

At the heart of 'Mama' Gloria Allen



by [Gretchen Rachel Hammond](#)

February 25, 2015



Local trans icon Gloria Allen. Photo by Gretchen Rachel Hammond

It was Gloria Allen's mother Alma, grandmother Mildred Johnson, great-aunt Fannie Hearn and actress Sophia Loren whom she has said were the most inspirational in the past and present development, sensibilities and unshakable determination of a woman so beloved by all the souls she has touched that they call her "mama" without a moment's hesitation or doubt of kindred familiarity.

When Allen walked into the Center on Halsted's lobby one early February afternoon, her posture and air seemed regal. Her face was painted with the compassionate and infectious glow embodied through decades of

personal beliefs and actions.

The transgender community and a fraction of its members may have taken center stage under a glaring media spotlight, but Allen boasts no magazine covers or book deals, no blistering editorials lauded over by legions of social-media followers, invitations to keynote symposiums or to be the expert on all that is transgender on a talk show—nor does she yearn to toast herself with them.

Yet many of the people in the Center’s lobby who had been chatting, reading or tapping away at their cell phones immediately stopped what they were doing and waved an enthusiastic greeting at Allen’s arrival. Some rose in happy anticipation of her hug—an empowering comfort that no matter what their troubles, all would be well if she had anything to say about it.

Allen was no stranger to anyone at the Center—staff or clients. When she made an impromptu request for a quiet room to talk with Windy City Times about her life, one was found immediately.

As she has been to the transgender individuals who have taken part in her Center on Halsted charm school—each in need of the firm guidance, steady hand and continual encouragement manifested in the best of the profession—when Allen was asked how she likes to be titled, her correction was that of a patient but firm teacher.

“You can’t fit me into a pigeonhole,” she said. “I’m just a person who’s out there in love with life. I really do everything that I can when I can and if I’m needed to be there, I’m there.”

Allen will turn 70 this year, and she relishes the milestone certain in the knowledge that there are more to come while maintaining a thoughtful and reverential gratitude at the prospect. “So many trans women of color don’t make it to my age,” she said. “There’s a few out there and you can count them on your fingers. I am blessed and proud to be here to talk because older trans women should be heard. We walked that long mile to get here.”

That long mile began for Allen at her grandparent’s Bowling Green, Kentucky, farm in 1945—just as the world was celebrating victory over tyranny and oppression. She spent her early childhood alongside her parents and the first of what were to become 13 younger siblings. “I’ve always said I have that mother wit,” she admitted. “I am the way I am today because I took on the role to help my mother out.”

She described her early childhood in Kentucky as “amazing.”

“My daddy was a mill worker and my grandfather was a coal miner, so they made good money,” Allen recalled. “My mother worked as a registered nurse and she was a beauty queen so my grandmother kept the house. She was a very good homemaker, too, and an amazing woman. The household was fun and there was a lot of love there. We were so free. The outdoors was beautiful. There was a pond we could swim in and I learned to hunt, shoot and fish.”

Between enjoying the spoils of farm life, Allen’s young eyes watched everything her grandmother did with esteemed wonder. “She was the salt of the earth. Oh, I just loved her,” Allen said with a smile. “She taught us love, how to sit down and eat. She was very beautiful, classy and loveable and she was the basis for all of us to be that way.”

Allen added that her grandmother, mother and great-aunt knew who she was before she did. “They protected me and were always there to watch over me,” she said. “I would be around these amazing women learning how to cook, clean, do my homework. To them, I was the gifted child. We’d sit down for a family dinner at the table and we were asked ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’ So I said I wanted to be a nurse and my nine brothers would sit and chuckle, ‘Boys don’t become nurses.’ But my parents would tell them that it takes all kinds of people to make up the world and that everybody’s different.”

The fashions and deportment of the 1950s woman fascinated a young Allen who was, at the time, presenting with male clothing. “Back then, there were no skinny girls,” she said. “All of them were voluptuous and beautiful and they dressed like ladies—beautiful dresses with gloves, slips and silk stockings. My family would go to the movies for 25 cents and all the women were so glamorous. I would see the Arabian Nights harem girls dancing with their veils and I would emulate them when I got home.”

Both Loren and Alma are glittered through Allen’s memory. “My mother could walk into a room and captivate it because she had a beautiful figure,” she said. “They called her the Black Marilyn Monroe.”

Allen was only 4 when her father took a job in Chicago for U.S. Steel. The family relocated to South Side neighborhood of 89th and Green Bay. It was in this city that her life took a dramatic turn for the worse.

“Elementary school was devastating,” she said. “The kids weren’t friendly so I just stayed to myself. I knew how to protect myself and my younger siblings but there were 7th and 8th graders who would chase me home and push me down. After a while I started pushing them down and fighting back.”

Her bedroom became a sanctuary from the city around her. “I would go into my room and I would cut out paper dolls,” she said. “I’d make clothing and put it on them. This would soothe me. Some in my family would say, ‘Boys don’t play with paper dolls,’ but my mother would say ‘Let my child be the way my child wants to be.’”

But her mother, grandmother and great-aunt could not always be there to defend and protect her. With both her parents working, an 8-year-old Allen sometimes spent her days in the care of a babysitter who lived in the same apartment building.

“She had a 17-year-old son and his name was Frank,” she remembered, her smile quickly fading from her face. “I’ll never forget that name. He was a typical teenager. You know, his hormones were raging and he would send my brother out to play but not me. I had to stay in with him. He was ... he became attracted to me. It was a lot of touching and feeling on me. I didn’t know what was going on. I was thinking it was a game. It was degrading. I didn’t like it but I couldn’t stop it from happening to me.”

The abuse went on for a year. All the way until her twenties, Allen told no one, fearing she would not be believed. “It was a secret that became embedded in me,” she said. “It haunted me throughout my life. I didn’t want a man to put his hands on me. I would have issues with my brothers and my father. If they gave me a hug, I would just freeze up.”

Allen was a 14-year-old freshman at Englewood High School who had yet to match her outward appearance with her inner self when she, one of her brothers and a cousin went to a movie matinee after church. “We were walking down Michigan Avenue heading home,” she said. “There were four boys from my high school coming down the street toward us—two of them I went to grammar school with, the other two I didn’t know.”

According to Allen, the men ordered her cousin and brother to leave. “I’m standing there wondering why they were sending them away and not letting me go. Then they forced me into a gangway and up under a porch. I could hear somebody on the porch. But the four guys had me under it and they...” Allen struggled to form her words. “They forced me, you know, and everything just went haywire. They held me down and covered my mouth and I remember hearing the person up on the porch. Then all of a sudden the guys ran but one [of them] stayed behind. My father, God rest his soul, made it there and caught the guy. There was a barbed-wire fence and my dad was getting ready to crush his neck on the fence and I told my father ‘Don’t’...”

Allen paused to regain her composure, but made no attempt to dry the tears falling down her face. It was as if she needed them. “I told him ‘Don’t do it’ because I didn’t want him going to jail because of me,” she said.

The men were eventually all caught by the police. But Allen’s suffering was far from over. “At the trial, these guys had their lawyers say that I initiated everything,” she said. “I’m sitting there and I felt so cheap. But the judge put them all away. Back at school, their girlfriends wanted to beat me up. My mother blamed herself and I had to convince her that it wasn’t her fault.”

Allen dropped out at 15. After a period of therapy, she enrolled at Hirsch High School. “I started doing much better and my parents were proud of me that I got back out there after something so traumatic,” she said. “But

I started having fun. I could really sing back then and I won a lot of people over after I performed in talent shows. I became more confident in myself. I only ran with the girls. I was in the top 20 in my class and, in my senior year, I was voted the friendliest, the one with the prettiest smile and the one most likely to succeed.”

Around her, the '60s were at their tumultuous zenith. “The march on Washington had a big impact on me,” Allen said. “I remember Martin Luther King coming to Cicero. But if I went over to Cicero, I would have either been lynched or murdered. The North Side wasn’t any better. Blacks coming up north were all carded and profiled [by the CPD]. We had to have at least three pieces of ID with the same name on it. Halsted had so many clubs and a lot of gay men but transgender girls just did not exist.”

Instead, Allen spent her weekend evenings performing at clubs on the South Side. “There was the Bonanza Club and the Burning Spear,” she said, her smile returning in fond recollection. “The girls would put on shows there. My mother gave me her old dresses. But they were good clothes, designer clothes.”

On one such evening, an 18-year-old Allen was preparing to leave by the back door of the Englewood family home. “My mother told me, ‘No! You’re going out the front door.’ So when I came on out, everybody on the block was on their porches looking at me as I came down the stairs and walked down the street. They were applauding me and saying ‘You are so beautiful. You should have done this a long time ago.’ They loved me and I didn’t know it.”

Allen’s self-confidence skyrocketed. At 27, she received her nursing certificate. But with her singing ability gaining her ever increasing local acclaim, she moved to New York’s Greenwich Village neighborhood in 1969 determined to conquer the Broadway’s stages. “I was loving it,” she said. “I was going to take New York by storm. I would go to casting calls but I didn’t make it.”

Meanwhile, she frequented local bars with a couple of friends. “The police were vicious,” Allen said. “They’d arrest you if you rolled your eyes at them. The violence against transgender women was horrific. They were being stabbed and found in garbage cans with their bodies chopped up. The police were killing us, too. They would raid the clubs and drag us out. It was like living in Salem during the witch hunts. If you were Black and transgender it was bad.”

Then one June night, the police raided the Stonewall Inn. “We just got tired of it,” Allen recalled. “The girls decided we’re going to fight and we fought because we weren’t going to take it anymore.”

Because she lived through and participated in such a pivotal moment in history, the bitter irony of transgender individuals forming the genesis of the LGBT movement and promptly being forgotten by it is not lost on Allen. “Trans people weren’t in existence at all,” she said. “A lot of people would come to the clubs just to see the trans girls perform and we would put on a good show. They put us into categories—sex workers or

entertainers. They didn't realize we were educated. The lesbians hated us and we couldn't understand why. It's changed now but when I was coming up, lesbians would fight us just because we were trans girls. The gay men didn't like us because we were feminine."

Struggling to make ends meet, Allen returned to Chicago in 1974 to take a job as the head nurse at a clinic. She found an apartment in Hyde Park and looked forward to weekends at the clubs. However, those nights were becoming increasingly dangerous. "A lot of trans girls were being murdered," she said. "You'd pick up the wrong guy in a club and he'd get you to your house, shoot you in the head, cut your throat or beat you to death. No one would ever investigate. It was just [the attitude of] 'This is what you get because you shouldn't be in women's clothing'."

Police harassment was constant. "One time my cousin and her boyfriend were driving," she remembered. "They saw me and stopped. I got in and a police car followed us all the way to our destination and they arrested us."

The charge was loitering.

When in the lock-up, Allen was paraded up and down in front of the other inmates. "It was nasty and degrading but they didn't care," she said. "They did that to deter you from wearing a dress. It just made me more determined. I was an activist then and I remain one today."

Within eight years, something else was terrorizing Allen's community. "When AIDS came out, everyone I knew were dropping like flies," she said. "We didn't know what was going on."

Allen began talking to the girls working on the streets. "I tried to tell people 'you are much better than that'," she recalled. "I would give them information on how to protect themselves because we used to run in small social circles. My mother told me when I was a teenager to protect myself. I didn't understand at the time, but she told me 'people mess round and they're not going to tell you about it'."

Allen gave speeches to fellow parishioners of the Greater Metropolitan Baptist Church which included a sizeable gay presence. "People in my church were happy that I could stand up and tell them what we could do as human beings to save people," she said. "My pastor and I had words. I told him 'you're not going to preach the Gospel and tell a person that they can't come in because they're transgender. I dare you to put me out'."

Allen remains a member of the church today.

“In church, in public I believe that people need love and support,” she said. “When my mother, grandmother and aunt set the table, they always put an extra plate out. I used to ask ‘who’s coming to dinner?’ They would tell me ‘somebody might knock on the door and they might be hungry’.”

They were words which thundered on Allen’s heart when she saw Chicago’s homeless LGBT youth gathering outside the Center on Halsted’s doors. “They were hungry, dirty, no education and no love in their lives,” she recalled. “And they would dress in stuff that I would be ashamed to put on—the butts and the breasts all hanging out. You can be sexy and classy, but never trashy.”

“I don’t understand people who hide from their past,” Loren once said. “Everything you live through helps to make you the person you are now.”

Allen knew that all the lessons she had learned from the people and events who were the shapers and teachers of her own life, could be applied in a charm school held at the Center and designed to give her students the same unwavering love, dignity and self-respect bequeathed by the great women who raised her and paramount in each day spent honoring their legacies.

“Some of these kids change, some of them stop coming,” Allen said. “You can tell them things but if they don’t take heed to it, they don’t. Life is complicated but it can be beautiful if you are prepared to work at it.”

If there is anything that discourages Allen, it is the current divisions in the transgender community. “They’ve got too many categories for people,” she said. “People are jealous. They’re fighting against each other and the public are watching this. Remember, they’re so quick to label all of us the same. We’ve got such a long way to go. Unite because it’s a revolution that’s happening here.”

For Allen, it is not a journey or a revolution that should end with the attainment of celebrity status. “I’m all for people getting up there,” she said. “But when you do, reach out, grab that person who’s down and pull them up with you. Don’t just talk about ‘you’. We know what you’re doing but let’s see what you’re going to do to get other people where you are.

“I’m not ready to stop. I’m ready to give people what was given to me. These kids are my babies and if my mother, aunt and grandmother were here now, they’d be helping out.”

