

FELICIA ELIZONDO

b. July 23, 1946

TRANSGENDER ACTIVIST

“I am your history. You can never change that no matter what you do to me.”

Her activism has been crucial in raising public awareness of transgender history.

Felicia Elizondo is a self-described “Mexican spitfire, screaming queen, pioneer, legend, icon, diva, 29-year survivor of AIDS and Vietnam veteran.” Her activism has been crucial in raising public awareness of transgender rights and history.

Elizondo was born in San Angelo, Texas. Assigned male at birth, she knew she was “feminine” from the age of 5. Due to the lack of awareness of transgender people, Elizondo grew up believing she was gay. She was sexually assaulted by an older man and suffered bullying and name calling from her peers.

At age 14, Elizondo moved with her family to San Jose, California. Around the age of 16, she found refuge at Gene Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood, where she became a regular. It was one of the few places in the city where drag queens and transgender women could congregate publicly. In 1966, three years before Stonewall, it became the site of one of the first LGBT riots in U.S. history. The Compton’s Cafeteria riot was led by a group of transgender women against police harassment.

Elizondo joined the Navy at age 18 and volunteered to serve in Vietnam. She decided, “If the military couldn’t make me a man, nothing would.” While serving, she realized she would always be attracted to men and told her commanding officer that she was gay. Consequently, she was interrogated by the FBI and the CIA, and the Navy dismissed her with an undesirable discharge. Later, she successfully petitioned to have her discharge reclassified as honorable.

After seeing “The Christine Jorgensen Story,” a film about the first nationally known transgender American woman, Elizondo came to understand her own identity. She completed gender confirmation surgery in 1973.

In 1987, during the AIDS epidemic, Elizondo tested positive for HIV. She returned to San Francisco and began working with community organizations seeking to improve quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS. She became a trans drag queen and organized drag shows to raise funds for numerous HIV/AIDS nonprofits.

Elizondo has worked extensively to bring public attention to transgender history. In 2006, due largely to her efforts, the city of San Francisco renamed the 100 block of Taylor Street as Gene Compton’s Cafeteria Way. In 2014 Elizondo successfully worked with San Francisco city supervisors to rename the 100 block of Turk Street in honor of her late friend Vicki Marlane, a transgender icon.

Elizondo appeared in the documentary “Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria” (2005). In 2015 she served as the lifetime achievement grand marshal of the San Francisco Pride Parade.



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