

## Document Set - Marsha P. Johnson

### *Document 1: Biography*

Marsha “Pay it No Mind” Johnson was a trans rights and LGBTQ+ activist born on August 24, 1945, in Elizabeth, New Jersey. After graduating high school in 1963, she moved to New York City with only \$15. To support herself, she became a waiter, drag queen, and sex worker, which resulted in regular imprisonment. Throughout her life, Johnson struggled with mental illness and psychiatric disabilities, however it did not deter her from activism.

After participating in the Stonewall Rebellions, Johnson and her friend, Sylvia Rivera, became activist leaders for issues related to the rights of sex workers and gay and trans people. In 1970, Johnson and Rivera founded their own organization, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which provided support, food and housing for homeless sex workers and queer and trans youth.



Johnson continued her activism until the end of her life. As an HIV positive person who lost loved ones to AIDS related illness crisis, Johnson became involved with AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly with AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP.

In 1992, Johnson’s body was found in the Hudson River. The New York City Police Department initially ruled her death a suicide before ultimately ruling it a drowning. Conflicting reports have led to a reopening of the case in 2012, and it still remains open as of June 2019.

Johnson is remembered for her pioneering work in trans rights activism, and there have been numerous tributes to her. In 2018, the *New York Times* included her in an initiative to provide obituaries for notable people who have been ignored by the publication. Documentaries and films have been made about her life including the film *Happy Birthday Marsha!* by filmmaker Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel. In 2019, it was announced that New York City would honor Marsha P. Johnson and her friend Sylvia Rivera with a monument, making it one of the first monuments in the world dedicated to trans women.



*Document 2: "Rapping with a Street Transvestite Revolutionary: An Interview with Marsha P. Johnson,"  
From Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries: Survival, Revolt, and Queer Antagonist Struggle*

**Can you say something about the purpose of STAR as a group?**

We want to see all gay people have a chance, equal rights, as straight people have in America. We don't want to see gay people picked up on the streets for things like loitering or having sex or anything like that. STAR originally was started by the president, Sylvia Lee Rivera, and Bubbles Rose Marie, and they asked me to come in as vice president. STAR is a very revolutionary group. We believe in picking up the gun, starting a revolution if necessary. Our main goal is to see gay people liberated and free and have equal rights that other people have in America. We'd like to see our gay brothers and sisters out of jail and on the streets again. There are a lot of gay transvestites who have been in jail for no reason at all, and the reason why they don't get out is they can't get a lawyer or any bail. Bambi and I made a lot of contacts when we were in jail, and Andorra, she went to court and she walked out. What do you mean she walked out? Well, when you're picked up for loitering and you don't have a police record, a lot of times they let you go, and they let your police record build up, and then they'll go back there and look at it—and then they give you a lot of time. That's how they work it down there at the courthouse. Like my bail was \$1,000, because I have a long record for prostitution, and they refused to make it lower than \$500. So when I went to court they told me they'd let me go if I pleaded guilty to prostitution. That's how they do it, they tell you ahead of time what you're going to get. Like before you even go before the judge, they try to make an agreement with you, so that they can get your case out of court, you know.

**What would have happened if you'd pleaded not guilty?**

I would still be there. They gave me 20 days to serve. And a lot of people do that a lot of times. That's how come their record is so bad, because they always plead guilty just so they can come out, cause they can't get no lawyer or no money or no kind of help from the streets.

**What are you doing now about these people who are still in there who need lawyers?**

We're planning a dance. We can help as soon as we get money. I have the names and addresses of people that are in jail, and we're going to write them a letter and let them know that we've got them a lawyer, and have these lawyers go down there and see if they can get their names put on the calendar early, get their cases put out of court, make a thorough investigation.

**I remember when STAR was first formed there was a lot of discussion about the special oppression that transvestites experience. Can you say something about that?**

We still feel oppression by other gay brothers. Gay sisters don't think too bad of transvestites. Gay brothers do. I went to a dance at Gay Activist Alliance last week, and there was not even one gay brother that came over and said hello. They'd say hello, but they'd get away very quick. The only transvestites they were very friendly with were the ones that looked freaky in drag, like freak drag, with no tits, no nothing. Well, I can't help but have tits, they're mine. And those men weren't too friendly at all. Once in a while, I get an invitation to Daughters of Bilitis, and when I go there, they're always warm. All the gay sisters come over and say, "Hello, we're glad to see you," and



they start long conversations. But not the gay brothers. They're not too friendly at all toward transvestites.

**Do you have any suggestions for people in small towns and cities where there is no STAR?**

Start a STAR of their own. I think if transvestites don't stand up for themselves, nobody else is going to stand up for transvestites. If a transvestite doesn't say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite, then nobody else is going to hop up there and say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite for them, because they're not transvestites. The life of a transvestite is very hard, especially when she goes out in the streets.

**Do you know what STAR will be doing in the future?**

We're going to be doing STAR dances, open a new STAR home, a STAR telephone, 24 hours a day, a STAR recreation center. But this is only after our bank account is pretty well together. And plus we're going to have a bail fund for every transvestite that's arrested, to see they get out on bail, and see if we can get a STAR lawyer to help transvestites in court.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. What was the purpose of STAR?
2. How did Marsha P. Johnson's personal experience influence STAR's mission?
3. What are some of the services STAR offered? What are some of the forms of oppression or discrimination that Johnson describes, making these services necessary?