

got there, we were told that there was a group that had come down from Chicago who were notorious head-breakers. We didn't know what that meant. I assumed that it was metaphorical.

We decided to defer to the other group to make an opening statement, and we would make our opening statement second. The first woman was one of the people from Chicago. She stood up, I didn't know her because I didn't know anyone from Chicago, and she made a very calm, quiet matter-of-fact statement of which the general tenor was, "Of course we all know that transgender people are really men, transsexuals are all men, they're really destructive and carry male energy with them. One must be really misguided to be around them. So we've come to ask Olivia why they..."

How were they so sure? Did they have a ton of contact with trans people? It seems like it was coming out of a vacuum.

None of us had any idea and we never found out. I made a terrible mistake, because I didn't understand how bad the situation was or what the stakes were. When she finished, it was our turn to make an opening statement, and I had assumed Jenny Ginny (Berson) would do it. Jenny Ginny says my memory is probably wrong because she's not sure she was there. But whoever it was, I assume that one of the older members of the collective, some of the original people, would get up and make our opening statement, but I discovered everybody in the collective that was there, we had seven women, they were all looking at me, and I hadn't prepared anything. This woman whom I didn't know had just unloaded a huge truckload of bullshit on the group, and I looked at my collective mates and they were all looking at me, saying "Sandy, say something!" I said the first thing that came into my head, which was, "First of all, that's all bullshit!" and the room exploded. Apparently, I had just said a totally male thing, and they were off!

It didn't matter what you said.

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I had given them the perfect excuse to be verbally violent. It literally turned into screaming. That was the end of the meeting. We couldn't quiet it down. Eventually, we retreated to the far corner of the room. The other group said, "We won't continue the discussion unless that guy leaves," pointing at me. We had no plan for this at all! We were so naive. So, we went off to the corner of the room, and we caucused. All the other women said, "We're not gonna let you leave." So, we chose someone to go to the other side of the room and palaver with the other group. They went on and on, and we watched it from a distance. There was a lot of gesticulating and hand waving and moving of mouths and eventually she came back and said, "they won't move or talk with us unless you leave, Sandy." That's realpolitik in the real world. What are you gonna do? We were a bunch of naive, young women, and we looked at

each other, tongues tied, trying to get somewhere. I said, "I'll tell you what, do you think we're gonna get dialogue if I do go?" And she said, "Well at least it opens up the possibility that there might be some dialogue, because they say they won't even talk to us if you're here. So we have either the choice of us leaving or you leaving." I said, "Let's see if you can get dialogue going, I'll go home." So I did.

I left and went back to—I don't remember if I went back to the hotel room or how the hell I got back there because I was in shock. But I did get back to the collective home to Olivia House in Wilshire District of LA and went into my room and curled up in a ball. There was no further dialogue. They wouldn't engage in reasonable discourse even after I left; my leaving was for nothing. The rest came back shell-shocked in their own way.

We did our best to process that, and then we went on the big tour. That was the West Coast Olivia tour. It was the first one they ever did. I had built all the audio equipment—not all of it, but most of it—by hand. We had made our own mic stands. We handmade a couple of our own microphones, though not all of them. I built the mixing board from scratch; I etched the circuit boards in the Olivia kitchen using an aquarium tank and a heater I had filled with etching solution. It was a totally homegrown operation. We made it work, and we were using things like brake drums for mic stand bases, and I built all the speakers; the stage wedges from scratch by hand in my bedroom. We built the whole thing up from nothing, and we went out on the tour, and before we got to Seattle, we heard about this group that had said when we got to Seattle they were gonna kill me. At this point, we were prepared to take such a threat dead-serious.

We had our first women's concert—I'm laughing because it's so completely absurd and was utterly scary at the time—we did the first women's music concert with security. We had honest-to-god heavy-duty people. The group that issued the threat was this radical, transphobic separatist group up there. They shaved their heads, wore camo gear, and had live weapons. We had people at the door checking for weapons. A couple of them did come. I don't know if they brought any weapons—if they did, they were taken away. But I did the concert with—I could feel the hair standing up on my back the whole time, because I was working the board, which was set up right in the middle of the auditorium. I was the sole tech person.

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Sitting duck, right in the center of the crowd!

Halfway through the concert, between numbers, somebody in the auditorium screamed the name of the group and I went under the console table so fast, I think I exceeded the speed of light. I was totally

cowardly. I regret that. I feel it was a moment of shame. I should've stood up and turned around and looked at the audience, but my reflex was to duck.

To survive, yeah! It's totally instinctual.

We got through the concert. Nothing happened. After the concert, I passed out. Not from fear, just from, I had—all right, I have to back up a bit if you don't mind.

At some point, near the peak of the transphobic hysteria regarding Olivia Records, I suddenly realized, while they knew I was trans, I hadn't bothered to tell them I was preoperative. At the time that was a no-no. At the time that was a huge thing.

In 1979, 1980, it was everybody's business.

You remember that, right? Remember how that was? I didn't keep it from them out of malice; I hadn't told them because I thought, well this is just personal information. Now, I was putting them in a really dangerous position. After a series of really horrible, agonizing meetings with only the core collective, we arranged for me to have surgery in secret, just before the tour. And we chose to do it right before the tour because we were also in the process of moving to Oakland. Part of the collective was in the Wilshire district at the Olivia house, part of it was in Oakland, and people were flying back and forth, and nobody was really keeping track of where anyone was. It would be possible for me to disappear for a week or two without anybody noticing. So that's what we did.

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How big was your influence to get surgery based on the hysteria around you?

Well I think it was all mine, but the timing was because of the hysteria. If you wanted to, maybe we could throw in forced feminization of an extreme kind!

Oh totally, are you kidding me?

I had been approved by Stanford before that. I was in Olivia living out my time before I could put together enough money to have surgery I had been doing that, saving up. And Olivia said, "We'll contribute the balance, just go do it right now, and you can't tell anybody else. Not our collective, not

the women's community, you can't tell your family, you can't tell anybody!" Those were the terms under which I did it. I want to tell you, it was scary. It was fucking terrifying.

It's terrifying to begin with, but under these extenuating circumstances, having a mob behind you basically.

It was not fun. [It] could've been celebratory the way many peoples' are, but it was not celebratory. Nobody from the collective could go anywhere near the hospital. Of course, Stanford, at that point, was being sued by somebody, and they were not doing gender confirmation surgery at the Stanford hospital. They were generally doing it at San Mateo General (a.k.a. Chope Hospital). That was where San Mateo had the prison ward. They put me in the prison ward because they didn't know where else to put a transy. I had two guys on gurneys on either side of me. The one on the left side was just ranting incoherently and thrashing around. The one on the right was looking at me silently with this "I'll kill you if I get loose" stare. It was not an enjoyable moment. They had guards for the other guys. Fortunately, they were handcuffed and couldn't roll over and make a grab for me. I don't think we were that close together.

I came back from surgery and went right back to the collective and pretended nothing had happened. I think I'm a week out of the hospital at this point. We go on tour, and after the strain of the Seattle one, I passed out. And the reason I passed out was I was still so weak from surgery. A few people on the tour knew, but most did not. I was busy pretending being a very macho woman and pretending everything was fine and doing the setup, and eventually the tank just ran empty.

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Just hearing about that meeting in Los Angeles, it's so volatile and irrational, and so dangerous. To be the only trans person in that space, with a room full of people out to get you... I'm wondering what is the take away? What is the survival strategy from that experience that can be applied today to trans people who are encountering the same kind of irrational fears about who we are? You know, what you're describing is a microcosm of what's happening on a larger cultural level right now.

I'm afraid having told you what I have, I don't have much of a strategy for you; I only have what worked for me, which is how I got through that one and the next one and got into graduate school and got my job and got through the transphobia at University of Texas: you just put your head down and you keep fucking moving forward. That's the only thing I know. And it's terrifying and exhausting, and if you're very, very lucky, you break through into something eventually, which I did. I also had the extreme privilege that I know a good many of my brothers and sisters don't have. I have the extreme privilege of

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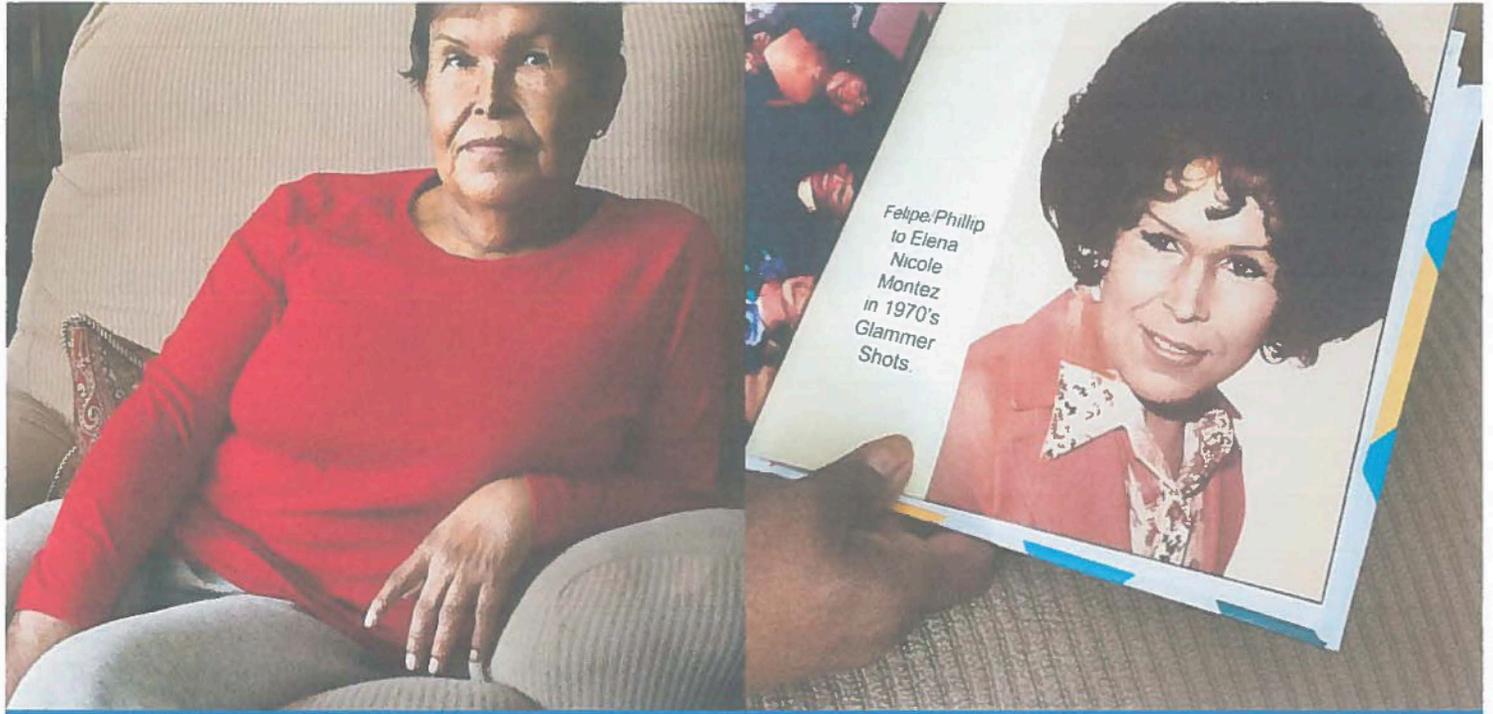
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TRANS LEGENDS

## Felicia Elizondo's Wild Memories of Trans Life in 60s San Francisco

**In the 60s, activist and entertainer Felicia Elizondo was a regular at San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria, the site of a historic 1966 riot for trans rights, and the only place she felt free as a transgender woman.**

By [Zackary Drucker](#) | Dec 12 2018, 1:14pm

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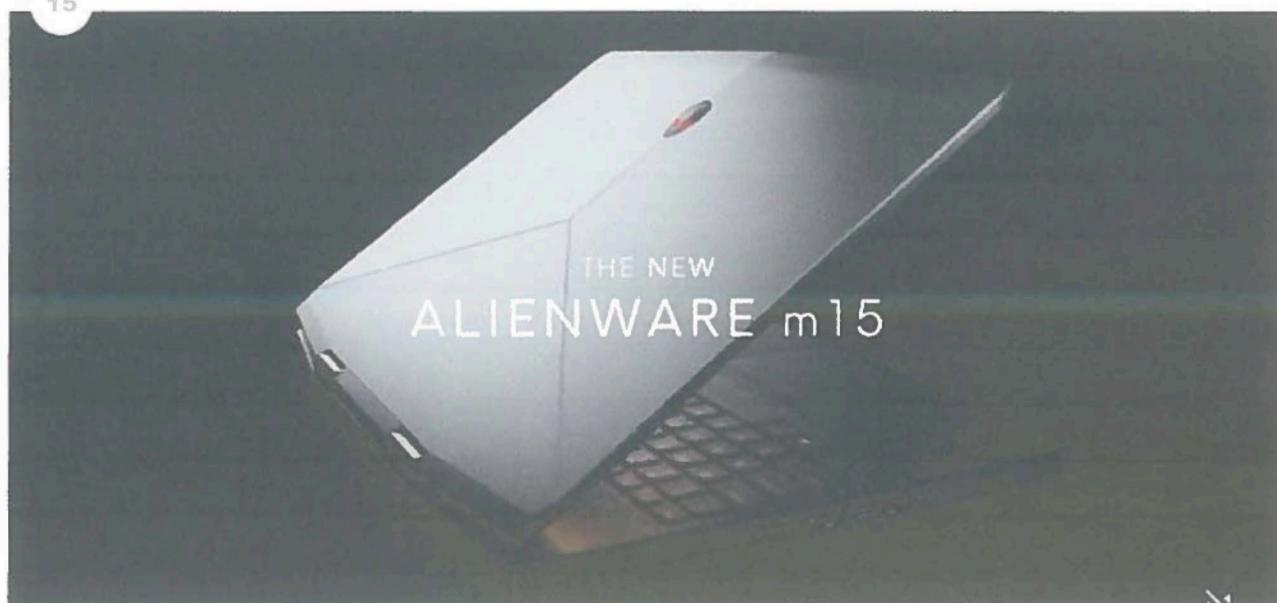
Read more from our [Trans Legends oral history project](#), a growing archive of interviews with transgender icons and pioneers.



Felicia Elizondo's memories are a vivid and spectacular rendering of trans life in the latter half of the 20th century. And as an activist, historian, entertainer, and long-term survivor of HIV/AIDS, her work in the decades-long movement for trans rights is a testament to our adaptability, fortitude, and industrious ability to build community in the margins.

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Felicia was a regular patron of San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria, a refuge for queens and transgender people in the 60s, and the site of the historic 1966 [Compton's Cafeteria Riot](#), when patrons of the diner fought back against discrimination by police. She is also featured in [Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria](#), a 2005 documentary about the uprising co-directed and produced by Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman. Her stories of time spent there reveal a particular moment and place, where trans people were able to create chosen family and thrive in each other's care, that is still not widely recognized—even as part of LGBTQ history.

Punctuated by moments of presenting as male in the first act of her life—to avoid arrest for cross-dressing, to satisfy a male benefactor, or to prove her

choosing to go to Santa Cruz. I thought, "I know this place is safe. It feels good to me." I'm going to stay here as long as I can, and I'm gonna make this work for me. I did that and I'm still here.

Famously, you were vindicated and wrote what many would perceive as the penultimate beginning of trans feminism with *The Empire Strikes Back*. That's the antidote! That's the real survival strategy, right? To produce and create something, to take that trauma and manifest it into something. Words, especially books, last forever. How is that a healing mechanism for you, and how did you channel all of that frustration?

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I wrote it for Donna [Haraway]. It was my first year project in [the] History of Consciousness [department at the University of California, Santa Cruz]. I got into History of Consciousness the same way.

When Donna suggested I go down to San Diego to spend a year with their science studies program, I went over to the hard science side, to look at the people who were in the [Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Program]. I forget who was running the program. When I came into the lab, two of his grad students took me in to see him, and the first thing out of his mouth was "Why the fuck should I take any time to talk to you?" That makes you think really fast, and I did.

I got a two-second breather by taking the time to stretch or put my hands behind my head, which was kind of a fake maneuver to get a little moment, and I looked him in the fucking eyes and I said, "I'm the brightest person you're likely to ever meet. I'm not in your field. I'm down here for sociology, but one of these days, I might just do something that you'll need very much. And it pays you to talk to me right now, if for no other reason than that."

He sat back and looked at me in an entirely different way and said, "Okay, what do you want to know?" And he gave me a tour of the glass cockpit project [they were working on] and we talked about how this and that was done from a technical viewpoint and I left. That kind of thing happened all the time! I never got used to it, but after a while, I got to realize it was going to happen, so at least I you know, I developed a gesture like that of putting my hands behind my head which gave me a second or two to think, "What the hell do I do now?" I don't know if I'm the brightest person he's ever likely to meet, that was completely false, but it was enough to get his attention.

I also developed another strategy that won't be useful to anybody! While I was down there, I was having a horrible time. I was away from everyone I knew, I was away from my home, I was in a hostile

environment. I was working in a sociology department, and I didn't have that much affinity with it. I was there to visit a program—maybe the science studies program—which was totally traditional. They didn't believe in cultural theory or critical theory, they were hostile to me and they later in fact threw me out. And I developed a strategy. There was an elevator in the humanities and social sciences building, which had eight floors. The sociology department was on one of the top ones. The elevator was very slow. I'd get in, the doors would close, I'd pick a time of day when there were few people in the building or traveling in it, and if I was lucky enough to be alone in the elevator, the doors would close, I'd lean against the wall of the elevator and I'd cry. I'd cry and cry 'til I got to my floor and the doors would open, and I'd be on! I'd go in and do whatever the hell needed to be done. I wound up doing that for almost five years. But that was purely accidental, because I said something cultural or theoretical and they kicked me out. But I got rehired.

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To paint with broad strokes, it seems like a big piece of your survival strategy was letting yourself be a full person, letting emotions pass through you, knowing that you would survive. I think that's the trick of life: not being so overwhelmed and ruled and directed by your emotional space. You can get lost in it forever.

And I didn't know I was going to survive. I just knew I needed to survive the next couple minutes. At least for me, my time sense closed in until it was just in the present moment. Okay, you're in the present, something's happening that hurts like hell, just be with it, now it goes away. It was kind of like that.

Sandy, how did you get your full name?

Allucquère Roseanne?

Sandy was a name you were using back then? I'm so interested in the journey.

Sandy was originally "Sanne," which was a contraction of "Roseanne;" and I didn't shorten it, friends did. It was a nickname that friends chose rather than I did. Allucquère was a name that a friend of mine named Robert Heinlein used in a novel, do you know that work?

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memories amount to a wild and explosive ride that proves the accuracy of her nickname, Felicia “Flames.”

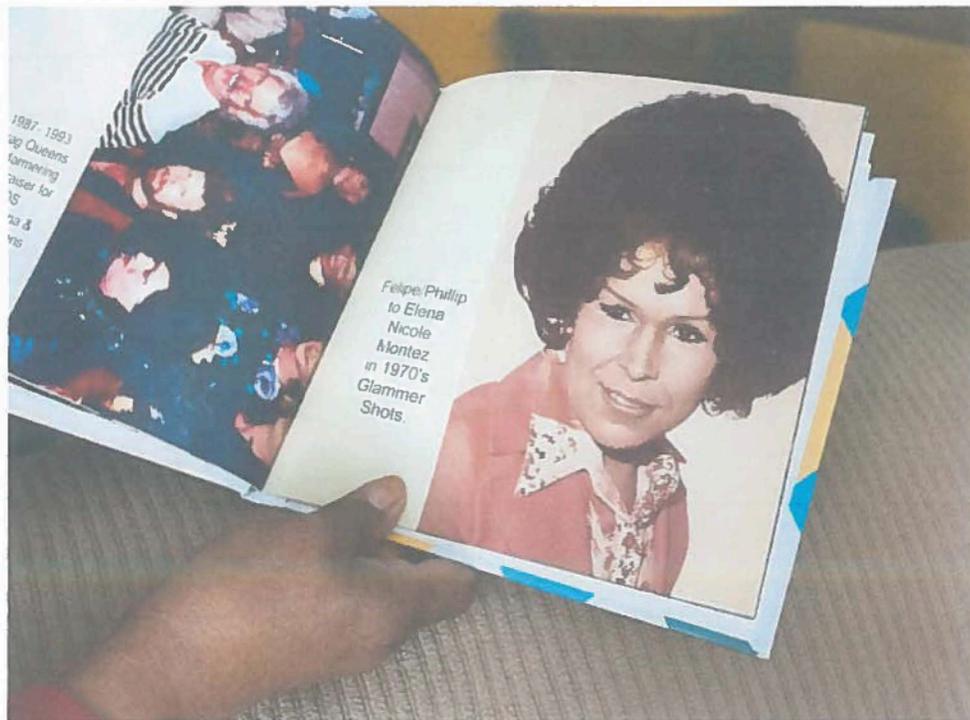


Photo by Jordan Reznick.

*Interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**ZACKARY DRUCKER:** Tell me about when you first came to San Francisco.

**FELICIA ELIZONDO:** Let me tell you a little bit about my past life, okay? I was born Felipe Alvarado Alessandro in San Angelo, Texas. I'm Mexican American. My birth certificate says that I'm white. In those days, anything that was not “colored” was white, and Black people were colored. Those days, everybody had their own community. Whites had their own community, Blacks had their community, and Latinos had their own community.