

# street roots

org

# Gay, grey and groundbreaking



**BY STACY BROWNHILL**  
STAFF WRITER

For a while, Bruce Meisner and Bob Rugar were attending a funeral a week. The two energetic, grey-haired men in their 70s, partners of 40 years, recall the Reagan era as a dark time when male friends were quietly dying, childless and spouseless, from an epidemic no one acknowledged: AIDS.

Today, Meisner, Rugar and other gay seniors of their generation still live in the shadows. There are an estimated 10,000 gay seniors in Portland, and around 3 million nationwide, according to the most conservative estimates. Many are battling a double dose of vulnerability that wrecks havoc on their finances, health and emotions.

Portland's own gay elder advocacy group, Gay & Grey PDX, is on the frontlines of fighting that vulnerability. Supported by the community nonprofit Friendly House in Northwest Portland, the team of about 20 advocates and allies organizes benefit events and conducts educational workshops in nursing homes to raise awareness about discrimination that many don't even realize exists.

The group is a rarity — Gay-Straight Alliances and United Sexuality clubs are becoming common in schools, but gay senior support groups are virtually nonexistent. Consider the last time you heard of an LGBTQ group at your grandma's nursing home, or similarly elder statesmen at the Pride Parade.

But a new awareness is gaining steam and Oregon leaders are joining the cause. Gov. John Kitzhaber is proclaiming May 21 as "Gay & Grey Day" in Oregon, and Secretary of State Kate Brown is reading the official proclamation at the

Gay & Grey PDX Expo at Friendly House on Saturday, May 21.

### Double dose of vulnerability

LGBTQ seniors are more likely to live alone and five times less likely to access senior services than their heterosexual peers, according to Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders (SAGE). Gay seniors are also more likely to lack adequate support networks, especially since many do not have children to care for them as they age, according to SAGE.

More than 1,000 federal marriage benefits are denied to gay couples, many hitting gay seniors the hardest, including medical decision-making power and hospital visitation rights, Social Security survivor benefits, Medicare spousal benefits, inheritance of a spouse's estate, and financial decision-making power on a spouse's behalf.

When Rugar was hospitalized in Arizona, nurses would not let long-term partner Meisner see him because he wasn't a family member. They would not tell Meisner Rugar's condition or even if Rugar was still receiving care. In other states, hospitals recognize domestic partnership certificates, but an individual nurse or administrator can still "make it difficult in a difficult time," says Gay & Grey PDX member Sharon Messerschmidt, who dreads what would happen if her partner of 26 years, Jo Hamilton, should enter the hospital.

"If one of us were to become widowed," speculates Hamilton, "how would we grieve? People would say, 'I'm so sorry about your husband,' but I would be mourning Sharon."

Whereas a heterosexual older couple wouldn't

think twice about moving into a nursing home together, many same-sex senior couples hesitate to divulge their sexual orientation to health and housing providers because they fear prejudice, and struggle with the idea of coming out anew in retirement.

"Until I started coming to Friendly House," says Messerschmidt, "I referred to Jo as 'my partner' purposefully, as a cover." Rugar laughs, saying he frequently refers to Meisner as his partner only to get the response, "what business are you in?" Both Messerschmidt and Rugar say they did not always correct people.

Martha Wright, Marketing and Communications Coordinator for Friendly House, weighs concerning questions: "In nursing home facilities where care workers come from a conservative religious background, are they delivering care to gay seniors with compassion? Are (gay senior couples) free to be in the same apartment? Will they be separated from their loved ones? The bottom line is there are policies that are flat-out unfriendly toward gay seniors."

### Changing for the better

In response to gay seniors' worries about discrimination, gay retirement centers are springing up nationwide. The Palms of Manasota in Palmetto, Florida, Triangle Square in Hollywood, California, and RainbowVision in Santa Fe, New Mexico are just a few that cater specifically to LGBTQ elders.

Gay & Grey PDX members (clockwise, top right) Bob Rugar, Jo Hamilton, Sharon Messerschmidt and Bruce Meisner.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER JANSONS

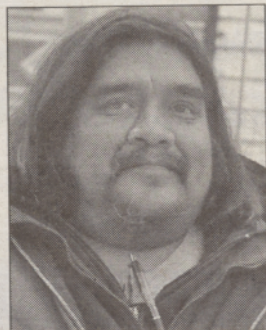
See GAY AND GREY page 12

## Inside



**'FBI: Taken' exhibit resonates with Portland filmmaker**

Documentary looks inside a different kind of internment camp  
**Page 5**



**Poetic justice**

Street poets break down stereotypes and prejudice with the power of words

**Page 8**



UNITING COMMUNITIES

Western States, United Communities joins SR commentary  
**Page 14**