



photo by Sherri Riggs

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The search for that relationship exhibits itself most in the bars, and experiences there can prove to be disheartening and depressing for the older gay male. Sagging biceps do not promote a good self image in a culture in which acceptability is often determined by beauty.

"The bad feelings develop when I go to the bars two or three times a week," Earl, 45, said. "Relationships there are purely based on sexual attraction and chemistry."

However, the poor self-image of many older gays make Earl resist dating people his age. "They bore me. Younger gays are more exciting to be around," he explained.

Some older Lesbians would agree with Earl. However, the interest in older women shown by many young lesbians make age and youth a more comfortable marriage in the Lesbian culture. Age is viewed far more positively by most women.

Delores, 38, says, "I can't wait until I'm 40."

She and Ruth, 46, have been lovers for over 15 years. The attraction to older women is partially due to the fact they are seen as "more emotionally and financially stable," according to Ruth.

"You feel more secure in the relationship than you would with a younger person," Kelly, 18, agrees. "It's not as likely to just be a fling."

Young gay men, on the other hand, are portrayed as being largely uninterested in the mature man. Earl calls the bars a "very one-dimensional existence. Older men are sought after only by those who are pretty far gone."

Another man over 60 said he felt "hostility and rejection" in the bars. In those bars, as elsewhere, people are seeking coupledom, often considered the best defense against the hazards of aging. Those seeking relationships are far more visible than the element of the gay community that is surviving, prospering and aging in existing relationships.

Warren and his lover are a good example and a sharp contrast to the bleak picture painted by some older single gays. Age takes

a back seat to other considerations. Warren describes himself as being "62 and a half." His lover of 26 years is 74.

"We have small groups of people, mostly couples, who meet regularly. We don't have that negative feeling," he said. The alternatives to the bar scene are limited, Warren admits, and he stressed the need for currently non-existent support groups for aging gay men. Being half of a couple makes approaching age a better experience, he said.

"I lived alone about 20 years ago and I wouldn't want to do it again."

Even couples, however, realize chances are good one of them will be left alone. The problems of widowed spouses are well known. Gay couples may face the additional problem of coping with intolerant or ignorant relatives.

The horror stories of gay people losing mates and subsequently losing all joint belongings to grasping relatives are numerous. Brenda Maddox, in *Married and Gay, an Intimate Look at a Different Relationship*, details one woman's experience.

She and her lover had not admitted their relationship for 20 years. One of the women was married, the other lived at home with her parents. The woman called her lover, whose mother told her, "She's dead." And hung up. The woman summoned enough courage to call her lover's parents and ask for photo albums the two had compiled in their trips together. She was told they did not know what had happened to them.

Since lovers cannot be considered legal relatives, other immediate family members not supportive of a gay relationship can cause serious problems for the surviving mate. Couples are urged to seek legal advice as insurance against potential problems. Family support, though, can provide a safety net for older gays with the opportunity to use it.

Earl calls that support the most important option available to the older gay. "We need to realize we are human first, gay second," he said. Friends and co-workers can provide another support network. Warren agrees and cites the loss of contact with friends and colleagues as a major problem for the retiree.

The men concur that the range of options for the older gay male is limited. In addition to cultivating relatives and friends, Earl says, men should "try to remain friends, rather than just tricking. We desperately need intellectual stimulation." He also stressed the importance of formation of an image enhancement group for gay men, "maybe as young as 25."

Despite a better self-image and more widespread community acceptance, older Lesbians deal far more with a very physical reality than do gay men. That reality is poverty.

Burnside Community Council reports that 200 to 300 women are homeless in the Portland metropolitan area. About 75 of them are served by community shelters. The others survive in other ways. Older Lesbians, without family support or a means of economic survival, could easily find themselves in that situation.

Some members of the Portland Lesbian community are working on a unique solution to that problem and the problem of older Lesbians no longer able to take care of themselves. It's called the Old Dykes' Home.

Grace, who will be 51 this month, said she's been thinking of this since she was 35. The project is still definitely in the planning stage, but interest is high from Lesbians in all age groups.

"Who want to be another Alice Paul?" she asked. Paul submitted the first Equal Rights Amendment to Congress over 50 years ago, was a Lesbian and died in a nursing home unknown to those around her.

"When I die, I want to be surrounded by dykes," Grace said. "I want to have a dyke nurse."

The options for older Lesbians are far more extensive than they are for gay men on a community level. The Lesbian forum, and rap groups held the first and third Friday of each month are a sampling of programs in the community which provide valuable contacts for older women, especially those who are single. Metropolitan Community Church provides another resource for both men and women.

Aging is viewed with disdain and often disgust by society. Homosexuality is viewed and treated with the same distaste by many. The prospect of being both can be ominous and frightening, especially since aging, and identity, are inevitable. Bitter, lonely, unproductive isolation, however, is not.

"I do a lot of self-hype," Earl admits. He recently closed a business, is in the process of working on a play, has an idea for a novel, and just sent a resume to a donut company. "It's my life. It can get nothing but better."