

It is no secret that the United States has an aging population. But it might as well be a big secret that gay men and lesbians are getting older right along with the rest of the country, as very little has been said or written about these folks—and even less done to meet their needs.

That all will be changing in the near future if a recently formed Portland group has its way. The Elder GLBT Outreach Committee is making tremendous strides in trying to connect with queer seniors; more importantly, it is working diligently to figure out what their specific needs are and how they can be met.

Paul Iarrobino, a gay man who works with Multnomah County Aging and Disability Services, is one of several people who helped get the group off the ground. He is quick to give credit to Vaune Albanese, a lesbian who works as assistant director of Friendly House, a nonprofit agency that decided a few years ago that there was a need to reach out to sexual minority elders.

Shortly thereafter, Iarrobino went to a national aging conference and learned that his colleagues across the country were starting queer-specific programs and services. He decided it was time to get involved.

"I came back from the conference hopeful," Iarrobino says. "I called together a small group, and we've been meeting ever since."

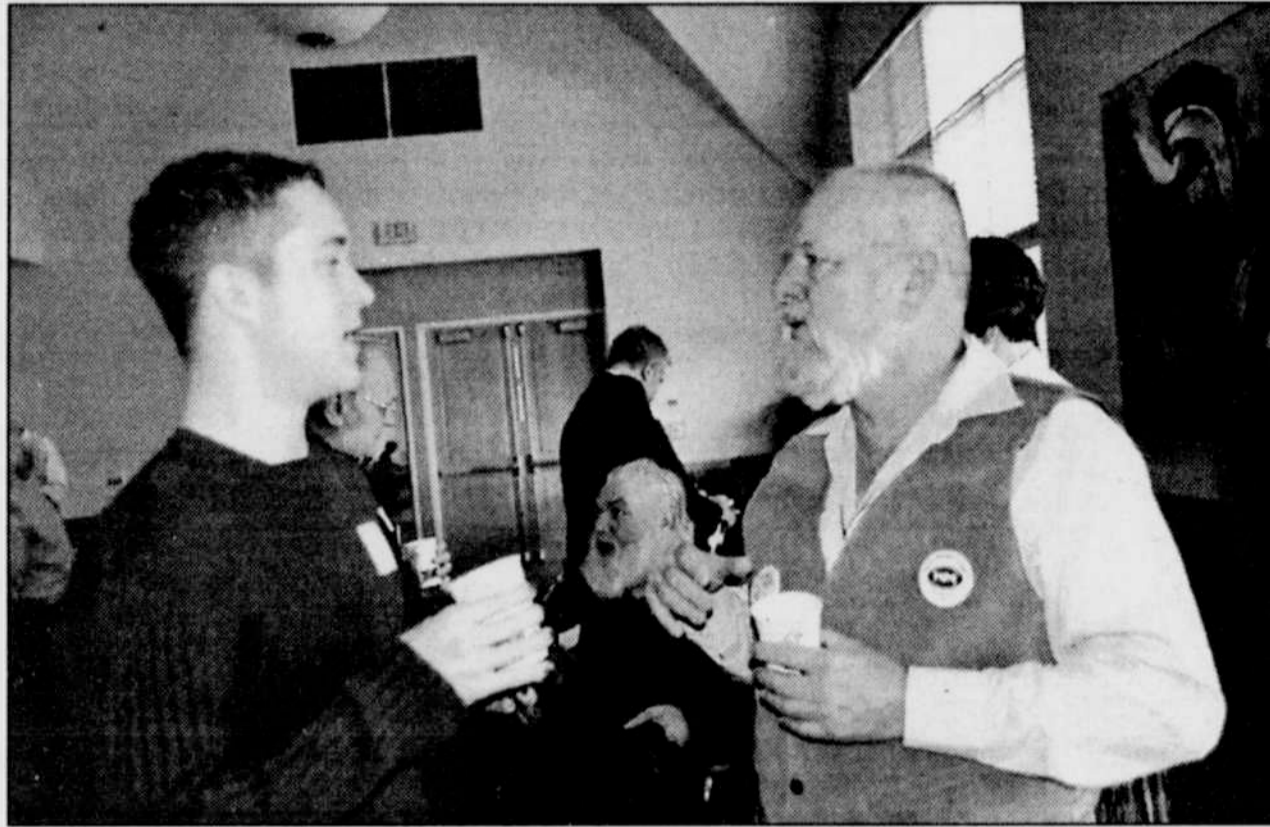
Iarrobino is grateful to the Friendly House staff and the endless volunteers who have stepped forward. A lot of people have put in a lot of time, he notes.

Although the group really has been rolling for only a year, it has accomplished a great deal. The first big step was planning a social event connected with the Portland Gay Men's Chorus *Vintage Voices* concert.

"It was a major success," Iarrobino says. "Students from the Reed [College] Queer Alliance hosted the event. With the help of the Friendly House, we were able to get seniors there to see the event that ordinarily wouldn't have either known about it or would have had problems get-

GRAY AREA

Committee reaches out to sexual minority elders by Tom Stevenson



Generations mingle prior to the Portland Gay Men's Chorus *Vintage Voices* concert last March at Reed College

ting to and from the event. The folks at Friendly House sold the tickets and provided transportation for people who needed extra assistance. Also, an 'angel' in our group made a generous donation so that people who were low-income could take advantage of a sliding scale."

The group also recently provided an "elderly hospitality center" during the Creating Change conference in Portland. According to Iarrobino, it was a "smashing success."

"We provided a fun and relaxing space for older people to visit during the conference," he says. "It was a very moving experience."

In addition, the committee recently was awarded \$5,000 from Seattle's Pride Foundation and \$2,700 from Portland's Equity Foundation to fight homophobia in the aging provider program. Rainbow Train, a Seattle nonprofit organization that increases cultural competency about queer seniors, will teach a core group of Portlanders how to accomplish this goal.

"We are very excited about that," Iarrobino says. "We will be providing sensitivity training to agency staff around homophobia and how it relates to sexual minority elders. Providers are asking for this type of training, as it really has not been offered before."

Albanese is pleased that the committee's work has been recognized. "It looks like we...will be able to provide even more training than we originally anticipated," she says.

The group's dozen members have a number of ideas about what to do in the future, but definite plans will wait until their upcoming strategic meeting. The reality, however, is that much work remains to be done for queer seniors.

"Our community, like the population in general, is growing older," Albanese says. "The leading edge of the baby boom generation is inching

toward 60. There will be more and more queer old folks who will need services. Now is the time to jump on board and create programs and services that work for elder lesbians and gay men."

Committee member Ric King, who remains plenty active at 77, says housing, health care and other issues are urgently important to the aging sexual minority population. "Federal, state and local elder programs do not address GLBT elder needs."

King notes that a general sense of disconnect from formal family ties and "reliance on peer extended family and gay friends make elder health care and end-of-life issues different" for queers. He also thinks the gay, lesbian, bi and trans community is not overly supportive of the elderly population in its midst.

"GLBT groups pay lip service" to the elder issues, he says. "But general ageism dilutes effective support and respect of and about elders. One-on-one contacts work but is not within the mission of most GLBT associations."

Albanese also is frustrated by the lack of attention given to this rapidly growing segment of the sexual minorities community.

"Growing up we all heard our parents admonish us to respect our elders," she says. "Unfortunately, that maxim seems to be missing in our society today. And GLBT elders take a double hit because not only are they old and disrespected and not paid attention to, they're gay or lesbian and disrespected and not paid attention to. We're only just now scratching the surface when it comes to providing respectful services." □

For more information about the ELDER GLBT OUTREACH COMMITTEE contact Paul Iarrobino at 503-988-3620 or paul.iarrobino@co.multnomah.or.us or Eileen McClary at 503-224-2640 or emccclary@friendlyhouseinc.org.

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The Elder GLBT Outreach Committee meets monthly at Friendly House

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- **Conversations Project:** Group giving elders a forum to share concerns, issues, hopes and frustrations about aging in the sexual minorities community with younger counterparts. 503-227-0605.
- **50+:** Lesbian social group for women. Meets from 4 to 7 p.m. on the third Saturday of the month. 503-642-3360 or 503-286-3575.
- **Funny Ladies Tea and Posey Society:** Social group for lesbians 35 and older. Meets for a potluck on the second Saturday of the month. 503-760-0816 or flataps@aol.com.
- **Old Lesbians Organizing for Change:** Portland chapter of a national lesbian organiza-

tion for women 60 and older interested in changing the social disease of ageism. Meets 1 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month. 503-286-3575.

- **Portland Metro Prime Timers:** Social group for mature gay men—and those who appreciate them—coming together for social, educational and cultural purposes. 503-286-4613, 360-254-1718, pdxprimetimers@yahoo.com or www.geocities.com/pdxprimetimers.

- **Senior Housing and Retirement Enterprises:** Coalition laying the groundwork for future gay and lesbian senior housing in the Portland area. 503-286-3575.

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