggest goals which is to be able to reach out to the transgender community and serve as an example to my sisters and brothers, and to help inspire those that may doubt themselves or their potential.

Has it been difficult for you being a woman in what many consider to be a "boy's club" genre?

Actually, even being an openly TG woman in the scene, nearly everyone I've interacted with, from bands to promoters to club owners, has been very respectful and great to work with. It's been like a big metal family that I've been fortunate to be a part of. Sure there's always a few who will be negative but by and large it's been a great experience and environment.

Why did you pick the bass guitar?

Everyone always played guitar, including myself, but there was never a bass player around when friends would get together. I had a bass and so I would always switch to that for jamming. I always had a love for the bass and one day I started jamming with some new friends, and it just felt so right that it finally just stuck.

Most inspiring female musicians in metal? Musicians or artists in general that inspire you?

Marissa Martinez of Cretin (CA) was a major inspiration for me back when I thought I would have to give up playing metal when I transitioned, until I read her story in Decibel Magazine. I love MIny Parsonz from Royal Thunder. We played with them about three years ago and I got to hang and chat with her last October when they played at Rudyard's. Tomasz Scull of Venomin James/Wide Gauge (OH) has been a major musical influence throughout my life. Over the past few years, I have met so many amazing artists, photographers, body painters, models, etc. Anybody that finds the heart to express themselves in whatever medium they can, I find inspirational.

How did you connect with your bandmates?

I auditioned and joined their old band. We toured with Reverend Bizarre from Finland and The Gates of Slumber through the Northeast for a few weeks. We got back home and recorded a record at my house. The three of us kept working and jamming and eventually I started writing stuff that didn't fit the other band so we formed Project Armageddon as a side project and quite quickly realized it was the only project.

Your music has been growing and evolving since your first record. From what I understand, Project Armageddon is well on its way to finishing up the next album. What can you tell us about your writing and recording process?

Writing takes many shapes, from free jams on riffs to someone bringing in pieces of a song and then hashing it out as a whole. Everyone contributes to the writing. Even our drummer Raymond will pick up the bass or guitar to play a riff or he'll suggest an alternate way of playing something or switching certain notes in a riff. Likewise, I'll climb behind the drums and beat out a few ideas to show the direction I may be hearing something going in and then he'll develop it from there. Brandon is just the man. He'll start ripping something out and Raymond and I will just stare sometimes like where the fuck did that come from?! I do write ninety-nine percent of the lyrics but I encourage the guys to contribute even if it's just ideas or themes and I give them credits for that.

What is next for you and the band?

We are planning a video shoot for mid/late July for "Into the Sun." Several shows coming up including my second international booking for August 3rd at Fitzgerald's with Project Armageddon, Doomdogs (UK), War Injun (MD) and Leather Nun America (CA). Also, we're returning to Dungeon Manor Studios to finish demos for the third record. Then we are gearing up for our fall touring schedule, which will hopefully have some out-of-state shows, as well as some Texas towns we haven't made it to yet. **FPH**



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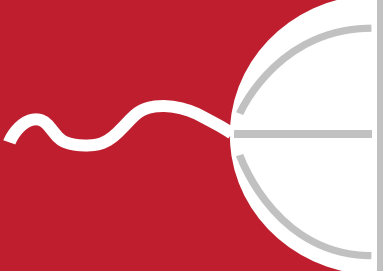
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IN APRIL OF THIS YEAR, Nathan Nix self-published a novel he wrote titled *The Drifters*. Nix is a soft-spoken, polite gentleman who has lived in Houston his entire life (with the 5-month exception of living in Africa as a child). Having written two books (that he was not satisfied with and therefore did not publish) prior to *The Drifters*, Nathan Nix decided not to hold back and went on to champion his goal. FPH caught up with Nathan Nix at Big Star Bar and tricked him into telling us all of his secrets.

Let's start this interview in the middle, shall we? Good. Is this the book you set out to write?

No, not really actually. What inspired the book in the first place is I'm a proud product of the Houston Community College system. Or, I guess, Montgomery College is where I went but whatever. It was such a bizarre experience that ended up being a good experience. However, at the time, it was almost like this purgatory that you're caught in and there are all of these bizarre people that you meet at a community college that you don't meet at a university. So, I set out to write about these people and about this experience. It was going to be like this comic novel. But as I went along and began developing these characters, the character of Nicole (the main character), I realized that she would be from The Woodlands and she would be this type of person who grew up wealthy, a little spoiled, and ended up having to go to community college because of an Enron-type thing with her dad. I really got more into the idea of her meeting these not necessarily poor, but community college people. So the book is less funny than it started out being.

How did you manage to write a novel wherein the main character is the opposite sex? What drove you to make that decision?

A lot of research. In a way, it was easy because my background is in journalism and so I've been taught how to observe and how to distill that into a story. Combining that with researching how girls talk when they're talking to each other—that's the hardest part. I know how they talk when they talk to me. Sooooo eavesdropping. A lot of eavesdropping. But at the end of the day, guy or girl, a lot of it is similar until you get to the specifics; like how a girl would describe something. And I intentionally set out to write from a girl's perspective in this book

because I had written two other books that went nowhere from a guy's perspective. And I figured, if I'm going to go through this whole experience again and get kind of a tepid reaction then I'm at least going to want to stretch myself as a writer. So what's the easiest way to do that— write from a female's perspective.

Tell me about the decision to publish this novel yourself.

The thing that turned me onto the idea of self-publishing, and basically made it OK for me, was looking at the situation from my musical background and being involved in the music scene and seeing all of that. Well, it was the same thing my friends had been doing for years. They record an album in their friend's garage and then they sell it at shows for five bucks. They send it out to magazines or to labels and most of the time they're going to get rejected. But it's practice almost in a way. You know, you're putting yourself out there and growing with each album you put out, or, in this case, each book you put out. The main thing is you're building an audience. So even if it's not put out by a big publisher, the publisher is still going to want you to have an audience eventually. So, just put it out there yourself and build your audience. And I was thinking, "You know, if Sufjan Stevens and Ian McKay can do it, then I feel OK just going ahead and doing it myself." At the end of the day, all that you really want is for people to read it and enjoy what you've written.

How has putting out this novel changed you as a writer?

I finally feel OK trying for a career as a writer, as opposed to it just being some hobby that I might be OK at but I'm not really sure. And now going through this whole process—and not just the process of writing the novel—but the process of producing it as well, you know, hiring Ashley Ward to do the cover, doing all of the interior part of it, and hiring an editor to edit it—I feel like I actually know what I'm doing.

What role do mosquitoes play in this story?

They're bloodsuckers, man. And I'm sure there's a parallel there with the suburbs.

Well, yeah. The suburbs are bloodsuckers, too.

They'll suck the soul out of you. **FPH**



NATHAN NIX NOVELIST

ESCAPE BY GOING DEEPER

By Mills-McCoin



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THE FUTURE OF VIDEOGAMES: A THEORY



By Rob McCarthy
Illustration by Blake Jones

IN THE '80S, after-school activities often included hours spent at the local arcade pumping quarter after quarter into PAC-MAN and Galaga. Some fortunate folks could enjoy playing games such as Pong and Pitfall in the comfort of their own home. If you were mathematically inclined enough, you could dominate PAC-MAN in a very short period of time because, at its root, the game revolved around good timing and formulaic strategy.

When console gaming took off with the Nintendo and Sega Master System, a lot of things changed. Video games began to weave stories into the mix. It wasn't just about racking up a high score, but also about seeing the game through until the very end. When you played *The Legend of Zelda*, you were compelled to complete the quest. The player became much more immersed in the alternate universe provided by the video game experience and games were no longer just an equation.

Naturally, as technology improved, so too did the ability of the designers to more fully immerse the players in the world they were creating. From 8-bit onward, each generation of gaming console brought a revolutionary approach to not only what you were playing, but also how you were playing it. First-person shooters put you behind the trigger and long-winded RPGs offered an opportunity to build challenging and beneficial relationships with characters.

Games began to tell their stories utilizing voice acting and computer-generated cut scenes. They became longer and more complex. That's not to say that the new generation of games became more challenging; try beating *Altered Beast* sometime. They just became more engaging. When games like *Metal Gear Solid* were raising the bar on how developers approached writing, acting, direction, and other production aspects, game playing evolved.

Nowadays, most video games, especially the big-budget ones, are essentially

lengthy narratives and epic stories that grip the gamer for hours on end. Video games may be replacing books and movies by doing something that neither ever could—giving you a feeling of control, of responsibility to the story.

Take a game like *Heavy Rain*, for instance. When I played this game for the first time, I remember getting a group of my friends together over at my apartment with the understanding that this game would be a very intense and extended experience that could last for hours. Without giving anything away, the game requires that the player make decisions throughout the story that ultimately decides the fate of the protagonist. It's not a new concept, but the developers nailed it. You become so engrossed in the plight of the hero that you actually begin to think like they do. We played the game for 11 hours straight, right until the very end.

A lot of new video games are providing an experience that is as annoying as it is enjoyable; they are basically designed like a thrill ride. You strap yourself in, journey down a given track, and encounter and experience what the developer wanted you to experience all along the way. On the one hand, it is a lot of fun to play the game like a movie, knowing that you are in for the ride. However, with games such as *Call of Duty*, I often feel uninvolved in the progression of the on-screen action, and I want to be more in control in setting the scene.

If you've ever seen the movie *eXistenZ*, you may have some idea as to what the future holds for gamers. Video games become an escape from reality, and not just the games themselves but the worlds they create.

My reasoning for this is simple: technology. Quite recently, a developer perfected 180-degree virtual reality with a device they are calling the Oculus Rift. This device, like most virtual reality headsets, is worn over the eyes, fully immersing you. Unlike most VR, however, this device has seemingly

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VIDEOGAMES

perfected a majority of issues that have kept VR from becoming mainstream. A lot of the developer giants, such as Valve and id Software, are standing behind Oculus VR. They believe that the Oculus Rift is the future of video games (and so do I).

Imagine standing in your living room. You've powered on your game console of choice, strapped on your VR headset, and whether it be Wii-like technology or Kinect camera, motion sensors capture your every move. To anyone else in the room, you'd look pretty silly, but you're too busy being the hero of some faraway world, blowing shit up and kicking a ton of ass.

But, that's the thing. Who would be in the room? There was a time not long ago when gaming was a social experience. You brought your friends home, grabbed four controllers, and killed each other endlessly in *GoldenEye* or *Halo*. You can hardly have that experience these days because everything is best played online. Arguably, you have a more accessible social network online but you lose the personal proximity, that essential human contact. Internet friends become your only friends.

I bet that if developers created a small, claustrophobia-inducing room for you to stand in for privacy and immersive purposes, gaming would absolutely become the ticket out of the monotony of your everyday life—not that it isn't already. But things could certainly take an extreme turn in that direction.

Imagine all your sick fantasies becoming a purchasable pastime. Buy the ticket, take the ride.

Soon enough, the boundaries that separate real life from fantasy will become so blurred that you probably will prefer living the fantasy. How about taking equal parts *Second Life* and mixing in the fantasy experience of your choice. Add a limitless, open world and there's pretty much no reason to come back to the boring, asleep-at-the-wheel existence that you so often take for granted.

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JOINING THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID AFTER IT'S ALREADY OVER

By Nick Cooper
Illustration by John Forse

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LOCAL

FROM TWITTER DEATH HOAXES to health updates to pre-obituaries, Nelson Mandela has been in the headlines constantly for the last few months (as of the print deadline, he's still alive). However, when Mandela, South Africa, and the world most needed the media spotlight, it was conspicuously absent. The first decade of Mandela's 27-year imprisonment was the most miserable— he spent it breaking rocks into gravel and quarrying lime on Robben Island. He was harassed, cut off from the world, and forbidden to wear sunglasses, permanently damaging his eyesight. He slept in a damp concrete cell and contracted tuberculosis, the source of his current suffering. The same newspapers that have eloquent words for him now were silent.

The mid-'60s were what Larry Shore, a South African American anti-apartheid activist and professor at Hunter College, refers to as "the worst years, when apartheid wasn't on the radar." In the U.S., Martin Luther King, Jr. broke the media silence, calling for sanctions against South Africa in his speeches. Then came Robert F. Kennedy's trip to South Africa, where he met black leaders and called apartheid evil (this trip is the subject of Shore's film *RFK in the Land of Apartheid*).

By the '70s and '80s, black solidarity movements, radicals, students, and musicians built pressure for sanctions and divestment. Eventually, institutions and politicians in wealthy countries were pressured to impose sanctions and apartheid fell. Suddenly the people of the world loved Mandela and felt that they shared his victory, regardless of whether they had previously been anti-apartheid, pro-apartheid, or had never heard of apartheid. Many seemed to think they themselves, or their group, had somehow helped. Barbra Streisand gives the credit to liberals, saying:

I am also very proud to be a liberal. Why is that so terrible these days? The liberals were liberators. They fought slavery, fought for women to have the right to

vote, fought against Hitler, Stalin, fought to end segregation, fought to end apartheid. Liberals put an end to child labor and they gave us the five-day workweek! What's to be ashamed of?

There is apartheid today in Israel/Palestine and liberals such as Streisand are not fighting it. Instead, she played a benefit concert for Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. Activists of color, radicals, communists, anarchists, socialists, and union members roll their eyes (and the dead ones roll over in their graves) when liberals try to take credit for winning rights for women, workers, or non-whites. With a few exceptions, such as RFK, liberals were not the ones being executed, imprisoned, blacklisted, and oppressed for their efforts.

Republicans and conservatives in the Global North had close ties to the apartheid government, including such allies as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Pat Buchanan. Larry Shore had moved to the U.S. in 1973 and saw them slamming Mandela and the ANC, "Many Republicans called Mandela a terrorist... With some very rare exceptions, no Republican ever supported Mandela." Nonetheless, after apartheid fell, the Republicans weren't going to let the liberals be the only ones to steal credit.

So, when Mandela spoke at Rice University in 1999, the Republicans were out in force, each trying to outdo the others as Mandela's closest friend (watch the video: tinyurl.com/EnronPrizeForMandela). The event was sponsored by Shell Oil, which started things off on a bizarre note as Shell was the single corporation anti-apartheid activists had boycotted the most. Shell not only violated a U.N. embargo by providing fuel to the apartheid regime, but also hired a Washington-based firm called 'Pagan International' to conduct an international spying and subversion program (named the 'Neptune Strategy') against anti-apartheid activists. However, at Rice that day, Shell was trying to rebrand itself. According to Larry

Shore, when the sanctions against South Africa ended, "Shell wanted to get back into South Africa and donated money to the ANC. They were sucking up to Mandela."

Shell's sponsorship was just the beginning of the absurdities. James Baker III, a Reagan and Bush White House official, who now lauded Mandela as the greatest among the important figures of the second half of the 20th century, introduced the program. His Royal Highness Prince Bandar Bin Sultan, the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia (aka "Bandar Bush" from Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*), introduced Nelson Mandela. And finally, Ken Lay presented Mandela with the "Enron Prize for Distinguished Public Service."

Sharing the stage with these oil mafiosos, Mandela thanked the American students who had helped hasten the end of apartheid and the audience of Rice students applauded themselves. However, even during the '80s when other universities had protests and some divested from South Africa, the Rice students who were part of the anti-apartheid movement could have been counted on one hand.

For South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the anti-apartheid struggle has never ended, it has only moved to Israel. Tutu said, "I have seen the humiliation of the Palestinians at checkpoints and roadblocks, suffering like us when young white police officers prevented us from moving about. Many South Africans are beginning to recognize the parallels to what we went through."

Activists struggling against apartheid in Israel are lobbying, making films, organizing protests, marches, boycotts, and concerts, etc. — the same type of things they did in response to South Africa. Folks such as Barbra Streisand, James Baker, and Bandar Bush are not helping out, but it seems likely that after Israel/Palestine has been transformed into a multiethnic democracy, they will show up to take credit. **FPH**



BUS STOP STORIES COME TO LIFE



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By Amanda Hart

Photos by Ibikunle Ashcroft and Charlotte Kennedy

CHARLOTTE KENNEDY is an emerging Houston writer working on a collection of character-inspired flash fictions called BusStopStories. The Houston Arts Alliance is the current sponsor of Kennedy's work. FPH caught up with Kennedy after her literary creation made its first theatrical debut this past month.

What are BusStopStories and where did the inspiration for this idea originate?

BusStopStories are twelve interactive flash fictions in reader's theater format for outdoor/indoor performance. In this collection of what I call "the hardly ever heard" stories, seven to eight actor/readers utilize costume accessories indicative of the public-transit dependent and a minimal set and charm passersby to pause, hear, or step into a slice of the story's action.

When my truck died two years ago in August, I turned to public transportation. When I stepped onto the bus on that first Monday morning, I immediately confronted my own ideas about people who rely on public transportation. Rather than feeling repelled, the faces of my fellow bus riders drew me to them. I began to wonder and write while commuting. Reimagining their circumstances, hopes, deferred visions, and dreams being actively pursued. Where I saw etchings of anguish, I fashioned a tale that would give reassurance. I wanted to remind their sorrow that joy stood close-by.

Sensing tedium in a day that began as many others—with public transit—I eventually decided to take a leap into magical amusement by employing devices from African American and other mytholo-

gies so that those who witnessed the enactment of BusStopStories could be re-introduced to the power of transformation.

A few months later, I submitted a proposal to the Houston Arts Alliance and was awarded a grant to launch this project.

What was your favorite experience during this voyage?

There were two. While painting signs and set pieces, I had an epiphany that all the collecting of fabric, paints, buttons, and other things throughout the years, as well as my love for reading and theater, was all I needed to take BusStopStories out to Houston's outdoor spaces. Also, watching the cast of BusStopStories breath life into words I'd written during the debut.

BusStopStories had its first theatrical debut last month.

How did the audience receive it, and what was it like seeing your words transformed into a different medium?

Amazing! Even the toddlers paid quiet, wide-eyed attention to the action and organic animation in story-telling in the park space on one of Project Row Houses properties behind the Eldorado Ballroom. I heard over and over again that not only was "Dewella's Food Desert Greens" entertaining and visually stimulating but also that many onlookers were pleased that the story carried messages of physical and emotional health, and paid attention to the beauty and wholesomeness around you, no matter what your community gets labeled as, so you can interpret what your environment is for yourself. Audience members weren't as reluctant as I thought

about coming forward to participate in the story. They were also thrilled to receive a sticker that reads, "I am a story in tranzit."

What's next for you as a writer?

Two things. We're looking to perform "Dewella's Food Desert Greens" in both Sylvester Turner and Lincoln City Parks in the Acres Homes area and anticipating a spot in Houston's Fringe Festival. I plan on revisiting one of two stories, "The Antique Angel" or "For The Brother Who Is No Longer Here" and crafting it into a modern day folk tale as I've done with "Dewella." Infusing the BusStopStories series with mythical elements challenges my writer's imagination and makes for a highly creative collaboration between the Story Tranzits (actors) Ashlei Mayadia, Angela Sanchez de Bravo, Terri Crawford, Kristen Davis, Cayla Coats, Anthony Cashmere, Darius Johnson, and Christian de Bravo, the crew Ibikunle Ashcroft, and myself when I don my director's hat. Also, since starting this journey with BusStopStories, many have approached me with their own personal stories and points of view concerning riding public transportation. I would like to see a public space created where our stories can be shared with the world, inspire connections and insight among the many who commute.

How can people get in contact with you or find out more information about BusStopStories and future theatrical productions?

Those interested can visit our website at charlotted-kennedy.com or the BusStopStories Facebook page.

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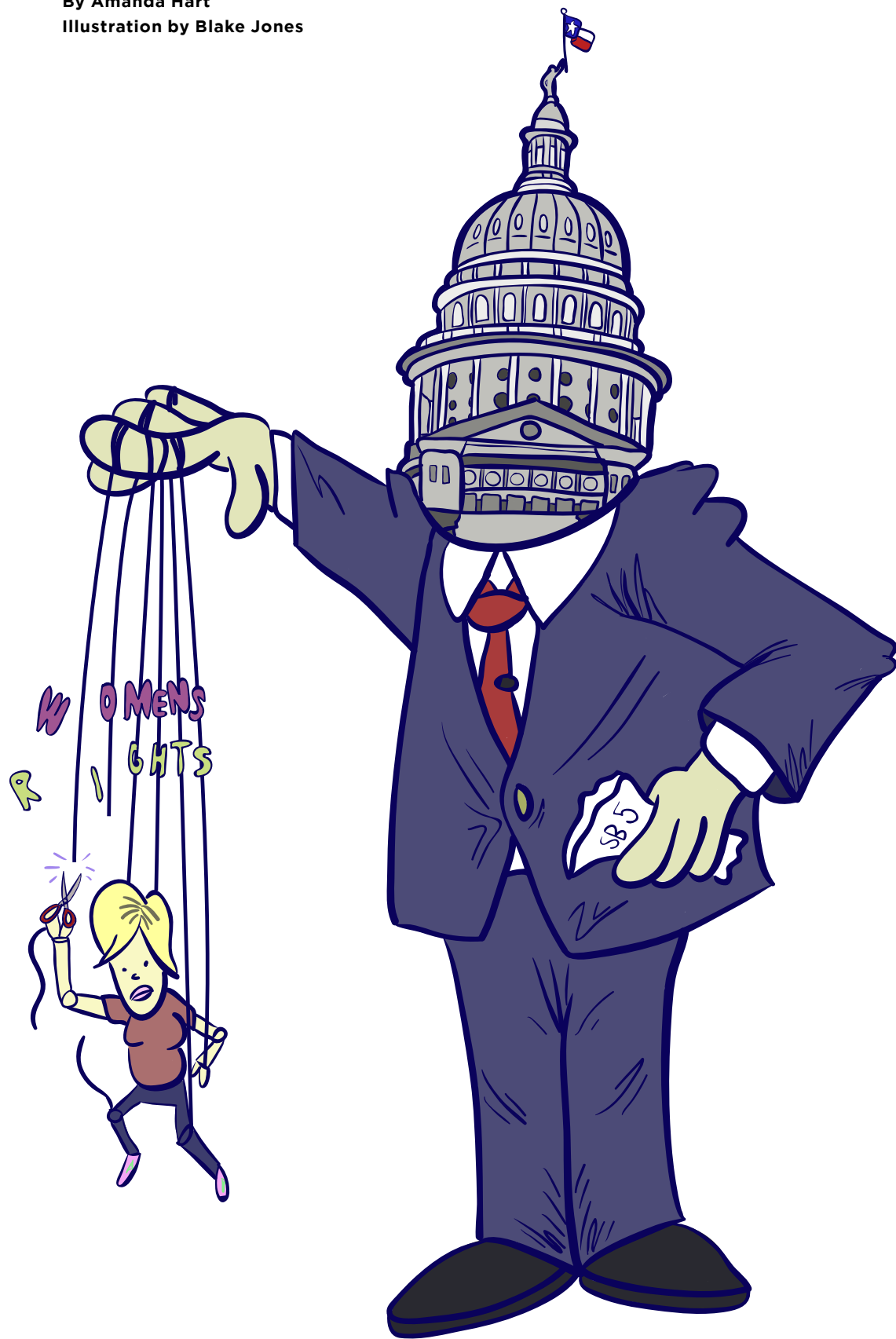
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THE FUTURE OF TEXAS POLITICS

By Amanda Hart

Illustration by Blake Jones



IT APPEARED NOTHING SHORT of a miracle when the 83rd Texas Legislature came to an end in May and not one of the 24 anti-choice bills had even made it to the floor for debate. Pro-choice activists and women all over the state slept a little easier that night knowing that women and their families weren't going to, at least for now, be forced back into the dark ages.

We didn't mess with immigration, abortion laws, voting laws, guns on campus, or school vouchers during the regular session. The anticipated tooth-and-nail moral debates were almost non-existent on the floor this year. The 83rd Legislature was so calm, in fact, that the media began referring to it as the "Kumbaya Session." For months, Texas Republicans received coverage from the media claiming that the "War on Women" in Texas was over and that they had no desire to debate abortion this session.

Nevertheless, Gov. Rick Perry gave the dark ages a fighting chance when he added abortion-related legislation to the special session docket. The special session is a form of life support for legislation that is deemed too important to not act on before our legislators are dismissed for another two years. This year's special session was called to order with the main focus centered on redistricting maps. The district maps that were drawn in 2011 during the 82nd Texas Legislature were found by federal judges to be discriminatory against minority voters. Republicans used the special session as a chance to redraw the districts to their liking instead of using the maps handed down by the courts.

Also during this special session, Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst used his position to disable the normal two-thirds majority vote that is needed to debate a bill. With this rule change, a simple majority is all that is needed to pass legislation. The Republicans thought that with the simple majority rules in place they had the special session on lock. Their confidence was emboldened by their new source of power. With two weeks remaining, Perry, at the request of Dewhurst, placed abortion-related legislation on the special session docket. A sneaky move when combined with the newly made simple majority rules.

The supposed "Kumbaya Session" proved to be nothing more than a decoy. It didn't take long for the Senate to take up the pro-life stance on the floor. The proposed legislation was drafted and presented by conservatives under the guise that they want to protect women. Senate Bill 5 (SB5), authored by state Sen. Glenn Hegar, R-Katy, would have banned abortion at 20 weeks, mandated that doctors who perform the procedure have admitting privileges at a hospital within a 30 mile radius of the clinic, required all clinics to become ambulatory surgical centers (ASC), and demanded that abortion-inducing drugs be administered directly by a physician. SB5 effectively took all the harmful bills that never made it to the floor for debate during the regular session and rolled them up into one omnibus bill. When broken down to its core, the regulations proposed in SB5 would have had a catastrophic effect on the lives of Texas women and their families.

Poor rural women and families will experience the brunt of any anti-choice legislation. Lack of access to reproductive care is already plaguing many Texas families due to previous attacks from legislators. Mandatory, costly, medically-unnecessary ultrasounds, 24-hour waiting periods when seeking an abortion, and defunding the Texas Women's Health Program during the last legislative cycle have already taken their toll on our communities. The future of women in Texas is also impacted by the decision of legislators to reject \$100 billion in federal funds to expand Medicaid to over 1.5 million uninsured Texans.

According to the 2011 census data, 30 percent of women and 15 percent of children were uninsured. The poverty rate for female-headed families with children was 42 percent, and 53 percent of all poor children lived in female-headed families. The census also found that women working full-time, year-round were paid an average of 70 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. During the regular session, Gov. Perry was given an opportunity to address the poor socioeconomic state of Texas women through legislation that would have protected women from wage discrimination. Instead of signing what should have been straightforward equal pay for equal work legislation, Perry opted to veto the bill citing, “smart regulations and fair courts is a large part of why we continue to lead the nation in job creation” in his veto statement. This bill would have made it easier for Texas women to challenge their employers when they choose to discriminate against women and pay them lower wages than their male counterparts. The current operating system is in the business of keeping women trapped in poverty, and anti-choice legislation has the same, but deadlier, impact.

Currently, there are 42 abortion clinics operating in the state of Texas. SB5 would have closed down all but five of the current operating clinics. Forcing clinics to become ASCs is not just medically unnecessary, it is also costly and involves 117 pages of red tape. Only four Texas cities, San Antonio, Dallas, Houston, and Austin, would be left with an operating clinic. A little over 13 million women live in Texas and only 2.8 million reside in one of these four cities which means Texas Republicans just put 78.5% (10.3 million) of Texas women at risk of not having safe and legal access to their constitutional right to decide what is best for them and their families.

Even if a woman was lucky enough to live near one of the aforementioned cities, she may still be faced with significant time and financial constraints. Yet, the women most affected by this bill would have been those residing in rural areas such as the Rio Grande Valley or the Panhandle. To illustrate, if you reside in El Paso the closest of the four previously-mentioned cities to you is San Antonio—a 1,100-mile trek round-trip. Distance and costly travel expenses are further exacerbated by issues such as the mandatory 24-hour waiting period and the cost-prohibitive, medically-unnecessary ultrasound bills that passed during our last legislative cycle. These obstacles combined with the new restrictions that demand abortion-inducing drugs be administered in person, as well as requiring women to return to the same doctor two weeks later for a checkup (normally any clinic or OB/GYN for a checkup was acceptable) reveal just some of the ways in which many of our state legislators are trying to shut off access to abortion under the pretense that this legislation is beneficial to women’s health and safety.

Hundreds of pro-choice supporters showed up on the steps of the State Capitol, foiling the plans of the Texas Republicans. On the day the House was to vote on this extreme anti-abortion legislation, over 700 citizens from all over the state of Texas showed up to the Capitol and signed up to speak for their allotted three minutes. In a matter of hours, the Texas Legislature had an unexpected, almost unheard of, citizens filibuster on their hands. This went on until 4 a.m. when the House State Affairs Committee chairman Rep. Byron Cook (R-Corsicana) cut them off despite there being hundreds of people left waiting to speak. The following day, Rep. Cook called a back-alley meeting in a room that could only hold 30 people and quickly voted to

open up the bill for debate on the floor. At that point, it became apparent that the best chance state Democrats had to block this legislation was to run the clock out on the session.

The filibuster began in the House where Reps. Jessica Farrar, Dawnna Dukes, Senfronia Thompson, and many others continued the debate as long as they could before a vote was forced on the floor. If Texas Republicans truly cared about women they would have listened with sincerity to the hours of citizen testimony that was given, as well as to the pleas from concerned democratic legislators who drafted thoughtful amendments to help ease the burden SB5 would surely impose. Pleas that asked for amendments to allow exceptions to these rules for girls and women who were victims of rape or incest. Pleas for exceptions to the rules for women who are at risk of dying due to their pregnancy. Pleas to accept federal money to expand Medicaid and to restore the Texas Women’s Health Program. Pleas that would have allowed just one clinic to remain open in West Texas. Pleas to enact a statewide sex education class. Pleas to not force girls and women to have to seek solutions across the border, via underground abortion clinics or through dangerous self-inducing tactics. Not one heart-wrenching plea for amendments was given consideration by the state Republicans who were instead playing on their phones, sleeping, and joking around with each other. High fives were had by many Republican representatives when they finally passed the bill in the wee hours of morning.

When it became clear that it was headed to the Senate for passage, Sen. Wendy Davis announced her plans to finish the filibuster by talking as long as necessary to ensure SB5 would not pass. Sen. Davis spoke continuously without water, food, sitting, or bathroom breaks for 11 and half hours. Republican senators were visibly shaken at her perseverance as they tried repeatedly to strip Davis of her voice to speak for Texas women everywhere. Finally, after some questionable rulings, Dewhurst alerted Davis that her filibuster was over. The crowd inside and out of the Capitol began chanting, “Let her speak.” When silence was restored inside, Sens. Kirk Watson, Judith Zaffirini, and Leticia Van de Putte picked up the filibuster torch. They used the rulebook in hopes that they could run the remaining 50 minutes down on the clock to that magical stroke of midnight that would officially bring the special session to a close. Watson, Zaffirini, and Van de Putte all did their best to hold their ground but a mere 12-minutes shy of success they too were stopped short of their goal. With nearly 200,000 people streaming the proceedings live, something magical happened. The citizens inside the Senate, who had restrained themselves from outbursts all day, relit the filibuster torch and marched it to the finish line with nothing but the strength of their voices. This was a collaborative effort on the part of so many democratic legislators who are owed a great deal of gratitude. But it was also the collective voice of the people demanding to be heard and respected that ultimately clinched this victory. Texas women and their supporters reminded our legislators that the power of the people will always prevail and that their utter disregard for the rights and lives of women will not be taken away without a fight. Our Republican representatives learned a hard lesson when they decided to take on women and men who are fighting with their hearts and minds on the side of justice. There is no strength greater than that of a united community that stands beside their women. The war on women is not over, but the strength of Texas women this legislative cycle proves that it will be soon. **FPH**

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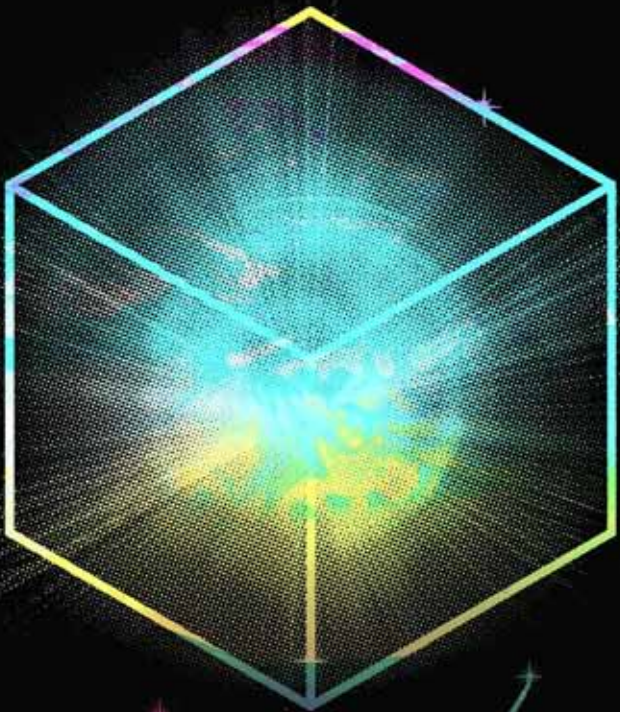
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FRAMING THE FUTURE:

FROM PIPELINES TO PRE-MEDS

JASON MENDEZ WAS A POPULAR Westbury High School student, a member of the Latin American Club, and a varsity soccer player. He even volunteered to teach auto mechanics to underclassmen. Mendez had grown up around the construction industry, where his father worked as an expert framer building new homes. A first-generation American, Mendez dreamed of becoming an architect. Recruiters from Rice and Texas public universities visited his high school. But while his friends fanned out across Texas for college, Mendez decided to enter the workforce.

"I needed to earn money for myself," Mendez says. "I wasn't going to depend on my parents anymore. I wanted to do it on my own and carry my own responsibility."

Mendez has already received two promotions in less than two years working in the petroleum pipe manufacturing industry and can now help support his parents, siblings, and his four-year-old son, Jaidan.

Mendez is one of the many students in the Houston area who are choosing not to attend college immediately after high school. Although the Houston Independent School District boasts a high school graduation rate of 74.3 percent—its highest ever, according to the Texas Education Agency—more than a quarter of HISD students are still dropping out. U.S. News & World Report discloses that Mendez's high school has only a 16.6 percent college readiness index based on state exit exams. Project GRAD, an HISD college mentorship program, reports that some HISD high schools have had college enrollment rates dip below 20 percent.

Despite Mendez's success, today's job market is bleak, especially for those without a college degree. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the unemployment rate for workers younger than age 25

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By Laura Coburn
Illustration by Blake Jones

is 16.5 percent, twice the national average. Without a college degree, almost one in three is unemployed. By comparison, recent college graduates have an edge in the job market, with only a 9.4 percent unemployment rate and potentially higher wages. Yet despite their high chance of admission, even accomplished students from low-income backgrounds are not applying to the many colleges that are actively working to diversify their student body. A New York Times article "Better Colleges Failing to Lure Talented Poor" by David Leonhardt spells out the long-term fallout, saying economists believe that "the pattern contributes to widening economic inequality and low levels of mobility in this country." With more students attending college, the educational playing field and job market will level out and give greater opportunity to anybody with drive and intelligence, regardless of their economic roots.

"There's such great demand now, with a forecasted 60 percent and up of jobs by 2020 requiring some sort of education beyond high school, and with a growing population of kids that we're serving here in Houston and in the state of Texas, we know there's a great demand for kids getting themselves ready for the workforce," says Ann Stiles, executive director of Project GRAD.

Houston offers a broad range of educational and scholarship programs, including federally funded programs, community partnerships, state and local programs. In HISD, college readiness programs begin in kindergarten. One successful partnership, Project GRAD, works in five low-income communities that enroll nearly 44,000 K-12 students into neighborhood schools. The program serves an additional 2,000 college students. According to the Project GRAD website, only 13 percent of high school



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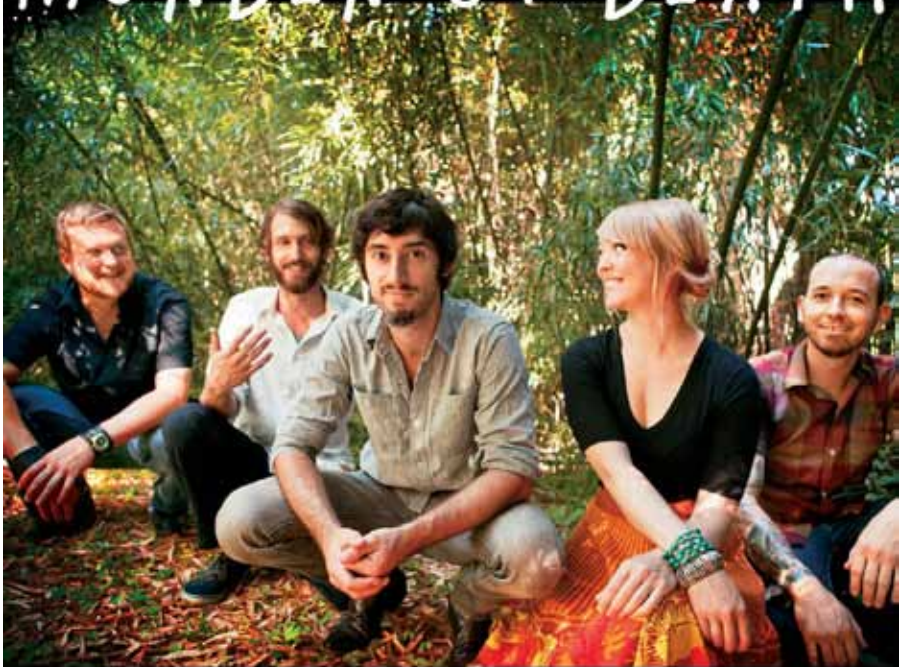
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graduates at their five target HISD high schools enrolled in college prior to implementing their program. After Project GRAD intervention, the overall enrollment tripled. Project GRAD offers scholarships to qualifying students in their five partner schools, but will open their services to any student in HISD beginning this fall when they transition to a community-based organization.

Besides private-public partnerships, HISD provides district-wide college-readiness programs and career-oriented magnet schools. HISD now has five early college campuses that allow students to take college credit classes while still in high school. Local and international businesses based in Houston, such as Wells Fargo and Coca Cola, also have high school mentorship programs. Universities and graduate schools including Baylor College of Medicine, Rice University, University of St. Thomas, and the University of Houston all host programs for high school students. While these resources are expanding, college prep programs still face an uphill battle for student participation and solid results.

Regardless of push from high schools and pull from colleges and businesses to attend college, many HISD high school students do not, or cannot, participate in mentorship programs. Students often miss program meetings due to extracurricular scheduling conflicts. According to a 2012 National Center for Postsecondary Research study, many students could not manage to attend programs held in the summer or on weekends due to jobs and other obligations.

Furthermore, without sufficient funds for transportation or a vehicle, students cannot attend activities that take place outside of school. Students may not have access to public transportation due to inconvenient bus stop locations or schedules.

Even if programs are held at the schools, students may not take advantage of beneficial resources. Houston holds an advantage in attracting college representatives because its dense, diverse student population provides a potentially high recruitment yield. A recent Stanford study “The Missing ‘One-Offs” points out that many universities do not have sufficient funds to send teams to rural areas to search for only a few potential candidates, and colleges are more likely to target students close to their campus. However, attendance at college fairs is voluntary, and the high volume of students often makes it difficult for them to build personal relationships with a college recruiter or counselor.

“Our college counselors were not really helpful,” says Mendez, who only visited them once. “The kids that actually went to talk to them said they were always busy and told them to come back later.”

However, challenges within college readiness and recruitment vary greatly between schools. While the Stanford study revealed that very few high-achieving students with limited financial resources even apply to competitive colleges, 65 percent of those that do come from only a few high schools in highly metropolitan regions. In Houston, Carnegie Vanguard, Bellaire, and Michael E. DeBakey boast outstanding graduation and college enrollment.

Although graduates from many of the 47 HISD schools do not enroll directly into college, that does not mean that they are ignoring the message about the benefits of higher education.

Besides those seeking work in the community, some students make a decision to serve the country,

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knowing the military will send them a consistent wage to support their families and give them the option to attend college and graduate school later with government funding.

“I was a senior when Sept. 11 happened,” says Jamal James, a graduate of Alief Hastings High School. James’ mother passed away when he was a child. He grew up with his Aunt Marie, a strong, kind woman who had earned an LVN and worked at the John Sealy Hospital in Galveston. There was never a question that James would need to excel. In high school, James was heavily recruited by top universities for his academic achievement and aptitude for baseball. However, James was thinking ahead. “I have a family history of people going into the military, so I always wanted to be in the Marine Corps and give back,” he explains.

James was a medic on the frontlines in Iraq. He stabilized injured soldiers in helicopters on the way to field hospitals. Unfortunately, his career was cut short by a severe injury that paralyzed his arm and forced him to spend months in the Veteran’s Hospital system. Now, at age 29, his arm still damaged, James is working his way through the undergraduate prerequisites to apply to medical school.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are many success stories of students that do immediately continue on to college, and even to nationally-competitive universities. Francisco Rodriguez graduated from Davis High School and attended Cornell University on a full scholarship. He earned his acceptance on the merit of his strong academic record, as well as for his efforts as the captain of the drill team and as a member of the National Honor Society. However, he credits his decision to attend Cornell to Project GRAD, which gave him the information and resources he needed to make an informed decision.

“I was hesitant to go away, with my connection to family and my community, but I was encouraged to go for the summer,” Rodriguez says, referring to the Cornell Summer College program that he attended in 2008. “I realized that going away was very much feasible and would better prepare me to appreciate my community and make change in a positive way.”

Thousands of other students are making the same decision to pursue higher education and are taking advantage of the abundant connections and resources available in Houston. Rice University Vice President for Enrollment Christopher Munoz says Rice, along with all universities aligned with the College Board, are constantly trying to promote the message that motivated students, regardless of family income, “are wanted and that they have the academic qualifying records to do well and to accept the challenge of attending one of these universities.” Munoz says that today every college is required to have an informational website to inform students and their families about financial aid opportunities.

Although Mendez chose a different road, he says he is satisfied and proud of his job and looks forward to learning more about the petroleum industry. However, Mendez says he is still considering going to college later in life to one day become an architect. He emphasizes that he believes others should consider higher education—but start earlier.

“I think you should go to college after high school because not everybody gets lucky,” Mendez says. “But it’s never too late to go to college.” **FPH**



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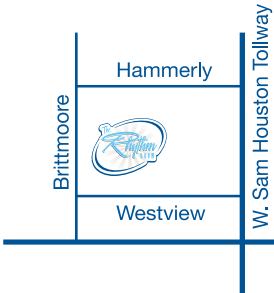


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