

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

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. The only time we saw Blacks and whites was downtown. I remember seeing a faucet that says, "Black or White Faucet." I wondered why the Black people always [sat] in the back of the bus. I was telling my mother that, but she never paid attention because she wasn't that concerned. You know what I mean?

I was raised a little sissy boy. Everybody called me *joto*, queer, sissy, and all that stuff. I was wondering, *how come they're calling? I don't even know the meaning of all these words, and they're calling me all these names just because I was feminine.* We were raised in a place where queers, sissies, and *jotos* were in the closet—they were pushed back somewhere. But I was very flamboyant. I had these little hot pants on before hot pants was even in style. When I was around maybe seven or eight, I was wearing hot pants, girl.

In those times, boys discovered each other with each other. We weren't told about sex at all from our parents. We had to use trial and error. Most of the little boys, when I grew up, we used to play with each other's. I loved that, because I was one of those girls, but we didn't know that—didn't know anything. I fell in love with my best friend. I used to have a love affair on him for years and years. *Even until now, I still have a love affair for him, but he's gone.*

Then a lot of things happened through the years. One of my friend's older brothers, we were playing with each other. He was just about four or five years older than me, letting me do things to him that I thought were normal because we used to always play with each other, so it wasn't a big deal.

Anyway, growing up, I knew sissies, but we didn't know that we were sissies. We were just feminine boys. You know what I mean? We didn't know the meaning of queer, sissy, none of that stuff because we were just growing up being little boys but very feminine.

**This was in the 1950s, right? You were born in 1946.**

Right, 1950s. My father died. My mother moved us to San Ysidro, California. We moved in with my sister. We lived in a mobile home, and this older man—I was around 12, I think—got me in his trailer. That was the first time that I ever experienced a climax. I thought I was going to die.

[Later], we moved to Stockton, California where I met my first gay man.

**What was that like?**

Big, tall, handsome, very feminine boy that everybody made fun of him and stuff like that. We were going to have an affair, but we were two girls, so we just said, "Oh no. It's not going to work out for us." That was my first gay [friend]. Then I thought, "Oh my God. I'm not the

only one." I mean, we were feminine boys, but we didn't know what "gay" or "queer"—none of that—meant until I was at least 12 or 13, maybe 14.

Then, we moved to San Jose, California. I was around 14 or 15. You know how, in the early sixties, the sissy boys used to wear their coats off their shoulders to make them look feminine? I was walking down Santa Clara Street in San Jose, and this guy picked me up. Beautiful Irish redhead. Red hair, red hair everywhere. I could be in love with that boy. It was just a quickie, you know? Then he told me, "Well, there's a whole bunch of you guys over there on Saint James Park." I thought, "Oh really?"

There was a park right downtown in San Jose called St. James Park. I met my best friends there, the gay sissies of San Jose. Call it the "Gay Queens of San Jose." We started hanging out at Saint James Park. There was a restaurant on Santa Clara Street called Around the Clock. We couldn't go to the bar because we were too young, so we hung around Around the Clock cafeteria or restaurant. We used to go to the park and get our tricks and make money and then go eat or something.

When I was a hustler, I was a boy. When I was in a relationship, I was a girl. I had to have a man with me. I may go down on him and stuff like that, but as far as me playing a man's part on my love of my life or my boyfriend? Never. I would drop him right there and then, because I didn't want another girl with me. I wanted a man.

I met this guy named Wally. He was an older man. He was married, but he used to like to play with young boys, so he picked me up, and became my sugar daddy. I played the man part because he was older and he liked young boys. I go, "Hey, it's money. Money that I don't have, and I'm too young to work." He would take me to Santa Cruz. He would take me all over the state. One day, he took me to San Francisco. I was around 15 or 16.

**It was like 1961 or 1962?**

Yeah. Around that. He took me to the Tenderloin in San Francisco. Then I noticed that there was a lot of people like me. Not only in San Jose, but in San Francisco. My God, it was the Mecca of gayness. Me and my best friend, Bernie, used to play hooky from school and come into the Tenderloin on a Greyhound from San Jose to San Francisco. Greyhound [station] on 7th Street. We would walk to about two or three block away from Compton's Cafeteria. We'd just stand there, and we'd just admire, because we were scared of what could happen to us.

Then, one day, we were standing out there, and this guy came up to us, and says, "You scared to go in there?" I said, "Yeah, we're just from San Jose, and we're just brand new at this stuff, and we don't know what to expect." His name was Siro. He took us to his hotel room—because most of the queens and the sissies and the hustlers were living in hotels. That was the only place that we could find a place, because if you [were a] sissy or a *joto* or whatever, they wouldn't rent to you outside the Tenderloin. The Tenderloin was the gay Mecca of San Francisco in the sixties.

He went to his room, and he stood in there. That was when being a queer, dressing up like a women, or any position of being feminine was against the law, period. They would take to jail. The only people that were allowed to dress like women were female impersonators [at]

Pinocchio's or other gay bars that had drag. You walked in as a man, and you walked out as a man.

What happened is that Siro was putting on his little eyebrows and hair, but still was against the law. All of this was against the law—wear skin-tight pants. White, skintight pants, tennis shoes, angora sweater, and a white jacket. That's as feminine as we could go in the sixties before they would take us to jail. [People like Siro] were called "hair fairies."

There was the Embarcadero right next to the YMCA where all the servicemen used to come and party. When you walked up Market Street, you would walk into the Tenderloin, and it was like la la land. I mean, we could be who we were and not worry. There was like Woolworths on Market and where the trolley car goes around. That was where the girls used to wear the makeup, the hair, whatever they needed to get. Then we would come back to the Tenderloin. I just was there at a very young age, and [eventually] my girlfriends from San Jose came to San Francisco and started being hair fairies.

The only way that they could make money is by selling drugs or selling themselves, because they wouldn't hire us because we were too feminine. You couldn't work in San Francisco because a lot of people would be jealous and out you. You know what I mean?

Compton's Cafeteria was the center of the universe for us. It was a place where we could make sure that we had lived through the night. It was like a society club—it was a cheap food, cheap coffee, cheap breakfast. Windows on both sides on one corner of Taylor Street and the other corner of Turk Street was nothing but windows. You could see who was coming in, who was coming out, and who was there and who wasn't. A lot of times, Compton's was a revolving door.

People came in, did what they did; if they liked it, they stayed, if not, they went about their business to another state or back home or wherever, because a lot of the kids that came into the Tenderloin at the time was kids who were thrown out. And a lot of the kids came from broken homes. The kids came to start a new identity and a new life and forget about the past. A lot of times we didn't know where they came from or their real names, because as soon as they came into the Tenderloin, they would change their names. Like Gypsy or Greta, or Vicky, or Alexis.

So then I went back to San Jose, and I had just broken up with my lover and I told my mother I was gonna run away and she would never see me again. And then I just said, "Well, you know something? I'm going to join the military."

I joined the US Navy in 1964. I lowered my voice, I played the role of an Academy Award winner, okay? I decided if the military doesn't make me a man, nothing will. And it didn't. I went into the boot camp in San Diego, then I was stationed at Coronado, and then they were asking for volunteers to go to Vietnam. Then I said, "Oh, there's more money." And I was [a] scared little sissy, but I volunteered to go to Vietnam. Not only because of that; because this is the only way that I could prove to my family that I was a man.

And another thought behind my head: If I would get killed, I would become a hero to my family. And it was important to make my mother proud, because I hadn't made her proud

before, because she knew what I was. She never said anything; she never turned against me or anything. But I still wanted to make my mother proud.

So, one day, I was in Da Nang, Vietnam, and I was working unloading cargo from freezer ships where they had all the freezers in the bottom of the boat, and you would come up. And then one day I thought, "Oh my God. I've had enough. I am not going to do this. I've put myself through hell, and I will not put myself through hell anymore." I went to my priest and told him that I was gay. I went to my commander and told him I was gay. They put me in the "brick," whatever they call it. And they interrogated me, then they sent me back home. I came to Treasure Island here in San Francisco. There was a gay barrack.

I was discharged from the military January of 1967. I tried to do the straight thing like work for Goodwill, work for a hospital as a receptionist and all that stuff, but it didn't work. So what happened is, five queens from San Jose, we were living together in this house and the cops busted us. And it's either you go to jail or get out of town. Well, there's five queens on the Greyhound bus depot in 1967 headed to the Tenderloin.

We moved back into the El Rosa Hotel. That's how we became female impersonator prostitutes. Cause nobody would hire us because we wanted to be who we were meant to be and be free, and the Tenderloin was the only place that we could do that. We had a whole bunch of people who were doing it with us.

Compton's was a place where you could go and you could see whether some girls had stayed, some girls had left, some people had been killed, raped, put in jail.

It was against the law to wear long hair. It was against the law to dress like a woman. If the police [saw] you on the sidewalk walking, they would take you to jail for obstructing the sidewalk.

We were in danger all the time, because we didn't know if the pigs were going to kill us, find out about.

So, I moved in with Larry, he was one of my girlfriend's boyfriend. He was a martial artist, and we moved to Chicago. He didn't want me to stay there, all that time at home by myself. So later on that year, we went to the movies to see that Christine Jorgensen movie. And I thought that, *Oh my god, that's who I am! How the hell am I gonna get there?* Being in my twenties and whatnot, I had no money, no future, no nothing.

So I came back home to the Tenderloin, got another boyfriend, and his name was Joe. He was a longshoreman. He took me to North Beach here, to a nice, high society apartment. But one day he got a flashback from Vietnam and started beating me with an iron over my head. So I went to the hospital and they told me, "Are you guys queer?" I says, "No!"

"If you are you're gonna go to jail," [they said].

I says, "Oh no, we are not queer! We are not queer!"

So, when I went back to the Tenderloin, [but] it wasn't the same anymore. So, I started working in the early 70s; they were hiring minority people for the telephone company. I got hired as [a] male long distance operator. But they wanted me to lower my voice because it was so feminine. So I went through all that stuff, and then I heard about a Gender Dysphoria Clinic in San Mateo, California. And there was a doctor that was doing surgery there. So I went to there and they gave me a letter. I saw a psychiatrist, and I gave it to my supervisor. And they read it, they accepted it, they told all my coworkers what I was gonna be doing. And I transitioned in 1973. From male to female, at work with the Pacific Telephone at the time.

When I came to the first day at work, I still had my male ID, so I showed it to the security guard and he told me, "Hey you know something? You look better than some of these real girls." And that made my day!

The telephone company and their employees and their management were the best thing that ever happened to me, because they made sure that when I went to the restroom, there was a girl standing outside to protect me from anybody complaining that I was a man and stuff like that.

I applied for [the company insurance to cover] my surgery, and about four months later they approved me and three other kids that worked at the telephone company to do the surgery.

The company gave me all of the time that I needed to recuperate. They paid my wages. Years later, after I'd been married, my boyfriend David, I married him. I stayed in San Jose working for the telephone company from 1972 or 73 when I first got hired, 'til 1992 or '93.

**Wow! So that was a really stable job for you.**

Yeah. Because I was a girl now. And I was happy. And nobody could tell me anything, you know what I mean? So in 1987, I became HIV positive. And I joined the ARIS Project and volunteered. I wanted to make sure that the trans community was involved because we needed a community.

So I started volunteering, and I made the first AIDS memorial quilt for Michael Burnay, a mother that had just lost her son. And we all gathered together, and they organized it, and I sewed every little piece by hand; that was my first one. I've made eighty something quilts by now.

I moved to San Francisco in 1993, because the best possibility of surviving AIDS was the mecca of the medical center of everything. I worked for The Shanti Project for years. I worked for Project Open Hand for years. I worked for the LGBT community center for years.

My community who started the gay movement in San Jose and started the gay movement here in the Tenderloin will never be forgotten. I'll be damned if Stonewall, which was the primary struggle in our community, is the only uprising remembered. Compton's had been forgotten for 40 years until Susan Stryker came out with the movie. [After that,] I said, "Okay. I am going to take the torch and going to make sure [the world knows] the transgender community started the gay movement, no matter where."

But when you have no money, you can't do nothing.

What happened to the seniors that made this happen that were killed, raped, thrown in jail, murdered? What happened to them? What happened to those people that made it happen? If it wasn't for us, a lot of the kids today wouldn't be who they are today. We had the balls to go out there and be who we were meant to be, because that was who we were. We couldn't be nothing else—no matter how many times I tried to. I even tried to get married and stuff like that. It was not the place. You know what I mean?

What's really good about [the younger generation] is that we had no family when we were young. But you guys do. You guys have family. You've got your families backing up a lot of you guys, where we were thrown out like trash. It just makes me think that the kids of today don't understand what we went through to be who we are today, and it's just upsetting that I'm 72 years old but the kids today don't want to hear about us. They've got their own lives, their own destiny, their own goals. They don't have to worry about the seniors that made it happen.

**What would you like those young people to know out there?**

Don't forget the people who made it happen. Don't forget that all those people that died.

Another thing that I'm against is the "queer" word. The "queer" word, in our generation, was being murdered by that name. The "queer" word was just horrible for us because if we were queer we were killed, thrown out, or disposed like trash. Now that the new generation is restoring "queer," you have to be proud. You have to know the history of what "queer" was to us. To be proud of that word—it's not in my vocabulary at all.

All of my friends passed—died. All the people that, years before us, came and they were killed and murdered and thrown in jail because they were queers.

"Gay" was the word that we used in the diction for all of us. We weren't lesbian, gay, queer, whatever, transgender, whatever. We were gay. We were a community. We weren't silent. We were together. Now that they have it in little boxes, we can't get in here. We're not allowed to go into the little boxes. Do you know what I mean?

One more thing, too, I think that the "transgender" umbrella is a joke.

**Why?**

How can we ever unite when everybody's got their own little piece of the puzzle that, you know what I mean?

Transgender is before surgery. Transsexual is after surgery. That should be it. You can do whatever you want to with whatever sexual you are, but don't name it because that destroys the unity of our whole existence.

**What were some of the things that helped you survive those difficult times?**

I don't know how I survived at Tenderloin. I really don't. Because it was bad, but Compton's was the center of the universe for us.

That's why I tell the kids: I am your history. You can never change that no matter what you do to me. *I am holding the torch because I was lead organizer of Vicki Marlane, street name, on 100 block of Turk Street. I was the number one person putting Gene Compton's Cafeteria right on the 100 block of Taylor.*

This year, we had our 52nd anniversary of [the] Compton's Cafeteria [riot] and the person that runs that building actually walked into Compton's Cafeteria. I mean, it's not "Cafeteria" anymore—it's transitional housing for criminals. We walked into that door and I cried. I cried because the people that walked in through those doors, whatever became of them, or whatever their future, they came through here. They came through those revolving doors of Compton's, where it was the center of the universe because we had nowhere else to go. The end.

In 1964, I didn't want to be this way so I joined the military. I went through boot camp and all that stuff and got stationed in Coronado [San Diego] and they were asking for volunteers to go to Vietnam. And the only reason I joined the military is because I didn't want to be this way. But I wanted hopefully that the military would make me a man, and you know, it didn't do it — but I went to Vietnam to try and not be gay or sissy or anything like that. I even went to bed with two minute to make sure this is what I was. Then I came home and started living in San Jose, and I got a couple of straight jobs, but my heart was in the Conga Line. So, therefore I came to start my new career as a female impersonator prostitute. After that in the early 70s when I was transitioning I went in front of the military board, in front of a whole bunch of colonels, and told them that I tried to be the man that I thought I could be, that I thought the military would make me a man but it didn't, that I was a trans woman. And in 1967, I got an undesirable discharge from Treasure Island, and a couple of years after that, I requested for my discharge to be reversed in front of a whole bunch of military colonels and stuff like that, and months later they reversed my discharge from dishonorable to honorable.

Then I got my military medical and doctors for free, so anything when I get sick, I just go to the VA hospital and everything is free for me.

