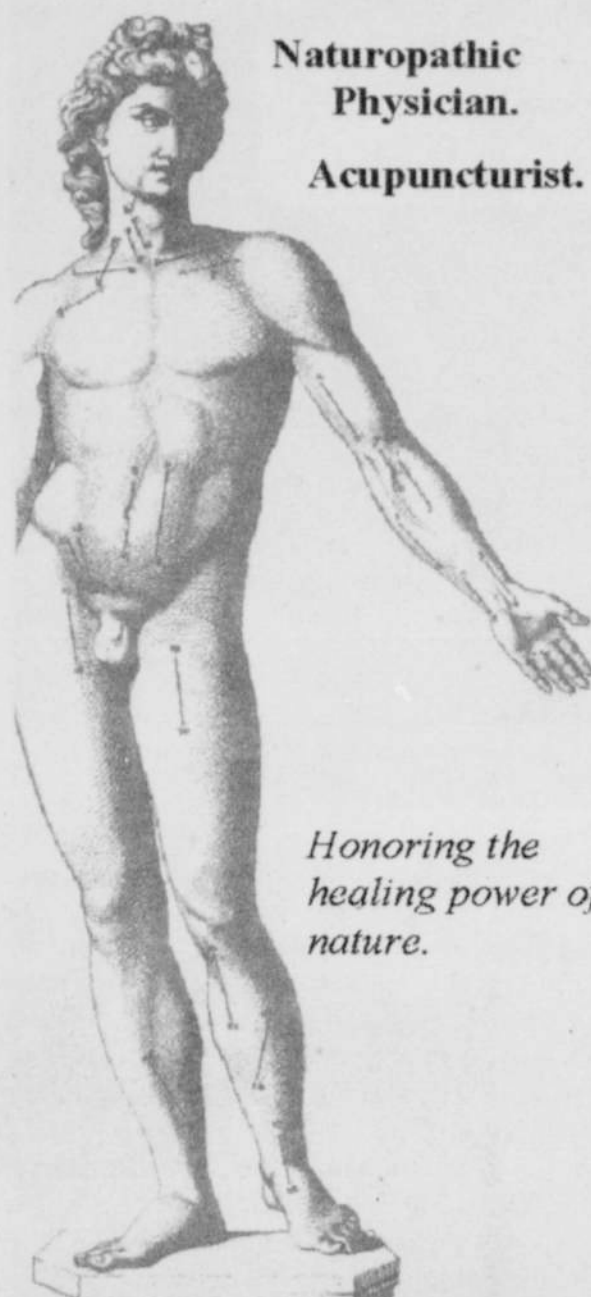


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NORTHWEST news

QUEERS PREPARE FOR THE GOLDEN YEARS

SHARE plans retirement housing to meet needs of sexual minorities

by Sarah Dougher

An estimated 3 million gay men and lesbians older than 65 live in the United States—a number that's expected to double by 2030. Queer seniors face the same aging issues as other seniors. However, because of their sexual orientation, they often encounter discrimination, social isolation and barriers to accessing services geared to heterosexuals.

As more queers enter midlife, or deal with aging parents, they become increasingly aware that the current housing facilities for the senior population in general are often less than ideal. Housing options that address the needs of queer seniors are, in particular, scarce. Nationally, only a handful of retirement communities are designed specifically for the queer community, although increased elder activism is bringing the issue to the forefront in many communities. Few of the existing facilities serve seniors with low to moderate incomes. The Pacific Northwest has no retirement facilities tailored to the needs of queer seniors.

bisexual and transgender elders is available to them as they age.

Many indicated they fear they will have to hide their sexual orientation if they choose to move into retirement housing geared to heterosexual seniors. Of those surveyed, 80 percent said they want to live in a setting that is supportive to queer retirees.

The survey also indicated a critical need for affordable housing among queer seniors. A quarter of survey respondents have annual incomes below \$20,000. The proportion of low-income respondents increases to nearly 60 percent for those 65 and older.



David Wilson (left) of SHARE and Daniel Hutchison of Out Dancing cut a rug for the crowd April 23.



Music for the SHARE fund-raiser was provided by the Rose City Swing Band.

More than one-third of the respondents would prefer to stay in their own home as long as possible and hire help as needed. When increased care becomes necessary, one-fifth would prefer to live independently in a home, condo or apartment located in a retirement setting.

Survey respondents indicated it was extremely important that their

eventual homes promote independence of residents. In addition, they wanted a safe neighborhood and secure building, a place where pets are allowed and a place located in a queer-friendly community with queer-sensitive service providers available.

The survey reflects a general community consensus about the need for queer elder housing and care facilities, but it is in personal anecdotes that one can truly understand the need for this type of facility. Unfortunately, people and institutions do not miraculously become more tolerant as they age; in fact, quite the opposite is true.

Woods comments that when a care facility knows something about your lifestyle, it is much better equipped to ask appropriate questions and not, for example, assume that you are straight. This is particularly important when issues of health care come into play: "People need to be honest with their doctors in order to get good care. If they are afraid of the repercussions of being out, they may not want to see the doctor. This has an impact on the quality of care if they aren't able to be who they are." ■

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