

A community for aging suburban gays

Saul Friedman | Gray Matters
February 1, 2008

I can only identify her as KL, from Huntington, a 67-year-old lesbian, for she is of an older generation and still living in the shadows.

She's been isolated from her family and adult children since she acknowledged her sexuality 15 years ago. And she's been alone and in and out of therapy since losing her partner to cancer two years ago.

Like thousands of gays, lesbians and transgender older adults, KL, who is still grieving her loss, is facing one of the costs of sexual liberation. Now that they've emerged from the dubious security of the closet, many without their families, who is to care for them as they age? To whom do they turn for counseling and comfort?

One important answer is a new organization, SAGE-LI, for Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders on Long Island, which opened a center in Bay Shore last October to see to the needs of this growing population -- which despite its size has been invisible.

As the executive director, David Kilmnick, a veteran social worker, told me in an e-mail, SAGE-LI is the only organization to provide extensive social services to Long Island's elderly population of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders (GLBT). And this Wednesday, Feb. 6, is Advocacy Day, when busloads of the Island's LGBT community are scheduled to travel to Albany to talk with legislators and state officials about their needs and problems.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has estimated that there are about 3.5 million Americans over 50 who identify themselves as gay or lesbians.

As I pointed out the last time I wrote about this issue (June 3, 2006), the problems they have faced include explicit discrimination, on the job and in seeking social services and medical help. Unfortunately, too many of the straight elderly are still ignorant throwbacks. And it has not helped that President George W. Bush and other leading politicians perpetuate the notion that homosexuality is a matter of choice. As I noted in 2006, many gays run into hostility in nursing homes and are all but barred from some senior centers. Many older gays, who lived through the closet years, remain reluctant to come "out" among their straight friends, fearing they would be the butt of jokes or worse.

While younger gays and lesbians take pride in their sexual orientation and have their own activist social and political groups, older GLBTs have more quietly organized themselves, including in New York City and around the state. SAGE-LI is the newest comprehensive organization, with its center at 34 Park Ave. in Bay Shore. It is open most days for social gatherings, counseling, computer classes and other activities.

To prepare for the center's opening, SAGE-LI conducted focus sessions with a number of GLBT seniors to probe their fears and needs. They complained they felt left out by members of straight groups, political and social. They asked for health care and bereavement counseling. They

wanted to know about potential legal and insurance problems in a same-sex partnership.

Kilmnick told me, "We're seeing the first generation of GLBT people that has been willing to take advantage of services target especially for them. Seventy-five years ago, most GLBT people got married to opposite sex spouses and they had their kids. ... Now we're dealing with the first large groups of GLBT seniors who did not get married and who, by and large, do not have children. The question is who will be their caretakers?"

Several studies have found that more than two-thirds of older GLBTs live alone, and many have no one to turn to for help. And the law is often in their way. Because the Family and Medical Leave Act doesn't cover non-married partners, elderly GLBT people can't get time off when a partner is ill or dies. Health care proxies designating a same sex partner may be challenged by a blood relation.

The many issues confronting GLBT people and the rapid growth of their numbers has attracted the attention of the MetLife Mature Market Institute, which, along with the American Society on Aging, has published a list of tips to help them prepare for retirement and long-term care. While most of the tips are obvious, the MetLife Study, "Out and Aging," is an indication that the generally affluent GLBT community is of great interest to insurers and advocates for the elderly.

"This group reports a great deal of worry about who will care for them," said Sandra Timmermann, director of the MetLife Mature Market Institute. "Financial concerns are also an issue, for women slightly more than men. Planning for financial, legal and emotional support should be a high priority."

The tips include some important Web sites, such as that of the advocacy organization Lambda Legal, lambda.org, which offers specific advice on wills at: lambdalegal.org. Many gays and lesbians have complained they cannot find physicians who understand their needs and aren't unreasonably fearful of AIDS. A good resource is the Web site of the Gay & Lesbian Medical Association, which has a directory of friendly doctors: glma.org.

But the relatively new Web site for the Long Island GLBT network can be of great help to gays and lesbians, young and older.

For it is part of a unique network, financed by grants, which includes SAGE-LI, the Long Island GLBT Community Center, the Long Island GLBT Health Services Network and the umbrella group, Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth (LIGALY).

It's worth browsing the new Web sites, ligaly.org, or sageli.org, to learn what's available.