

unity



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## Versatile actor finds visibility in assortment of roles

INSIDE:

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*Unity is published in February (Black History Month), March (Women's History Month), May (Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month), June (Pride Month), September (Hispanic Heritage Month) and November (Native American Heritage Month).*

# Versatile actor finds visibility in assortment of roles



Conrad Ricamora's acting credits in 2023 will include roles on TV and on the theater stage. Photo by Ricardo Birnbaum Photography

New York City-based [Conrad Ricamora](#) learned early in his acting career not to get his hopes up after an audition.

When Peter Nowalk, creator of ABC's "[How to Get Away With Murder](#)," mentioned he enjoyed Ricamora's portrayal of Oliver Hampton on HTGAWM's first episode, Ricamora took it in stride. "He (Nowalk) was on set when we were shooting the pilot," Ricamora says. "We were riding back to the hotel in the van, and he said, 'I really liked what you did. I think I might look for you to come back for some more episodes.'"

Nowalk was true to his word and Ricamora's character, a gay IT guy, appeared in multiple episodes in the first two seasons. Ricamora became a series regular until the show concluded in 2020, after six seasons.

Ricamora's role as a gay man in HTGAWM and other productions hasn't gone unnoticed. He received the Visibility Award in 2016 from the [Human Rights Campaign](#), an award that "recognizes LGBTQ+ individuals who are living open and honest lives at home, at work and in their greater community."

"Sometimes we forget that some places don't have the type of freedom and acceptance that we've gotten used to," Ricamora says. "Recognizing that (visibility) is something that's desperately needed and is still important."

Ricamora wasn't always comfortable being himself. As a young kid, he enjoyed singing and dancing but worried about being bullied by other kids. He grew up on Air Force bases, following his father to places such as Colorado and Iceland, and eventually settling in Niceville, Florida, where he attended middle and high schools.

It wasn't until attending Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina on a tennis scholarship that Ricamora was introduced to stage performances. "I didn't know theater existed until I went to Queens," Ricamora says. "I saw something at the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center and it was the first time I'd been to a theater. Queens expanded my mind."

After graduating in 2001, Ricamora studied with Film Actors' Studio Charlotte for three years before being accepted into an acting fellowship in Philadelphia. He continued to take classes and go to auditions. He returned to school and received his master of fine arts in acting at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2012.

"I finally realized, 'Oh, this is what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life. I should probably go study it for an extended amount of time,'" he explains. "I'd been going from job to job. I'd never had an extended period of time where I just studied acting. I was always trying to get work."

He will get another opportunity to play a gay actor in eight episodes on Hulu's new half-hour comedy, "[How to Die Alone](#)," written by and starring Natasha Rothwell. Rothwell's character, Melissa, dies during the first three minutes in the first episode. After she's revived, she decides to turn her life around. The story is set in NYC and Ricamora plays her best friend, Rory. Shooting has begun.

"The character is so different for me," Ricamora says. "It's somebody who is chaotic. His life has been a mess. I've played a lot of people who have been contained in their lives. This character is definitely a little bit louder. I'm excited."

This summer, Ricamora returns to the role of Ninoy Aquino in "Here Lies Love," a musical about the former Philippine first lady Imelda Marcos, written by Talking Heads' David Byrne and solo artist Fatboy Slim. He was originally cast in 2013 for the off-Broadway production.

# Inspired by community, renaissance in Appalachia



A return to Appalachia offered Mark Ferguson the community he'd remembered from his days as a kid and a bonus – a supportive LGBTQ+ community. Photo courtesy of Mark Ferguson

When Mark Lynn Ferguson moved from Roanoke, Virginia, his Appalachian hometown was a much different city than it is today.

"When I left in 1991, Roanoke was in a rough place," Ferguson says. "The railroad was pulling out. Banks had pulled out. We had a beautiful Tudor hotel called the Hotel Roanoke. It was completely boarded up and shuttered. To build a career, I really felt like I needed to leave."

Ferguson graduated from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and then headed north to pursue a graduate degree at Harvard University and employment in Massachusetts. In 2017, after 30 years away and a career in marketing and communications for nonprofits in Boston and Washington, D.C., Ferguson returned to a new Roanoke.

Restaurants, hotels, bakeries and shops lined Roanoke's bustling city streets. Visitors were staying overnight in downtown – in a restored Hotel Roanoke – and taking advantage of the bike trails, kayaking and other leisure activities within a short distance of the city. An economic turnaround powered by an intentional 20-year plan developed by the city included building a vibrant downtown, increasing cultural attractions and capitalizing on the area's outdoor recreational opportunities.

A return to Roanoke offered Ferguson the Appalachian Mountains he'd remembered from his

days as a kid and a bonus – a supportive LGBTQ+ community he'd been accustomed to in larger cities.

"A lot of people make negative assumptions about Appalachia," he says. "Roanoke is such a queer-affirming city. Three of the seven seats on city council are held by queer people. We have LGBTQ+ neighborhood walking tours. And there's just an overwhelming spirit of welcomeness here for queer folk."

In 2019, Ferguson founded Crafteria, a makers' market in a midcentury building in downtown Roanoke. The space features the work of about 200 craftspeople, many from Appalachia.

A conversation with the building's owner sparked the idea for Crafteria. The building once housed an S&W Cafeteria, a chain founded in the 1920s. It was almost empty except for a coffee and smoothie bar and a vintage record shop. Several restaurants had already failed there. Ferguson suggested the large area that once served as the cafeteria's dining room be used as a makers' market showcasing small batch foods and handmade crafts.

Revitalizing the old cafeteria and starting a business with original art and handmade crafts from local makers wasn't a huge hurdle for Ferguson. He'd been writing about Appalachia's art and culture for more than a decade for magazines and newspapers. Crafteria was the next step in the evolution, a home to highlight artists' work and provide a physical location to sell it.

Bent Mountain, Virginia resident Minor Terry owns Crooked Mountain Crafts and sells her crocheted items – Baby Yodas, hats, mittens and yarn plants – at Crafteria. "We have a pretty good idea of who our customers are and what they like," Ferguson says. "We gravitate toward hip, more unusual creative crafts. And we've learned that anything that has Dolly Parton on it sells really, really well."

In November 2022, Ferguson launched, "Woodshed: An Appalachian Joint," an online publication, about modern life in Appalachia. "I knew I could bring these things together," he says. "It takes Appalachian products in the shop and gets them online and puts them beside articles that are about the food, music, culture and places in Appalachia that make the region really special."

# 'Visually stimulating' works with 'meaning and depth'

The artists featured in this Pride edition of *Unity* exemplify the human spirit of artistry, and their commitment to proudly represent the LGBTQ+ community.

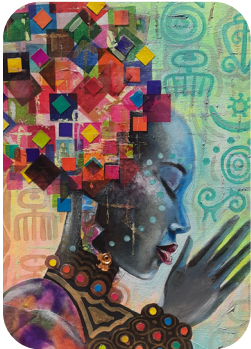
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## ELTON TUCKER



"Faith in the Sun" by Elton Tucker

Tucker's affinity for clothing is apparent in his work, "Faith in the Sun." In the bottom left corner of the composition, Tucker uses paint and mixed media to create a beautiful jacket with floral and vegetal patterns similar to the printed Kitenge clothes common in Tanzania. The garment drapes on to the shoulders of a bearded Black man, whom Tucker depicts with hands clasped.



"Grateful" by Elton Tucker

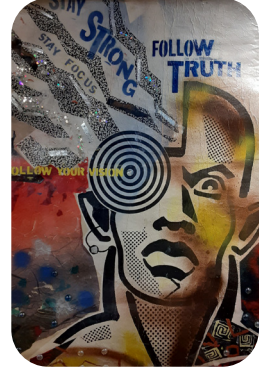
her. The Adinkra of Ghana express parables important to their culture and are often appropriated by artists of the African Diaspora to reconnect to their ancestry.

A Black gay man, Tucker experienced some bullying throughout his youth. However, he says, "I just lived

From an early age, Elton Tucker found himself drawn to art and fashion. The native New Yorker graduated from the High School of Art & Design and later earned an associate's degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology. Following graduation, he worked as a fashion illustrator for Women's Wear Daily.

my life the way I wanted to and never cared what people thought about me." In "Follow Truth," the artist creatively expresses this sentiment. Tucker paints a muscular Black man with strong features and embellishes his bone structure with dotted shadows and spurts of yellow and brown spray paint. At the center of the painting, Tucker contorts the subject's eye into a pulsating bulls-eye that radiates affirmative messages like "Stay Strong" and "Follow Your Vision."

When Tucker reflects on people's past difficulties in accepting his sexuality, he also recalls his insistence on demanding respect and believes the experiences made him stronger.



"Follow Truth" by Elton Tucker

## JONATHAN BROOKS

Perhaps ironically, artist Jonathan Brooks inverted a colorful flower bouquet with the stems facing upward in his series of three works, "Peace," "Love" and "Happiness." The hues of the blooms sharply contrast with the blankness of the white backgrounds. Just above the apex of the flowers, Brooks plasters each photograph's title in a large font. This playfully tongue-in-cheek example showcases how Brooks' work uses photography and strategic staging to create whimsical scenes of color and form.



"Rainbow Weather" by Jonathan Brooks

As an adolescent, Brooks found creative ways to express himself, whether through the clothes he wore or how he decorated his room. He took this passion

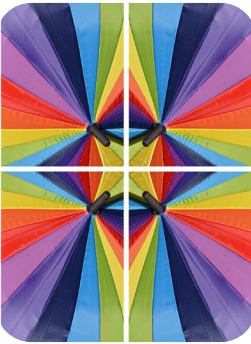
## HAPPINESS



"Happiness"  
by Jonathan Brooks

and transferred to the University of Miami to pursue advertising and fine art photography.

In "Rainbow Weather," Brooks showcases his ability to transform the everyday, like an umbrella, into this extraordinary photograph on canvas. The artist masterfully isolates this brightly colored quotidian object's center to create radiating sections of the rainbow to evoke warm feelings of playful exploration in the viewer. The rainbow hues allude to his identity as a gay man. Brooks believes because his sexuality is a part of who he is, it is important to be identified as a gay artist.



"Pride" by Jonathan Brooks

a beautiful kaleidoscope of color. The mirrored effect reflects the artist taking pride in how he views the world.

### ANDY BELLOMO

Many children who grew up in church rarely viewed the ornate crown molding and stained-glass windows in their sanctuaries as anything besides mere decorations. However, for artist Andy Bellomo, the prisms of color revealed through beaming sunrays captivated her into contemplative study every time she encountered them.

She began teaching herself the art of stained glass and experimenting with the strong convergences of color, line and shape she knew so well. However, by

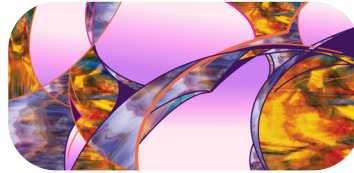
as a calling to study architecture and enrolled in Miami-Dade Community College. However, "the mundane and strenuous aspects (of architecture) kind of spoiled it for me." He experimented with graphic design and studio art classes, discovered the power of the camera,



"The Pink Triangle"  
by Andy Bellomo

employs bright pinks and yellows and sharper lines. She centers an actual pink triangle in the composition to represent Nazi Germany's use of the symbol to bring shame to queer people. LGBT pride movements of the 1970s reclaimed the pink emblem as a way to empower their community. By placing this coded symbol in stained glass, Bellomo reimagines how this medium typically used in churches can be mediative for other purposes.

Bellomo considered applying to art school but decided to focus on teaching as her career. She graduated with her master's in education in creative arts in learning from Lesley University and taught for more than 20 years.



"Digital Glass 3" by Andy Bellomo

Bellomo's "Digital Glass 3" and "Digital Glass Mag Mile Chicago" highlight the maker's commitment to finding new, exciting ways to share her love of stained glass. Both works greatly differ from the crisp intersections of lines in "The Pink Triangle" because the artist introduces more organically shaped curvatures, experimentations with color and contrast, and less focus on representational content.

"My background has given me the tools to treat each project with thought and careful consideration," Bellomo explains, "so that the end result is not only visually stimulating but also holds meaning and depth for the viewer to be a part of."



"Digital Glass Mag Mile Chicago" by Andy Bellomo

the time she became a teenager, many of the ideals she encountered starkly contrasted with her budding identity as a queer person.

One of Bellomo's earliest works, "The Pink Triangle" depicts this evolution. In it, the Chicago artist

The artist's digital works demonstrate her development as an artist and quest to elevate her skills.

# Stellar sustenance, for body and soul



Vivian Joiner, left, and Stephanie Tyson's idea to open a restaurant came after a frustrating day at work in the food industry. Photo by BrittanyButterworthPhoto

Twenty years ago, Vivian Joiner and Stephanie Tyson opened Sweet Potatoes (well shut my mouth!!) - a restaurant in the heart of Winston-Salem, North Carolina's art district.

"People come for the comfort, but they really come for the food," Joiner says. "We get to feed people in multiple ways."

Joiner and Tyson met in 1986 at a poetry reading at Lambda Rising, a once-iconic bookstore in Joiner's hometown of Washington, D.C. The couple have been together ever since; they were married in 2014.

Joiner and Tyson's idea to open a restaurant came after a frustrating day at work in Winston-Salem's food industry. After maxing out credit cards and mortgaging their home, they opened Sweet Potatoes 18 months later in 2003, with Tyson in the kitchen and Joiner in front of house, working with customers and service.

Choosing to call the business "Sweet Potatoes" and "a restaurant" came easy: Tyson's menu was heavy with sweet potato dishes, and Joiner wanted to be clear the establishment wasn't a café or diner. "It was sweet potato cornbread stuffing, candied sweet potatoes, sweet potato fries, sweet potato cheesecake," Joiner says. "The sweet potatoes kept coming."

The most notable dish, says Joiner, is the Salmon Florentine, consisting of a lightly blackened salmon filet atop wilted spinach and toasted sweet potato cornbread, finished with a wild-mushroom vinaigrette. "It is a combination of flavors that not

only make your taste buds and eyes water," she says, "but it just feeds your soul."

A year later, when it came to trademarking the restaurant's name, they needed something to set them apart. 'well shut my mouth!!' came from a folk art painting of Joiner and Tyson with a sign hanging above them that read, "Sweet Potatoes, mmm ... shut my mouth."

Although Tyson, a Winston-Salem native, was a semifinalist in 2022 for the James Beard Award for Best Chef of the Southeast, cooking wasn't always her passion. She remembers her grandmother frying fish and chicken, but Tyson didn't help. It wasn't until she managed a restaurant and a cook walked off the line that she was forced to consider cooking. She realized she had a knack for working in the kitchen and decided to attend Baltimore International College and graduated with a culinary degree in 1994.

"It all clicked for me," Tyson says. "Everything my grandmother did made sense. I guess I found my calling."

Tyson authored "Well, Shut My Mouth! The Sweet Potatoes Restaurant Cookbook" in 2011. It features 100 recipes. In Tyson's "Soul Food Odyssey," published in 2015, she defines soul food and compares it to Southern cuisine. "I think that in the end, it's comfort," Tyson says. "Food that's good for all souls."

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# Chef savors vocation of crafting mouthwatering food

In 2022, [Amanda Cusey](#) competed against 11 chefs for the Louisiana Seafood Cook-Off, an event coordinated by multiple organizations including the Louisiana Seafood Board. Cusey had one hour to create a dish while judges watched. She created Pan-Seared Fish and Polenta Topped With Crawfish, her version of a fancy shrimp and grits, and was crowned Louisiana Seafood Queen 2022.

"I like to surprise people with the bites," says the Lake Charles resident. "It's a great dish. It packs an unexpected flavor. Everything works really well together."

This spring, Cusey opened The Terrace at [Lake Area Adventures](#), a family entertainment center, as the executive chef and director of food and beverage. Regular specials highlighting local farmers and seasonal ingredients and seafood will supplement the small gastro pub-style menu.

At 14, Cusey started as a dishwasher in restaurants in her hometown of Flagstaff, Arizona. After high school, she moved around the United States as a server at various restaurants. While in North Carolina, she grew tired of the front of house (dealing with customers) and asked if she could transfer to the kitchen. "I was pretty good back there and kind of stayed," Cusey says.

As part of the LGBTQ+ community, Cusey's always found comfort working in kitchens because everyone is welcomed. Although cooking is cathartic for her, it's the joy on people's faces when they take a first bite that motivates her to create dishes people love.

In 2011, Cusey pursued a Cordon Bleu certificate at Tanté Marie Culinary Academy in England because she knew she wanted to be in more upscale restaurants. She gained experience in English pubs and a diner and Italian restaurant in Ireland. After serving as head chef for a year under Oliver Dunne – a Michelin Star recipient – for Eatily, a pop-up restaurant in Dublin, she returned to the United States in 2017. At the end of 2022, after a six-year run, Cusey left her executive chef position at Villa Harlequin Restaurant in Lake Charles.

When Cusey isn't in the kitchen, she's rescuing dogs through [Do Good Dog Rescue](#), a nonprofit she founded in 2020, after volunteering for animal rescue groups during hurricanes Delta and Laura. Cusey and a few volunteers have saved more than 100 dogs since the group's inception. The dogs are microchipped, neutered, spayed and vaccinated before being adopted. "We take dogs in and find them a new home," she says. "We take them from all kinds of situations."

*Continued on page 8*



As part of the LGBTQ+ community, Amanda Cusey's always found comfort working in kitchens because everyone is welcomed. Photo by Chris Brennan

# Gullah Shrimp And Crab Pilau By Stephanie Tyson

(A One-Pot Meal)

Serves 4-5

## Ingredients

- 4 strips chopped bacon, 1/4-inch diced
- 2 cups peppers/onion, julienned
- 1 teaspoon seafood seasoning mix
- 1 cup diced tomatoes
- 1 cup uncooked long-grained rice
- 1 tablespoon parsley, plus some for garnish
- 1 pound raw shrimp, 21 to 25 count
- 2 cups chicken stock or water
- 1/2 cup crabmeat picked (get the larger shells out)

## Directions

Preheat the oven to 375° F.

In a Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid, cook the bacon until crisp. Remove the bacon, set aside to drain and pour off all the fat except 3 tablespoons or enough to cover the bottom of the pan. Add the onion and peppers; cook over medium-low heat until the onions are transparent. Add the seasoning, tomatoes, rice, parsley and half of the crab meat.

Cook for approximately 25 minutes in the preheated oven. Remove the pan from the oven, add the shrimp, top with the remaining crab meat and cook for an additional 15 minutes. Remove and garnish with parsley.

Photo by Stacey Spreng



# Pan-Seared Fish And Polenta Topped With Crawfish By Amanda Cusey

Serves 4

## Ingredients

- 3 cups water
- 5 1/2 cups cream
- 1 cup polenta
- 3 ounces tomato paste
- 1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan
- 12 ounces fresh green beans
- 2 tablespoons cooking fat, bacon fat, butter, coconut oil or olive oil
- 2 shallots, sliced
- 4 cloves garlic, finely sliced
- 12 ounces crawfish tails
- 1 tablespoon beer mustard
- 1 tablespoon Creole mustard
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons cooking oil
- 4- to 6-ounce portions of fish fillets, suggested: red drum
- Basil oil for garnish, optional

## Directions

Bring water and 1 1/2 cups of the cream to a boil and slowly whisk in the polenta to prevent clumping. Add the tomato paste, reduce the heat and simmer, cook for about 8 to 10 minutes. Add the Parmesan and salt and pepper to taste.

Start with trimming the ends of the green beans. Get a frying pan nice and hot and add your cooking fat and beans with a pinch of salt. Cook on high until your beans start to color. Add the shallots and garlic and reduce the heat. Cook until the beans are tender. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Bring 4 cups of cream to a boil and reduce the heat to a simmer. Reduce the cream until it coats the back of the spoon. Add the crawfish tails and mustards. Salt and pepper to taste.

Add the cooking oil to a hot frying pan and place the fish in the pan and sear until golden. Turn the fish over and sear until almost golden brown. Add butter to the pan and baste the fish until it's cooked through.