

Generation Stonewall

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Robert Morris Smith has been a peace and gay rights activist for more than four decades

Out, Political and Proud

Longtime activist Robert Morris Smith, 76, sees a disconnect within the sexual minorities community. "The gay community is very youth oriented," he says. "So as you get older, it's more difficult to really be a part of it." Smith prefers to hang out with people from his own generation, many of whom are straight political activists or Quakers, like himself.

Sporting a "Kucinich for President" pin, Smith talked of his many years of political activism. He was a conscientious objector during the Korean War. More recently he went on a peace mission to the Middle East after the first Gulf War. The trip organizers asked Smith not to be open with his Palestinian hosts about his sexuality. "I told them I couldn't do that," he says.

Later in the trip, when the activists met Yasser Arafat, Smith told the Palestinian leader: "I am a gay activist and an American. One reason I'm here is because I have a sensitivity to prejudice." Smith says the response from Arafat was one of understanding.

These days, at home in Portland, Smith won-

ders about the changes in gay culture. When he sees ads for gay clubs, he is curious about "who are all the people who go to them. I wonder what they would think of me." He gestures to his long gray hair and one dangling earring.

Smith says he misses his long-term gay friends who died from AIDS. "No one replaced them," he says. Still, he has a fairly active social life going to plays and the symphony with friends. "I couldn't do much more," he says. "I have no complaints."



Gibby Clarke lives in Aloha with her partner, Charlene

In and Out of the Closet—Twice

Gibby Clarke, 82, met her first female lover when she was 19. However, living as a lesbian didn't seem like a viable possibility to her then. She married a man she met at University of Oregon and hoped her feelings for women would go away.

Seventeen years—and three children—later, Clarke divorced her husband. She lived with a partner for several years and was part of various lesbian social groups. She lived in a women's community in Arizona before moving to Newberg in the late 1990s to be near her daughter.

In January 2001, after a bout with diabetic ulcers, Clarke let her Newberg apartment go and moved into a Portland-area retirement home. Unfortunately, she encountered homophobia and negativity among many of her fellow residents. She decided the most she could

"We're scared out of our shoes that we'll be rejected by the younger people"

—Ric King

do was defend gays when the dinner conversation turned to homosexuality. "I would get a lot of hassle," she says. She was sure if she came out, people would shun her.

Luckily, Clarke had long been a part of the Fifties Plus Social Club, where she eventually met her partner, Charlene. The two moved in together and now live in Aloha.

Clarke stays active in lesbian social groups and exercises several times a week at an athletic club. She works in the garden, has lunch with friends and revels in the freedom to be herself again.



Jan Schaefer is a trans lesbian who volunteers for KBOO-FM

Late Transition

Jan Schaefer pays more for electrolysis each month than she does for rent. The 67-year-old is a transsexual lesbian who came out four years ago. She faces numerous emotional and physical challenges because of her age and gender identity. Her story shows just how important support resources are for

sexual minority seniors.

Schaefer was about 6 years old when her father caught her in her mother's dress and high heels. "He took me downstairs and he beat me badly enough that I was in the hospital for a week," she says. "In this day and age a doctor would be required to call the cops. Back then they said, 'Well, maybe it will cure him.'"

The beatings she suffered at her father's hand did not crush her spirit, though. After many years and with the help of a good therapist, Schaefer was finally able to come to terms with her gender and sexuality and begin living more openly. She is setting aside a little of her Social Security and her retirement money for sex-reassignment surgery. But her physical health is deteriorating because of age-related conditions, and the future does not always look bright to her.

For now, Schaefer stays as active as possible in the lesbian community. She has not yet had a relationship with another woman as a woman. "How many 50- or 60-year-old lesbians do you know who consider me a lesbian?" she asks. "It's nobody's fault; it's just the way it is."

Loneliness is a hard issue for Schaefer. She says she's working on her intimacy issues in therapy. "When somebody gives me a hug, I don't push them away anymore," she says. "I have high hopes that someday maybe I'll learn how to 'do' relationships."

Finding Love the Modern Way

After spending 20 years as a nun, Kathy Svani left the convent with another nun whom she was in love with. The two spent 20 years together in California. But Svani's partner could not reconcile lesbianism with her religion, and eventually it caused the two to split.

Svani, 73, moved to Portland two years ago. To deal with the social isolation aging has brought, she began turning to the Internet for community. She met her current partner in a chat room for people older than 60. "It was really an educational experience," Svani says of finding the online group. She did not have much contact with the sexual minorities community while she was in her long-term relationship. "I learned relationships come and go," she says.

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"The greatest thing I can wish for anybody in the sexual minority community is not to let fear stop you from living"

—Nikki Isaacs

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