

Trans community gets a public face

Vicki Marlane's friend led campaign to rename key block of Turk Street

By TOSHIO MERONEK

“WE WERE FREE in the Tenderloin,” says drag performer, community activist and Vietnam vet Felicia Elizondo, who lived and worked in the neighborhood in the 1960s.

Elizondo, who later performed under the name Felicia Flames at Aunt Charlie's Lounge on Turk Street, says the TL was a place where transgender people could live relatively undisturbed by police and the rest of society.

She's mostly retired from the stage now, but busily campaigned for recognition of the trans community's contribution to local culture by getting the 100 block of Turk Street renamed in honor of famed local drag performer, and Elizondo's late best friend, Vicki Marlane. It was Marlane, nicknamed “the girl with the liquid spine” thanks to her trademark shimmy, who inspired Elizondo to take up performing.

And now Marlane is being honored by the renaming of that block of Turk, punningly, as Vicki Mar Lane, thanks to a Board of Supervisors resolution by D6's Jane Kim.

Beloved as a boundary-pusher by many in the local trans community, for decades Marlane performed every Friday and Saturday multiple times per night well into her 70s. She claimed to be the oldest continuously performing drag queen in the world. It wasn't until the 2000s that she started garnering wider acclaim: an SF Pride grand marshal crown in 2003; a profile in the New York Times and a feature-length documentary in 2009; a GLBT History Museum exhibition earlier this year.

OPENED THE DOORS

Marlane and others “opened the doors for us,” Elizondo says. If trans women like Marlane a generation ago “could wear dresses, why couldn't we dress like women, too? It was against the law, but we had to take a chance.” Getting an aboveground job as a transgender person was almost impossible — a reality that continues today for many — so performing in drag and turning tricks were among the limited ways they could make money.

The two entertainers knew of each other in the 1960s, but became friends in the '90s. Marlane encouraged Elizondo to join Aunt Charlie's long-running weekly drag revue, the Hot Boxxx Girls.

“I was so nervous the first time I performed, I walked out on the stage and fell on my face,” Elizondo remembers. But she stayed on there, performing covers (Tina Turner and Mexican singer Dulce María were favorites) until Marlane died in 2011 at the age of 76.

Elizondo inherited the drag legend's 75 dazzling stage gowns, many by Los Angeles designer Sue Wong. Marlane can be seen wearing a number of the dresses in a film about her life, “Forever's Gonna Start Tonight,” made a year before she died.

Elizondo gave some gowns to the local trans Latina organization ELLA for an upcoming benefit pageant. Others she donated to the GLBT Historical Society, which recently wrapped an exhibition on Marlane that Elizondo helped to curate.

“Vicki Marlane's life is emblematic of so many transgender and queer people, who discover their fullest selves in San Francisco and, in the process, become iconic inspirations for the rest of us,” says Don Romesburg, curator of the society's museum in the Castro.

A group of fellow Marlane fans and friends hatched the plan for the Turk Street renaming soon after her death,



COURTESY FELICIA ELIZONDO

Vicki Marlane graces a poster from her stage days at Aunt Charlie's Lounge, an LGBT landmark on the stretch of Turk Street to become Vicki Mar Lane.

commemorating her on the block where she entertained over the years. They gathered hundreds of signatures and raised \$2,500 for new street signage, but for several years they couldn't find anyone at City Hall to get behind the cause.

Enter Supervisor Jane Kim. “The camaraderie and community that was built by (the) shared struggle (of the trans community) is incredibly inspiring, and Vicki in particular was a mentor to other performers and transgender youth coming up in that scene,” says Kim. “It's time for a transgender icon and activist to have a place of recognition on our city streets, and this block is the perfect place to memorialize her legacy.”

A LEGENDARY PERFORMER

Kim met with campaigners last year and in February introduced a Board of Supervisors resolution to get things moving with the street sign change.

“It's a teachable moment,” says Kim, “an opportunity to educate and share information about the history of the transgender community in the Tenderloin so that it becomes a larger community history.”

Supervisor David Campos agrees. “She was a legendary performer and was certainly an institution within the LGBT community,” he says. Marlane “worked very hard to empower the transgender community ... and I think that it makes sense to honor [her].”

Kim's resolution passed unanimously at the April 22 full board meeting. Kim and Elizondo hope to announce the renaming by this year's Trans March in June.

“We can no longer have the ‘T’ in ‘LGBT’ be silent,” Elizondo says, and the renaming is one way to challenge the cultural erasure — as a result of Kim's resolution, a shout-out to the public as well as the trans community.

Elizondo is an HIV-positive AIDS activist who, throughout the 1980s and '90s, cared for gay men with AIDS in hospice, but has mixed feelings because the gay community, she says, often has been unsupportive of trans people. Marlane, elected 2003 SF Pride Parade grand marshal, had for years before avoided the event because at her first one, in 1970, transphobes in the crowd had thrown trash at her as she was driven down the parade route.

“There's still no unity in our community,” Elizondo says with a sigh. She said SF Pride recently asked her to join its board, but she declined: “Since the lesbians and gays don't accept us, why in

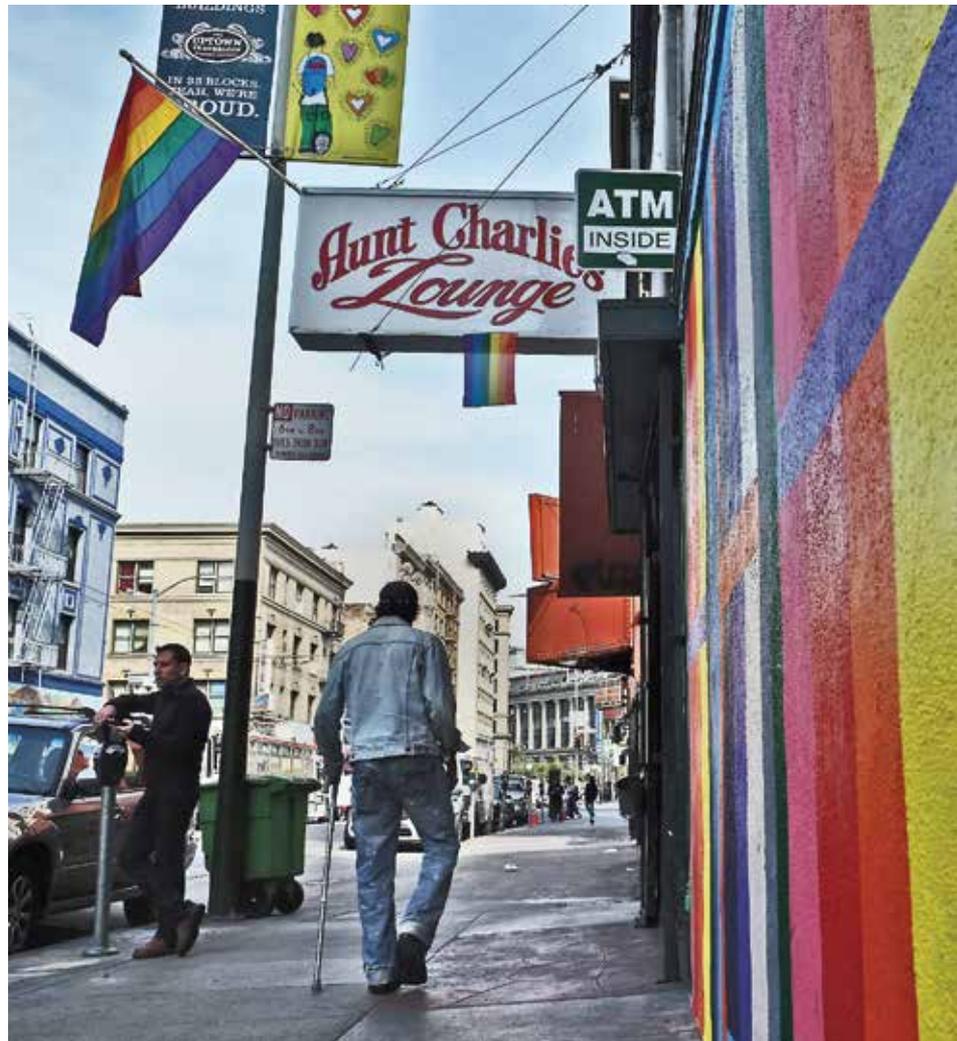


PHOTO PAUL DUNN

the hell would I go into a board if there's gays and lesbians that, no matter what I say, will always bring me down?”

Now in her 60s, “I'm tired of fighting for my community,” Elizondo says. “I think it's time for them to stand up for themselves.” Many of her friends have moved out of San Francisco, and sometimes she thinks of leaving, too. “I'm tired of living in a matchbook apartment.”

Though Elizondo says she's ready to pass the torch, it's easy to get the sense that, like Marlane, she'll keep working it till the end. She recently dusted off her gowns to perform for LGBT seniors, was honored with a civil rights award by the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club, and is helping with plans for a Marlane mural by local artist Laura Campos, to go along with the street name change.

Elizondo frequently has done speaking gigs and media interviews since appearing in “Screaming Queens,” the Emmy-winning 2005 documentary about the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria riot, when trans people fought back against police abuse in the Tenderloin.

Any regrets in life? she's asked. “Waiting until I was old before I got famous.” ■

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PHOTO PAUL DUNN

Felicia Elizondo, one of the noted Hot Boxxx Girls who is still performing, relaxes at home with companions Gypsy and Diamond and remembers her friendship with Vicki Marlane.

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