

GRAY LIBERATION!

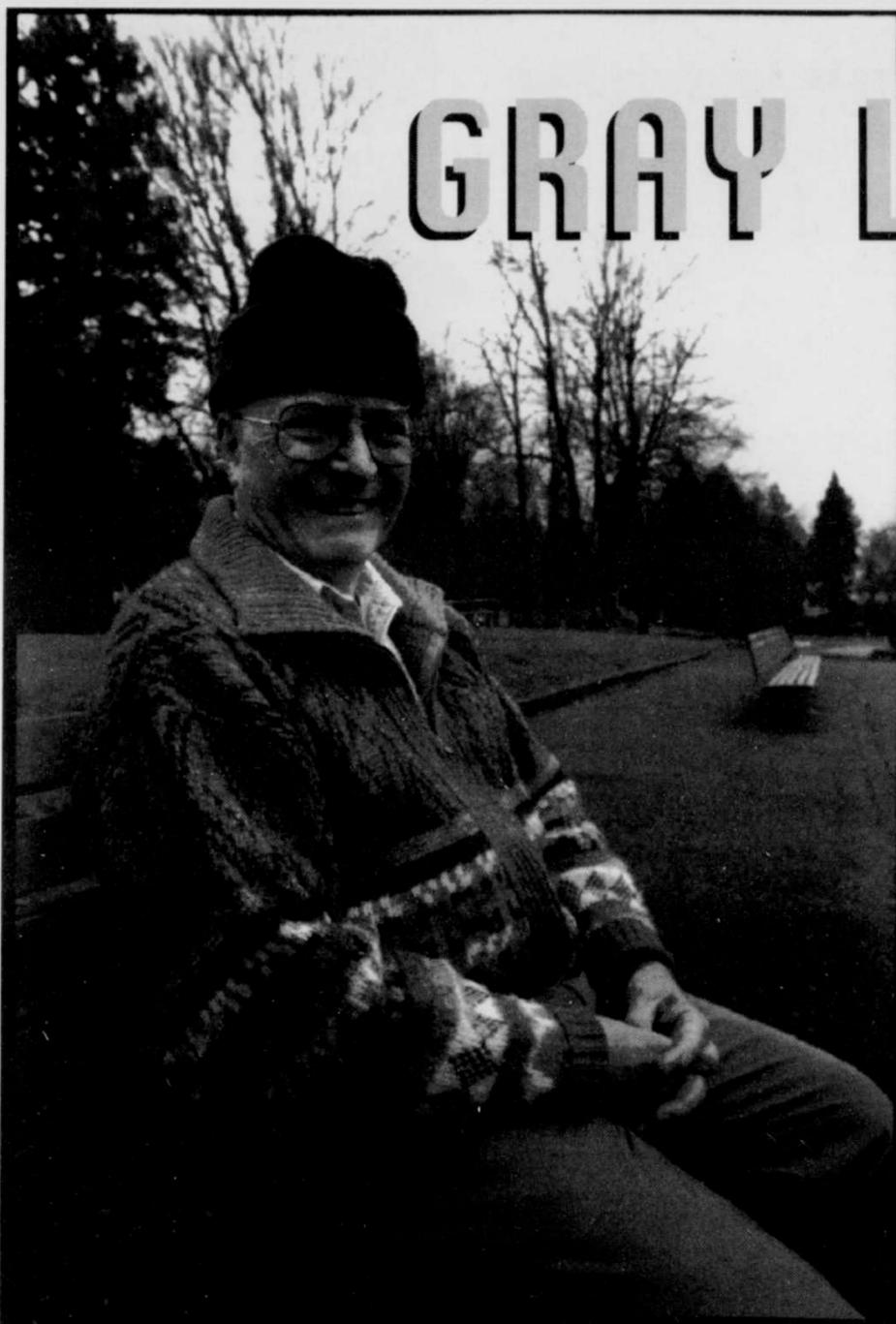


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

Warren James

Age Wise: Many older gay men and lesbians grow into greater self-acceptance and self-determination

by Paul Varnell

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The aging of the community might have been more obvious earlier if it weren't for the fact that AIDS swept through killing off many gay men who would now be in their 40s and 50s.

But the onward pace of aging continues. And researchers have begun studying older gay men and lesbians to see what they can learn about their lives, their problems and their potential.

On the whole, older gay people have the same feelings about aging that older heterosexuals have. They worry about the possibility of declining health and their ability to take care of themselves. Some worry about reduced income after retirement and wonder if their pension and retirement plans will be adequate for their needs. They worry that their partner or friends might die before they do and leave them socially and emotionally isolated.

Older people look for ways to stay active after retirement, to remain involved in the community, to feel they are useful and productive and learning new things.

But some concerns seem to differentiate sexual minorities from heterosexuals, and even gay men from lesbians.

Gay men, who may view the social "gay

community" as focused on youth and handsomeness, express concern about the loss of youthful appearance and sexual attractiveness, which they see as threatening a previous source of self-esteem as well as the possibilities for sexual intimacy.

Lesbians, some of whom may have been married and gotten a late start on the job ladder, may express more concern about financial security than do gay men. On the other hand, lesbians report that they develop a greater acceptance of their bodies as they grow older, if only as part of a general self-acceptance.

Like heterosexuals, gay men and lesbians voice concern about loneliness and social isolation as they age. The threat for gay men tends to be more obvious because many of their age group have already died from AIDS. I came out in the mid-1970s, for instance, and of the friends I met in the first few years of being out, more than half are dead.

Older gay men and lesbians report that it is not easy to find places to meet new friends in their own age group. Although bars and clubs are a primary place for younger gay people to gather and meet others, older gay men say they feel a bit out of place there. And—trust me on this—they really do play the music too loud.

Lesbians report that a good deal of their social lives are spent with friends and at private parties. Gay men do so to a lesser degree, but both groups say they regret the lack of contact with a wider age-range of people, which heterosexuals have naturally with their children and grandchildren.

But there are decided advantages to being older, and specific advantages to being gay and older.

Older people in general say that one of the best things about growing older is that they do not have to prove anything to anyone anymore. They can take some satisfaction in their achievements and express themselves more freely. They describe themselves as calmer, more patient, more "mellowed." In general, they feel they have developed a broader perspective on things, even achieved a kind of "wisdom."

For older gay men and lesbians specifically, many of whom have been closeted with regard to relatives or coworkers, they usually feel they can stop having to hide their orientation. This can lead to the feeling that they have finally eliminated a persistent inner tension of which they were perhaps only barely conscious. As one older man remarked to me, "If someone is unhappy about my being gay, I simply don't have time for them anymore."

Gay social service agencies are at last becoming aware of older gay men and lesbians. Horizons Community Center in Chicago recently commissioned one of the first needs-assessment surveys of older gay men and lesbians in hopes of developing beneficial programs.

Other cities would do well to follow Horizons' lead.

Still, not everything needs to be planned or solved by social service agencies. Some of these problems will gradually solve themselves "as by an invisible hand," that is, automatically by people pursuing their own self-interest.

As openly gay men grow older, not all of them will want to abandon the clubs and bars they have grown accustomed to, so the age mix in all but the noisiest and most frenetic of the bars may gradually come to include more older gay men. And of course, with more bars there is more specialization of types, and some will come to be preferred by older men.

As queer youth notice more older gay men and lesbians in their midst—and get to know them even a little—more contacts will develop between age groups, which can lead to out-of-the-bar socializing as well. Certainly, in communities with well-developed social, political, sports, cultural, religious and social service organizations, there are already ample opportunities for older gay men and lesbians to meet one another as well as younger queers, with the additional advantage of a shared interest.

Ultimately, of course, people's lives are their own responsibility. Older gay men and lesbians who feel isolated, or who find themselves in communities that lack gay- or elder-friendly support services, may find that they need to take more personal initiative. But who better than us to prove that activism is ageless?

Paul Varnell, age 56, writes for Chicago's Windy City Times and is a contributor to Beyond Queer, edited by Bruce Bawer.

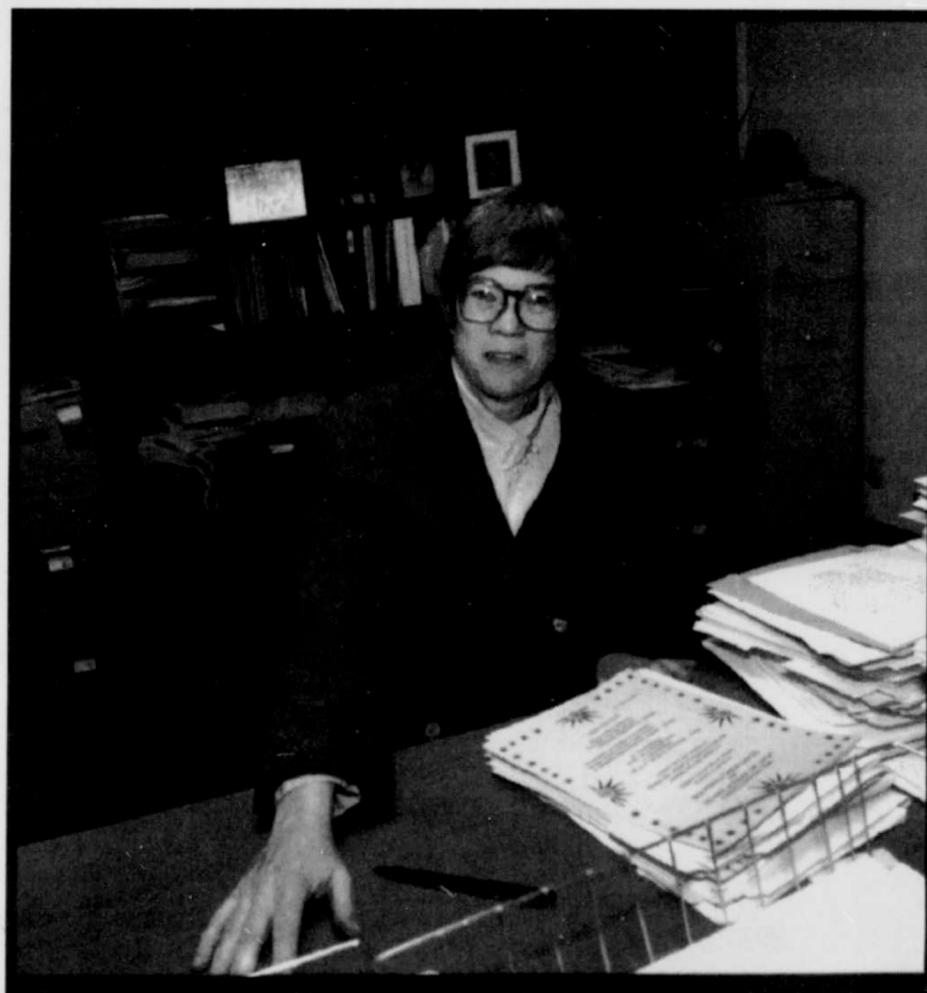


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