

Famous New Yorker Isabel Sanford

The popular TV series *The Jeffersons* celebrated the success of hard-working black families. Louise Jefferson's rise to wealth on the show mirrored the long climb to success of the woman who played her, Isabel Sanford.

Eloise Gwendolyn Sanford was born in Harlem on August 29, 1917. She was the only child in the family to survive infancy. While attending high school she wanted to become an actress. She performed in secret because her mother considered show business immoral. Her mother's death forced her to take her mother's place as a cleaning woman to make ends meet. Eventually, calling herself Isabel, she found work with the American Negro Theater and other acting companies while working daytime jobs to support three children born in an unhappy marriage. In 1960 with \$700 in savings she left her husband and moved with her children to California. She saw the move as her last chance to succeed as an actress.

The move eventually paid off. In 1963 the veteran actress Tallulah Bankhead cast Sanford as Gertrude, a maid, for her national tour in George Oppenheimer's comedy *Here Today*. The role was small and stereotyped but gave her important exposure across the country. A bigger opportunity came when actor-director Frank Silvera cast her in James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*. As the ambitious Sister Moore, Sanford made her Broadway debut on April 15, 1965. Among those who saw her was Stanley Kramer, the director of hit films from the serious *Inherit the Wind* to the comic *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*. He cast Sanford in the 1967 movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* The comedy about an interracial romance starred Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Sanford played Tillie, a maid who disliked the idea of interracial marriage. The film's popularity meant that more people than ever before saw Isabel Sanford.

Sanford made her TV debut in 1968 and began appearing frequently. Her biggest break came when producer Norman Lear cast her as Archie Bunker's new neighbor on his TV comedy *All in the Family*. She made her debut as Louise Jefferson in the show's eighth episode, first broadcast on March 2, 1971. More than two years later, the actor Sherman Hensley first appeared as Louise's husband, George Jefferson.

In 1974 Lear decided that the Jefferson characters deserved their own show. Thanks to their dry-cleaning business, George and Louise moved from Archie Bunker's working-class Queens neighborhood to a "deluxe apartment in the sky." In keeping with a long situation comedy tradition, "Weezy" was the level-headed wife who defused crises created by her husband's temper. Isabel Sanford and Sherman Hensley became two of TV's most popular stars once *The Jeffersons* premiered on January 18, 1975. The show quickly became more popular than *All in the Family*. At its peak, in 1980, it was the third highest rated program on television. The next year, Sanford became the first black woman to win the Emmy award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series.

Until her death on July 9, 2004, Isabel Sanford continued to play Louise Jefferson in commercials, stage plays and guest spots on other programs. She never found another role to match "Weezy," but that was enough to secure her spot in television history.



Courtesy of Lemack & Company
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Harlem is a large neighborhood within the northern section of the New York City borough of Manhattan (New York County).

For more about Isabel Sanford and the Isabel Sanford Scholarship at Emerson College go to www.isabelsanford.tv. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.