

Gay retirement community is a first

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By BOB MOOS

SANTA FE, N.M. – Jan Gaynor and Barbara Cohn have decided to spend their retirement years in this city of art and culture, not just because it's steeped in 400 years of history, but also because it offers something new.

The sixtysomething couple wanted to live in the nation's first full-fledged retirement community for gays and lesbians. They sold their house in California and moved into a condominium at Rainbow Vision Santa Fe this summer.

"We've been together for 16 years, and we were looking to retire someplace where we could be ourselves," Ms. Cohn said. "Here, we can hold hands and give each other a kiss without someone raising an eyebrow."

Since Rainbow Vision opened in June, 60 people from across the country have bought or leased residences and settled into what's been billed as a resort community for those who want to make the most of the second half of life.

Gay men and lesbians are the newest niche in a booming retirement housing market that already includes developments catering to Asian-Americans, the deaf, golfing enthusiasts, military veterans and university alumni.

Besides Rainbow Vision, 21 gay and lesbian retirement communities are under construction or on the drawing board, according to the American Society on Aging.

Others, including the Silver Hope Project in Dallas, are under discussion.

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The number of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans over 65 will more than double in the next 25 years, from an estimated 3 million to 7 million, according to projections by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Yet it's more than a matter of numbers. Gay boomers are the first generation to come of age after the gay rights movement of the 1970s and have been more open about their sexual orientation than previous generations.

"Gay boomers won't worry what other people think if they choose to live in a gay retirement community," said Sandra Timmermann, director of the MetLife Mature Market Institute, which has published a report titled "Out and Aging."

Gay people have long thought about retiring together, but the idea of building such communities hadn't progressed much beyond talk until recently, said Amber Hollibaugh, a strategist for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Over the last decade, however, a few housing projects have popped up to serve the "gay and gray" population. Developers have built subdivisions of single-family houses or sometimes just sold lots for trailer homes.

"As gay people, we may feel especially vulnerable as we age, since we're less likely to have children to call on for help," Ms. Hollibaugh said. "Yet we've also been resourceful and created our own 'families of choice' with our friends."

Varied options

Rainbow Vision, a 13-acre development of adobe buildings, is the first project to offer a broad range of retirement living choices – from 120 residences for active adults to 26 assisted-living suites for frail seniors.

From the outside, only rainbow banners at the entrance suggest this is no run-of-the-mill retirement home. Inside, members enjoy a fitness center and spa, gourmet food prepared by a chef trained in France, cabaret shows and a salon.

"Life can be difficult. We try to make it easy," said Joy Silver, the community's founder.

Activity revolves around the community center, where tai chi and yoga classes in the morning are followed by hot stone massages and book discussions in the afternoon and cabaret shows with celebrity look-alikes at night.

Gay memorabilia adorn the center's walls – Billie Jean King's tennis rackets in the fitness center named after her, an old magazine cover of Truman Capote in the library, a photograph of Oscar Wilde in the community room.

But the sense of community at Rainbow Vision comes mainly from the members themselves.

"We don't have to hide or lie here," said Alan Taylor, 60, a retired designer who moved from Los Angeles. "We've all lived the same history. I can talk about the friends I've lost to AIDS, and everyone understands."

Stephen Kerr, 67, a retired librarian from Florida, doubts he could have talked much about his life if he had moved into a mainstream retirement community. "And at my age, I wasn't about to go back into the closet," he said.

Rainbow Vision's 60 residents vary in age from 48 to 94 and are pretty evenly divided between men and women and between singles and couples. About a dozen aren't gay but chose the community for its camaraderie.

Overcoming skepticism

Ms. Silver, president of Rainbow Vision Properties Inc., the privately held company that built the community, said she faced skepticism when she asked potential investors for help with the \$32 million project.

"When people asked why we would want to live in a gay community, I'd reply, 'Why wouldn't we?' Why do golfers want to live in golfing communities? Because people feel comfortable being with others like themselves."

After conventional financiers told her the venture was too risky, she turned to individuals who shared her vision.

It took her nine years to raise the money, often in \$25,000 or \$50,000 investments.

Construction will begin on a second Rainbow Vision community in Palm Springs, Calif., next year, and Ms. Silver said she'd like to work with groups in other areas of the country to develop more communities.

Dallas potential

A group of Dallas' gay leaders has been trying to raise the seed money for a gay retirement community that would include condominiums and small homes for active seniors and assisted-living apartments for others.

"The gay vocabulary hasn't included the word *old*, but that's about to change," said Jim LeCroy, vice president of the Silver Hope Project. "Many of us are getting older, and we'll need a place where we can feel safe."

Though almost all of the gay retirement projects have sprung from the gay community itself, an established senior living company is developing a continuing-care retirement community in Northern California.

Aegis Living of Redmond, Wash., operates 40 communities, but its Fountaingrove Lodge in Santa Rosa is its first venture in the gay retirement market.

"We're an entrepreneurial company," said Wes Winter, the project's marketing director. "We had built a community for Asian-Americans, so we were already in a niche frame of mind when a group of gay professionals approached us with the idea."

The group of physicians and college professors from the San Francisco area provided the community connections, while Aegis Living had the development experience and the access to \$85 million in capital.

Mr. Winter said the 148-unit community will open in Northern California's wine country by 2009 and offer the equivalent of "cruise ship living."

Reforms needed

As appealing as communities like Rainbow Vision and Fountaingrove Lodge will be to some gay people, gay advocates say mainstream retirement communities must be made more welcoming to gay and lesbian seniors.

The MetLife Mature Market Institute's recent "Out and Aging" report on gay and lesbian boomers found that one in three worry they'll face discrimination because of their sexual orientation when they become old and require care.

"Most long-term care facilities operate under a sort of 'don't ask, don't tell' policy where gay seniors are expected to conceal their identities," Ms. Hollibaugh said. "Those who don't follow the unwritten rule face ostracism or worse."

The long-term care industry has done little to train staff how to treat openly gay seniors and ease tensions with other residents, said Michael Adams, director of SAGE, a nonprofit group that advocates for older gays and lesbians.

"Nursing homes often tell us they don't have any gay residents," he said. "Those are the homes with the greatest need for training, because they probably have a few folks who feel they can't be open about who they are."

When Joy Silver hears of gay seniors suffering in silence, she tells the story of one woman in her early 80s who moved to Rainbow Vision from a traditional retirement community where she was the only gay person.

"The people there were all very nice, but she still cried every day because she couldn't share her stories with anyone," Ms. Silver said. "Now that she's here with us, she's not crying anymore. She's too busy chatting up her new friends."