

Building a wiser – albeit older – queer community

BY KATHRYN KENDALL
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

In 1975, if you were a smart woman and an artist-activist, if you were cutting edge, if you wanted to change the world and yourself for the better, you came out. Some just dabbled and experimented; some found they were bisexual. But for some women, for me, it was a time of earth-shaking discovery. This is who I am. No wonder I've had troubled relationships with men. I was a lesbian all along. It never occurred to me; I was that much out of touch with my body and my feelings. I rushed into lesbianism with relief, recognition and joy. I had come home.

Like most of my friends, I loved lesbian music before I came out. Chris Williamson, Meg Christian, and Sweet Honey in the Rock furnished the soundtracks of our lives in the '70s. I joined a consciousness-raising group. I cut off my long, hippie-girl hair, bought Birkenstock sandals and an ear cuff, traded dresses made of Indian bedspreads for flannel shirts and jeans, and after three years of seeking, I found a girlfriend and we courted by reading each other poems by Audre Lorde and Pat Parker. "Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice," wrote Ti-Grace Atkinson. "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," wrote Irina Dunn. We created lively activist communities of like-minded women.

The heart of my personal revolution was the Redstockings Manifesto, drafted in 1969 by a collective in New York City. It changed my life irreversibly, years before I ever found a woman who would make love with me. It includes this statement:

Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives. Our humanity is denied. Our prescribed behavior is enforced by the threat of physical violence.

That made sense to me. Like many of my

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women friends, I admitted in my first consciousness-raising group that I was a survivor of sexual abuse; we were astonished to discover how many of us had been keeping that secret. Our husbands had treated us like ornaments or slaves. Many of us had married out of high school and had children to raise, and we wanted a safer world for them than our mothers had provided for us.

We hung posters in our kitchens, proclaiming Gertrude Stein's famous motto: "Women never do anything disgusting." We believed, at least until Margaret Thatcher proved us wrong, that women were more compassionate and nurturing than men. Through the '80s and '90s, we grew up to the fact that some women identify with the oppressor; and some men are more compassionate than some women. But we were proud of what we were. Being lesbian was a political orientation as well as a sexual orientation.

Now those vibrant young lesbian singers of the 1970s have white hair. The sexy lesbian icons of the 80s, like Ferron and kd lang, have acquired grandmotherly girth and jowls. Tracy Chapman and Ani DiFranco are young enough to be our granddaughters, and they inhabit a Queer universe that makes our radicalism seem outdated. Our vibrant women's communities, first scattered by career mobility, are decimated by retirement, death, financial hardship, and diminishing physical capacity. After coming out in a burst of political activism, we find ourselves in elder housing and assisted living centers where we are surrounded by people who don't get it.

If we have partners, we can't share a subsidized apartment because we aren't

married. Until President Obama changed the rules, we couldn't visit our partners if they were in ICU, because we didn't count as "next of kin." If we are single, we're invisible.

After I retired, I moved to Portland, where I had long wanted to live. But I knew nobody here; had no community. Aging makes me vulnerable to abuse and ill-treatment from care-givers and housing administrators who wield power over me. I'm not used to this. I joined Occupy Portland and connected with other activists, but as far as I know, I'm the only lesbian actively involved. Already different because of my age, I'm reluctant to correct young activists who would be embarrassed to know I ever had a sexuality. Old women aren't sexy. Eeeeww.

Some of my neighbors are old farts and curmudgeons who are my age or older but missed the whole point of the '70s. They think it was drugs, sex, and rock-n-roll. It was, but for me it was also revolution. Coming out was coming into my authenticity. There was strength in it. Waiting in line at the food pantry, at the free clinic, at the office of aging and disability, it is hard to feel strong. A bright young nurse at the clinic asks me when is the last time I had sexual intercourse. I am too weary to explain.

Gay and Gray is a way for me to build community with other old Queers, many of whom have some shared history. Even there, few are like me. Few came out politically before they found a lover. Few opened up to the truth about themselves as part of a revolution. Not many discovered their orientation by reading. But we do share some history. We share the experience of aging and vulnerability, of prejudice and stereotypes. We share music, books, movies, culture. We share the isolation and invisibility of aging. Politically, we make common cause: we don't want to go into the closet now.

Friendly House 4th Annual Gay & Grey PDX Expo

Each year in Oregon another 4,300 LGBT adults turn 65. And that pace will continue for the next 18 years as Boomers reach retirement age.

Friendly House is hosting its 4th Annual Gay & Grey PDX Expo, the largest event of its kind in the country, on May 12, with the theme, Moving Forward, Looking Back. This outreach event addresses the social, health and housing needs of Metro Portland's older LGBT community. The Expo will take place at Friendly House, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m., 1737 NW 26th (at Thurman), Portland, OR 97210, 503-228-4391.

The event offers LGBT senior housing resources; free health consultations such as blood pressure, body mass index, and HIV screening; gay friendly senior service information; break-out sessions on topics such as Sex After 60, LGBT travel and recreation, living well with HIV, end of life concerns & celebrations, and spirituality; and demonstrations of practices such as Zumba Gold, Tai Chi, and yoga. There will be a vendor fair with a wide range of agencies and businesses committed to improving the lives of LGBT older adults and seniors.

There will also be live music and food for purchase from area restaurants. The price of admission is a \$5 suggested donation; no one will be turned away. Sponsorships of the event and proceeds from food sales will support ongoing advocacy and outreach by Friendly House's Gay & Grey program.



Dignity



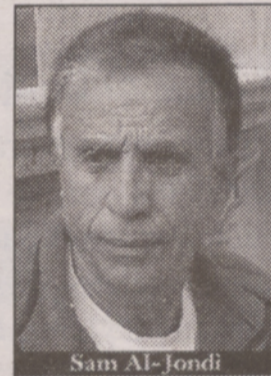
Poverty

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Vote for Dignity.



Check out Street Roots Vendor Sam Al-Jondi's new book, "Code of Conduct." Al-Jondi writes about his experiences and offers a fresh perspective about the world we live in.



The books can be purchased at the Multnomah County Central Library on SW 10th Ave., on Kindle, Amazon, and for \$10 through Street Roots at 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209.



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