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## Retirement Communities Cater to LGBT Population

**A generation that grew up in an earlier era worries about discrimination amid a search for senior housing**



Joseph Rieckhoff at his home in Stonewall Gardens in Palm Springs, Calif..  
CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Joseph Rieckhoff relished the palm trees and mountain views from his ranch-style home in Palm Springs, Calif. But when routine tasks became too onerous for the 88-year-old, and he couldn't walk, prepare meals or take medicine without aid, he realized he couldn't remain there alone.

He decided it was time to move into an assisted-living community. But as he began shopping around, he got worried. "A lot of people still don't like gays," says the retired banking executive who came out of the closet decades ago. "I don't want to have to hide who I am."

Then Mr. Rieckhoff found Stonewall Gardens, an assisted-living community with three daily meals, social activities and an on-site nursing staff.

But what sealed the deal for Mr. Rieckhoff was its clientele.

While everyone is welcome at the 24-unit Palm Springs development, according to Lauren Kabakoff Vincent, the community-relations director, the development caters to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and friends. Its very name, Stonewall, was inspired by the New York bar that helped spark the international gay-rights movement.

"Many of our team and volunteers identify as being part of the LGBTQ community, which makes our residents feel comfortable and at home," says Mrs. Vincent.

**'Gay, Gray, Hooray'**





For 88-year-old Joseph Rieckhoff, life is good at Stonewall Gardens, a senior-living development in Palm Springs, Calif. He likes to go for walks and sometimes watches television with an assist from a pair of opera glasses.  
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LGBT residents empathize with one another about coming out to their families, HIV-positive residents share details of their treatment, and transgender residents aren't gaped at. There are trips to gay bars, to Gay Pride events and performances by the Palm Springs Gay Men's Chorus. Everyone gets a T-shirt that says "Gay, Gray, Hooray," Mrs. Vincent says. Two years ago, Mr. Rieckhoff sold his home and settled into Stonewall Gardens. "It's a friendly place where I can be myself," he says. About three million LGBT adults over age 50 currently live in the U.S., according to estimates from SAGE, a national organization that studies and advocates policies friendly to the aging LGBT population. And some predictions say that group could soar to seven million by 2030, says Sydney Kopp-Richardson, director of SAGE's National LGBT Elder Housing Initiative. Cassandra Cantave, senior research adviser at AARP, says that as the population of LGBT adults grows and ages, "society must step up to provide more safe, inclusive housing options so all older LGBT adults can thrive." But the generation that grew up in an era before laws protected LGBT rights is now grappling with fears of discrimination amid a search for senior housing. Among their worries are that they will be harassed or pressured to hide their sexual identity. Many graying LGBT individuals are childless and lack support from extended family members, which exacerbates their sense of isolation and need for a welcoming senior community.

### **Many lack support**

"AARP's research shows that 82% of LGBT older adults do not feel like they have the social supports they need as they get older, and 52% are socially isolated, reporting that they lack companionship, feel left out or feel isolated from others," says Ms. Cantave.

Jim Meadows, executive director of the New Orleans-based advocacy group and service provider New Orleans Advocates for LGBTQ+ Elders, adds: "Our clients worry about ending

up in long-term-care facilities where they won't feel safe. They are afraid of having a roommate who isn't accepting of LGBTQ people or being mistreated by staff."

Still, a variety of housing options have cropped up around the country that seek to be attractive to LGBT individuals in their older years. At least 15 affordable-housing developments geared toward the older LGBT community have been built in cities across the U.S., including in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles, and at least 18 more are in various stages of development, according to SAGE. And several upscale LGBT-friendly retirement communities have opened—or are under construction—around the country.

A community called Living Out is scheduled to open in Palm Springs, Calif., in 2023. Advertising materials for the three-story, 122-unit project highlight amenities such as a putting green, pet salon and movie theater. Same-sex couples are featured on the community's website sipping wine or decked out in workout gear accompanied by taglines like, "Living Out is the home you have always wanted in the community every LGBT person deserves!"

Developers are betting that making LGBT acceptance a selling point will help ring up sales.

"You hear stories about people in mainstream senior facilities having to go back into the closet or hide photos of their loved ones because they're in a place that doesn't accept them or the staff isn't educated about how to interact with them," says developer Loren Ostrow, owner of KOAR International LLC., the Los Angeles real-estate company behind Living Out, and the development's chief executive officer. "Here, nobody will have to worry about that," says Mr. Ostrow. "Anyone is welcome to live in Living Out. Living Out Palm Springs is for LGBTQ+ people and allies."

## **LGBT programming**

The community's name signals that it's a place where one can come and live out of the closet, but its programming will also be LGBT-oriented, says Mr. Ostrow. That includes everything from the art displayed, which will be created by LGBT artists, to the entertainment. "We hope to bring in national Broadway stars and drag queens and things that are very popular in the gay community," he says.

Bonnie McGowan had to scrape together her own money to purchase land in New Mexico for a senior development welcoming to the LGBT community in the late 1990s, she says. It was challenging to get such projects off the ground in that era.

"There was no bank or private investor that wanted to invest in the concept of a gay-friendly community because there was no experience or history of them being a success. Nobody was willing to take that risk," she says.

Ms. McGowan opened Birds of a Feather, a 140-acre gated community of single-family homes in Pecos, N.M., in 2004 with the aim of providing a safe haven for active LGBT seniors.

"I get people in their 60s and 70s who come here and feel they can live openly as who they are for the first time in their lives," Ms. McGowan says. "I'm getting two to six inquiries a day. There aren't enough of these places around the country where gays can feel supported."

## The Palms



Fred Hodges, 71, and Mary Cumisky, 80, share a laugh reminiscing about old parties at their retirement community, the Palms of Manasota, in Palmetto, Fla.

PHOTO: MARTHA ASECIO-RHINE/TAMPA BAY TIMES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

One of the earliest communities in the U.S. to specifically welcome gay seniors was the Palms of Manasota, which opened near Palmetto, Fla., in 1998. At the time, Fred Hodges was living in Atlanta with his partner in a predominantly straight neighborhood, he says. The couple would drive 20 miles or more to socialize with other gay couples, and Mr. Hodges says he and his partner dreamed of retiring to a neighborhood where they could be in a community of their peers. So when they heard about Palms of Manasota, they flew down to visit.

“The people there were all very friendly,” says Mr. Hodges, who is now 72 and treasurer of the Palms of Manasota Condo Association. “A lesbian couple was having a fiesta and invited us. We said ‘This is so great, we have to live here!’” They bought a home shortly thereafter and moved in.

“It was amazing because every one of the units there was owned by gays and lesbians who came from all over the United States,” he recalls. “It was an amazing thing. We had a lot of get-togethers.”

Over the years, the Palms suffered financial setbacks, some arising from the recession of 2008-09, says Mr. Hodges.



Homes surround a pond at the Palms of Manasota, in Palmetto, Fla., one of the first communities in the U.S. to specifically welcome gays.

PHOTO: MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE/TAMPA BAY TIMES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ownership of the property changed hands around that time, says Mary Cumisky, secretary of the condo association board. Today, she says, the development is a mixture of gay and straight couples.

Meridian General Contracting of Bradenton, Fla., took over a large tract of mostly undeveloped property from the bank about two years ago and is building a community there called the Cove at Terra Ceia Bay, which will be open to residents of all ages and sexual identities, according to the company's website. The developer, Kelly Frye, did not return emails or phone calls seeking comment.

Despite the ups and downs over the years, "Every Friday night, there's a small group of us who still get together for Happy Hour," says Mr. Hodges. "We are still good family for one another."

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