

northwest

Grant Means Gain for Seniors

Elder Resource Alliance continues to support our aging community

by Malka Geffen

As the "out" population of the sexual minorities community grows older, many of its members find themselves going back into the closet.

Elder Resource Alliance (ERA) is a Portland organization that enhances the lives of sexual minority elders 60 and older through education, advocacy, outreach and fun. A component of the Friendly House Senior Program since 2004, ERA recently received a \$20,000 grant from United Way of the Columbia-Willamette. The money will help members of the elder population living in Multnomah, Clark, Washington and Clackamas counties get their survival and social needs met without hiding their identity.

Founded in 1930, Friendly House is a contracting agency of Multnomah County Aging and Disability Services. According to Vaune Albanese, executive director of Friendly House, one of ERA's primary goals is to build a sense of community among sexual minority elders and alleviate their social isolation. "We had been getting smaller GLBT-targeted grants, but we needed more money to do all we wanted to do," said Albanese, who is a lesbian.

With the new grant money, ERA can afford to hold more social activities including movie and game days, monthly speakers, outings, a summer barbecue and sock hop, a spring pancake bingo breakfast and vital exercise and wellness activities. The grant will also support greater outreach efforts. ERA chairman Paul Iarrobino said, "We will do more to let people know we're there as a resource, offer more activities and provide more administrative support."

ERA will also use the grant to continue educating service providers, caregivers and community leaders on the specific challenges and needs of the elder sexual minority population. Facilitators help social service professionals and nursing students understand the personal biases that can create obstacles to working effectively with this population.

In 2005, ERA presented 15 diversity trainings, reaching 356 people. According to Iarrobino, the three-hour trainings include facts and accurate information on the changing demographics as well as a presentation where elder panel members tell their personal stories. In an exercise called "Keeping a Secret," participants discuss why people keep secrets and the toll they pay for doing so. "It's the emotional buy-in from the audience," said Carol French, ERA's primary training facilitator.

According to French, ERA has not held a facilitator training since she herself was trained several years ago. A session led by French; her partner, April Lewis; and Iarrobino will train new facilitators about special issues for sexual minority elders, basic diversity and cultural competence, important language regarding gender identity and good facilitating techniques. French says she hopes for new facilitators to learn from the elder panel members as well.

Elder panel member Mary Beth Brindley and her partner, Evelyn Hall, have been together for 47 years but lived in the closet for 37 years. "When we came to Portland from Texas in '96, we vowed to



Dick Burden educates service providers through the ERA elder panel.

become active in GLBT senior things," said Brindley. She attended the second ERA meeting in the fall of 2001 and has been a member ever since. "The GLBT senior population is underserved and practically invisible."

Brindley said she has visited friends in assisted living facilities and seen them go back into the closet so they'll be socially accepted. "It saddens me to see previously active GLBT seniors go back into the closet we just came out of," she said.

Brindley joined the elder panel when it began in 2003 and chaired the group in 2005. "Slowly but surely, we're trying to drag these seniors out of closet to join us and have fun."

A more recent addition to the elder panel, Dick Burden, was a pastor when he married and had children in the early '60s. The 75-year-old gay Oregon native admits to having "clandestine rendezvous in risky places" throughout his adult life. A run-in with the law when he was 52 brought his behavior to light.

"For a long time I got away with it, but this brought things to a head and allowed me to get out of my marriage, to be free to be myself without all this hiding and making excuses and living a life of shame and depression," he said. Burden speaks out to "encourage others to be open and deal with who they are and also to inform those who are against us."

The elder panel portion of ERA's presentation is the most popular part, according to Burden. "It touches on some very sensitive issues that people wouldn't perceive when they hear this is a lesbian or a gay man.... Just identifying sets up a barrier, but people can relate better once you tell your story. It opens things up so they can ask questions." 

ELDER RESOURCE ALLIANCE holds a holiday open house with songs and door prizes 2 p.m. Dec. 6 at Friendly House, 1737 N.W. 26th Ave. The next ERA "train the trainer" program is from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Jan. 27. For more information contact Rachel Indigo Cerise Baum at 503-224-2640, ext. 152, or visit www.elderresourcealliance.org.

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