

## ‘Invisible And Overlooked’

A growing population of lesbian and gay senior citizens seeks recognition for their unique needs and challenges.

September 18, 2008

Jessica Bennett

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Bob McCoy is a youthful, active 78-year-old. He sings in his church choir, takes a weekly computer class, and regularly attends social gatherings organized by a gay senior citizens group in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he lives. But McCoy worries about a day when he can no longer care for himself: he has no close family, no partner, and he's outlived most of his friends. "I'm used to having friends I can call up and say, 'Let's go to [a movie],'" he says. "But now there's nobody to call."

Newly engaged, Jim Fetterman, 62, and Ilde Gonzalez-Rivera, 56, look forward to growing old together at their home in Queens, N.Y., where they share a garden and a green Cadillac. But the couple isn't sure if or when they'll be able to marry. Their house is in Rivera's name, but because the couple can't legally wed in New York, Fetterman won't automatically inherit it, should his partner die. And even though they are registered domestic partners in New York City, neither man will have access to the other's Social Security, because the federal government doesn't recognize their relationship. "It's not something we like to think about, but there's a certain amount of anxiety that comes with not having those things," says Fetterman.

These are typical faces of the gay and aging—a growing population often overlooked by mainstream advocates. **Gerontologists haven't traditionally viewed sexual orientation as relevant to their work—and, according to a study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, most national health surveys of elderly citizens fail to assess sexual orientation.** But gay seniors confront unique challenges: they're twice as likely as straights to live alone, and 10 times less likely to have a caretaker should they fall ill. Older gay men are at high risk for HIV, and many suffer the psychological effects of losing friends to the AIDS crisis. (See our [report on HIV and aging](#).) Many face discrimination in medical and social services, and on top of it all, they're less likely to have health insurance: one survey, by the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law, at UCLA, estimates that gay seniors are half as likely to have coverage as their straight counterparts.

"In many ways, this population is a mirror opposite of what the mainstream aging community looks like," says Karen Taylor, director of advocacy and training for the New York-based Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders, or [SAGE, the nation's oldest senior network](#). "The average senior in the United States lives with one other person; two-thirds of LGBT seniors live alone. If you don't have those informal support networks built into your life, then everything else becomes a bigger issue. Who forces you to go to the doctor? What happens if you fall?"

As this community grows, in both population and visibility, those questions are becoming harder to ignore. Over the next 25 years, persons in America who are 65 and older are expected to grow from about 12 to 20 percent of the total population, and various estimates indicate that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals will comprise 7 to 10 percent of that senior population. Meanwhile, like the Baby Boomers of all stripes, aging gays and lesbians are radically

redefining what it means to be a senior—and how they fit into the larger community. They're coming out of the closet, vocalizing their experiences and needs, and, most importantly, demanding public recognition. "If you go back 40 years, there were virtually no openly gay seniors," says Gary Gates, a senior research fellow and demographer at the Williams Institute. "But now you have a large enough group that people are paying attention."

This year, SAGE is celebrating its 30th anniversary, and running an ad campaign in New York to raise awareness about their constituents. And when the organization holds its national conference on aging next month, it will be sponsored for the first time by the AARP. Just that acknowledgement, say advocates, is huge: with 40 million members, the AARP is considered one of America's most powerful lobbying groups—and an influential voice on health care and social policy. "When we look to the future, we know we cannot progress if we don't bring in these other communities," says the Washington-based organization's chief diversity officer, E. Percil Stanford. "The [gay and lesbian] community is quite often invisible and overlooked."

That recognition is much needed—especially for older seniors, many of who spent years hiding their sexuality, and in some sense, still do. Many of today's seniors were already in their 20s and 30s when the Stonewall riots took place in 1969, considered the birth of the gay rights movement. Until 1973, homosexuality was still considered a mental illness, and in some jurisdictions in the United States, gays could be prosecuted as recently as five years ago, before the Supreme Court struck down a Texas sodomy law. Attitudes may have changed, but many seniors harbor chilling memories of being shunned, isolated, and in fear for their physical safety.

Social worker Lee Chew, 59, remembers, in junior high school, looking up "gay" in the dictionary, to find out just how "sick" he was—and deciding, until he was in his mid-20s, "to keep this to myself." At 90, Jerre Kalbas, one of SAGE's original female members, tells stories of growing up in the 1930s, when women weren't supposed to even wear pants. She describes men hooting at her on the street, yelling "dyke"—and even though she had relationships with other women, she was terrified she'd be exposed to her family, or fired from her job. McCoy, who spent years as an Army communications official, remembers going to a bar in Greenwich Village in the late 1960s, and climbing out a bathroom window to escape police officers during a surprise raid. Fetterman, who came out to his wife and the Episcopal church where he was a priest just six years ago, was dismissed from his job and kicked out of his home. "My entire life came crashing down," he says.

Some seniors, like McCoy, still won't offer up their orientation willingly. (Though McCoy considers himself out, he still hasn't told his doctor, therapist or social worker he is gay.) And in some cases, that internalized fear may actually prevent lesbian and gay seniors from accessing public services. One study, by the Milwaukee County Department On Aging, found that gay seniors who feared they wouldn't be welcome at an aging center were five times less likely to step foot in the door.

For those who can afford it, there are gay-specific retirement communities and free service centers dotted around the nation, mostly in urban areas. But most regular nursing homes give shared-room preference to their married clients, and only a few states require employers to give leave for employees caring for same-sex partners. Inside care centers, advocates tell stories of social workers using gloves to treat only their gay patients, or those patients being shuffled around from room to room to avoid harassment from other residents. In rare cases, social workers say that couples have gone to the extent of agreeing not to visit each other, for fear the staff will treat them differently. And many patients revert back into the closet to protect themselves. "If you can imagine a situation where you're 80 years old, with no kids, a partner passed, no cousins or relatives and not one service that will provide you help with an emoticon of respect, that's what most LGBT seniors in this country face right now," says Michael Adams, SAGE's executive director.

Financial and estate-planning matters can complicate things further. In most cases, gay survivors don't have rights to a partner's pension plans, and are taxed on 401(k)s and IRAs they might inherit. Same-sex couples must also pay federal estate taxes on jointly owned homes where married couples don't. Sometimes they even have to fight with blood relatives over how to dispose of a partner's remains. To approximate some of the protections of marriage, many gay couples have to set up extra legal frameworks, such as powers of attorney and joint tenancy agreements. "Senior citizens have enough of a challenge just figuring out all the paperwork for health insurance—but gays and lesbians have this added layer," says attorney David Buckel, the director of the Marriage Project at the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a civil rights group. "It can be overwhelming."

The good news, of course, is that attitudes are changing. At New York's gay pride parade earlier this year, SAGE made the rounds in two purple trolleys, amid 90-degree heat, with walking canes and colorful streamers waving out the windows. Some had been coming to the parade for years; for others, it was their first time. One couple, in matching T-shirts, held a sign that read: "Together 51 Years"—to raucous cheers from the crowd. "The fact is," says Adams, "the [gay and lesbian] community is going through a sea change in terms of the way we live our lives." For gay seniors, there's no time to waste.