

THE INTERNATIONAL COURT SYSTEM

CANADA - UNITED STATES - MEXICO



Jose Julia Sarria

1922 - 2013

“Jose is The ‘Rosa Parks’ of the Gay Rights Movement”

Queen Mother of the Americas, Nicole the Great



“I want to be remembered not as the little Latin that sat on table tops and sang “God Save the Nelly Queens.” I think I’ve done a little bit more in this world. I want to be remembered for the good things that I’ve done. I have achieved something. I was the first. I was the first to organize a gay non-profit corporation in the state of California. I did it. It was The League for Civil Education. And that became SIR, the Society for Individual Rights.” Jose Julio Sarria

S.I.R. Jose

In 1960 Jose and another San Francisco resident, Guy Strait formed the first gay non-profit in the State of California- The League for Civil Education. LCE provided support for gay men caught in the all too frequent police stings, and sponsored ongoing presentations on homosexuality.

SIR was seen as fairly radical in that it did not support hiding the fact that you were homosexual but instead argued "responsible action by responsible people in responsible ways". In 1963 Jose split off as the League started to focus mostly on their newsletter and formed S.I.R, The Society for Individual Rights. At a time when same-sex dancing was banned in bars, SIR's most popular events were regular dances held at the group's space on 6th Street near Market in the heart of San Francisco's skid row. Opened in April 1966, the SIR Center, the nation's first gay and lesbian community center, had a resource library, a performance hall and a small office space.

SIR sponsored many social and political functions, including bowling leagues, bridge clubs, voter registration drives and published its own magazine, *Vector*. In association with the Tavern Guild, SIR printed and distributed "Pocket Lawyers". These pocket-sized guides offered advice on what to do if arrested or harassed by police. By 1968 SIR was the largest homophile organization in the US with over 1,000 active members, a thriving magazine, and the base for political power that would later shake the city. SIR lasted for 17 years, ceasing operations in 1980.

Along with other local groups, including the Daughters of Bilitis (the nation's first lesbian rights group) and the Tavern Guild (an organization of gay bar owners), SIR helped form the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, in conjunction with progressive Protestant clergy.

Staff Sergeant Jose

Too short to serve in the Military? That's what Jose was told when he showed up at the Army recruiting office shortly after Pearl Harbor was attacked. Just short of five feet tall in his stocking feet Jose was declared unfit for enlistment. He continued his determined efforts to enter the army and eventually seduced/ coerced/ convinced an officer at the San Francisco Army recruiting station to sign for his enlistment.

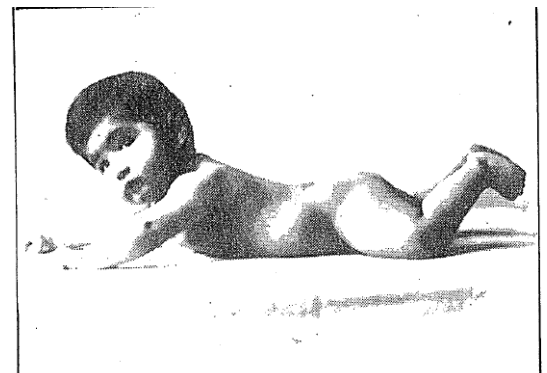
Jose completed Basic Training in Sacramento, California and was assigned to the signal corps (intelligence) school, based in part on his high aptitude for languages. That training ended as soon as his security clearance came back (long before don't ask, don't tell) with a quick transfer to the Cooks and Bakers School. Jose completed the school, graduated, and was eventually assigned to the Motor Pool. His driving skills were legendary for their near-misses, and yet one day he was the only driver available when Major Mataxis needed a driver. That drive resulted in the Major requesting Jose as his orderly and opened a world of opportunity to the young Jose. He eventually ended his career running an officers dining facility in occupied Germany prior to his Honorable Discharge from the Army in 1945. His final rank was Staff Sergeant.



The Early Years- Baby Jose

José Julio Sarria was born in San Francisco California on December 12, 1922 as the only child of Maria Dolores Maldonado of Columbia and Julio Sarria of San Francisco.

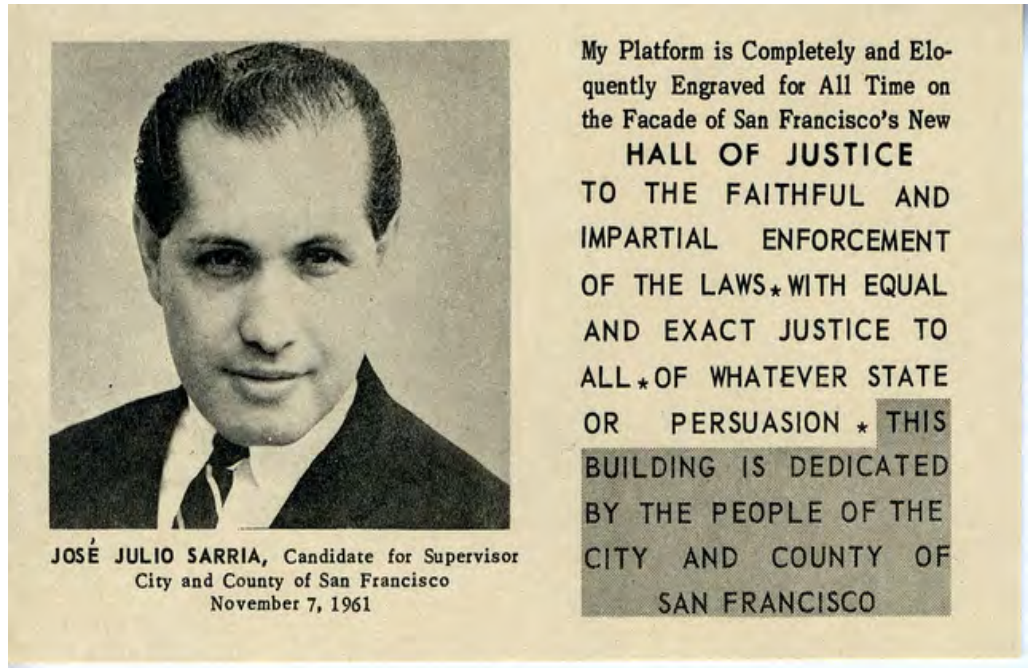
His childhood was a rough adventure with an absentee father and an overworked mother. He spent many years in the care of families who loved and nurtured his individuality while his mother served as a Nanny to several families. His elementary education started at Emerson Grammar School but attended several schools including the Rafael Military Academy. He graduated from Commerce High School in San Francisco.



Jose the Politician

In 1961 Jose declared himself a candidate for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Remember that at the time he had to find registered voters to sign the petition allowing him to run, and he was running as an openly gay man! The day before the deadline city

officials realized that they had fewer applicants than open positions which would have guaranteed Jose a win. The City bosses kicked into gear and had a near-record 34 candidates on the ballot a day later! Jose ran his campaign from the Black Cat Bar and spent many a speech talking to the gay community about accepting the power they had if they worked together. Even though he lost that November, placing ninth of almost 30 candidates and garnering about 6,000 votes, it is recognized as the beginning of the gay community showing its personal and political clout. As Jose says "from that day on nobody ran for anything in San Francisco without knocking on the door of the gay community". In 1977 the first openly gay man to win an election in California, Harvey Milk, was elected to that same position.

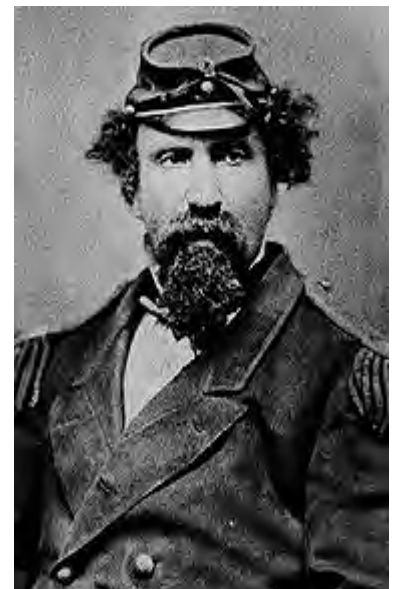


Emperor Norton, beloved husband of the Widow Norton, Absolute Empress 1 Jose

In 1964 Jose was crowned Queen of the Tavern Guild Beaux Arts at their annual event.

Jose proclaimed that he was "*already a queen*", and declared himself "Her Royal Majesty, Empress of San Francisco, José I, The Widow Norton". He selected the name "Widow Norton" as an homage to the much-celebrated Joshua Norton, who had declared himself Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico in 1859.

Norton was English born and arrived in San Francisco in 1849. After losing his business and fortune he became increasingly eccentric, printed his own money, issued proclamations and decrees, and called for a bridge and a tunnel across the bay. Years later the Bay Bridge and Transbay tube would become a reality and original currency of the Emperor can sell for hundreds of dollars. At his death 30,000 people packed the streets of San Francisco to pay homage to this colorful local resident.



Her Royal Majesty, Empress 1 de San Francisco, Jose, The Widow Norton



Jose became Empress 1 almost by accident. He left the Army in 1945 and returned to his beloved San Francisco intent on becoming a teacher. He enrolled in college and was eventually hired as a part-time cocktail waiter at the Black Cat bar when one of the waiters

called in sick. The Black Cat would later become the stage that hosted Jose's famed weekend operas, and that sick waiter was Jimmy Moore who soon became Jose's lover.

A short time later Jose was arrested in a police entrapment sting—he was using the restroom at a local hotel that the police claimed was notorious for homosexual activity. His attorney urged him to plead guilty so that his name would not be in the paper and he did, also paying a small fine. It was only later that he was told the plea also meant that he could never become a teacher. With that, his lifetime goal was crushed,

One weekend Jose was invited to be in a female impersonator contest at "Pearls" in Oakland—the winner got a 2 week stint at \$50 per week. He won and found both the money and the attention enjoyable. The win gave him some notoriety and as important earned him a few small singing jobs—another life passion. That singing came in handy a few months later when, working as a waiter at the Black Cat one night he recognized the tune being played by the pianist as part of the opera Carmen and started singing along. Jose was an instant hit, and as the popularity (and tips!) grew Jose and the pianist decided to plan the music and even do special shows that featured the music. "The Nightingale of Montgomery Street" was born. Soon his abbreviated operas (45 minutes to an hour instead of 3, one character instead of 20) were running 2 shows every weekend to packed houses—drawing more business (and tips) and ever increasing law enforcement attention. Jose ended every show reminding the patrons to be open and honest about who they are, quit living double lives and allowing persecution. He then followed with a rousing "sing-along" chorus of "God Save Us Nelly Queens" to the tune of Good Save the Queen.



Show Bars

Bill Kane Jerry Carpenter

The Jose is now on stage at The Orpheum Circus (Market at Hyde). He was never in better form and this ample stage suits his zany versions of operas and musical comedies. As he has been over the years and beginning at the Black Cat, he is ably accompanied by "Hazel" McGinnis at the piano. If you are in San Francisco at four thirty on a Sunday afternoon this is the show to see. No cover charge but the famous chamber pot collection helps defray some of the expenses of this San Francisco institution—you give what you wish. Bar prices are also the same and as everywhere else in the city due to the competition, still at 1956 levels.

At the Post Side Room in the capacious PS restaurant bar on Polk

vies. The show is better than when we last saw it at The Frolic—better coordination all around and a large cast that include some well-built go-go boys make this a popular tourist spot even though it has been open only a few months. Drinks are slightly higher here but there is no cover charge. ●●●



S.I.R. Community Center
is YOUR Center
(415) 781-1570
Office Hours: M-F, 12-8 P.M.

JOSE
The Nightingale of Montgomery Street
Empress
de San Francisco I
Star of Stage, Screen
and Other Places

Operas with JOSE
every Sunday 4:30 p.m.
"Dinners Nightly—Sunday Brunch"

By 1949 the police were attempting to shut any bar that attracted gay patrons, including the Black Cat. While the California Supreme Court eventually decided that a bar could not be closed “due to the client’s it attracted” the police and liquor authority harassment continued for another decade and a half- eventually closing almost half of the city’s gay bars. Drag performers and the trans community received special enforcement with the police storming bars and arresting everyone in sight. At one point the arrests were averaging 400 per week, despite police assurances that it had nothing to do with the \$50 bail and \$50 fine that all were required to pay for their “lewd behaviors” such as holding hands, kissing or even (gasp) wearing clothes that were “inappropriate for their gender”. As Jose saw more and more discrimination he got angrier and angrier- and started to lead the patrons out into the street to sing the closing song to the men who were in the city jail directly across



the street. Jose and other unofficial community leaders finally started to encourage the men to not plead guilty. As more men plead not guilty the result was in a huge backlog in the Court, the Court started requiring that police provide proof of the alleged behavior, and hundreds of dismissed cases!

One favored harassment technique, employed especially on Halloween after midnight, was to arrest drag queens under an old city ordinance that made it illegal for a man to dress in women's clothing with the "intent to deceive". Jose countered this tactic by distributing labels to his fellow drag queens (hand-made, in the shape of a black cat's head) that read "I am a boy". If confronted, the queen would simply display the tag to prove that there was no intent to deceive. Sarria's actions helped bring an end to Halloween police raids.



The SF Tavern Guild

The Tavern Guild was an association of gay bar owners and liquor wholesalers that formed in 1962 in San Francisco, California. The Guild formed in response to police harassment of gay bars and gay people that had resulted in the closing of several bars.

The Guild was **the first gay business association** in the United States, and lasted until 1995.

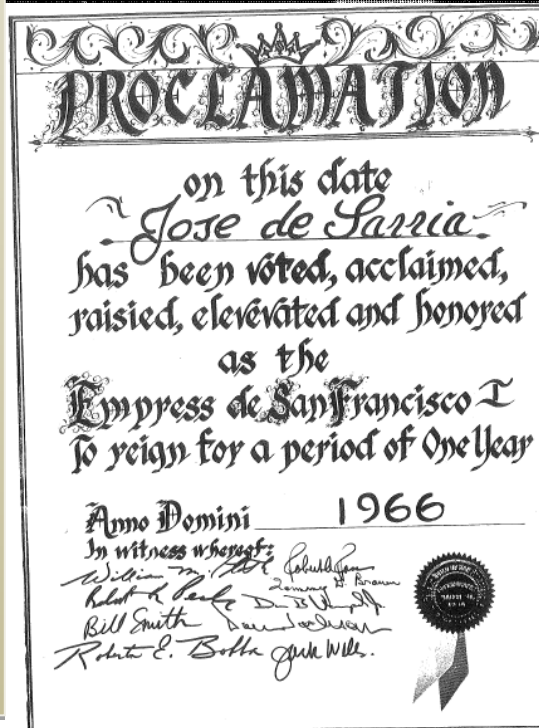


The Beaux Arts Ball

The first Coronation Ball in San Francisco was in 1971. The five Empresses prior to that time were elected at the Beaux Arts Ball sponsored by the San Francisco Tavern Guild.

That first Beaux Arts Ball was held in the San Francisco Hilton with the winner announced shortly before midnight. They would reign until the following October when a new Empress would be elected.

The order of the evening was simple- The Court assembled at 11PM, members of the Court were presented followed by out-of-town guests. The Aspirants to the throne would perform and the winner would be announced. They were then Invested with the title, a door prize drawing was held at 1AM, and at 2AM the Coronation was declared over. The first San Francisco Emperor was elected in 1972.

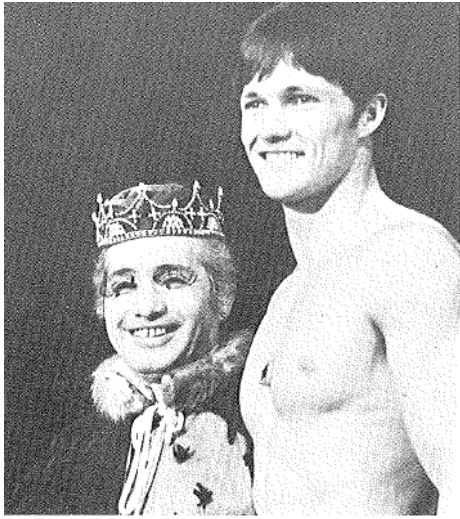


In 1963 the Black Cat finally succumbed to ongoing enforcement assaults by law enforcement and the powerful (and anti-gay) Alcohol Beverage Association. For the next two years Jose hosted the "Opera" at the Backstage on Bay Street and entertained brunches at Salinas Parlour until his election at the Halloween 1964 Beaux Arts Ball as Queen. A few months later Jose declared that he was already a queen and named himself Her Royal Majesty, Empress de San Francisco, Jose I The Widow Norton. This 1965 date is accepted as the start of the Court of San Francisco and the International Court System as an entity. Jose later added "Protector of the United States, Mexico and Columbia".

It is important to note that several groups were already in existence on the west coast that had Balls and Queens. They were social organizations, and as Jose saw the political and organizational potential he worked with those groups to craft a loose union of the groups. It was with the agreement of groups in Portland, Vancouver BC, Seattle and other cities that Jose was affirmed the Queen Mother and the Court of San Francisco given its place as the Mother Court

Known for her theatrical performances, fancy dinners and fun outings, by the time Jose completed her year as Empress he had established himself as the leader of a fun and dedicated group of volunteers. Other cities expressed interest in similar "Royal" organizations and Jose began blessing other groups who promised to remain charitable, have fun, and obey any and all of her Royal Proclamations. Those groups are now known as the International Court System- which Jose led as absolute Monarch and head of the International Court Council until February 2007 when he passed the mantle of office to Nicole the Great in Seattle Washington.





Special Honors and Recognitions – Jose Sarria

- Jose appeared in the 1995 film “**To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar**”, playing one of the judges for the "Drag Queen of the Year Contest" that opened the film.
- In 1995 Jose was honored with the San Francisco LGBT Pride Celebration Committee's Lifetime Achievement **Grand Marshal Award**.
- In 2006 he was

commemorated when the city of San Francisco renamed a section of 16th Street in the Castro as **José Sarria Court**. A plaque was placed in the sidewalk in front of the Harvey Milk Memorial Branch of the San Francisco Public Library which is located at 1 José Sarria Court.

- In 2009 the **California State Assembly** recognized Jose for his lifetime of achievements.



Jose lived his life by one simple adage. “You don’t have to conform, you are what you are and that’s it. I am what I am, and that’s it.”

Quotes on the passing of Jose Julio Sarria



Speaker **John A. Pérez** of the California Assembly noted that Jose had impact beyond California, his influence was global.

“Jose Sarria was a monumental figure in the LGBT Community whose contributions to our movement cannot be overstated. His trailblazing run for public office as an openly gay man laid the groundwork for LGBT Californians to run for public office proudly and



openly. But Jose's refusal to be silenced or shamed back into the closet--in an era where LGBT People were routinely discriminated against--was the greatest contribution to our movement. Jose's courageous personal example of living life openly, with pride and dignity, gave so many others the courage and confidence they needed to do the same. Jose's death is a great loss for our community, and it's fitting that it drew to a close just days after an historic victory in the Supreme Court that could never have happened without brave souls like Jose Sarria leading the way for all of us.”

Stuart Milk of the Harvey Milk Foundation says that the passing of Mr Sarria marks a significant moment in gay history. *“Jose Sarria, founder of the International Court System showed us how to turn a night into a grand occasion and a grand occasion into a means of providing*



support. That support led so many who did not “fit in” to actually proudly stand out, together, creating a local sense of community and an international network that would raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for local and major charities. He paved the way for my uncle Harvey Milk to run for public office by being the first openly gay man to put his

name on the 1961 ballot and was right there to support Harvey's first campaign in 1973. José's extraordinary life on this earth has come to an end. And the extraordinary good that he did lives on. For the International Court System he was a guardian and an inspiration. For anyone who felt like they were different he was a defender of our dreams. He taught us how to turn an idea into action, how to wear a tiara and how to laugh and ultimately he taught us how to lift up and nourish a marginalized community. We will forever keep Jose in our history books and in our hearts.”





Rea Carey, Executive Director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force says of Sarria *"Today we lost a pioneer, trailblazer and hero in the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality. I am deeply saddened on the passing of civil rights legend Jose Sarria.*



The Task Force honored Jose Sarria at the National Conference on LGBT Equality: Creating Change in 2005 for his over 50 years of leadership and activism on behalf of LGBT people and our families. He was an original that will be sorely missed."

Toni Atkins, Majority Leader, California State Assembly

"I was sad to learn that our

community has lost Jose Sarria. With a larger than life personality and heart to match- he was a national LGBT icon. To San Diego, Jose was the recipient of the Harvey Milk Humanitarian Award at San Diego's first Harvey Milk Breakfast. I was honored to know him and proud to call him my friend".



Russell Roybal, First Imperial Grandson to Empress I Jose, The Widow Norton and Deputy Executive Director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

"Words cannot express what a tremendous loss I feel today on the passing of Jose Sarria. He is an icon of the LGBT community, a hero, a mentor and a friend. Jose brought laughter, camp and fun to all of our lives and to the struggle not just for gay and lesbian liberation, but for all people. His legacy as a gay Latino leader, activist and drag queen will live on for all of us who share his commitment to the communities from which we come."



Nicole Murray Ramirez, City Commissioner, Executive Director of the International Court Council and Queen Mother of the Americas



"Jose Julio Sarria was indeed the Rosa Parks of the gay rights movement as an activist in the

1950s and 1960s. Jose was a close friend to me, a confidant and someone who shared a vision for a community that is empowered and powerful. We laughed, fought and cried together and I will miss Jose for the role he had in my life and in our community. He leaves behind an amazing legacy and serves as an inspiration for all of us who follow. This is a sad day for me personally, and for our movement. I miss him."

