

Who Cares?

Gays and aging

By: Ken South

I recently had the opportunity to conduct a workshop at a national GLBT conference in Philadelphia on "Outing Age." As part of the workshop I asked people to write down on a card the date of their 85th birthday party and to describe what that day would be like; who would be there, were would they be living, how they would be supporting themselves, and what would their health be like. This is not a bad exercise for most of us to try.

The fact is most of us never take the time to consciously think about our own aging process. Most of us would just not like to think about what it is like to grow old. This fear of the future and denial of aging is one manifestation of a social disease called ageism. Ageism simply defined is the fear of aging.

This fear shows itself in our society's total lack of meaningful roles for its elders. In many other societies around the world, old people are respected and revered for their knowledge, wisdom and role as guardians of the history of the culture. Old people in our country are, for the most part, seen as a financial and social burden. In a culture which places its greatest value on production, people who do not produce are treated as a burden. Added to this is the fact that people are living longer and longer. The fastest growing age group in the US are people in their 100's!

If ageism is a social disease in our culture in general, it is an epidemic in GLBT culture. You don't have to go very far to see the clues all around you. In preparation for this "Outing Age" workshop I counted the pictures in one issue of my local gay paper. I counted 174 pictures and of these I surmised that maybe seven were of gay people over 50. They included, Bishop Gene Robinson, some ads for counselors, and an ad pushing for plastic surgery. The only pictures of other people over 50 in that issue included: Congressman Pete Stark, President Bush, The Pope, Bishop Tutu, Nigerian Archbishop Peter Akinola and Congressman Bob Barr. So where do old GLBT people find images of themselves?

In another portion of the workshop I asked people to write down the names of ten, living GLBT seniors they know over the age of 65. Only a few people who were actual members of GLBT senior organizations could fill their list. Most people could only name one or two people they actually knew of that age.

Ageism is the "default" ism. Ageism trumps all other "isms" in our society. No matter your nationality, color, religion, ability, sex, sexual orientation, or political party, you are, if you are lucky, going to grow old. Remember, everyone is in fact growing older at the exact same rate; 60 seconds a minute, 60 minutes an hour, 24 hours a day!

Even more insidious in GLBT culture is the fact that ageism actually kills!. I attend an "emergency conference" in Texas in the late 80's sponsored by Physicians for Human Rights, before it became the Gay and Lesbian Health Association. We met for three days to try and find ways to lower gay male recidivism rates of HIV infection. This conference was attended by about 200 seasoned HIV educators and prevention experts, many of whom had been working since the very beginning of the epidemic. Part of our process was to break into small groups to try and come up with new and innovative prevention strategies.

While there was great debate about the very meaning of HIV prevention, I was part of a small group that understood HIV prevention meant keeping HIV negative men negative!

In the midst of this process we talked about finding a social marketing technique to motivate uninfected gay men to stay uninfected. One person reminded the small group that one of the most obvious reasons for staying negative was that you got to grow old, you didn't die in your 30's! A pall of silence fell over the group.

"You get to grow OLD...this is an incentive? Surely we can do better than that!" said one seasoned health professional, followed by fits of laughter.

I have thought about that day ever since. And now after several years of working in GLBT aging, I am even more convinced that the stark terror most young gay men have of growing old could be at the center of the denial of HIV infection.

Many gay men find it difficult, if not impossible to imagine, accept and cherish themselves as a healthy, happy, or even sexual, 85 year old. Furthermore, social scientists have even identified a phenomena in gay men call "accelerated aging" where gay men think, and lament that they are washed up at 40!

As an alternative to having to face their imagined fears of a lonely, decrepit existence beyond 50, many 20 year olds would much rather enjoy sex, drugs and rock and roll, even if it means, in their minds, of the possibility of getting infected and having to take some pills.

I really think that if gay men aren't able to respect themselves and love themselves enough to embrace the whole continuum of their lives, we will continue to see HIV infection ravage our community.

In my experience, coming out and loving myself as a gay man was a profoundly spiritual experience. While there were some bumps along the way, I'm relieved that thirty years ago I could say with the full embrace of my being, "thank God I'm gay." I do believe that this declaration is very hard, if not impossible for many gay men to embrace, especially men who have been spiritually abused by religion. In addition many gay men never grow beyond the poison they absorbed and move to a liberating level of acceptance and love for themselves. I do believe many men go to their graves still feeling that somehow they are "damaged goods," that God, or who ever is their ultimate concern, cannot possibly love them just as they are.

After a couple of years of trying to straighten myself out I had a wonderful religious conversion experience. One day it hit me like a bolt of lightning that I was the recipient of dozens of free gifts from

God, none of which I either chose or earned. Case in point; as part of a very long list I remembered that I was born a healthy child into a loving home, I found I had a gift for music, a sense of humor, and enough working grey matter to get me through college and seminary. I acknowledged that I had certain leadership skills, and given the right resources I could plan and carry off a mean dinner party! How could I acknowledge and thank God for all these freely given gifts to me and then think that somehow God messed up and looked the other way when it came to my sexuality. I realized that my sexuality is just one more in a long line of gifts from God whom I thank for all the others, therefore, "thank God I'm gay" is not a stretch, but a relief!

Now back to old gay men. As I write this I can imagine someone thinking, "well what about the fact that one of the fastest growing groups are gay men over 50, the baby-boomers?" And I would say there is a similar problem. Many gay men over fifty are trying to recapture their youth by having sex with younger men and trying to head off their own aging into their 60's and 70's by re-living "the golden age" of the 1970's when the party was in full swing.

Speaking of baby-boomers. Born two weeks before 1946, I consider myself one of the very first "boomers." My generation, those people born between 1946 and 1964, will contain the largest GLBT elder population this country has ever experienced. There are currently thirty-four million Americans over the age of 65. There are seventy-four million baby-boomers coming along, which probably means a GLBT elderly population in the next ten years of around six million souls.

A social crisis of serious proportion is on the not too distant horizon which our community needs to face head on. The problem of care-giving for GLBT frail elderly. Gerontologists' studies have shown over and over again that upwards of 80% of all the care of frail elderly comes from the immediate family. Surveys have shown that family members and close friends — usually spouses, daughters, and daughters-in-law — provide the majority of care-giving to old people in this country. Our parents have every right to expect that they will be cared for by their adult children when needed. Many gay people, especially in the boomer generation are now experiencing living in what I call an "open sandwich" generation in which we have aging parents but no children. We are taking care of our parents until they die, but who will take care of us when we need it?

According to the 2001 NGLTF publication, "Outing Age: Public Policy Issues Affecting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders," which I co-wrote with Dr. Sean Cahill: "In Dana Rosenfeld's recent study, some 75% of lesbian or gay seniors lived alone." Another study of New York gay seniors found that 65% live alone.

People without children may be less likely to have caregivers that are willing and able to provide long-term care for an extended period. This could be particularly problematic for gay men—and, to a lesser extent, lesbians—as they age, since they are less likely than heterosexual men to have children.

While many current gay seniors who were a part of the post WWII generation do have children, far fewer GLBT baby-boomers were of the generation where getting married and having children was expected. In the future while 80% of care for elderly people will be provided by adult children in the heterosexual community, 80% of GLBT elderly will have no adult children to provide the same care.

Except for a very few GLBT gerontologists and a handful of social service organizations caring for GLBT elderly, this issue is just not on the community's radar screen. The GLBT community did such a remarkable job in establishing the HIV/AIDS industry when the main-stream health care system did not respond in the 80's. Where is the thinking and planning to care for those who have survived the HIV epidemic and will need all the same services like, housing, home care, case management, meals on wheels, and companionship?

The attention to aging issues in our community is really at its very beginning stages. The aging GLBT social service network is now, where the whole GLBT community was at the time of Stonewall in 1969. The challenges for our community in this area are daunting, however, I have the faith and hope that we will rise to this challenge just as we have in so many other ways. As I have said many times, "this generation of GLBT old folks will not go the Methodist Home quietly!"