

# JOSÉ SARRIA

b. December 12, 1923

d. August 19, 2013

## ACTIVIST

**Sarria cofounded the Imperial Court System, an international organization that raises money for people living with HIV/AIDS and other causes.**

*“Why be ashamed of who you are?”*

José Sarria was a drag performer, singer and activist. He was the first openly gay man in the world to run for public office.

Sarria, who was of Latin-American descent, was born in San Francisco. He was raised by his mother and grandmother, who allowed him to dress in women's clothes.

During World War II, Sarria enlisted in the army. His fellow soldiers discriminated against him because he was gay. Sarria became friends with some by giving them tours of San Francisco.

Sarria began performing at “The Black Cat,” a San Francisco gay club. His shows, which included warning guests of police extortion and raids on gay bars, were a hit. Although the messages were often serious, Sarria presented them humorously and with a gay twist. He became famous for his closing song, “God Save Us Nelly Queens.”

In 1961, Sarria became the first openly gay candidate for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. He lost, but received 5,600 votes, demonstrating that a gay voting bloc could wield political power. The possibility of empowerment laid the groundwork for the election of Harvey Milk.

In the 1960s, San Francisco gay bars were being shut down. The Tavern Guild of San Francisco organized a drag ball to protest. Sarria was crowned Queen of the Ball.

Sarria cofounded the Imperial Court System, an international organization that raises money for people living with HIV/AIDS and other causes. In 2006, a street in San Francisco was named in his honor.



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