

Triumph and Trial: Preserving Houston's Black LGBTQ+ History through Community-centered Archiving

By Erika Thompson

On a crisp December morning, over flaky croissants and Parisian tea in dainty, porcelain cups, the answer was yes. Overwhelmingly, emphatically, unequivocally YES. There was no need to finish either the pitch or the ask; we were already completely on board.

It is a truism that no archive is complete. The African American Library at the Gregory School (The Gregory School) is no exception. In fact, now nearing its twelfth year, Gregory is a virtual newborn babe in the world of collecting institutions. On that crisp December morning that brought activist/creative/visionary Harrison Guy to the literal table, Houston Public Library curator and Gregory School manager Danielle Burns Wilson and I were confronted with the weight of this truth. However, the difficult reality was not that Gregory's collection was incomplete due to its infancy but rather that the collection was incomplete due to its omission.

The Gregory School is one of three research centers operated by the Houston Public Library System. Located in historic Freedmen's Town/Fourth Ward and housed in a building erected to serve as the first public school for free Black children after Emancipation, The Gregory School's mission is to document and preserve Houston's African American culture. A repository of rich and dynamic histories, The Gregory School employs exhibits, programming and an ever-expanding archive to tell the story of Black Houston's impact locally, nationally, and internationally.

Danielle and I initially assumed that Harrison wanted to discuss *Urban Souls*. Born of a solo he performed at the city-wide festival *Dance Houston*, Urban Souls Dance Company



Houston LGBTQ+ activist Charles Law addresses a crowd during the 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Photo courtesy of Botts Collection of LGBT History.

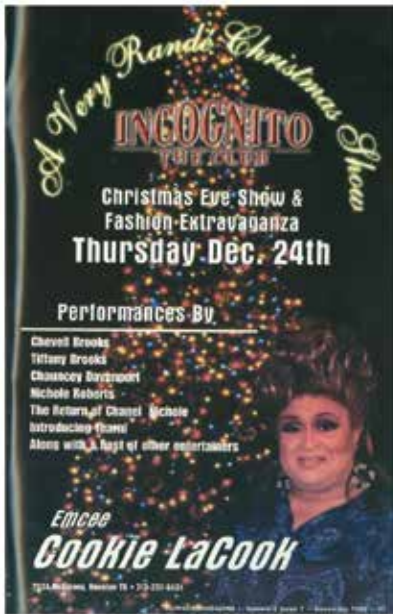
was created and founded by Harrison in 2004. At the time, *Urban Souls* was about to celebrate its fifteenth year and The Gregory School would soon be reaching its own milestone of ten years, so the timing of this conversation felt right. The three of us talked at length. As this was my first time meeting Harrison, we had to do the necessary work of, as the elders call it, "find[ing] out who your people are." Our rapport was organic and the conversation delightful. We shared who was from where, attended what schools, worked in what institutions, knew so-and-so, and belonged to which organizations. Harrison waxed poetic about the founding and the future of *Urban Souls*; Danielle and I did what we always do in these initial meetings with potential collaborators — made the case for a new collection. For all intents and purposes, it was a great meeting.

We were feeling good about the time spent and our next steps, and as we began to wrap up, Harrison quietly interjected: "Is it possible," he asked, "to establish an initiative



Drag performer Chevell Brooks dances at Uptown Downtown in the 1990s.

All photos courtesy of the African American Library at the Gregory School unless otherwise noted.



The Christmas Eve show at Incognito the Club in 1998 featured beloved drag performer and emcee Cookie LaCook. Known as “the Mouth of the South,” LaCook gave generously of her time for benefit shows and to help those in need.

that seeks to archive the Black LGBTQ Houston experience at The Gregory School?” What unfolded in the next several minutes was both education and call to action. Harrison shared his idea of an archival collection to be housed at The Gregory School that would preserve and celebrate the histories and culture of Houston’s Black LGBTQ+ community. He went on to say that he thought it fitting that said collection would be named after the late Dr. Charles Law — one of Houston’s first Black LGBTQ+ activists, University of Houston

alum, and Texas Southern University’s first archivist — and how powerful this initiative would be for Black LGBTQ+ Houstonians.

Is it possible? Every time I replay this conversation in my mind, a pang of emotion hits me. On the surface, Harrison’s question was one of procedure — of process — not unfamiliar to our team. A potential donor’s asking how to donate is a customary, routine part of the work we do at The Gregory School. The conversation usually goes in part, “I have some items I’d like to donate ...” or “I think I would like to start a collection ...” However, peeling back the layers a bit, a closer examination of Harrison’s question brings a weightiness that stings of the denials and exclusions of Black LGBTQ+ history from the larger canon of African American history. In my replay of his question of possibility, I hear, “Is it possible that our history is of value to the archive?” or, worse yet, “Is it possible to be included?”

At the time of our conversation, I could not definitively say what LGBTQ+ history our collection held. However, instinctively I knew that the percentage was small to non-existent. As aforementioned, no archive is complete; but as we seek to fill whatever gaps may exist in telling the story of Black Houston, we feel a pressing need to ensure the broadest representation possible. Omissions such as the Black LGBTQ+ community from The Gregory School collection, however unintentional they may be, carry grave consequences for the integrity and accuracy of the city’s historical record. As Danielle and I debriefed about our meeting with Harrison, we both expressed how appreciative we were (are) that The Gregory School was gifted the opportunity to correct course and make things right.

In our next staff meeting, we recapped the meeting and the idea of creating this new collection. To no surprise, our team rallied behind the initiative. First, The Gregory School held a kick-off event in February 2019 to announce the creation of the Dr. Charles Law Community Archive (CLCA). Then, in continued support of the new collection, The Gregory School dedicated the entire month of June to programming on and around Black Houston’s LGBTQ+ community. And in the most perfect ending to the month imaginable, Houston’s Pride parade selected Harrison to be the grand marshal, the first Black person to be bestowed that honor. The Gregory School team had shirts made, and we all attended the parade together.

Without question, June 2019 was one of the most memorable, impactful, and personally fulfilling programming months I have experienced since joining The Gregory School team. More importantly, it spectacularly laid the foundation to create a dynamic collection that would greatly enrich Gregory’s archive, specifically, and Black Houston history overall. Over flaky croissants and Parisian tea in dainty, porcelain cups, we said yes. And as a reward, the photographs, oral histories, and ephemera were bound to come pouring in. I imagined our phones ringing off the hook with inquiries, and, as news spread of the newly created CLCA, the LGBTQ+ community racing over to donate their items to the collection. I even wondered if we might need to petition the powers that be to get help to process the new acquisitions.

Gregory School employees and their family members attend the Houston Pride parade in 2019 to support Grand Marshal Harrison Guy. From left to right are LaCecia Jackson, Toni Burns, Tracey King, Ingrid Grant, Harrison Guy, Danielle Burns Wilson, Erika Thompson, and Sheena Wilson.



One of the things I had promised Harrison at the onset was that Gregory would not relegate CLCA to an annual June observance, brought out as our show pony of inclusiveness and put back on the shelf until the next Pride month. The Gregory School knows this reality all too well, as every Black History Month we become the hottest ticket in town. We refused to actively participate in marginalizing the CLCA collection in that way. Our excitement fueled many conversations about the direction the new collection would take, even though donations weren't rolling in *just yet*.

Shortly after the launch of CLCA and the June programming, we jumped into a whirlwind of preparations for The Gregory School's tenth anniversary coming in November 2019. We had a full weekend of events scheduled, including a VIP reception and two-day symposium. Was CLCA forgotten? Absolutely not, but it certainly was not at the fore of all the planning. Once the anniversary events were successfully behind us, the team used the fairly quiet holiday season to recover from what had been a long, but wildly productive year. In January, as we do at the start of every new year, The Gregory School team turned our attention to our plans and goals for 2020, with an air of greater significance seemingly swirling about.

Harrison and I touched base and candidly discussed the state of CLCA. The calls we thought would inundate us, the inquiries we thought we would field, the acquisitions we



A popular Black gay bar and dance club, Incognito the Club operated from 1996 to 2004.

thought we would make — none of it happened. In reality, for all the anticipation and excitement surrounding its creation, CLCA had yet to become. Everyone and everything was about this highly touted “Year of Vision,” and what we both saw clearly was that CLCA

needed help. Harrison and I made a commitment that in this new year, the collection would get the attention it deserved and desperately needed. But by March, COVID-19 had brought our world to a literal halt.

Barring the obvious limitations of a global pandemic, CLCA's failure to launch is in many ways emblematic of



Grover Fortenberry, right, provided entertainment to Houston's Black gay community, including theater productions, scheduling club entertainment, and helping establish Houston's Black Gay Pride celebration and Houston Splash, which drew up to 20,000 people to the city. Performer Tiffany Brooks was Miss Texas Continental in 2001 and Miss Black America 2002.

the challenges that accompany preserving the histories of under-represented communities. Over the years, from “walk in” days with our archivists to community scanning events, The Gregory School has employed numerous tactics to acquire materials from our community. There has been no shortage of attempts to collect and preserve Houston's African American history, and yet the struggle persists. One thing that we know to be true is that our communities collect, but they do not share. There are myriad reasons for this, but the elephant in the room remains that African Americans feel a grave distrust in turning over their materials, one that is rooted in a very real history of being taken advantage of and treated poorly by institutions of all stripes.

More recently, in trying to secure photographs for CLCA, donors showed a willingness to have the images scanned, but they wanted them subsequently returned. They demonstrated great reluctance to take the next step of relinquishing

original documents and photographs to be included in a permanent collection. Similarly, in our experience, potential donors want to hold on to their materials to a certain point in their lives before creating collections with us. Yet, their intentions to donate are rarely if ever documented, be it in a will or expressed to loved ones and next of kin. We are combatting not only deep-seeded mistrust but also the illusion of time. This reluctance will prove to be a death knell to collecting institutions like The Gregory School, signaling to us that much work remains to be done to educate our communities on the import of historic preservation.

When outside opens again and whatever modicum of the normalcy we once enjoyed returns, my hope is that we will breathe renewed life into CLCA; for not only is it possible, it is necessary.

Erika Thompson currently serves as community liaison for the African American Library at the Gregory School, one of Houston Public Library system's three local research centers. Prior to her position at The Gregory School, Erika worked at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta. Erika graduated from University of Houston, where she double majored in psychology and radio/TV; earned her master's in Africana Studies from Cornell University; and is ABD with a master's in American Studies from University of Maryland.