

## Pride Houston honors grand contributions

Four picked as grand marshals for nighttime Pride parade in Montrose

By JOEY GUERRA

COMMUNITY SERVICE, CALLS TO GOD and history-making activism are hallmarks of this year's Pride Houston parade grand marshals.

The quartet includes Ray Ramirez, Phyllis Randolph Frye, Rev. Marilyn Meeker-Williams and honorary organization Bunnies on the Bayou.

This year's honorees will preside over the nighttime parade, which is set for June 24 at 8:45 p.m. in lower Westheimer between Woodhead and Whitney streets.

Grand marshals were voted on locally from a pool of several nominees. About 300 people participated in this year's vote during four polling dates in February.

### Ray Ramirez

Ramirez, this year's male grand marshal, has an endless stream of civic, cultural, charitable and political organizations to his credit. It's a non-stop job throughout the year.

"We as lesbians and gays have a higher calling, and that is to do non-profit work in our community," Ramirez says in between listing off his accomplishments with equal amounts of pride and duty.

They include, but are not limited to, his work as founder and first president of the Lambda Roller Skating Club, during which he represented Houston at the 1994 Gay Games and received the bronze medal in speed skating.

Ramirez was also an active member of Pride Houston for many years and spent time co-chairing the parade committee.

"I've done the grunt work before," he says. "After the parade, I was down on Westheimer, picking up trash that was knee deep. It's paid off."

Ramirez was also a Bunnies on the Bayou board member for 17 years, and even coined the organization's name. He has organized, and participated in, fundraising for several political campaigns, including those for then Houston Councilmember Annise Parker and newly elected Councilmember Sue Lovell. And there has also been stints assisting the Houston Gay & Lesbian Film Festival.

During his downtime, Ramirez is an active member of Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church and a



Transgender attorney and activist **Phyllis Randolph Frye**; and Rev. **Marilyn Meeker-Williams** are the female and honorary female grand marshals for this year's Pride Houston parade. Ray Ramirez is male grand marshal and Bunnies on the Bayou is organizational grand marshal.



professional hairstylist.

Ramirez balances it all "with friends and family," but says he is continually inspired by being a survivor. Two of his sisters were killed separately in car accidents several years ago, and he says he was also motivated by the onslaught of the early 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic.

"I had to get out there and do something," Ramirez says. "I knew that I had to put my skills to work, and that's what really propelled me to do quality, quantified work in our community."

### Phyllis Randolph Frye

Female grand marshal Frye was similarly inspired by specific events in her life. She is a prominent transgender lawyer who, for nearly 30 years, has worked tirelessly to change discriminatory laws, including a Houston ordinance outlawing cross-dressing. She was a founding member of the Transgender Law Conference and the Stonewall Law Association of Greater Houston.

In another life, Frye was an Eagle Boy Scout, her high school's ROTC commander, a member of the Texas A&M University Corps of Cadets, a military officer and a civil engineer.

Most recently, Frye has helped veteran Houston police officer Sgt. Julia (Jack) Oliver, who has made headlines with her decision to undergo sexual re-assignment surgery.

"I am flattered and humbled both as a transgender and as a long time GLBTI activist to have been elected by popular vote to receive this honor," Frye says. "I have been

out since 1974 and have been full-time as a TG for 30 years this September. I was there when Ray Hill was trying to get Pride started in the late 1970's. I have seen much and been in the thick of much change for the better in the GLBTI freedom movement."

### Marilyn Meeker-Williams

Honorary grand marshal Meeker-Williams is not a lesbian, but she does have strong ties to gay rights causes. Her son, Nathan, came out to her in 1996, and it triggered something inside both her head and heart.

"It began to focus some of my ministry," says Meeker-Williams, who was appointed to St. Marks United Methodist Church in the Heights area this month. She previously spent 10 years serving at Bering Memorial United Methodist Church.

"It occurred to me, 'That could be a direction God was calling me to go,' which was confirmed a year later when I was appointed to Bering Memorial," she says.

Though her son lives in Boston and will not be here to see her waving to parade onlookers, Meeker-Williams says he was amused at the honorary marshal appointment.

"He thought that was fun," she says.

In 1999, Meeker-Williams took a public stance on gay marriage by refusing to marry any couples in her church until same-sex couples could also be married there. Beyond being a polarizing political statement, it simply seems an extension of her gentle, knowing grace.

"I have been very supportive—all of my life, really—of people who are denied full human rights for some reason, who are

### MORE INFO

#### Pride Houston Parade

June 24, 8:45 p.m.

Lower Westheimer

Free general admission and \$25 bleacher seats

713-529-6979

[www.pridehouston.org](http://www.pridehouston.org)

oppressed in any way, who are treated as the 'other,' rather than one of us," she says.

On Saturday, she'll be ready to celebrate all walks of life.

### Bunnies on the Bayou

Organization grand marshal Bunnies on the Bayou has produced an annual Easter Sunday fundraiser for the past 26 years. In the process, the group has donated more than \$500,000 to a slew of non-profit organizations, including AIDS Foundation Houston, Bering Omega Community Services, Houston Area Teen Coalition of Homosexuals (HATCH) and the local chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

"Being named grand marshal is one of our community's highest honors, and the list of past grand marshals is a who's-who of GLBT community leaders," says Nick Brines, Pride Houston president. "This year's awardees definitely belong on that list."

Previous grand marshals include activist Ray Hill, nightlife entrepreneur Charles Armstrong, Houston City Councilmember Annise Parker, former Houston Voice Editor Nancy Ford, the Texas Gay Rodeo Association and Bayou City Boys Club.