

ISSUE No. 1

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n. the profound
feeling of realizing
that everyone,
including strangers
passing in the
street, has a life as
complex as one's own.

Editor's Note

When I set out to create this magazine, I had a vision of combining journalistic ambitions with creative writing styles. I wanted my writers to challenge themselves by using traditional journalism practices to find an interesting story to share, but to ask questions that will enrich their stories with details people often overlook. I believed that the addition of specific details would allow the readers to feel as if they know the subject of these stories rather than only seeing them as words on a page.

Journalism is all about collecting the facts and delivering them to readers in a digestable manner, and although I feel that this is the best practice for delivering hard-hitting news stories, when it comes to conveying stories about people in our communities, the writing style should be more personable; more creative; more lifelike. I wanted the stories in this magazine to feel as if our readers were reading one of their favorite fiction books, but they'd actually be reading stories about real people which would (hopefully) make this big, complicated world feel cozier.

I began this project with six writers, but by the end of this project, I only had two. I did what I could with what I had, and to be frank, I'm pretty happy with the final product, which is my attempt at fusing a magazine with a paperback book and bring some story magic to the real world.

- Kim

Esha and Jasmine, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for your contributions and hard work:)

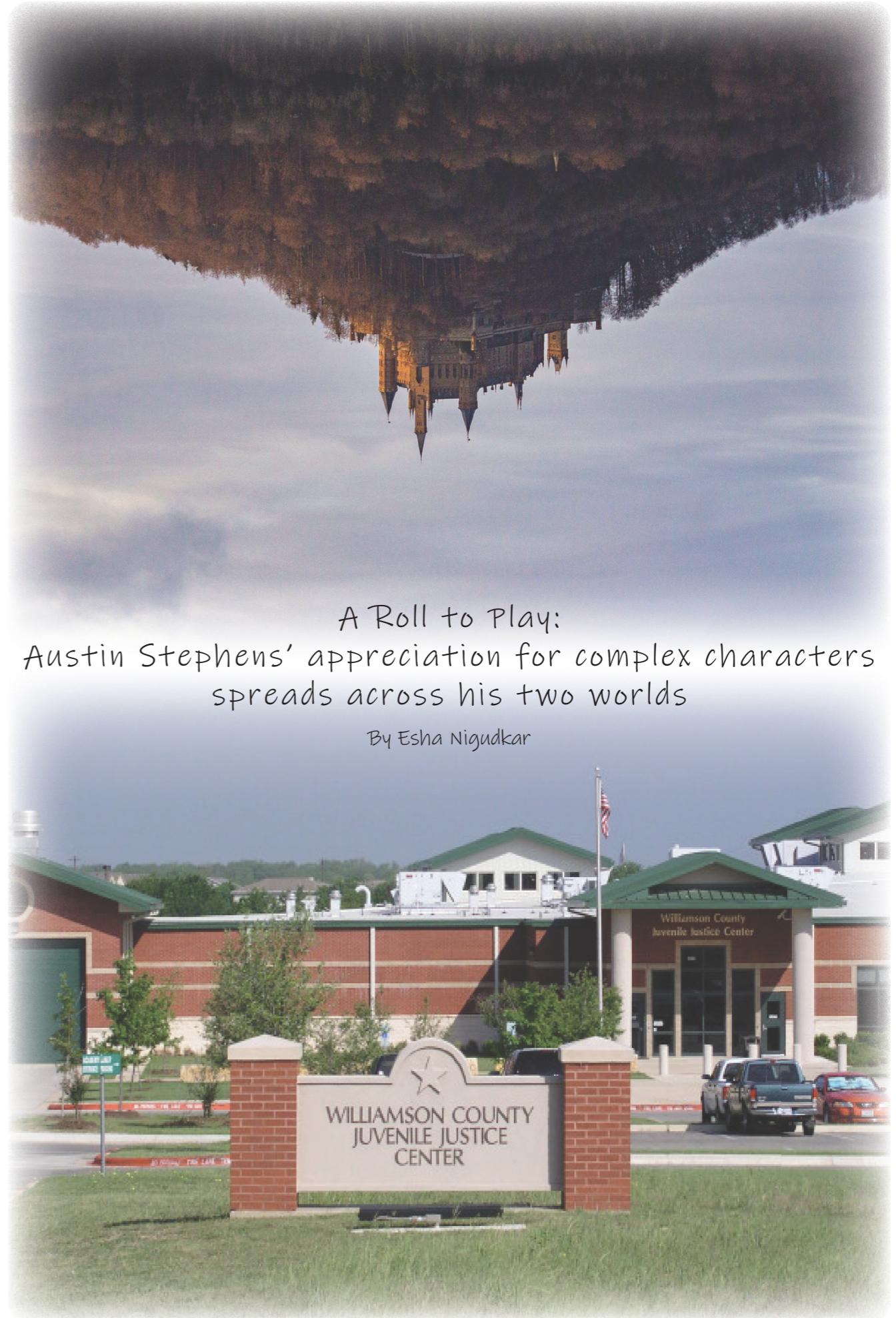


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*A Roll to Play:
Austin Stephens' appreciation for complex characters
spreads across his two worlds*

By Esha Nigudkar

It was a muggy, dark and considerably damp night out in the forest. Jasper was walking through the darkness when he heard heavy footfalls. He stopped. He turned his head keenly in the direction of the stomps, paused and listened.

He could hear the sound of his own heartbeat, but he also heard the prodigious weight of an oncoming creature. However, that was not what Jasper was so desperately listening for.

He cocked his ear to the left, listening for any indicator of his enemies coming towards him and his clan.

He could hear the soft clinking of chainmail rustling against the forest floor.

Without a second thought, he dashed off to alert the others...

Austin Stephens, a committed Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) player, fiddles with the dice in his right hand and deliberates his character's next move. His previous rolls have not been in his favor, so his party members watch him with bated breath and wide grins across their faces. Tonight they play in their regular space — at the Dungeon Master's home — surrounded by four dogs and their various drinks strewn about an original Andy Warhol table.

This D&D campaign has been running for a year now and Austin has gone through three iterations of his playable characters: first came Olev, a fighter barbarian with a tragic backstory; then came Vincent, a mischief-loving warlock that would run headfirst into chaos if given the chance; and finally came Jasper — an anxious elf-ranger with intense PTSD who can swap souls with Vincent (which is determined by a coin flip).



Austin's die lands on 12.

Sighs of relief fill the space.

The Dungeonmaster allows him to hide from the troupe of orcs. Jasper is safe... for now.

The D&D session comes to a close and Austin bids farewell to his party. They'll see each other again in a few days because their fantastical escape has become a weekly tradition. But until then, Austin returns home to Round Rock and prepares for the coming work week.

In the morning, the exhilarating buzz brought on by the D&D campaign has subsided and has been replaced with the hum of responsibility.

Austin rolls out of bed, goes on a run, waters his mother's 20-year-old plants and completes all other morning chores while an inner monologue goes through the tasks he must accomplish during the day.

Austin's day-to-day life is far from the magical adventures he embarks on during his weekly D&D gameplay. Yet, much like his characters, Austin is frequently thrust into a world of chaos where, under all circumstances, he must remain calm.

Austin is an intern at the Williamson County Juvenile Center where he doesn't, in fact, play the role of an elf-ranger, but rather the role of a youth counselor.

After parking in the staff lot, Austin walks towards the terracotta and green-accented detention center to start his shift. He thinks about fun ways to make an entrance for his co-worker, vis-a-vis John Cena or some cartoon character — any way that could get some laughter going through the otherwise tension-filled halls.

Austin explains that when an adolescent between the ages of 10-17 is arrested for a crime, two things can occur: their intake officer can choose to process and release them (often recommending probation) or they can detain the individual and take them to the juvenile detention center to await a judge's

hearing. Depending on the severity of the offense and the individual's past history, detainment can range from a few days to a few months.

It's during these periods of limbo where Austin steps in.

When most think about an adolescent in "juvie," perhaps an image of a leather-jacket-wearing teenager from a cheesy 90s movie comes to mind. But although this cliché is entertaining to watch on a silver screen, this character is not a part of Austin's work day.

The teens Austin works with are unique. Each approaches the unexpected circumstances of life the best way they know how, and unfortunately, this is what usually gets them in trouble. A foundation of trust must exist for counseling to be effective, so Austin begins each session by simply listening to each client's story.

From Austin's perspective, many of the youth at the Williamson County Juvenile Center regret the wrongs they did, but find themselves stuck in a cycle of poor reactions to the complex emotions they are feeling. Some are prone to lash out in anger when something wrong happens and others revert to substance abuse as a method to cope. Regardless, once they fall into this cycle, they start believing their only identity is that of a troublemaker.

It's a lot of pressure for young kids to grapple with their sense of identity and with society's obsession with maintaining its "model minority," and that's what Austin seeks to acknowledge.

"We're just two human beings having a session together," he explains with compassion in his eyes. "You're stressed out, I'm stressed out; you're scared, I'm scared; And that's fine. But what are we going to do about it?"

Austin's main priority is to guide these kids towards better coping mechanisms with the hope that these kids will never find themselves in trouble again.

Austin shares that there's no such thing as a "bad kid," nor is there a counselor that can save the day with just a few words. Working with youth was not what Austin originally imagined for himself when he decided to pursue a masters in clinical health psychology. In fact, he was strongly opposed to working with kids in fear that they would be more complex cases than adults.

However, Austin's time at Williamson County has not only made him appreciate working with the youth, it's made him realize that there is a desperate need for good counselors to help guide troubled individuals while they are still young.



“What I focus on, and what I have confidence in, is what I can provide for them in those moments,” Austin explains, “And that is an individual that can listen; an individual that can empathize — and maybe sympathize, if they really need that as well.”

Essentially, counseling is not for the weak-hearted.

An equal amount of conviction and dedication is required by both counselor and client, and they both need to believe that a person is capable of improving and healing. To be that support — that safe space — for someone at their lowest is what drives Austin to keep going.

And just as he provides for his clients, he provides for himself as well.

Austin's weekly magical tradition has not only become a primary source of joy, but they have also enhanced his appreciation for complicated characters. Whether it's a warlock fighting through an orc ambush or a teen caught in a whirlwind of emotion, Austin approaches each character with the faith that a path forward can always be found amidst the chaos.

As everyone is settling in their chairs, Austin takes the liberty of preparing the table for the game ahead.

He rolls out the cunning D&D dice, flips his notebook to a new page and flips a coin; today he plays as Vincent.

He rolls his dice and the adventure continues.



Austin Stephens preparing for D&D game / Photo by Esha Nigudkar



Austin Stephens playing D&D / Photo by Esha Nigudkar



Austin Stephens / Photo by Esha Nigudkar

From Dream to Reality: How María Ramos Pacheco's roots inspire her storytelling

By Jasmine Wright

Local government reporter for the Dallas Morning News, María Ramos Pacheco says reporting plays an important role when holding people accountable and wants her readers to stay informed despite the difficult moment people of color are experiencing.

Originally from Chihuahua, Mexico, María's first exposure to journalism was during a high school internship, where she had the opportunity to cover the armed violence occurring in her county.

"When I saw those scenes, I was really impacted by the power that journalists have to tell what is happening in the community and give important information quickly," said María.

When María first came to the United States, she worked as an au pair, but never gave up her dream of studying journalism. After earning her Associates degree in Communications from Mercer County Community College in New Jersey, María briefly returned to Chihuahua before moving to El Paso.

While she transitioned to life in El Paso, María noticed it's common to use a mix of English and Spanish language to communicate and in most scenarios her university classes were taught in English, but elsewhere everyone spoke Spanish. Her first journalism job at El Paso Matters gave her real experience of life in the U.S.-Mexico border.

"What impressed me was the interchange between the two countries but at times it felt like one big city," said María.

María started at the Dallas Morning News at Al Día, a Spanish language newspaper written for Mexican-American and other Spanish speaking audiences in the region. Currently, her role as general assignment writer allows her to spend more time in her community instead of the newsroom. On any given day, María can be found attending city council discussions, community meetings and gatherings. She said her job is to take the information and write out what it means for a certain zip code and with support from her colleagues, María has been able to bring together responses from neighborhood organizations and write stories that explicitly detail how a city can best serve its residents.

"There's a lot of intersection in the job so I learn to cover everything and nothing," said María. "But in our community housing and climate change comes up a lot."

María has seen first-hand how her job can have a direct impact on her community and to complete in-depth investigations she undergoes an intensive research process to uphold ethical journalistic standards.

"There is still a deep interest from the community to stay informed so it's important that we stick to the facts and stay unbiased," said María.

Out of all of the stories she's covered, María believes that her reporting has moved the needle to protect people living in high risk environmental pollution. Both of her stories "BioFuel plant next to neighborhood closes" and "Lead Removal a Failure" have successfully communicated the grievances of the communities and how the city government should use financial resources to solve these issues.

If there's one thing María wants people to know is that journalists can serve as advocates for their communities.

"Please reach out to share your stories with me, even on social media, there are ways journalists can be helpful," said María.



María Ramos Pacheco / Photo provided by María Ramos Pacheco



Two Austinites speak
on the growing trend
of adults taking
beginner classes

By Kimberly Andrade

Age
is
Just
a
Number



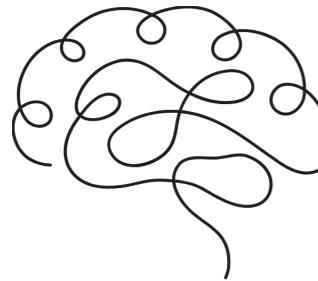
There's been an uptick in recent years of adults looking to take adult beginner classes. Whether this is a result from the solitude of the pandemic or because of the increase in mental health awareness, no one really knows. The trend is slowly becoming more prominent, but it should become a trend that never fades because of its overall positive impact on people's lives.

Adults of all ages should be looking for ways to add excitement to their mundane weekly routines. People can enroll in pottery, singing, dancing, cooking and more classes with the sole goal of breaking out of the usual 9-5 schedule.

Laura Jorgensen is a singing teacher in Austin with a majority of her students being adults with little to no experience in the art. With an extensive background in singing, Laura looks to share her passion with anyone who has an interest in exploring their voice. Because most of her students are adult beginners, Laura has seen first-hand the effects of people trying something new.

"Trying new things as an adult is something that wasn't really encouraged for older generations (...) there's been a longstanding idea of if you're not going to pursue something professionally, then what's the point?" Laura expresses. "A lot of people are now resisting this idea and are doing things for themselves. Students come to me with the realization that they can do things with their life — they don't have to just work and go home."

Laura's students enroll with hesitation, but with a little encouragement, they find joy in trying something new.



"The mental hurdle," Laura shared, "is the biggest challenge that most of my students face. My students come to me with a lot of fear and self-consciousness, but my goal is to always create a comfortable and safe space for them to explore creativity through their voice — and just have fun with their progress."

Laura's home studio is where she hosts her singing lessons. The room is decorated with personal knick knacks, instrument cases and an assortment of music books. There's a whimsical and homey feel to the space that can make any nervous student feel comfortable — and if the knick knacks aren't enough, maybe Cosmic, the music-loving pooch, will suffice.

The "mental hurdles" are a definite obstacle for most adults, but what about finding the time to try something new?

Betsy Martinez spends days and nights helping patients, easing pain and navigating the chaos of hospital corridors as a registered nurse. But a little over a year ago, in the midst of burnout and stress, she found herself searching for an outlet to release her anxieties.

Betsy has always had a love for ballet — the moment she watched her first Barbie ballet movie, Betsy was enchanted. Unfortunately, her family's financial status had her resorting to spinning around her childhood home in socks.

But, at 28-years-old, Betsy fulfilled that childhood dream.

"I was so close to leaving that first class because I was so intimidated by the 14 and 17-year-olds that were walking around (Ballet Austin)," Betsy recalls, "but I realized that I needed an outlet to forget all of my worries and just have fun and feel pretty."

And after her first class, she was hooked.

Betsy began her journey at Ballet Austin, but now attends classes at BB Dance Collective, a latina-owned dance studio that focuses on teaching adults and older teens of all skill levels.

Betsy's schedule used to be so hectic that she would get out of an overnight shift and head straight to the dance studio. Now, she is able to balance her work schedule with her dance classes, which allows her to truly reap the benefits of taking adult beginner dance classes.

"I feel more energized," Betsy shares, "and having something to look forward to after a hard day makes me really happy because, trust me, there have been days where I've been really overwhelmed and stressed."

Betsy encourages everyone — no matter their age or experience — to embark on a journey similar to hers.

"It's never too late. If you want to learn an instrument or dance or ice skating, just do it," Betsy says, "There's a lot of adult beginners here in Austin — I didn't know that until I started my journey about a year ago. You might love it. You might hate it. Just do it."

These two Austinites are a testament to the slow growing trend of adults taking beginner classes.

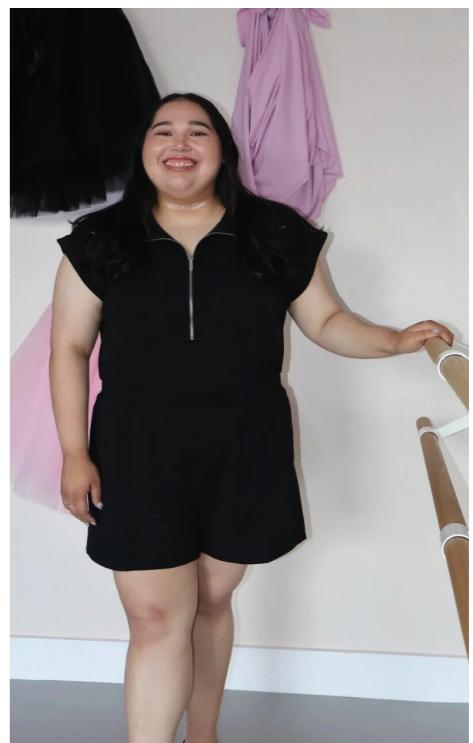
From ballet studios to singing lessons, these creative spaces are becoming havens for adults ready to step out of routine and into something more fulfilling.

Whether it's twirling across a studio floor or singing in a cozy home full of mismatched knick knacks, adults like Betsy and Laura's students are proving that it's not about perfection or profession — it's about reclaiming joy, embracing curiosity and allowing ourselves to be beginners again.

So chase that childhood dream or try something totally new because learning doesn't have an expiration date.



Laura Jorgenson sitting at her home piano / Photo by Kimberly Andrade



Betsy Martinez standing in BB Dance Collective / Photo by Kimberly Andrade