

**The Future of Aging: Re-Defining
Aging Services & Advocacy for LGBT Older Adults**

Plenary presentation

No Need to Fear? No Need to Hide? Aging On Our Own Terms

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The first thing we must recognize about the culture of aging is WE CREATED IT. We create it EVERY moment. We create it when we talk about "old people" and mean someone who is older than we are. We create it when we talk about "healthy aging" and we define "healthy" as not having a disability. We create it when we say we value independence and do not recognize that not one of us would be here today if someone else hadn't grown the food we ate this morning or made the cloth we're wearing or figured out how to treat the childhood disease we survived. We create it every time we talk about "us" and "them," and create lines that say, "You are different than I am," when the reality is that there is NO ONE IN THE WORLD like us and, at the same time, EVERYONE IN THE WORLD IS LIKE US: We are all human and our viewpoint has been shaped by our experiences.

So what is that culture of aging? Some of the big themes are:

- It's bad to have disabilities.
- It's bad to need people to help us do things.
- The older you get, the more losses you have.
- The older you get, the smaller your world becomes.
- The older you get, the less you can contribute to other people.
- Being in a nursing home is a fate worse than death.

ALL of us participate in these myths. The perverse and insidious thing about ageism is that we spend our lives creating the prison of fears about aging that we personally then have to live in. If you think having disabilities is a bad thing, then you live in fear that aging may bring disability, and you feel like a failure if you develop one. If you think that it is bad to need help doing certain things, you live in fear that aging may make you depend on someone's help for something that you used to do for yourself. If we think nursing homes are inhumane places to live, we avoid them like the plague and don't create a nursing home

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that IS livable. We live in fear of things we've labeled as "not good," and we perceive ourselves and other people as failures if those things happen to us anyway.

What would happen if we quit labeling them "bad"? What if we started believing there's nothing wrong with having a disability? What if we started defining "health" in a way that allows bodies to have disabilities?

What if we decided to turn beliefs on their head and began to say, "The older we humans get, the more varied our social circles become?" What if we began to say, "The older we humans get, the more ways we know how to contribute to the world?" What if we began to say, "The older we humans get, the more we can see how we are all interconnected and could never live without each other's help?"

What if we began to say, "You know, technology has made aging a completely different experience now. Even if my body can't leave home, my mind most certainly can. Even if I lose my hearing, I can certainly still communicate with potentially thousands of people on an equal basis. Even if I lose my sight, technology makes it possible for me to read just about anything these days."

What if we began to say, "The problem with nursing homes is that the residents get really isolated from the rest of the community and don't get many choices and don't have much of a way to contribute to the community," and then we decided to make that different for the people who live in the nursing home down the street?

The LGBT culture also shapes our prison of ageism.

One of the things that we had to do to survive as LGBT people is learn how to figure out if someone was "like us." We did this based on looks and codes. The red tie. Wearing green on Thursday. The cocked wrist. The haircut. The bandana in the back pocket. The way an eye was caught. This is how our community was built: on looks. Although it helped us build a community, it simultaneously makes it harder to age, because we associate who we are with how we look, and looking old in this culture is considered a bad thing.

We also began to segregate our community by gender and sexual orientation. This was necessary so we could begin to define ourselves through our own eyes rather than someone else's. It also makes it harder for us to age, because we think aging, too, is radically different for women than for men, for LGBT people and for non-LGBT people when the reality is, we human beings want, generally, the same things: respect, choice, human connection, to be valued.

We learned to protect ourselves from people who "didn't get it" and hence could and did hurt us by, whenever possible, keeping to "our own kind." This is also a dysfunctional characteristic foraging, because we HAVE changed the world and the reality of aging for most of us is that we will need MORE people, not fewer, to help us with day-to-day survival.

Let's talk, then, about our strengths.

I want you to think about the last 35 years. That's how long it's been since Stonewall. I do not want to diminish what people did BEFORE Stonewall, but Stonewall is a milestone many of us have lived through and can therefore use as a "before" and "after" marker.

Thirty-five years ago...

- How many gay bookstores had you been in?
- How many gay books COULD you own?
- How many gay pride marches had you been in?
- How many gay professional groups did you know of?
- What did you do for Gay Pride Month?
- How many gay conferences had you gone to?
- How many gay characters had you seen on TV?
- Could you have IMAGINED a whole gay TV channel?
- Could you have IMAGINED that in your lifetime, straight people would be talking about gay marriage?

We. Did. This.

We changed our world.

Because of the work our community did, we changed the whole world...within part of one lifespan.

Now let's talk about what we have done as individuals. How many of us have been present at the founding of a new organization, or new business, or new coalition -- not just queer, but any group? How many of us have been the first out Lesbian or out Gay man or out Bisexual or out Trans person someone had ever met? How many of us have given money to any LGBT cause?

Folks, the people in this room know how to change the world. We've already done it. We can do it again.

The way we need to do that this time is to put our diversity to use. While we were off in these groups separated by gender and sexual orientation and race and disability and age, we developed a whole palette of strengths we as a community now need to draw upon.

Let's start with those of us human beings with experience as a gay man. What we gay men bring to the table is our experience with AIDS. Within the time span of barely years, we created a whole new service system to deal with a whole new health need. We gay men also bring to the table knowledge about how people can connect -- sometimes on a really intimate level -- in very short amounts of time.

One of the skills we human beings with experience as lesbian women bring to the table is our experience building a community of ex-lovers. We know how to help people successfully transition out of relationships and still care about and support each other.

We human beings who call ourselves bisexuals bring to the table the knowledge of both/and. We KNOW the world cannot be so simply divided into opposites: gay and straight, male and female, young and old, traitor or supporter.

We human beings with transgender experience know how to either make a life story continuous even through monumental changes, or how to drop one life story and pick up another. We also bring the knowledge of SOFFA circles -- the Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies who may not have the same identity we do, but can suffer from the same oppressive actions and stereotypes that we do.

We human beings who have lived with disabilities all of our lives bring knowledge of how to learn to live with a body that most people don't covet. We also bring our experience of universal design: if we make a building easier for the person who uses the most unusual means of locomotion, LOTS of people find the building easier to get into, not just those who use wheels to get around.

We human beings who have emigrated from one country to another bring skills in moving from one culture, one set of expectations, into another.

We human beings who have a genetic endowment that is labeled "Black" or "African-American" in this country know how to survive centuries of oppression.

We human beings who have been parents know about how to give care and nurture someone's individuality at the same time.

We human being who live in rural areas bring skills in connecting people even when the nearest person lives half a mile down the road.

We human beings who are currently young bring skills in living without really rigid gender and racial boundaries.

We human beings who have experience as heterosexuals bring knowledge of how to build multi-generational organizations like Soroptimists and Rotary and the Masonic network that give people roles that aren't linked to age or ability, and that ARE linked to serving the community.

We could go on and on about the skills we bring to the table. Because as people who have lived and who have survived, we have developed skills. And these skills are what we must put to use to create the type of aging we want.

We've done it before, and we can do it again.

We just have to keep reminding ourselves that the personal IS political and the political IS personal. Policy is important, but how we treat each person and how each person we meet treats us is *more* important. Changing structures is important, but changing our minds is *more* important.

We created a world that thinks differently than it used to about gay people. Now we have to create a world that thinks differently about aging than we used to. And it begins with us. Who we see as "aging" or "older," who we see as "disabled" and "healthy," who we see as "independent" or "dependent," who we see as "us" and "them."

We need to understand that **we** are -- at every moment, with every thought, with every statement, with every action -- creating the world in which aging people live.

Are we happy with what we see, or do we want to choose again?