

GROWING OPTIONS FOR GROWING OLDER

As the movement matures, gay and lesbian rights include a friendly place to retire by Gip Plaster

If we live long enough, we'll all need somewhere to go when we retire. For many gay and lesbian seniors, however, the traditional options simply don't work.

Couples who have been together for years could be forced to go into the closet if they enter traditional retirement communities, and if nursing home care is needed for either of the partners, the couple could be forced to separate or lie about their relationship.

Since a baby boomer turns 50 every 7.6 seconds, according to government statistics, more and more gay and lesbian people face aging issues every day. Older gay men and lesbians face challenges that younger people in the sexual minorities community don't have to deal with yet—and queer seniors face challenges that older straight people don't face either.

Heterosexual people can turn to a variety of retirement communities—groups of houses, apartments and nursing home facilities that offer aging people the services they need as they grow older—but until recently, similar alternatives were not available for older gay men and lesbians.

Traditional communities are not always right for gay men and lesbians because the personnel may not be sensitive to gay and lesbian issues, and they probably won't encourage gay and lesbian residents to be open about their orientation. In addition, seniors, like everyone else, often want to be around others who are like them.

Several organizations are now working to create retirement centers for often-overlooked homosexual elders.

"We've all sat with friends and talked about what we are going to do when we get older," says Peter Lundberg, a San Francisco-based financial planner who is now planning communities called Our Town.

Two Our Town communities are in the works, one in Northern California and one in the southern part of the state. Lundberg is considering two options for the design of the communities. One concept consists of urban residential buildings and an incorporated assisted-living facility that would be either newly built or a renovation of an existing property.

The other option would be more of a resort community with a commercial core and a pedestrian-oriented square. Townhouses and detached homes would radiate from this central business area. Balconies and patios would overlook the activity.

Lundberg says it could be at least five years before one of his projects is ready for use, however.

"The development process is a very lengthy and time-consuming one," he says.

California regulations require zoning and environmental reviews, among other things. He adds the project could be accelerated if existing facilities are found that can be converted.

More than 1,200 people have responded to Lundberg's survey to determine the exact needs within the older gay and lesbian community. From that input, he has developed some conclu-

That means that, in general, gay men and lesbians have faced the issues of failing health and aging at an earlier age.

"Younger gay populations—age 45 to 55—overwhelmingly embrace having assisted-living and nursing home facilities. They're concerned about who will be there for them during this inevitable life process," he explains.

Lundberg was inspired to begin working to create Our Town about five years ago when he

for older people and is a strong lobbying force in government.

GLARP now has more than 1,000 members, and, in response to its members' requests, the organization is focusing on creating a retirement facility.

St. Claire says many people she has encountered since co-founding GLARP are people in their 40s and 50s who are concerned about what will happen to them when they get older.



A bucolic setting at the Palms of Manasota

sions about what gay men and lesbians considering retirement want for themselves.

He is not surprised to find that, although most want a gay-developed and gay-managed community, many say they don't prefer an exclusively gay and lesbian population in their retirement community.

He says this is probably because of the "Stonewall factor." Seniors who grew up before the riot at Stonewall Inn in 1969 are less likely to be out than those who have grown up since then. Living in an all-gay retirement community would mean everyone would know they are gay.

In addition, surveys have shown many seniors would prefer a community that includes younger people.

Lundberg also says gay men and lesbians have a unique perspective on end-of-life issues.

"Within the general population, there is a great deal of denial about the aging and dying process," he says. "In contrast, the gay population has dealt with death. Many of us have been caretakers for friends in their dying process."

read a brief paragraph in *The Wall Street Journal* about Bill Laing, a Florida man who was already working to create a gay and lesbian retirement community.

Laing, a retired psychology professor, recently opened the Palms of Manasota. He has invested about \$650,000 of his own money. Work has now started on the fifth home of the three-phase project.

"I had planned to have 10 homes in by the first of the year, and so far we're on schedule," Laing says. "We're just doing great. The sites are finished and ready for more homes."

Phase 1 of Laing's project calls for 21 homes built upon purchase and designed primarily for younger retirees. Phase 2 will include 44 apartments, and Phase 3 will be an assisted-living facility that can accommodate 45 people.

Back in California, Veronica St. Claire and her partner Mary Thorndal began the Gay and Lesbian Association of Retiring Persons a little more than two years ago as the gay version of the American Association of Retired Persons, a powerful group that offers consumer discounts

She says some are concerned about their future since they don't have children or relationships with their families.

"The whole idea is that when mom starts to feel she can't take care of the house anymore, then the kids make the decisions about what will happen to her," she explains.

But, she concludes, people with no children are afraid no one will be there to make the decisions for them, and they would rather be in control of their own fate anyway.

St. Claire and Thorndal are considering a project in Cathedral City, near Palm Springs, as well as other California locations.

Other options for gay and lesbian retirees are developing, too.

St. Claire says that while she and her partner are focusing on creating a community in California, they have already been approached by a West Texas landowner. Other retirement communities are in the works in Boston, Provincetown, Mass., and New York City, as well as additional locales in California and Florida.

CELEBRATING 'OLD' AND 'LESBIAN' TOGETHER

Arden Eversmeyer is an old lesbian.

She and her partner, Charlotte Avery, like other members of Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, prefer to be called old rather than older.

"Our concern is not aging, it's ageism," says Eversmeyer, the organization's co-coordinator. "Old has come to mean such dreadful things."

In concert with organizations like the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the President's Commission on Aging, the group works to confront ageism in society.

OLOC also aims to empower old lesbians to combat ageism, as well as help them become a visible force within their own community and be a force for women's issues.

Members like to be called old because they are attempting to reclaim the term in the way some have tried to reclaim the pink triangle, once a symbol of Nazi oppression, as a symbol for the lesbian and gay community.

"Society calls us old behind our backs while it calls us older to our faces," OLOC's brochure explains. "We refute the lie that it is shameful to be an old lesbian. We name ourselves old lesbians because we no longer will accommodate language that implies in any way that old means inferior. We call ourselves old with pride. In doing so, we challenge the stereotypes directly. Thus, we empower and change ourselves, each other and the world."

Eversmeyer says the group wants to change the belief within

the lesbian community that young is good and old is bad. She thinks such a change might help North American society become more like others around the world.

"We're the only civilized culture in the world that doesn't revere old people," she notes.

OLOC publishes a quarterly newsletter available by subscription. Membership is limited to lesbians age 60 and older. OLOC also publishes a book called *Facilitator's Handbook: Confronting Ageism for Lesbians 60 and Over*. The group's next conference will be held in San Francisco in the summer of 1999.

■ Reported by GIP PLASTER

To learn more about OLD LESBIANS ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE, write to OLOC, P.O. Box 980422, Houston, TX 77089.