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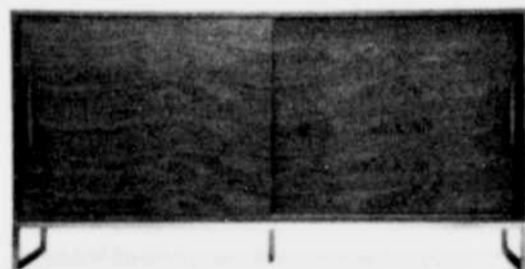
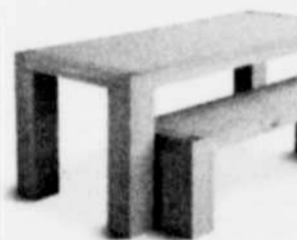
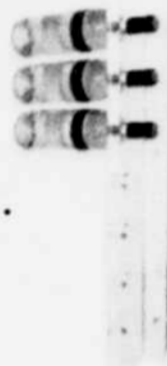
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It Gets Better, Grandpa

Gay & Grey program raises awareness of invisible generation

BY AARON SPENCER

When Natasha French's brother started having children, she was happy for him.

But the more she thought about them, the more those newborn babies reminded her of her own mortality.

French, who is a lesbian, doesn't plan to have kids. So when she saw her brother with his children, she considered her parents, who were growing older. Soon, she thought, her parents would need their children to take care of them. And her brother's new children, they would take care of him when he's old.

But then she thought, "Who's going to take care of me?"

French is 34, but she can already catch a glimpse of a future where no family is around to help her when she needs it. That future shouldn't be hard to imagine; examples of it are everywhere.

As many as 10,000 sexual minority seniors live in the Portland metro area, according to program officials behind Gay & Grey, an effort by the nonprofit Friendly House to provide resources to LGBTQ seniors. Program organizers say those seniors are more likely to live alone and without family support than their heterosexual peers.

French recently started volunteering for Gay & Grey, motivated by her own experience and need to create her own family as she grows older.

"Once I found out the program existed, I got really excited about it," French says. "I always wanted to help seniors in the Portland queer community but didn't know how to go about it."

French's example is exactly what Gay & Grey leaders want. Program officials are trying to raise awareness—this month during the annual Gay & Grey expo—of a plight they say is largely invisible to others in the gay population.

"In our community, you've got to be hot and young and hunky," says Bruce Meisner, a participant in the program, "and when you get old, you're just a dirty old man."

Gay & Grey is attempting to change that perception.

"Younger generations don't realize how much effort has been put in to pave the way to allow them to walk down the street arm in arm," says Mya Chamberlin, head of the Gay & Grey program. "We need to honor seniors and the work they've put in."

Having a closet, but staying out of it

Gay & Grey is a multifaceted program. It includes housing efforts, diversity training and social opportunities, among other services. Until January, the program was called Elder Resource Alliance. Friendly House, which runs the program, changed the name. It also adopted the SHARE (Senior Housing and

Retirement Enterprises) housing nonprofit into the program last year.

Now, SHARE has become a housing subcommittee of Gay & Grey, meant to address the lack of affordable housing for sexual minority seniors and find LGBTQ-friendly environments if they must go into senior homes. SHARE was established in 2001 by partners Mary Beth Brindley and Evelyn Hall.

"Evelyn and I actually talked about getting SHARE together after we had visited a friend who was 15 years older than we were," recalls

& Grey is also working on an evaluation procedure for senior homes. The evaluations, which senior homes will be able to request, will be used to determine which senior homes are LGBTQ friendly, and those homes will be included in a new directory.

Getting past the "dirty old man"

When Carol French, 69, was still teaching high school English, she attended a program called Rainbow Train, a project out of Seattle that provided training for health care providers on sensitivity toward LGBTQ patients.



"In our community, you've got to be hot and young and hunky, and when you get old, you're just a dirty old man."

-BRUCE MEISNER

Brindley, 71.

Brindley and Hall visited their older friend in a senior home, where the friend told them she had decided to keep her sexual orientation a secret.

"You've been an LGBT activist," Brindley remembers saying to her, "Why are you going back into the closet?"

Their friend said, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life here, and I don't want to be ostracized," Brindley recalls.

So as Brindley and Hall were walking back to their car, Brindley turned to Hall and said, "You know, in 10 years, this could be us. We have to do something."

"And the 'doing something' was starting SHARE," Brindley says.

The original idea for SHARE was to provide affordable housing for LGBTQ seniors, but organizers couldn't manage to raise enough funds to purchase a building.

So today, the housing assessment program operates as a referral service for seniors looking for LGBTQ-friendly senior homes. Gay

A Gay & Grey volunteer makes a sign for Portland Pride 2010.

That got the ball rolling for what would become Gay & Grey's diversity trainings.

If the SHARE housing program was an attempt to find LGBTQ-friendly places for seniors to live, Gay & Grey's diversity trainings seek to create more of those places. Gay & Grey offers these trainings to senior homes, college classes, social service agencies and other groups.

Carol French (no relation to Natasha) wrote the curriculum for the trainings, and now that she's retired, she volunteers three-hour chunks of her time to present them.

Senior homes and other health care environments can be intimidating for LGBTQ seniors, French says. Senior homes are microcosms, like high schools, and often just as scary.

"You know, they're seniors," she says. "They're set in their ways. They're not even going to be as open-minded as kids in high school."

The trainings work like this: A presenter like French first lays out the lesson. It includes, for example, information on how partners of LGBTQ seniors are often ignored in health care environments. Other lessons include how