

What do older queers want? "Socializing with others seems to be the overwhelming need of many seniors," says Allanya Guenther, executive director of Phoenix Rising Foundation, a Portland-based organization that provides counseling and support services to sexual minorities.

That assessment, she adds, is based on preliminary findings of a survey aimed at older gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people in the Portland area.

In February, Phoenix Rising sponsored a community meeting entitled Building a Golden Community, which was designed to attract queer seniors.

The event, held at the Multicultural Southeast Senior Center on Southeast Belmont Street, drew more than 80 people, many of whom completed questionnaires.

Among the findings compiled thus far:

- Forty-five percent of respondents identified as gay, 49 percent as lesbian and 3 percent as bisexual;

- Forty-nine percent were between the ages of 50 and 59, 34 percent between 60 and 69, while 13 percent were between 70 and 79, and 3 percent were 80 or older;

- Forty-one percent said they realized their sexual orientation between the ages of 13 and 19, while 1 percent realized they were queer at the age of 70 or older;

- Forty-one percent identified as single, while 32 percent said they were currently living with a partner.

A vast majority indicated that physical limitations, economic security, transportation and housing were "no problem."

Nearly 70 percent said they were interested in social activities for older people, such as attending concerts and lectures, going to the theater and movies, sightseeing, dancing and potlucks.

Guenther says distribution of the surveys is continuing, and final results won't be available for a few more months. The findings will be used to develop a multi-year strategic plan for senior services.

"This is just the start in terms of getting a sense of what seniors are looking for," she says.

Phoenix Rising, meanwhile, is now affiliated with Senior Action in a Gay Environment, a national organization for gay and lesbian elders and their allies.

The group recently held the first country-wide conference solely devoted to aging in the lesbian and gay community.

The event, which pulled in 500 people (300 were expected) was held at Fordham University's Lincoln Center Campus in Manhattan on May 1 and 2.

AGING GRACEFULLY

A Portland area survey and national conference spotlight aging sexual minorities by Inga Sorensen



Jawea Mockabee



Del Martin (left) and Phyllis Lyon

"The debates about aging, ageism, and age-phobia are really heating up in the lesbian and gay community," says Terry Kaelber, SAGE's executive director, "and there is a deep need to confront the unequal treatment older gay people face in the mainstream."

The conference featured workshops entitled Images of Vital Lesbians and Gay Men Over 50; Photos and Stories; AIDS and Aging; What Professionals Need to Know; Racism and Aging; Being Old, Gay and a Person of Color; Transgender Elders: Mental and Physical

Older gay men and lesbians also want to send the message that just because you may have more years under your belt, your yearning to hang, dish and have sex doesn't necessarily diminish.

Health, Legal Issues and Life Experiences; and Sex and Sexuality in the Later Years.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Dr. Robert Butler was the keynote speaker. He is a physician, gerontologist, psychiatrist and innovator who coined the term "ageism." The well-known lesbian couple Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who founded the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, also spoke.

"The youth beauty culture remains a major area of concern for older gay men," explains Martin Wendel, SAGE's executive assistant. "Lesbians seemed to have developed a healthier perspective around all of that, probably because of feminism. Gay men need to develop a feminism of their own."

According to Wendel, other topics of discussion included developing a sense of community—connecting with other older folks in a relentlessly youth-obsessed culture, and connecting with older queer folks in a relentlessly heterosexist culture.

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Elder sexual minorities may also encounter obstacles meeting peers because of closetedness, or may have difficulty obtaining appropriate care as the effects of age begin to take their toll.

Then there are the myriad concerns around property and inheritance, lifestyle options, decisions about life and death—matters which take on a particular urgency as the years mount.

"The unexpectedly high turnout [at the conference] proved what we know at SAGE—gay and lesbian seniors are a vital and vast community dealing with a slew of issues," says Wendel. "We're planning to do another one of these conferences in two years and it could be even bigger by then."

Phoenix Rising staffer Jawea Mockabee, 53, attended the national SAGE gathering. She gave a presentation outlining Phoenix Rising's work in the area of senior services.

That includes the creation of 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.

Mockabee says, "Aging is difficult, complex and challenging no matter who you are, but it can be even tougher for those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans."

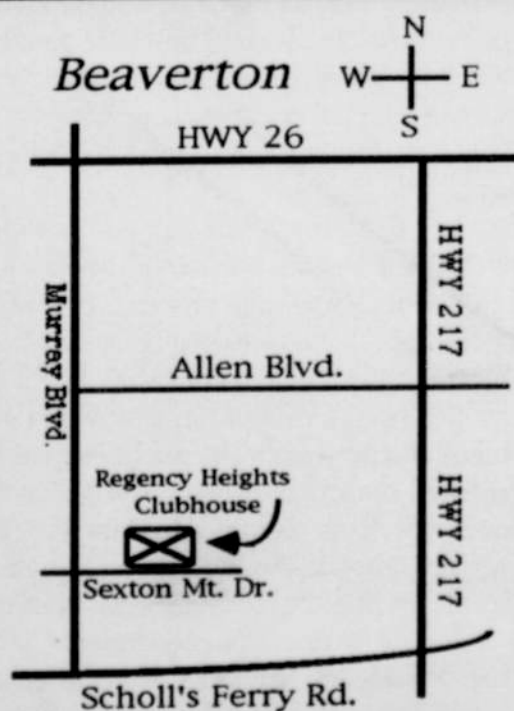
She adds, "This conference was really groundbreaking because it began to shed light on that reality and open up discussion."

■ To learn more about PHOENIX RISING'S SENIORS' COMMITTEE, call 223-8299.

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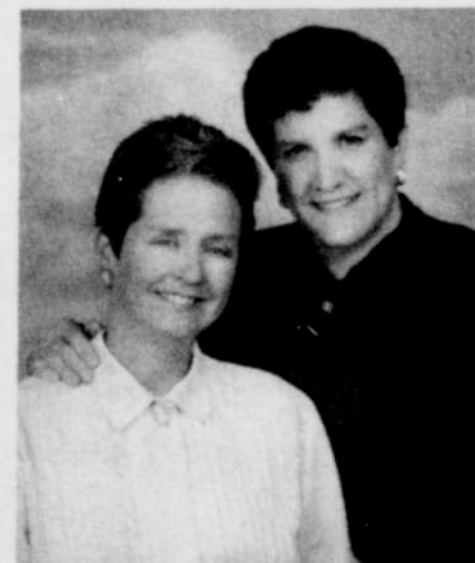
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