



BY CHLOE ALLMAND NOVEMBER 11, 2022 10:01 AM

Third World Newsreel

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## Mama Gloria

★★★★★

**DIRECTOR** Luchina Fisher

**GENRE** Social Issues, LGBTQ, Biography, Documentary

**RATING** Not Rated

**DURATION** 76 minutes

An inspiring, engrossing look at the life of LGBTQ+ activist and trans icon Gloria Allen, *Mama Gloria* is an essential addition to any public or academic library's documentary collection. Through a tapestry of personal interviews, archival footage, and ephemera, director Luchina Fisher has created a gorgeous testament not just to Allen herself, but to the pride and possibility Allen continues to represent.

“The only time I entered a closet was to get me an outfit and a pair of pumps.” This line introduces us to Mama Gloria Allen and lays the groundwork for a major theme of her story: being assuredly and unapologetically herself. “Walk proud. A lot of trans girls, they’re scared to come out and be seen. I want to be seen. Take all the pictures you want to. Because I’mma let you know, I am somebody.”

The documentary captures Allen as a vivacious and visionary community leader. Allen tells of her journey from watching her grandmother as a seamstress for drag queens, to her early twenties in Chicago’s ballroom drag scene, to founding a charm school for at-risk transgender youth at the [Center on Halsted](#) in 2012.



Twice a week, Allen taught free classes focusing on a range of topics from contemporary trans issues to personal style and etiquette as a means of supporting trans youth in their personal growth. Her work at the school inspired playwright Philip Dawkins to pen *Charm*. Watch Dawkins and Allen [discuss the play and their friendship](#).

Allen certainly does not glaze over the traumas she has faced in her life but recounts them so that others can draw strength from her experiences. On the whole, *Mama Gloria* works against the trope of trans people as solely victims or tragic characters and instead lets Allen tell her own story as its triumphant subject, not the object of an outsider’s gaze.

The challenges Allen faced growing up without trans role models speak to the importance of sharing her story today. For example, Allen says that her only regret in receiving gender-affirming surgery is that she was not able to do so at a young age. Had she been able to, she would have spent more years feeling happier and more herself. Her testimony is particularly valuable in the face of current and escalating anti-trans healthcare bills.

In her seventies at the time of filming, Allen was one of the reported 1.5 million transgender adults in the United States. Of that 1.5 billion, 14 percent were seniors, compared to a total US senior population of 16.5 percent. Despite the ongoing violence against the LGBTQ+ community, especially deadly violence against trans women of color, Allen worked to show that trans people could live long, full lives and that the trans community does have elders to look to as examples.

“Young trans girls feel they can’t make it forty—they don’t have to feel that way,” Allen says. “Getting older, I cherish it. Because if you live, you’re going to get old.”

As Gloria Allen is dearly missed following her passing in June 2022, *Mama Gloria* is a welcome reminder of Allen’s remarkable life and contributions as a trans activist and community leader. Too often LGBTQ+ films are relegated to a separate category, stripped of their complexity and contributions to a multitude of genres; while this documentary would make excellent programming for Pride Month or Transgender Day of Visibility, it should not be set aside for those occasions alone. *Mama Gloria* demonstrates that trans people are more than their gender identity or expression, and their stories demand our attention.

## What public library shelves would this title be on?

Any public library should have *Mama Gloria* as part of its documentary, LGBTQ+, or biography collection.

## What kind of film series would this documentary fit in?

*Mama Gloria* would be an excellent choice for film series on LGBTQ+ history, transgender activism, community leaders, or inspiring seniors.

## What academic subjects would this film be suitable for?

This documentary is well-suited to women’s and gender studies, queer studies, African American studies, and US contemporary history.



Chloe Allmand



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## Mama Gloria 2020

✔ Highly Recommended

Distributed by [Third World Newsreel](#), 545 Eighth Avenue, Suite 550, New York, NY 10018; 212-947-9277

Produced by Yvonne Welbon and Zainab Ali

Directed by Luchina Fisher

Streaming, 76 mins (59-min version also available)

High School - General Adult

Biography; Transgenderism; Gay Liberation Movement

Date Entered: **06/02/2022**

Reviewed by [Shanna Hollich, Director, Guthrie Memorial Library - Hanover's Public Library](#)

Luchina Fisher's *Mama Gloria* is a beautiful and inspiring tribute to Gloria Allen, a transgender woman born and raised in the mid-20th century on Chicago's South Side. Gloria came of age during the legendary drag balls in the 1960s and 1970s and transitioned several years before Stonewall and the first Christopher Street Liberation Day March. For those who view gender questioning and flexibility as a "modern" phenomenon, *Mama Gloria* makes it clear that queer and trans people have lived, and thrived, far back into history.

The film closely follows Gloria's life story and consists primarily of interviews with her and her friends and family. We see Gloria in her home, in her community, in the homes of her loved ones, going about her daily routines. It's an intimate look at the life of an icon, and it's powerful to watch Mama Gloria, age 75 at the time of the film's production/release, reflect on the adversity she faced over the years and her courage in boldly living the life she always knew she was intended for. The filmmakers pull no punches here, and we see Gloria tearfully recount incidents of severe bullying, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. However, there is a tremendous amount of love evident in this story as well. Gloria's mother was a showgirl and model, and her grandmother was a seamstress and costume designer for drag queens and male strippers, which means Gloria was blessed with strong family support during a time when many queer and trans folks were forced to live double lives, to hide who they were, and to struggle with feelings of intense shame. We see Gloria with her cousins, who have seemingly accepted her and

supported her since childhood, and we follow her to a high school reunion, where friends and classmates show encouragement and pride at her ability to live her truth.

This film is **highly recommended**. It paints an especially evocative picture of the history of LGBTQ+ issues by following the story of someone who lived through it, and it portrays a realistic and inspiring image of the potential for joy amidst hardship and struggle. Trans women of color in particular are far more likely to be targeted for hate crimes and are murdered at alarmingly high rates, a statistic that Gloria is painfully aware of. With that in mind, it's especially important for trans and queer youth to see an example of a strong trans woman aging with dignity and grace, to prove that it's possible to survive. This film would be a natural fit across multiple disciplines, including African American or Black Studies, Gender or Trans or LGBTQ+ Studies, Women's Studies, and Sociology. It would also make an excellent addition to courses or programs looking to expand the general LGBTQ+ knowledge of their communities. The film is engaging to watch and accessible to a wide variety of audiences, which makes it appropriate for viewing in LGBTQ+ club meetings, Pride events, or educational programs for the public.

Awards:

Best Documentary, Teaneck International Film Festival 2020; Jury Winner, MKE Film Festival 2021; Best of Fest, CineOdyssey Film Festival 2020; 2022 GLAAD Media Award Nominee for Outstanding TV Journalism – Long-form; Black Lens Award, Milwaukee Film Festival 2021; Nominated for Gold Q-Hugo Award and Best Documentary Feature, Chicago International Film Festival; Finalist, Holidays 365 International Film Festival

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# Booklist

June 15, 2022

## **Mama Gloria.**

2022. 76min. Third World Newsreel, DVD

In extensive interviews, Gloria Allen, known as Mama Gloria, tells the story of her life as a transgender woman. Born as George Allen in the late 1940s in Chicago, Gloria knew at an early age that she was a girl in a boy's body. At school, when she was beat up and bullied, there was no LGBTQ community to show support. After high school, she became part of the gay scene, living as a man at work during the week and a "drag queen" on the weekends. For a time, Gloria coached young trans women at a charm school (memorialized in the play "Charm," which is based on her work). As Gloria recalls her transformation, she's filmed talking with old high-school friends and family members about their memories of her childhood. In other scenes, she revisits her neighborhood church and talks to teens from the LGBTQ community. Into her 70s, Gloria remains a vital, vibrant woman, a role model for the transgender community, and a spokeswoman for gender equality.

— *Candace Smith*