



Challenges facing today's gay elders getting a closer look

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Frank Carter was once a globe-trotting professional dancer but his world is smaller now. He battles multiple health problems, walks with a cane and rarely leaves his compact Manhattan apartment.

As an 86-year-old gay man, with no family nearby and many acquaintances long since dead, he'd seem a likely prospect for isolation.

Instead, he has kindled a deep, five-year friendship with Gigi Stoll, a fashion model-turned-photographer half his age. Stoll helps Carter with medical arrangements, writes to him when she travels overseas and sat with him for six hours during his most recent hospitalization.

"The other guys in the hospital, no one was coming in to see them," Carter said. "To get that gift, you have to be lucky."

It's not just luck. Stoll came into his life through a program that matches infirm gays and lesbians with volunteers who commit to making weekly visits.

Long overlooked by society at large and even by younger gays, elderly gays and lesbians are emerging as distinct community, getting more help and attention as they confront challenges that differ in many ways from their heterosexual counterparts.

Advocacy groups say the estimated 2.5 million gay seniors in America are twice as likely to live alone, four times less likely to have adult children to help them and far more fearful of discrimination from health care workers.

Many fear anti-gay animosity or bias at senior centres, in nursing homes and from health-care providers. Some gay elders even keep their sexual orientation secret from the home health aides who may provide their only sustained company.

A watershed moment comes this month, when the AARP -- the largest advocacy group for Americans over 50 -- for the first time sponsors a major national conference focused on gay and lesbian aging.

It's being organized by SAGE (Service and Advocacy for GLBT Elders), the New York-based organization which counts Carter and Stoll among its thousands of clients and volunteers.

AARP's involvement is "a big breakthrough," SAGE executive director Michael Adams said. "To step forward and sponsor a conference of this high profile and splash your name all over, it's a quantum leap."

There will be workshops on a whole array of issues: mental health care and suicide prevention, transgender seniors, rising levels of HIV/AIDS among gay men over 50, and special challenges facing elderly gays in suburbs and small towns.

"There are very particular areas that make us a more vulnerable constituency of old people," said Amber Hollibaugh, 62, an expert on aging with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

"We tend to age alone, with no one to call on in times of need," she said. "We don't have a daughter to move in with us -- we don't have a kid to call when we're admitted to the hospital because we fall and break a hip."

Yet some of the sombre dynamics are beginning to change. Today's gay elderly do face unique problems -- but they also remember the bad old days in the closet, and many celebrate the joys of gay life in the 21st century.

Logically, Garrison Phillips ought to be a lonely man.

Though still handsome and charming as he approaches 79, he is, like most gay men of his generation, childless. His partner died five years ago. His older brother has refused to speak to him for decades.

Yet the former actor emerges regularly from his fifth-floor walk-up apartment in Manhattan to engage in an array of civic activities and volunteer work. He blogs, does public speaking and lobbying for SAGE, helps out at workshops on caregiving with tips learned from assisting his mother and aunts.

Phillips and his contemporaries lived most of their lives in an era where gays feared being too open about their sexuality. Only as elders have they witnessed the activism that has drastically reduced the ranks of closeted gays and built momentum in support of same-sex marriage.

"You were forced to lie every single day of your life," Phillips recalled. "I lied to my parents, I lied to my teachers, I lied to get into the army. Now you don't have to lie anymore."

Phillips was raised in West Virginia and served in Korea during the Korean War. He knew no other gay soldiers and confided about being gay only to his company commander, a high school teacher.

"He respected who I was -- he told me to be careful," said Phillips, who still wears his dog tag and proudly shows the paperwork verifying his honourable discharge.

In his 40s, Phillips joined gay-rights demonstrations for the first time, and came out to his mother, who replied, "Son, what's wrong with that?"

He notes that his generation of gay men was depleted by AIDS and many of the survivors have few, if any, close relatives to offer support.