

LOOKING AFTER OUR LESBIAN ELDERS

WHERE WILL WE LIVE
(AND HOW CAN WE AFFORD IT)?
BY VICTORIA A. BROWNORTH

The nation is getting older—and fast. According to a recent U.S. Census Bureau report, there are now more Americans 65 or older than at any time in U.S. history—the elderly comprise 13 percent of the population. SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders) puts the number of lesbians and gay men over 65 at 1.5 million, but other activists say the number is higher. The U.S. Census also tells us that there are more elderly women than men. Fifty-seven percent of Americans over 65 are women, and 77 percent of those 85 and older are women, which means that there will be more elderly lesbians than gay men, and that housing for elderly lesbians will be vital in the coming years.

SAGE in New York offers myriad resources for LGBT seniors, as well as some unsettling stats. Queer seniors are more likely than their heterosexual peers to live alone; more likely not to have children, or an extended family; more likely to be living in poverty. Also, queer seniors have to deal with the issue of being out—or closeted—in settings that provide a community for people over 65.

A study released in March 2012 by Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), a Washington, D.C.-based research agency, found that 60 percent of women over 65 in the U.S. cannot afford food, housing and health care. While many elderly women (27 percent, according to the census data) end up living with an adult child or grandchild, less than a third of lesbians have children, raising the question *Where will we live as we age?* Some communities are attempting to answer that question with LGBT senior-specific housing being built with the goal of serving of an aging—and out—queer population.

This kind of housing runs the gamut—from pricey single family dwellings in resort-like settings to efficiency apartments for LGBT seniors with the restrictive incomes that many older lesbians will have.



Residents of Birds of a Feather; Fountaingrove Lodge; Birds of a Feather

Retirement planners suggest that by the time you are 45, you should reserve a space where you can “age in place”—stay in your home as you age. The younger you are when you make these decisions, the more likely it will be that you can afford the retirement home of your dreams.

Yet according to a January 2013 study from *U.S. News & World Report*, fewer than a third of all Americans have retirement savings, more than a third will tap into their 401(k) accounts at least once before retirement, and half don’t have enough savings to last even three months, let alone the two decades that most women will be living past the age of 65.

Money is the first thing to take into account when choosing a place to live out your golden—or lavender—years. Other issues include safety, access to health care, climate and proximity to friends and family. And then there’s the nature of the community you’ll live in. Will you suffer discrimination? Will you have to explain yourself, or will questions about you and your partner be unnecessary?

The concept behind Fountaingrove Lodge, in Santa Rosa, Calif., is well-appointed living in serene surroundings. Fountaingrove promotes itself as the nation’s first LGBT senior community designed both for people who can live independently and for people who require continuing care. Fountaingrove looks like a resort

hotel, with everything from the requisite pool and golf course to resident gardens and orchards. There’s a movie theater, fitness center, art studio, bank, and drivers to take residents off the property. Since it’s in the heart of California wine country, there

is a wine cellar on site. Also, pets are allowed. According to Gena Jacob, senior marketing director for Fountaingrove, the facility is “perfect for those who want to age in place.” Jacob explains that there

are units for those with illness that requires advanced care and units for people with dementia and Alzheimer’s. But the main focus is enjoyable retirement for single or partnered

LGBT people who want to remain in a queer community as they age. “We want this to feel like home,” Jacob says. “We want people to feel comfortable and secure.”

Birds of a Feather is similar to Fountaingrove in its concept, but consists of single-family adobe-style houses on a 140-acre spread in northern New Mexico. Founded in 2004, BoaF is what founder Bonnie McGowan calls “a thoughtful community development for people who care about environmentally responsible living, an active and healthy lifestyle, and forming strong social connections when we need them most—as we are aging.”

Resident Ellen Bell says, “Our community represents everything I wanted in a retirement home. The physical environment is beautiful—gnarly old pinion pines, brilliant blue skies, space to walk for days, an abundance of wildlife to observe, and a grand view of the Milky Way on a clear night.” Bell describes BoaF as a diverse family with residents from all over the country, who are “talented, kind, caring, fun, and industrious...fully engaged in building a community where we can grow old in a safe and accepting place.”

While Fountaingrove has leisure at its heart, BoaF is oriented toward women interested in the outdoors and what the desert climate has to offer. (There’s a riding stable on the property, as well as numerous hiking trails.)

The appeal of Fountaingrove and Birds of a Feather is alluring, if you can afford them. For those who cannot, different options are evolving. Cities with large LGBT populations, notably San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia, have activists working to create affordable housing for LGBT people. GLEH (Gay & Lesbian Elder Housing) is a model for such low-income housing in an urban setting.

Triangle Square, a \$20 million, 104-unit building in Hollywood, was opened in 2007. A documentary about the process, *A Place to Live: The Story of Triangle*, underscores just how intensely lesbians and gay men feel about living in a queer senior community. Alice, a retired social worker, lived with her partner, Sylvia, for 45 years, until Sylvia’s death. Left with only \$1,000 a month in income, and her two cats to care for, Alice said that Triangle Square, “a sheltering and nurturing place,” saved her life. “It gave me a place to live, a place to grieve, and a place to find me.”

In November 2012, *Philadelphia Gay News* publisher Mark Segal realized a long-term dream when ground was broken on the city’s first high-rise apartment building for LGBT seniors. Segal, himself 62, explains that the queer community has been focused on many issues over the years, from “HIV/AIDS to marriage equality to bullying. We never put a system in place for LGBT seniors—especially those who are low-income and very endangered.”

The building Segal has worked toward realizing will

feature 56 one-bedroom units in the heart of the city’s downtown gayborhood. Affordability will be the optimizing factor, with apartments ranging from \$165 to \$785 a month, depending on the tenant’s income. Philadelphia’s low-income LGBT housing differs from other LGBT senior housing in how low the rents are and in where the building is, in the center of the city—a high-income area with all the aspects of queer community that LGBT seniors could access readily when they were younger.

Openhouse in San Francisco is devoted to creating low-income housing for LGBT seniors. In December 2012, Mayor Ed Lee announced that a grant of \$6.1 million had been allocated to build 110 units of affordable housing for LGBT seniors. Ground breaking on the site is scheduled for this year.

In Chicago, an 80-unit housing development is scheduled to be built by 2014 in Boystown, the city’s major queer neighborhood. Chicago’s LGBT center has a program offering services to approximately 500 LGBT seniors that includes home visits as well as social activities.

One of the reasons that these options are so vital to queer elders is because, as many of the seniors in the Triangle Square testimonials explain, the issue of housing is still rife with discrimination. Elderly women are most often the victims of discrimination based on both gender and age. The federal Fair Housing Act, which prohibits discrimination in eight different areas, does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

As the LGBT population ages, demand for services has increased, and resources for LGBT seniors are available in many cities. In New York City, for example, SAGE has a comprehensive, citywide program that provides advocacy, activities and a full-time senior center, which is open daily and offers dinner every evening. SAGE also provides home visits for shut-ins and case management for elderly LGBT people who are negotiating health and other issues.

Ultimately, most elderly lesbians want what Ellen Bell says she found at BoaF, “a community where we can grow old together in a safe and accepting community.” Adding, “When I built this house, I told my friends it was my ‘bag’ house. I plan to live here until they carry me out in a bag! This is where and with whom I belong.”

In order to access that level of comfort and contentment later in life, queers of all ages will need to participate in the process. As one lesbian noted, “When we think queer community, we think youth. We don’t see our older people. They are invisible.”

With the growth of LGBT-specific senior housing, that is beginning to change. Focusing on our future, so that our senior years aren’t spent in loneliness and isolation, is a new imperative—a challenge that must be met for the good of the entire community. ●

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