

# GRAY LIBERATION!

A Little Help from Our Friends: Local lesbian and gay elders are creating peer support networks

by Inga Sorensen

**W**hen Mary Brady's girlfriend packed her bags and headed south a few years back, Brady, then 61, was essentially left high and dry.

"She didn't even ask me to go," recounts Brady, now 66, in a dripping Brooklynesse accent. "It was heart-wrenching."

Due in part to her ethnic heritage and her Big Apple roots, Brady was inclined to not suffer in silence—she needed to express herself.

"Here I am, an Italian from New York who is very emotional," says Brady, who has lived in Portland for two decades. "I'm seriously grieving, but there's no one my age to talk to."

No one her age who was also a lesbian, that is. Instead of hanging back and griping about the deficit, Brady put a notice in *Just Out* seeking lesbians 55-plus for socializing.

"People called, we set up a date, and the next thing I know is we have a room full of women," says Brady, adding the only done deals on the agenda were ample servings of cake and tea. "I just said, 'Let's start by telling our coming-out stories.'"

And tell they did. That was in October 1991. Today, more than six years later, the group, which is now open to lesbians 50 and older due to demand, is flourishing.

The klatches, which quickly sprawled, have already outgrown a couple of spaces and have most recently shifted to the Multicultural Southeast Senior Center on Belmont Street, where Brady says the group—known as Lesbians Over 50—can really stretch out for potlucks and other assorted endeavors.

"OK Mary, though I am exactly half your age, I notice changes in my body. In fact, I just noticed my gums are beginning to recede," I say to Brady, in part playing devil's advocate. "Given that, what can't you comfortably discuss with me that you can freely talk about with the group?"

"I would never discuss my aches and pains with you. I couldn't talk about that because I would be afraid you would view me as old," she candidly responds. "I'm 66, and things are changing, but that doesn't mean I'm not vital and interesting and full of life."

Mary Brady

I couldn't agree more.

She adds, "It also helps to spend time with others who are going through the same types of things—surgeries, Social Security and benefits issues, all of that."

Lesbians Over 50 also provides an avenue to possible couplehood.

"Oh sure, we've had some women from the group get together," she laughs.

On a more serious note, Brady adds: "In this society, we are so ageist. It's terrible. Once you cross a certain age, you're invisible. Nobody cares."

**N**o doubt about it, ours is a youth-obsessed culture. Every year consumers spend millions of dollars on cosmetics and plastic surgery for the sole purpose of retaining youth. Just zap those wrinkles, baby, and you'll be on the road to eternal happiness.

Take that twisted view and blend it with the

culture's heterosexist bent, and you've got a formula that can spell loneliness and isolation for aging and elderly queer people. (As if being old in this country isn't tough enough.)

Some folks, like Brady, have taken the initiative to create and nurture supportive peer networks.

Gresham resident Warren James, 76, has been a member of the Portland Metro Primetimers, a group for gay men 40 and older, since its establishment a little over a decade ago.

Like Lesbians Over 50, Primetimers, also known as Metro Club, is designed as a social venue for older gay people. It, too, sprouted from an unmet need. (An estimated 60 men turned out for a recent bash.)

"Sure, sometimes we talk about surgeries and more serious matters, but the group is really about celebrating who we are," James tells *Just Out*.

And he notes, just because you may have more years under your belt, your yearning to dish doesn't

nomah Commission on Aging, an entity funded by Multnomah County and the City of Portland which addresses myriad senior concerns).

Smith also points out that many older gay men and lesbians live very private lives "because that's the way they had to when they were younger."

"For gays and lesbians who are in their 60s, 70s and 80s, being in the closet was a way of life—it was a way of surviving," he says.

And while Ellen may parade about on prime-time TV—and increasing numbers of younger queers feel more comfortable being out—it doesn't mean older gay men and lesbians are suddenly going to shun their lifelong ways to accommodate the changing times.

"That may be difficult for younger people to understand," Smith says.

The habit of closetedness, though, may become an obstacle to older gay people in meeting peers or receiving appropriate care as the effects of age begin to take their toll.



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEVER

diminish.

"Do we gossip? Oh sure," he says.

And some Primetimers ultimately pair up as well.

"I've dated a few men from the group. It hasn't worked out for me personally, but I still have hopes of finding a partner," says James, whose mate of 37 years, Jack Abele, passed away in 1995.

According to James, his Primetimers buddies, some of whom had also been widowed, served up support through tough times.

"We may connect with each other in a way we can't with younger gays and lesbians," he says.

On the other hand, some suggest that many younger queers simply don't wish to mix with older lesbians and gay men.

"We live in a very youth-oriented society, both in terms of the broader culture and the gay and lesbian community," says Robert Morris Smith, 70, a gay man who works with Elders in Action (formerly known as the Portland Multi-

Smith recounts tales of elderly gay men and lesbians in nursing homes, for example, who may not be out to blood relatives or facility staff. Such a circumstance may impede a partner's access to his or her loved one, as well as stymie the partner's input about the loved one's needs.

Even if staff knows about a person's orientation, they may not be cooperative.

"And since we can't marry, we can be denied all sorts of rights afforded to heterosexual couples," says Smith. Rights involving property and inheritance, lifestyle options, decisions about life and death—matters that take on a particular urgency as the years mount.

**S**ervices for queer youth, while admittedly deficient, appear to be light-years ahead of those provided for aging gay men and lesbians.

That, says Smith, is starting to change—not only via grass-roots, informal networks like Lesbians Over 50 and Primetimers, but also through

social service agencies, which are beginning to take notice of this neglected population.

Phoenix Rising Foundation, which provides counseling services to the queer community, recently received a \$3,000 grant from Equity Foundation for its Senior Services Project. The money will be used to conduct a survey of sexual minority seniors in the Portland metropolitan area.

According to agency Executive Director Allanya Guenther, survey results will be used to develop a three-year strategic plan for senior services, with the goal of implementing a program by July 1998.

She says Phoenix Rising has been researching senior services for more than a year, and is now affiliated with Senior Action in a Gay Environment, a national organization for gay and lesbian elders and their allies.

The agency also has a regularly meeting seniors' committee, which has been collaborating with Multnomah County to jointly identify the queer community's seniors and supportive services in order to develop a resource directory.

Additionally, Phoenix Rising says Multnomah County is providing two half-time staff people to work with gay and lesbian seniors. The staff—a man and a woman—are available at Phoenix Rising two mornings a week. According to Guenther they will provide assistance and referrals for senior services in a gay- and lesbian-friendly environment.

Jean DeMaster, 51, is a program manager with Multnomah County's Adult Care Home Program.

"This has been an underserved group, no doubt," says DeMaster, an out lesbian who admits she thinks about growing older.

The county, she says, offers an array of services to the overall senior population, but is also researching gay-and-lesbian-friendly adult foster homes. Thus far nine facilities in the Portland area have been deemed friendly, and DeMaster hopes to see the list grow. She also says the county plans to identify supportive nursing homes and other senior facilities.

"Typically those in their 70s and 80s are not asking for 'Gay Night' at a senior center," says DeMaster. "What they are asking for is supportive person-to-person contact with a caseworker or staff who understands where they are coming from, who will treat their partner with respect—someone they can feel comfortable with."

She anticipates that as lesbians and gay men now in their 40s and 50s age, they will begin to take action, be it in the form of creating exclusive gay-and-lesbian retirement communities or integrated supportive senior environments.

"The number of elderly is increasing," she says. "With that will come change."

To learn more about Lesbians Over 50, call 281-4424; for more details about Primetimers, call 598-3442. To get involved with Phoenix Rising's seniors' committee, call 223-8299. Multnomah County staff is available Wednesday and Friday mornings at Phoenix Rising to assist sexual minority seniors; for additional information, call 223-8299.