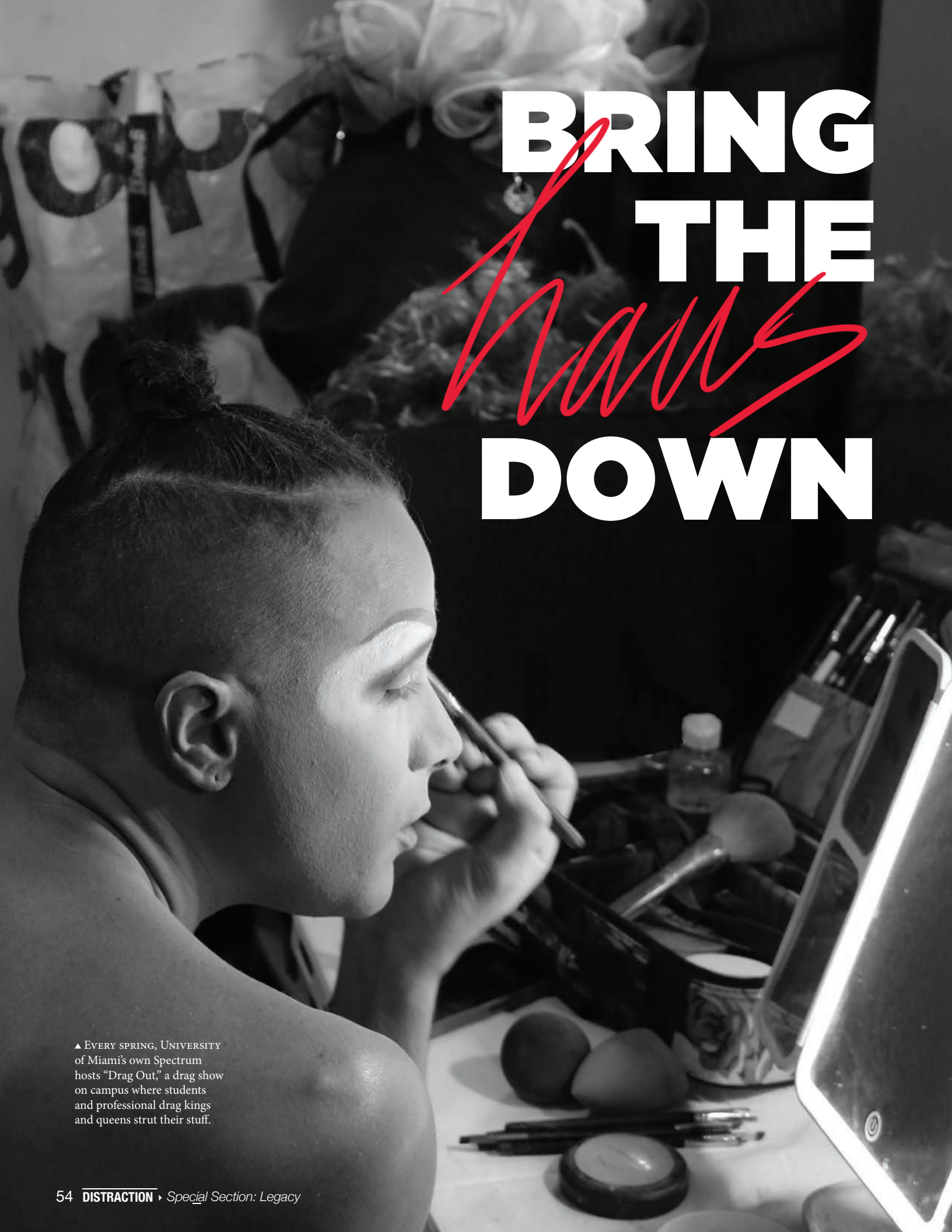


BRING THE NAME DOWN



▲ EVERY SPRING, UNIVERSITY of Miami's own Spectrum hosts "Drag Out," a drag show on campus where students and professional drag kings and queens strut their stuff.

Family ties aren't always forged in blood. For some Miami **drag queens**, they emerge organically as mentors and mentees form relationships and adopt found families often referred to as **houses** or "**hauses**." These groups offer members a support system, networking opportunity and the chance to leave a **lasting legacy** by taking on proteges of their own.

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"Drag was never meant to have rules- it was born out of rebellion," said Miami-based drag queen Athena Dion, who goes by Stavros Stavrakis off-stage. Long before RuPaul was a TV star and drag brunches were a popular Sunday destination, this art form was anything but mainstream. Rather, Stavrakis said, it was practiced underground by those who couldn't express themselves any other way.

And as long as there has been drag, he continued, there have been drag houses.

"There's always been drag families since the beginning of time," Stavrakis said. These families can consist of just a few members or dozens, but they all exist to provide drag queens, and occasionally laypeople, with a sense of community, a support system and a means of bettering themselves and their craft.

Since one of Miami's largest families, the House of Lords, emerged in the mid-1990's, they have welcomed over 100 members. But when Alex Velez started doing drag in 1994, the fledgling family was only home to six.

Velez, whose drag name is TP (short for Total Package) Lords, served as the House's mother from 2007-2020 before passing it on to his "drag daughter" Jasmine Pryce Lords. In that time, Velez said, he had over 30 "drag children." Today Velez, who refuses to be called the House's "grandmother" and prefers to go by "overall mother," said the family has over 50 active members and many more who have stopped performing.

The process of joining a drag family and, eventually, taking on one's own children varies for every queen- and

some don't do it at all.

To an outsider, these family trees can be difficult to follow, as queens may adopt their drag mothers' name at first and add a new name when they're ready to start their own family.

Stavrakis, who is currently mother of the "Dion Dynasty" as well as owner of his own drag entertainment company Dream Queens, had been doing drag for six or seven years when he had his first drag daughter.

To be a "drag mother," he said, means to take a new queen under your wing, show them the ropes of performing, help them find gigs and provide them with an overall place of belonging.

"Even in 2021 a lot of kids are not able to really express themselves in their own home environments," he said. "They often look elsewhere to find that family unit, and a drag family provides that."

Angel Rodriguez, whose full drag name is "Lil Plastic Love Dion," is the drag daughter of Morphine Love Dion, one of Stavrakis' kids. Growing up in a conservative home, she said, she wasn't really exposed to drag. Once she started performing, though, Rodriguez joined Morphine's family, the "Haus of Love," within months.

"It's like a chosen family," she said. "With a drag mom they pick you up from nothing, give you the tips and tricks like showing you how to glue a wig to your head."

When Rodriguez came out as transgender, she said, her drag family wasn't the least bit surprised.

"I really started transitioning through drag," Rodriguez said, noting that she hated getting out of it at the end of the night. "I would literally sit in tights, which



► QUEENS (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) AFTER performances at R House in Wynwood: Athena Dion, Serenity Hinez Dupree, Tayanna Love and Morphine Love.

“I LIVED MY ART”

- TP Lords
DRAG QUEEN

are horrendous to be in, for hours and just put myself through that so I can look the way I wanted to look,” she added.

While Rodriguez’ biological family was less than supportive of her transition, she said, her drag family welcomed the news with open arms and hearts.

“They were like “Yeah girl, finally, you put the puzzle pieces together,” she said. “They’re always very much there for me.”

The support offered by found families in this community, said Miss Toto Clermont Dion, one of Athena’s drag daughters who now lives in Chicago, goes far beyond performance tips—and family trees.

“I’m older than my drag kids and I’ve lived life a little longer,” said the queen, who goes by Rock Evans off-stage. “So it’s not just about drag guidance. It’s about being a friend, a mentor—being there for somebody.”

In addition to her six drag kids, Miss Toto said she has formed a number of close relationships in the Black drag community since moving from Miami to Chicago. “Instead of it being my direct drag family, we call each other sisters even though we don’t have the same last name,” she said. “We’re on the same level, we understand each other and we’re all Black queens.”

To Velez, “what goes into being a mother is being available for your family, being a positive role model.”

“We have our group chat and everybody is available to each other,” he said. “If there’s ever a situation, if somebody loses a job or something, we do our best to help them. Working at a bar I could always find something for somebody else in a tough situation. I’ve even paid kids to come and clean my dressing room just so that they had money and work.”

Velez, who earned the stage name “Total Package” for his ability to help other queens with multiple aspects of their appearance and performance, was first introduced to drag through the ballroom scene over 20 years ago.

The House of Lords came to be around the same time as South Florida’s ballroom culture began taking off, he said. These events, he explained, can be hosted by a person, house or group of people and feature various competition “categories” which could call for themed costumes, high-fashion performances or “transformations,” where a performer makes one appearance dressed as a stereotypical male before returning to the stage in full drag regalia.

It was these balls, Stavrakis said, that modern drag was born out of. The scene, Velez said, “started off as you know, gays and drag queens and trans women, but it’s evolved into everybody. Even kids now are joining balls.”

The House of Lords, he said, welcomes individuals regardless of their gender or sexuality, so long as they respect and care for the community. Over the years the requirements for joining have evolved, he said, and have included having to walk in a ball, win a category or be voted in by members.

Still, Rodriguez said, while the drag community has become more accepting over years, it isn’t yet where it could be when it comes to diversity and inclusion. Some stigma against queens still exists in the gay community, she said, while a handful of queens themselves are against the idea of transwomen performing.

“Everyone can do drag. There’s not an assigned gender to it,” she said.

“Everyone should accept and respect each other for what they bring to the table,” Velez said. The House of Love’s ultimate legacy, he hopes, will be that they give back to the community and “spread nothing but love and positivity.”

“I lived life unapologetically,” he said, “and I did drag unapologetically. I lived my art.” 🎨

▲ DRAG PERFORMER STAVROS STAVRAKIS’ BUSINESS “DREAM Queens,” which provides entertainment for events like bachelorette parties, began as a charitable effort. It all started when he was asked to round up a group of drag queens to help out with a makeup event for children in the burn unit at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

