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Honors for elderly who make a difference

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By Chip Johnson

The contributions of senior citizens often don't seem to count for much in a nation where mass media, technology and advertising speaks to the young. But there are thousands of gray-haired volunteers working behind the scenes to create a social safety net for their growing numbers.

Take Eva Bluestein, for example. When the 82-year-old El Cerrito resident isn't working on prison reform or organizing meetings for Holocaust survivors, she volunteers at Jewish Family and Children's Services of the East Bay.

"I feel I have a responsibility to help society improve, even if it's a little, little bit," said Bluestein, whose family survived the Holocaust by hiding in France under false identities. "That's why I'm active in a number of organizations."

Or consider Marvin Burrows, who is 70 and lives in Hayward. He co-founded several organizations in the East Bay that provide a social network and advocacy for gay senior citizens. He also delivers food as part of the Meals on Wheels program.

Bluestein and Burrows are among 30 senior citizen-volunteers who will be honored in Oakland next week at a two-day meeting of the California Senior Leaders, a group that provides resources and has created a network for senior activists to share their ideas, resources and experiences, and to address issues affecting their communities.

As America's Baby Boom generation swells the ranks of the nation's senior citizens, a social network that allows like-minded people -- and in this case like-aged people -- to band together around issues of mutual importance is more important than ever.

If there's a common thread among the seniors being honored in the East Bay, it's their social conscience and willful determination to live a full life after retiring from their individual vocations.

All of them will be linked with graduate students from UC Berkeley's School of Public Health, who will stay in regular contact with them, monitor their activities and provide support and resources when they're needed.

"I didn't want to be the sit-at-home grandmother that everyone brings the kids to," said Vernon Burks, 72, who formed the Association of African American Professionals, a group for seniors in Los Angeles that educates the community about issues such as Medicare benefits and construction scams that prey on seniors.

"Don't get me wrong," said Burks, a grandmother of three. "I love the kids, but I couldn't just sit and be stagnant. Sometimes, when you're past 60, people think you're dead and part of the environment that used to be, but there are a lot of intelligent seniors who have a lot to offer."

Burks said her work focuses on issues of social justice and bringing underrepresented groups together to discuss public policy.

While Burks' work requires her to help educated, low-income elders in Southern California, Burrows has spent the past 15 years helping other people in any way he could. He admits his Meals on Wheels gig comes with its own kind of compensation.

"Instant rewards come in hugs and smiles," he said. "I'm doing something that's appreciated by the community and really worthwhile."

Burrows and his partner Bill Swenor, who died in 2005, began their volunteer efforts as a lark: They flipped a coin to decide whether to devote their retirement to re-entering school or lending a helping hand to the community.

Just about everyone in Hayward is happy it came out tails.

Before Swenor's death, the couple, who were together 50 years, were married at San Francisco City Hall in 2004 when Mayor Gavin Newsom signed a same-sex marriage ordinance into law.

Since 1994, first with Swenor and later on his own, Burrows has been devoted to community service. He is a co-founder of the Lavender Seniors, a social and advocacy group for gay seniors' issues, and helped establish the Lighthouse Community Center, a gay and lesbian community center in Hayward.

Burrows also works phone banks and organizes family potlucks with senior citizens in San Leandro, Fremont and Oakland. He has spoken to dozens of groups across California on behalf of the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**.

Burrows, who grew up when homosexuality was neither discussed nor accepted, understands the special needs of gay seniors and tries to advocate for them in their dealings with state medical agencies and other institutions that gay men of his generation once avoided.

"As gays and seniors, we're sort of invisible," he said. "But we are older and we need the services that are provided to all seniors. We have special needs as well."

By 2020, 1 in 2 Americans will be older than 50, and what are now considered senior issues are going to become issues -- and concerns -- for all Americans.

It seems like good sense to start providing the kind of network needed to support the next Marvin Burrows or Vernon Burks who starts a community group, or the next Eva Bluestein who volunteers her time. Because every other person in the nation will be able to benefit from such services.