



. . . to the needs of older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals

Presentation to the conference held in London, 30 April 2002

Setting the Context

Evan Davis
Economics Editor of the BBC
Chair of the morning plenary session

First of all, congratulations to Age Concern for organising this Opening Doors Conference. It is a valuable conference on a valuable subject and one which, I think it's fair to say, is perhaps a little under-discussed.

The purpose of today is to begin to highlight the needs of older lesbians and gay men and to ensure their voices are heard, particularly by service providers and decision makers. Let me say, though, a few words of introduction. I don't wish to introduce too sombre a tone to this morning's proceedings because sombre would not, I think, be the right tenor of our event today. But it is the third anniversary to the day of the bombing of the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho and a timely moment to remember the victims of that bomb. I'm sure we can all recall that Friday evening as word spread and then the horrific scenes unfolded on the television news. I also remember an uplifting event a couple of days later in Soho Square with the Gay Men's Chorus, who incidentally I'm delighted to say we will hear from later. I remember a very powerful and impressive pep talk at that Gay Men's Chorus event from a senior policeman as it happens. A very striking memory indeed.

I mention this event for three reasons on this particular occasion. First, because it was demonstration that the spirit the gay and lesbian community can muster when it tries is very striking. We need to garner some of that spirit in relation to the important issues that confront us as a community, and the issue of growing old as a lesbian or gay man is clearly one of those.

The second reason is the impressive results that can occur when the institutions of the state are deployed constructively and co-operatively with the lesbian and gay community. A large part of the effort of today is not just about Age Concern, but about decision makers, service providers and other groups, institutions and individuals working together. We saw in the aftermath of that bomb what can actually be achieved when this happens.

The third reason for remembering that bomb is that it invites us to think about its victims. It is always a challenge on a day such as this to get our thoughts straight about gay men and lesbians as victims. It can be difficult to strike the right balance between, on the one hand, not allowing ourselves too much in the way of self pity, and on the other not forgetting the real difficulties, challenges and discriminations we can face.

The very extreme suffering caused by the Soho bomb can, I hope, help us keep a focus and perspective on that issue.

Well, we have plenty to talk about today and with an all star cast. The issues we hope to cover, though broad, are by no means exhaustive and I would wish to reiterate that today is very much a beginning rather than an end. It is also important to remember that there will be differences of opinion and disagreements and that it is not necessarily the purpose of today to agree on everything.

To conclude, I would like once again to say well done to Age Concern – not only for organising this event but for taking steps to put its own house in order in terms of inclusivity and for the opportunity it provides to support lesbian and gay organisations in their own related work as well.

Evan Davis is the Economics Editor of the BBC, responsible for reporting and analysing economic developments on a range of programmes from Today to the Ten O'clock News. He also has a role in shaping the extensive BBC coverage of economics across all the corporation's outputs. He received the Industrial Society's Broadcast Journalist of the Year award in 1998 and 2001. Evan is a governor of the newly formed Pensions Policy Institute and on the advisory council of the think tank, the Social Market Foundation. He studied at St John's College Oxford, and at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.



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The Challenges

Gordon Lishman
Director General of Age Concern England

I am delighted that we have this conference today and I am particularly pleased that, as with other Age Concern initiatives, it is founded both in substantial policy work and a wide range of partnership work and contacts with other organisations. This is not just a one off conference on a particular subject, it is part of a programme that is addressing issues around equalities and diversity in all of the work which Age Concern does.

Griff Vaughan-Williams, who's here today, has reminded me that some 28 years ago Age Concern had a conference to which he made a contribution on behalf of CHE, the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. He and I talked then about some of the issues which we're bringing forward today as part of a clearer agenda.

These issues have not been widely addressed in organisations concerned with ageing and older people. There are also some challenges from my organisation and others concerned with ageing which can be addressed to a wide range of lesbian and gay men's organisations. I hope that today's conference will give us the opportunity to develop those challenges in both directions.

I am particularly pleased also to see here today one of my oldest friends in his role as chair of the Leicester West Primary Care Trust – someone whose patient and passionate explanations to me and a whole generation of people, 35 years ago, about issues around gay rights had an important effect on my understanding of the nature of discrimination and of the nature of the persecution from which an important and significant part of our wider community suffered.

In Age Concern, we know that there are major issues to be addressed around diversity. Some of those are policy issues and they are for the Minister to address. Many of them are simply matters about practice; about what happens day to day in the organisation and provision of services, whether in an organisation like Age Concern or in a statutory body such as the Health Service, Social Services departments or local authorities. These issues will not be addressed if we fail to achieve a greater degree of mutual trust between organisations like Age Concern and those organisations which, locally in particular, represent older lesbians and gay men. We need to establish that relationship of trust because the point when an organisation like Age Concern comes into touch with older lesbians and gay men can be at some of the most difficult points in their lives. These are the times when someone needs, for themselves or for a partner, the provision of care. Sometimes of course, there are cases which are around death, dying and bereavement, which are normal challenges for an organisation like Age

Concern but which pose a particular group of challenges in a particular way in relation to older lesbians and gay men.

In Age Concern we are committing ourselves today, wholly and explicitly, to trying our best to be worthy of trust from the lesbian and gay community, which will enable us to respond on a basis of equity and equality to those needs whenever they arise. It is an important part of my commitment as Director General of Age Concern to reiterate that commitment and to promote throughout Age Concern our shared expectation of the quality of our response.

I have no doubt that ageism exists in the lesbian and gay community as it does in other communities. In this case, ageism may manifest itself less in formal discrimination than in attitudes which create feelings amongst people about older people and about themselves. One of the most important things we do in Age Concern is to talk about a philosophy of life which recognises the realities of later life; which recognises the normal processes of ageing; and which asserts the individuality and citizenship of all older people and their right to be heard; their right to services on a basis of equality; and their right to be treated as full citizens. We know that there are some groups in our society for whom there may be double or even triple forms of discrimination. In addressing those things we need to address the forms of discrimination that we find, that come from our own attitudes in organisations like Age Concern and we need to challenge attitudes that might be about discrimination, for instance on grounds of age, when we find them in other communities. We commit ourselves in Age Concern to address those issues and to try in the work we do practically and locally to base our work entirely upon the needs of people and a recognition of the diversity of those people in finding effective ways of meeting needs.

A major function of Age Concern is to challenge people who hold power: to challenge governments, whether national or local; to challenge corporations and others; and to challenge from time to time media organisations, about the way in which older people are portrayed. There is no doubt that there are still significant areas for challenge in relation to meeting the needs of older lesbians and gay men in government policy. The Minister knows well the arguments that are about partnership rights. In this context and reflecting a special interest of my own, I stress in that context the issues that are about the way in which people are enabled to make choices about the last part of their lives, around the process of their own dying and around bereavement. Issues of partnership rights in that context are particularly poignant.

More widely, I make the point that, across the range of the work of government departments, there is a continuing fact of exclusion of important parts of our society, and that includes older lesbians and gay men, which simply arises from a lack of effort and of a commitment to include. When we talk about the way in which the services we provide in Age Concern, the services that statutory bodies provide in day care services or home visiting services or anything else – when we talk about those things, if we do not set out to make sure that our services are designed to be open, to include everybody, then by definition they will exclude. The purpose of the resource pack which launched the work that we've done in the last year or so is to find ways of putting a sufficient emphasis on inclusion; a sufficient emphasis to make people think about the exclusion that can occur if you do not include, to challenge and to address the issues that are within our own organisations. We very much hope, Minister, that there will, from the centre of government, be an initiative across all the Departments of State, perhaps most importantly in terms of the areas we're talking about here, in the Department of Health, to address some of those issues of exclusion and inclusion and to work with organisations like Age Concern, which are taking on board the need to find ways in which we can most effectively and directly meet the needs of all older

people and specifically the group we're here to talk about today, who are older lesbians and gay men. Thank you.

Gordon Lishman OBE is Director General of Age Concern England, where he has worked for 28 years. He managed development of Age Concern, the federation, which combines local independence and responsibility with national leadership and standards. Age Concern is now one of the UK's largest charitable operations. He leads Age Concern initiatives to meet the needs of minority groups of older people. Gordon is a member of the Management Board of Better Government for Older People, the Board of the Experience Corps, the Department of Health Older People's Task Force, the NHS Service Delivery and Organisation R & D Programme Commissioning Board and the Government Rural Affairs Forum. He is also a Governor of the Pensions Policy Institute. He has been involved in campaigns for justice for gay men and lesbians since the mid 1960s.



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The Government Perspective

Rt Hon Barbara Roche MP Minister responsible for Equalities

First of all, let me say, as the Minister responsible for Equalities and the chair of the Cabinet Sub Committee on Equality, how delighted I am to be speaking at this conference, the first in the UK to look at the issues and problems affecting older lesbians and gay men.

I would also like to thank Age Concern for organising this event which simply would not have happened five or ten years ago. There has clearly been a sea-change in attitudes since the days when some of the older people here effectively had to live their lives illegally, although we still have a long way to go.

Progress

But I think it is important to stress that we have come a long way, especially in the last decade. Some of the changes have undoubtedly come about as a result of the campaigns that you have waged. Many of these campaigns have found a resonance with this Government, and have already resulted in change.

For the first time, we have an equal age of consent for gay men. I think it's important to stress the importance of this achievement. Many older people remember when all male homosexual acts were illegal and the devastating effect this had on their lives. But getting the legislation through the House of Lords wasn't easy. In the end, we had to use the Parliament Act to force it through after their Lordships voted it down three times.

And we have made amendments to the immigration rules to allow same sex partners of UK citizens or anyone settled here to get residence in the UK, if they have been together for two years.

Following the appalling bombing in Soho, the criminal injuries compensation scheme was changed to allow a same sex partner to claim compensation in fatal cases. As a local MP, I was only too aware of the awful consequences for the people caught up in the bombing - two of my constituents suffered terrible injuries.

But we also recognise that much more has to be done. For instance, we know that we need to amend the existing sex offence laws that discriminate against gay men. The review body that we set up has already made its report, and we are currently considering its recommendations with a view to introducing modernised and strengthened legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I am sure that attitudes in the House will be very different this time round compared to the views expressed in the debate around the Sexual Offences Act in 1967. Then, MPs referred to homosexuality as 'an abnormality', a 'dire handicap', a 'great sin'. One MP recommended that parliament think about how to 'reduce the number of faulty males in the community.' It's hard to believe now that this was from MPs speaking in favour of the bill.

We are also reviewing the right to register the death of a life partner, following the recommendations of a white paper by the Office for National Statistics. The Government recognises that withholding this right from unmarried couples causes great distress to partners at a very difficult time.

I was particularly moved by a story that I heard during the second reading of Lord Lester's Civil Partnerships Bill earlier this year. It concerned a couple called Paul and James who had lived together for 30 years. When Paul died suddenly, James was faced with penury despite Paul's wealth. He was not allowed to register his partner's death and Paul's family refused to allow him any say in the funeral arrangements, telling everyone that he had been Paul's servant.

Civil Partnership

Which leads me on to the issue of the lack of legal recognition for same sex partners – a matter of great importance to many people here.

I am aware that Civil Partnership Registration has been the subject of much debate and discussion. This is why in November last year, I announced that the Government would be looking at the issue of Civil Partnership Registration with associated rights and responsibilities. This work is now underway.

But I think it's important to say at this point that registration raises a number of complex issues for Government, not least in terms of the financial and administrative implications. And as I am sure you will understand, we cannot commit ourselves to making changes before we have completed our analysis.

Of course, there are some areas where the recognition of same sex partners has already occurred. I've mentioned the concession on the immigration rules and the changes to the Criminal Injuries Compensation scheme

The Government is also leading the way for its own employees by introducing the new civil service pension scheme, which will allow same sex and unmarried couples to benefit from a survivor's pension.

Employment Directive (Article 13)

And as part of Government's campaign to tackle discrimination more widely, we will be implementing the European Employment Directive to outlaw discrimination in the workplace on the ground of sexual orientation by the end of 2003. And on age discrimination by 2006.

Older people represent a valuable resource to our economy, and I find it personally offensive when companies refuse to employ people on the basis of their age – people who are as young as 45 or 50. I can only say that I'm glad the Government doesn't subscribe to this particular recruitment approach, otherwise I might be out of a job. It is an approach that causes great distress, and can have devastating effects on people's lives.

But then there is the dual discrimination that many of you, as older lesbians and gay men, also have to put up with. Discrimination not just on the ground of age, but also on the ground of sexual orientation. Figures from the TUC suggest that 44% of employees have suffered harassment on the grounds of their sexuality. In a world where the pink pound is valued at £95 billion this is not only morally wrong, but makes no commercial sense.

Employment Practices

But we cannot – nor should we – rely on legislation alone to tackle discrimination in employment on the grounds of age or homophobia. That is why we are promoting the business case for non-ageist employment practices to all employers and individuals across Great Britain through our Age Positive Campaign, in order to improve the employment rate of the over 50s.

And that is why the Government has endorsed Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme, which encourages employers to recognise the needs of lesbian and gay staff.

We have also introduced the New Deal 50 plus for people over 50 who have been out of work and claiming benefits for at least six months. It has already helped thousands of people back into work, by providing personal advice, a job search support, a tax-free earnings top-up and a training grant.

New Deal 50 plus can help whether you move into full-time work or part-time work and can also help you start up your own business.

Flexible Retirement

In line with our manifesto commitment, we are also looking at ways of encouraging flexible retirement so that people can remain in employment on a part time basis, but draw on their occupational pension at the same time.

Experience Corps

But once people have retired, they often want to remain active by continuing to make use of the skills that they have accrued over their working lives. To meet this need, the Government launched a campaign last year – known as Experience Corps – with a grant of £20 million from the Home Office to encourage the over 50s to get more involved with their local communities, mainly through volunteering.

The initiative is open to everyone over 50, whatever their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or social status to come forward and volunteer.

Housing

As I said earlier, we cannot rely on legislation alone to tackle discrimination. We also need to change people's attitudes.

This applies just as much to the provision of our housing services as anything else, which I know is of particular concern to older people. And that is why we have developed a set of national standards to ensure that care homes – and those who work in them – meet the needs of their residents.

But we also need to encourage better and wider choice in the housing options available to older people, as well as improved access to quality services – the dual aims of a strategic framework for housing for older people that we published last year.

An external development group, chaired by Age Concern England, is currently working with Government to build on the framework document, and the group is also looking at practical ways of improving access to good quality housing advice for older people.

Policing

The same principles must also underpin our policing policies. I know, for instance, that the Metropolitan police has been recording the level of homophobic incidents and offences in each London borough since 1999.

Waltham Forest is a good example. Because of the links forged with the local lesbian and gay community, the police there now have the highest level of third party referrals of homophobic incidents of any borough in London.

This process allows individuals, who don't want to approach the police directly, to go to a third party (such as a voluntary agency), which then passes the information onto the police. As a result, Chingford police station has been made aware of – and has started to tackle - the high rate of robbery of gay men in one particular area of the borough.

Health

We are also making progress in the NHS. North Warwickshire Primary Care Trust offers a counselling and support service to mental health users from the wider gay community. This initiative – which has been running for three years – acknowledges the effect that discrimination can have on mental health.

The scheme specifically offers support to older users of local mental health services who face particular problems when they decide to 'come out – they often risk not just losing their job, but also their family. The project offers support to the family as well as the individual, listening to and talking about their needs.

I know that Paul Fitzgerald from the Trust is here today and would be happy to give you more details.

Conclusion

Finally, let me restate how much I welcome this initiative by Age Concern, which has, at last, highlighted the very real issues of concern to many older lesbian and gay people that need to be addressed by us all.

I'm sorry that I am not able to stay for the rest of the conference, but I will receive feedback from my officials who are here today and can assure you of my continued support.

Rt Hon Barbara Roche MP is Minister of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Cabinet Office and Deputy Minister for Women (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk). As well as supporting the Deputy Prime Minister across the full range of his duties, her responsibilities include coordination of cross cutting equality issues, including gay/lesbian and age equality issues. Mrs Roche was educated at the Jewish Free School Comprehensive, Camden, and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She was called to the Bar in 1977 and elected MP for Hornsey and Wood Green in 1992. Mrs Roche's previous Ministerial posts were as Minister of State at the Home Office, Financial Secretary to the Treasury and as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry. Mrs Roche is married with one daughter.



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Real Lives

Panel discussion with:

Yvonne Leddra, Mary McIntosh, David Self and Eric Stone

Evan Davis (Chair)

We now have another question time session with four people about whom this whole day is organised – a panel of four eminent older lesbians and gay men. Starting at this end we have David Self, a former freelance broadcaster and writer. David, you've written over 40 books. That sounds totally amazing. How can anybody write 40 books?

David Self

Well when you forsake a BBC staff salary, there comes a certain desire to earn a living. For 27 years I've had a very happy time as a freelance writer and broadcaster, and I can let you into a secret – the BBC, and Anglia Television for that matter, aren't exclusively heterosexual! So in a sense my working career has been an easy one and I have to say also I was lucky enough to have supportive parents. I am lucky enough now to be in a stable relationship with a long term partner.

Chair

You say in your biography here that you're out as a Christian as well.

DS

Yes – I'm never quite sure whether it's harder to come out as a Christian in front of gays or to come out as gay in front of Christians. Both can produce quite serious hostility in fact, and discomfort.

Chair

Next we have Yvonne Leddra, who started her career as an actress. Tell us a bit about your life, how you got here. I believe you were involved in the early campaigns for homosexual equality.

Yvonne Leddra

Yes, and one of the things that struck me most was the awful time the menfolk had. I have to say that I myself haven't had all that bad a time compared with so many people.

Chair

You've had two long relationships?

YL

Yes, but I have to say I'm quite appalled to hear some of the things that are going on, especially what has been said about behaviour in schools and so on.

Chair

Eric Stone, you're 72, you came out at 39 and life really started at 40 for you. But you were married and had two kids.

Eric Stone

Yes, I was forced into a situation where I had to get married. Not because she was pregnant but it was just a foregone conclusion. I'm Jewish, things were very hard in those days and you were expected to get married. I suffered for that for 14 years and it is the only thing I've ever truly regretted in my life. Coming out as gay – well I knew I was gay from about the age of 14. I had fun times going through college, going through school, and then met my partner who I was with for 22 years. They were the best 22 years of my life, being in a gay relationship. I didn't come across any hostility from anybody apart from my own family, but for them I was an outcast. It wasn't until two days after my mother died that I was told she was dead. My brother died four years ago and I wasn't invited to the funeral. With him, it was four days after he died that I was told. That's the way it was. With my partner, my gay partner, I was accepted as part of the family and I had 22 fantastic years. I have been on my own for nine years now but six weeks ago I met another man and things look to be going very strongly. I'm quite pleased.

Chair

And you're a founder member of Body Positive Blackpool as well. Last, Mary McIntosh, who published *The Homosexual Role* in 1968. You were among the founders of the Gay Liberation Front in 1970?

Mary McIntosh

I was, yes, and it was very exciting because for me it was the first time I'd really been able, intellectually, to say gay is good. I'd been through a very hard time coming out. For me, the difficulty was not other people so much as self acceptance. I found in the 50s I didn't want to be a lesbian, I wanted to be 'normal'. I didn't want to be what I thought of as being lesbian, and it was only meeting my partner and having a good relationship that made me more accepting of that as the 60s went on. And I must say going to the Gateways (club) was great. To walk into the Gateways and see a sea of other women who were like yourself made you feel very good. Creating a political movement and agenda out of that feeling was what the Gay Liberation Front was about.

Chair

I want to ask each of you if you can give me three sentences each on the salient features of being both elderly and gay. Starting with you Mary – what is it about? What are the key points of that life? Or is it just about being elderly?

MM

I don't really feel elderly! I think that's true of most older people, whether they're gay or straight, that they don't feel old until they feel ill or disabled or isolated and that's when it starts to hit you. That's not my own situation yet.

ES

Thanks for that, Mary. That was my sentiment exactly. I hate the words 'old' or 'older', I prefer the words like 'more mature' because I'm not old. I'm 72 years of age but 72 years young, not old.

YL

I agree with Mary entirely. I'm 81 and I don't feel old but I do resent a lot of the things like feelings of weakness that do come over occasionally and it reminds me that health is so very important. More should be done about the health complaints of old age such as arthritis because if you're fit and well you can buzz all over the place. If you're not you really risk becoming isolated.

Chair

Yvonne, do you have any contact with the younger gay community or are these two different worlds?

YL

I'm afraid they are two different worlds. I went to the Gates too – great fun, but now one draws away a bit. But then that's not just young gay people, I'm afraid it's all young people. I think they come from another planet sometimes. I just don't know what to say to them.

DS

I suppose positively I'm quite glad to be 61. There's a famous poem – when I'm an old woman, I shall wear purple and spit. Because I no longer give a damn, I'll exhibit myself on the nudist beach of Brighton and not worry what I look like. The disadvantages can be that, as you give up work, you begin to lose contact with younger people. It's quite difficult I think for many older gay people. Certainly I've experienced this – the discovery that you can construct horizontal families of your own age group but, unlike straight families which have subsequent generations, the vertical relationships with other age groups are quite often missing from gay life. The other thing I do feel is that, with the possible exception of the Pink Paper, the gay press woefully neglects older gays. The added problem for me, I suppose because I choose to live in the provinces and then not in Blackpool, Manchester, Birmingham or Brighton, is that if there even is a gay pub it's usually pretty tatty, on the outskirts of town and with a management that doesn't really want an old queen anywhere near the bar.

Chair

That's an interesting reflection on the problem. Eric, can you take us through what you think is the downside. What are the problems and concerns that you would say confront the older gay and lesbian community?

ES

The concerns are I think mainly back with older gays and lesbians themselves because they will not mix or integrate. As Yvonne just said, there's a dividing line between us and there doesn't have to be one. I mix with a lot of young people. All my friends are young. In fact my oldest friend is 57 years of age. My partner of six weeks is 42. There's a 30 year gap between us but it makes no difference. It's how you feel in yourself and your own personal attitude and outlook on life.

Chair

But you don't find the younger community puts up its own barriers?

ES

To a certain extent they do, but on reflection it comes back from the older gays. There's a bar I go to in Blackpool and in the same corner every night at half past nine there's a group of ten older gay men. They discriminate, they won't mix and all they do is sit there all night with half a lager complaining that the music's too loud. Mix with people, talk to younger people and get their views on life instead of sitting in the corner. Of the ten that sit in that corner there is only one that's older than me. But you're only as old as you feel.

Chair

Mary, do you think there is a gender difference in this issue of culture and the degree to which people choose to feel young or choose to mix with younger people? Is it easier for lesbians to grow old than gay men, or do you think it's the same?

MM

I think there probably is a difference because I feel there's less of a cult of youth in the lesbian world, in the stereotypical idea of lesbian attractiveness and so forth. But I do think there is still an issue about growing old. Personally, I find a lot of people under 40 no longer interest me much – they seem very unformed and still finding their way. Although I enjoy the odd occasion with them, I don't make my friends from people under 40 and I admit that is a bad thing. One of our problems is that our relationship to family is completely different from straight people. Older straight people depend very much on family support. Those who don't have family are isolated and unsupported and don't have people to help them. We need to recognise that we have to find other ways of building those bridges across generations. It's not just a question of whether you have the same taste in music and clothes and so forth, but about mutual support. We need to be developing other kinds of family, and it can't just be a bunch of similar age mates growing old together because we'll all be in each other's bath chairs and that won't do.

Chair

Life can be a richer tapestry than that. I want to open it up to the floor. Any questions for our panel?

Question

Why are you old people sitting saying you don't like being called old? Enjoy old!

Chair

A point well put. Eric, is there something in that? Is there something in the fact that maybe the gay response to growing old is essentially to try and remain young whereas there is actually something about being old which you can take pride in and enjoy?

ES

Yes, I do take pride in growing older but I don't have to go round saying I'm 72 years of age and an old age pensioner when I don't feel that way. I hope for many years to come I will still have the same attitude of feeling young.

Chair

David, do you feel old?

DS

I'm still trying to decide what to do when I grow up. Yes, the body creaks. One can't do what one used to do. I still go back to the fact that I do think the gay community can be quite hostile to, or simply prefers not to see, the older gay. Though I do accept this may be a particularly gay male thing.

Question

I'd like to see much greater recognition of and information about lesbian and gay history. Do you think this would be worthwhile?

Chair

A good point. You all come from a generation that grew up when homosexuality was illegal and are growing older in an era when social attitudes are more liberal, and we

don't want to let you go without telling us what it was like before. Is there a case for a written history?

DS

I've been lucky enough to be asked twice into sixth form colleges by enlightened head teachers to talk about the experience of being gay. I'm amazed at the number of people, presumably straight, say teachers aged about 30, who have no concept that it was once illegal. They have no idea of the terror I went through from the age of about 14 to 26, when the law was changed in 1967. The terror of being caught in a room with another man. The fear, induced most of all by the tabloids in those days, was enormous and it's very difficult to explain what that felt like and how gradually change came about. Another point connected with that – I have several friends in their seventies who have been in the closet all their lives and it's simply too late for them to come out now. Of course in actuality it's never too late, but they simply find it impossible, even though everyone around them knows perfectly well. We shouldn't forget what a potential minefield this is. If and when my partner goes into hospital, for example, I shall want and expect all the rights of access and to be treated as next of kin, but there are plenty of oldies who would be terrified of the thought of being 'outed' in such circumstances.

Chair

Mary, have you ever thought of updating your book from 1968 and writing a kind of 21st Century equivalent of where we are and how things have changed?

MM

I'm afraid I was an academic who gave up academia because I didn't like writing – the complete opposite of David! So no, but I do think it's very important. There is actually a very good book about gay liberation by Lisa Power called 'No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles' [note: Cassell, London 1995]. It's a good example of how much work is involved in writing such a history because you actually have to interview people. There is next to no documentation to go on because you're dealing with a very informal movement with very little in the way of organisation. There are developing histories of different gay subcultures but a general history is quite a difficult task I think.

Chair

You are all pioneers in this sense.

Question

Would the panel agree that it's important not to be talked into loneliness?

Chair

I'd like to open up this subject of loneliness in response to that point. Is there a problem with isolation? Yvonne, because you're involved in the Older Lesbian and Gay Men's Forum in Brighton, do you think loneliness is worse for older lesbians and gay men than for straight people?

YL

I've honestly seen no evidence of that. I am inclined to think that if people are going to be lonely, they're lonely anyway because it's something they have in them. I don't always feel it's entirely because they're homosexual. I mean, you'll notice in a hospital ward, if there's a jolly old lady somewhere the family always comes in, then there's a snappy old dear somewhere sitting on her own. In a way, one can invite these things in, perhaps by one's attitude. I don't notice it at all.

Chair

The dearth of family perhaps?

YL

That is I think a tremendous problem, because some people have families to look after them and others don't. I've said that my partner Ann and I and our two dogs have to go together! There will be no-one to push me around in a bath chair except Ann, and vice versa. But then an awful lot of these problems are worldwide and not unique to us. There are some details peculiar to being homosexual, particularly for men who had such a bad deal. Was it Queen Victoria who decided to ignore it so lesbian ladies weren't persecuted? It didn't happen so we didn't get into trouble!

Chair

Yvonne, does something like the Older Lesbian and Gay Men's Forum work?

YL

Well, it's very young, only beginning, but yes indeed. It does some marvellous things and is absolutely bubbling, but I haven't yet had anyone come rushing up to me saying you're all wonderful, I feel so much better. I'm not quite sure how many members it has at the moment but it's growing wonderfully and the Age Concern support is terrific.

Chair

It does seem that the institutions, whether the Gay Men's Choruses or forums such as the Brighton group, are a very important part of ensuring people are not isolated in old age.

Question

One of the things I'm picking up from what everybody is saying here today is the negativity or lack of communication between the younger and older generations and it has been said that they're two worlds apart. I can understand why it's happening, possibly because of lack of family but also the negative press and images we have of older people regardless of their sexual orientation. We've identified a gap here and I think Age Concern and other organisations need to be bringing older and younger people together so they can learn about each other.

Chair

The problem fundamentally, though, is of course getting younger people to be interested in an Age Concern event.

Question: There is an issue of loneliness and isolation for older lesbians and gay men, but what we find above all is public service provision that pretends we don't exist. I chair an NHS Trust and I know of no guidance coming through the system that the NHS should provide services for lesbians and gay men. I think the same is very broadly true for social services departments. We become more reliant on public services yet those services are not equipped to deliver what we need to live a full and vigorous old age.

Chair

I have one last question for you, but before that do any of you have a sense of where the public services are oriented or any comment about their willingness and ability to serve the needs of older gay men and lesbians?

YL

I think they serve everybody very well. But I don't go into a hospital and expect someone to say ah you're a lesbian so you go down there. I just want somebody to do

their job properly and not leave me sitting till I die before they deal with me. The problems are universal really.

Chair

My last question is to ask you if there was one thing that everyone in the room could do to make life better for you, what would it be?

YL

Find a cure for arthritis.

ES

Educate the service providers to the needs of older people. I can give you a typical example. I was in hospital four years ago with cancer of the bowel and had a successful operation. Four days later it all went wrong and I finished up in intensive care. It was only because I had made a living will that I was saved, otherwise I would have been left to die because I was also HIV positive. I have been for eleven years, but that isn't an issue for me. It's what you make of life and what older people's needs are that those providing the services need to know.

MM

I absolutely agree with what everyone has said about statutory services and official provision and I'm very suspicious about, for example, the way the government is encouraging volunteering at the moment from possibly the worst of motives. But I do think that in the lesbian and gay world volunteering is important and we need to be developing structures within which people can volunteer for buddying and befriending. I work as an advice worker in an Age Concern and one of the commonest needs I come across amongst older people is help with odd jobs about the house and garden. We need structures, maybe something like citizenship classes, to encourage and enable people to do those kinds of things, and I think younger gay people helping older gay people is a brilliant way of doing this.

DS

Thinking particularly of 'older old' gays, persuade them that their final years can be made more peaceful for them and, when death comes, for their partners by encouraging them to make a proper will. Appointing executors, even attorneys, can ensure that their final years are not spent in a period of anxiety over what might happen. The system has got to be managed carefully to make sure things go the way you want them to and so you don't get the awful situation of family members overriding wishes.

Chair

Mary, Eric, Yvonne, David – perhaps the most valuable resource we have here today – thank you very much indeed.

Yvonne Leddra's parents were on the stage and on leaving school she herself joined a repertory company. At the outbreak of WWII she joined the ATS and met her first partner Joan. They were together for the next 30 years. Returning to civilian life she went back on the stage, but found the casting couch syndrome difficult to deal with and so left the theatre. In her early 50s, having heard how much homosexual men had suffered through the years, Yvonne joined the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. She had parted from her first partner and eventually met her second partner Ann, with whom she has now been for 30 years. Yvonne was membership secretary of the women's group Kenric and is now a member of the Brighton & Hove Older Lesbian and Gay Men's Forum (www.olgmf.org).

Mary McIntosh published 'The Homosexual Role' in 1968. She was among the founders of the Gay Liberation Front in London in 1970 and has been active in feminist and gay politics since then. She has retired from teaching sociology at Essex University and is now an Information & Advice Worker at Islington Age Concern. She is on the management committee of Polari, supporting the housing and social care needs of older lesbians and gay men.

David Self is a freelance broadcaster and writer, having previously been a teacher, lecturer and a BBC producer. He has contributed to many BBC radio programmes – fronting programmes as varied as *Talking Politics* and *Sunday Half Hour* – as well as having several plays produced on stage and radio. For Anglia Television he presented two hundred editions of the discussion programme *The Big Question*. He has written for a number of national papers and has had over forty books published, mainly on literary or religious topics. David is 'out' both as gay and Christian and now lives with his partner in a Fenland village.

Eric Stone is a 72-year old gay man who came out at the age of 39. At the time he was married with two children, ages 9 and 12. It was a very traumatic time in his life but, as they say, life begins at forty and it certainly did for Eric. He met his partner whom he was with for 22 wonderful years until he passed away in 1993. Eric knew he was gay at a very early age and now lives his life to the full and has many friends. He is the founder member of Body Positive Blackpool (www.blackpool-bodypositive.org.uk), which was formed on Valentine's Day 1994.



... to the needs of older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals

Presentation to the conference held in London, 30 April 2002

Ways Forward

Angela Mason
Executive Director of Stonewall
Chair of the afternoon plenary session

I'm very pleased to see some of my brothers and sisters from the Gay Liberation Front here today, though I must say I have something new to come out about these days: being an older person, which, at nearly sixty, I actually am now. I find it rather hard to tell nowadays whether I am more discriminated against as an older woman or as a lesbian. However, I have to say it's good to be here as both today. 'Older person' and 'lesbian' are two things we don't often have the opportunity to put together.

What I hope we will achieve this afternoon is a better understanding of the needs and aspirations of older men and women within the lesbian and gay community and a better understanding of lesbian and gay issues within older persons' organisations. That said, being lesbian or gay is not of course one single category. We differ greatly amongst ourselves and, in talking to and learning from each other about how we want to go forward, we will no doubt come up with different solutions. By way of example, the Liberace Residential Home for Ageing Queens is likely to be a little different from the Alice B Toklas Lunch Club! What this illustrates is that there is, of course, no one single solution and that much more research is required if we are to understand what our different needs actually are.

However, I think there are some things we already know about how we should go forward. From all my years of agitating and organising I believe what we need above all is a voice. What is so important about this conference today is that Age Concern is helping ensure older lesbians and gay men have a voice. Without a voice you wait for what you are given rather than going and getting what you've been waiting for.

Secondly, we need a plan of action. There have been many workshops today on all sorts of issues that affect older lesbians and gay men. We need to bring those ideas and experiences together to begin a programme of action that we can promote within both the lesbian and gay and the wider communities.

Thirdly, we need to make allies and partners, and there are two places I suggest we look. First, within the lesbian and gay community. It's terribly important that older lesbians and gay men have a profile within that community, not just for our own sake but for all the young gay men and lesbians growing up today. It's very difficult to grow up with any real sense of your future if you don't actually know any older lesbians and gay men. We also need allies within the many communities of older people, their organisations and their movements, and for a number of reasons. I believe the dynamic social movement of tomorrow will actually be older people. We will be at the cutting

edge, just as other groups have been in the past, and we will be an important group to win over and influence. In addition, if we can organise within the ageing movement and can learn to organise across the divide of prejudice, we will send an enormously powerful message of tolerance to the whole of society that will help all lesbians and gay men. And finally, we need to work with older people's organisations simply because together we are stronger.

There is a very interesting practical example happening right now. No doubt during the course of today mention has been made of the new European framework directive on employment. It is a very happy coincidence that, as lesbians and gay men, we are going to win the right not to be exploited in the workplace almost at the same time as older people win the right not to be discriminated against on grounds of age. So there exists a real unity of interest here and a genuine possibility of co-operation and partnership.

If I can conclude with a brief reference to one of the other issues that has been a theme of today. We have been campaigning as a movement for different kinds of partnerships, including that of civil partnerships for couples. I suggest if we can also build another kind of 'civil partnership', one between the community of older people and the lesbian and gay community, then we shall be very powerful indeed.

Angela Mason OBE is the Executive Director of Stonewall (www.stonewall.org.uk). She has been involved in many high-profile campaigns for gay rights. She is working at the moment on the campaign for civil partnerships and for employment rights for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. She is the Mayor of London's advisor on sexuality issues and was recently appointed as a Commissioner at the Equal Opportunities Commission. She points out that she is fast approaching formal retirement age and has a personal incentive to end all age as well as sexuality discrimination.



... to the needs of older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals

Presentation to the conference held in London, 30 April 2002

A Community Response

Terry Kaelber
Executive Director of SAGE

It's a great honor to be here and to be part of the incredible work you are all doing to bring the aging issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender seniors out into the open in Great Britain.

For those of you who are not familiar with SAGE (www.sageusa.org), let me tell you briefly about us. SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment) was founded in 1977 – 25 years ago this fall – by a small group of community activists, gerontologists and social workers who were concerned about the impact that discrimination, anti-gay bigotry and homophobia had on LGBT seniors – many of whom were invisible even in our community. These activists sought to do two things:

1. To ensure that LGBT seniors could access high quality, gay affirming professional social services and support, and
2. To provide a safe place for LGBT seniors to gather within their community

Underlying all of this was the belief that our community must take care of its own as we age.

Within a year, SAGE was holding regular socials and gatherings in the basement of a gay friendly church in Greenwich Village, and had started its Friendly Visiting Program for homebound LGBT seniors.

Today, SAGE has evolved into the oldest and largest social service and advocacy organization solely dedicated to the LGBT senior community, providing programs and services locally in New York City to over 2000 LGBT seniors each year, and education and advocacy work across the US impacting the lives of the estimated 3 million LGBT seniors living throughout America.

There are four major areas to SAGE's work:

1. Clinical and social services
2. Community Organizing and outreach
3. Advocacy and Education
4. Volunteering

Through our Clinical and social services we provide a wide variety of services

- Crisis intervention and *care management*

- **Extensive Individual, family and group *counselling*,**
- Over 100 *socialization* & Group Activities opportunities each month, and
- *special programs* targeted to Older Lesbians, those who are homebound and those over age 50 living with HIV/AIDS.

Through our **Community Organizing and Outreach** and a special program called **SAGE Neighbors**, SAGE builds community, connectedness and support networks for LGBT seniors where they live in their own neighborhoods.

We also do extensive **Education, Advocacy and Communication work**, including

- hosting a biennial national conference on LGBT aging;
- conducting education, sensitivity and cultural competence training in NYC and across the US
- training LGBT seniors to be policy advocates
- providing technical assistance to SAGE's affiliate organizations in the US & Canada.

And finally, SAGE's **Volunteer Program** underlies all that we do. It is this program that works to engage all ages of our community in SAGE and in gay and lesbian aging issues, ensuring that we remain community-based and multi-generational.

Today I'd like to share some stories with you:

- One is of an old man who was being verbally abused and who was receiving sub-standard care from a home care attendant after that attendant learned his patient was a gay man.
- Another story starts with an old lesbian who, when her partner died, sought out a bereavement group only to have their 33 year relationship trivialized. She withdrew, became isolated and increasingly depressed, and was soon facing eviction from their home of over 20 years because she was not eligible for her partner's survivor benefits. She didn't know where to turn for help and grew increasingly distraught after it was clear that her local social service provider didn't know how to help her.
- And then there's the story of the otherwise healthy 82 year old women who broke her hip. Because she lived alone, was never married, had no children, and appeared to have a limited number of friends, the hospital discharged her to a nursing home, which in turn would not release her because she did not appear to have adequate family support to live on her own. Permanently institutionalized, cut off from her neighborhood and home, she became depressed and began to waste away.

Later you will find out what happened to these three individuals, but I'd like you to keep these stories in mind as I try to answer the question: what is different about LGBT aging as compared to the general senior population? What are our key definers as we age?

There is a growing body of research in the US that is allowing us to compare LGBT seniors with their straight counterparts and we are discovering some key differences that have profound implications for our community and service providers working in our community.

In research conducted for SAGE by the Brookdale Center on Aging in New York, it was found that LGBT seniors have significantly diminished support networks when

compared to the general senior population. Brookdale found (and this is being confirmed in other studies across the US):

- That up to 75% of LGBT seniors live alone (compared to less than 33% in the general senior population)
- That 90% have no children (compared to less than 20% in the general senior population)
- And 80% age as single people, without a life partner or significant other (compared to less than 40% in the general senior population)
- For LGBT seniors, Brookdale found this translated into a lack of traditional support networks which was not replaced by the strength of other close friendships or the size of informal support networks within the LGBT community. Nowhere was this lack of support more evident than in the fact that 20% of LGBT seniors indicated that they have no one on whom to call in times of crisis. This is a rate up to ten times higher than that seen in the general senior population.

Thus, when compared to their straight counterparts, LGBT seniors are:

- Twice as likely to age as a single person
- 4 ½ times as likely to have no children to call upon in times of need, and
- 2 ½ times as likely to live alone.

No wonder so many LGBT seniors can think of no one to turn to in times of need or crises! In societies where the health and well-being of the old depend upon the care, support and involvement of immediate family – ie: children and spouses – then the profile of a majority of LGBT seniors as living alone, without life partners or children to rely on, places us at particular risk as we age. In fact, research has shown that straight seniors with this very profile are at increased risk for depression, substance abuse, unnecessary institutionalization and premature death.

So what does this mean? One thing it means is that our community is much more reliant on and has a much greater need for professional social services and formal support systems in our old age than is the case with their straight counterparts. Unfortunately, studies in the US have shown that LGBT seniors do not access the programs and services they need. In fact, we are five times less likely to access senior services than is the case in the general senior population.

Why? Discrimination, anti-gay bigotry, homophobia and the ignorance of mainstream providers create tremendous barriers to services for LGBT seniors. In one survey reported in the American Association of Physicians for Human Rights, 67% of doctors and medical students reported LGBT patients receiving substandard care or being denied care. Clearly this has dire consequences for LGBT seniors – especially when considering the increased need for medical care as one ages.

In another survey of agencies serving seniors in the US, fully 50% said that LGBT seniors would not be welcomed at area senior centers if their sexual orientation were known.

As a result, when lesbian and gay seniors have no choice but to access mainstream senior services – many of us feel we must go back into the closet to do so. The resulting invisibility is compounded by the fact that the majority of mainstream providers

are heterosexist – assuming that all the old people they serve are straight. This assumption

- informs programming and social service delivery
- provides the language for intake, for the discussion of relationships, for life reminiscing and a whole host of other programming activities
- and serves to marginalize and alienate LGBT seniors.

So where can we turn for support and advocacy on these issues – the larger LGBT community. Unfortunately our community has not escaped the ageist attitudes of society at large. Negative attitudes towards aging in the LGBT community can be seen everywhere – from the characters in *Queer as Folk* who reflect an often felt sense that one is over the hill after age 40, to using the derogatory term ‘wrinkle room’ as a nickname for places where mature LGBT people gather. And what of the young gay man in an HIV+ support group who said the one good thing about being HIV+ is that you don’t have to face growing old as a gay man. This is not an isolated attitude. What is it about aging in the LGBT community that death is seen as a better alternative?

Ageism and age-phobic attitudes in society at large are very present in the LGBT community, but they have a particularly profound and destructive impact. Why? Because the very community on which we have depended throughout our lives for support, safety, love and affirmation – the very community we especially need in our old age – turns its back on us, sees us either as sweet historical footnotes, or as people to be shunned, as passé and irrelevant.

Even with the statistics showing that we are an at risk population as we age, our community

- Still does not see aging issues as important
- Still only has one social service and advocacy organization in the US like SAGE that is solely dedicated to lesbian and gay aging
- And our media still largely re-enforces the myth that we are a community only of the young

This, and more, means that LGBT seniors are marginalized and isolated even in their own community.

This is why LGBT youth (according to research done at the University of Chicago) cannot envision their life beyond their early 30s (unlike their straight counterparts who have a sense of their lives well into their 50s).

Ageism and the complete lack of any sense of one’s life after age 30 is why the life transitions that define aging in the mainstream society are so feared in the LGBT community – where the lexicon for old is invisible, ugly, unwanted, and shunned.

And this is why our community does not have a clear sense of its own life span – its own milestones to a gay life well-lived

Ageism and age-phobic attitudes literally rob our community of its future. Why fight for equality if we don’t want to grow old to enjoy it?

So . . . here we are:

- We're a population at risk
- Discriminated against because we are gay
- And discriminated against because we are old.

Why did I paint this picture? Because these are the most important issues facing LGBT seniors and all of us as we age. Because this picture should be a rallying call for the LGBT community. We are an at-risk population as we age. We must do work to educate and activate our entire community around LGBT aging – both the challenges and, yes, the rewards – so that we are not only informed but we can be proactive about creating the kind of aging future we all want:

- One that is free of discrimination and neglect from mainstream service providers
- One that is free of the ageist attitudes that isolate, marginalize and condemn us in our old age
- And one that brings our creative energy to building the kind of multi-generational communities, support and connectedness we need – especially in the absence of traditional societally-sanctioned family units to which our community does not have access.

So how do we do it – how do we address these issues? How do we combat the anti-gay discrimination of service providers while fighting ageism within the LGBT communities, and counteracting the isolation and lack of traditional familial support networks that are the lot of gay seniors?

The answer lies within the power of community – within the power of community building among and with LGBT seniors and doing so in a way that creates the connectedness we all need in order to age well. Creating community is about giving voice to the community you're working in, and giving voice allows that community to discover its intrinsic worth and its place in the larger society. This in turn is an extremely effective antidote to the marginalization and isolation that is the underpinning of what puts us at risk in our old age.

Not surprisingly, community building has become the central focus of all SAGE's work, through which our social service delivery and advocacy work is filtered. It has meant that

- For the old lesbian seeking an affirming place to grieve, she was able to find SAGE and thus a bereavement group aimed at lesbian and gay seniors and a social service organization that understood her issues and could thereby be an effective advocate for her
- For the old gay man with the verbally abusive home care attendant providing sub-standard care, he was able to find the support and strength he needed from SAGE's gay friendly visitor and lesbian social worker so that he was able to confront his home attendant himself and demand better treatment – which he got! This new found sense of his own worth as an old gay man meant that he participated in his first gay pride march at the age of 77. Now that's community building!
- For the old lady warehoused in a nursing home – a gay social worker at the home came to SAGE seeking help for this woman who he thought might be a lesbian. The up-shot – SAGE rallied our volunteers so that this woman – who was in deed an old lesbian – would have the support of our community so that she could be released and returned to her neighborhood and friends. She readily admits that

the SAGE community literally saved her life. Ten years later, at the age of 92, she remains alive and well and connected to her friends and SAGE.

The critical issue before all of us – those here today and our allies in both Great Britain and the US –

- is not just whether we will successfully fight discrimination and neglect by mainstream service providers,
- is not just whether we can fight ageism in the LGBT community and thus build the kind of non-biological, multi-generational support networks our community needs to age successfully.

The real question, the real call to action, is whether or not we can rally our community around LGBT aging issues – which is the only way we will ever develop the capacity to take care of our own, and thus ourselves, as we age. If we don't care about our own aging future, why should we expect anyone else to?

As we all know, our community rallied during the AIDS crisis. Why should we not demand a similar response during what is a very real aging crisis in our community?

- so that we do not have to die alone, before our time
- so that in our old age our lives are affirmed and not forgotten.

The key difference here is that the people infected with HIV/AIDS were the people who fought back. Well we need a similar response from the aging and old in our community – which, as I said, is why SAGE is now working from a community building, organizing and empowerment model. In the US, many of the underlying issues impacting our health and well being as we age will not be overcome unless LGBT seniors themselves discover their own self-worth, their own voices, so as to be able to speak out, and demand respect and a place at the table in their own community and in the straight senior community. For those of us working on these issues, we must provide the platform for these voices to emerge – and this conference is clearly part of that effort!!

Of course this work cannot and should not be done in isolation from mainstream service providers to the aging. We both have a lot to offer each other. Finding true allies in the mainstream provider community is a critical ingredient to shedding light on, and meeting the needs of, LGBT seniors, especially since our community can not possibly provide all the services we need as we age. By working in consort with mainstream allies, significant achievements can be made.

There is no better example of this than in the 'Opening Doors' resource pack – Age Concern's model publication designed to educate providers about LGBT seniors. It is especially important that this work is being done and debated at the national and local levels simultaneously, between both mainstream providers and the LGBT community. This kind of multifaceted approach creates a very potent momentum, and I think you see the fruits of this way of working here today, and with the work that is bubbling up locally across the UK. This approach is virtually non-existent in the US and may be one reason why LGBT aging issues still do not attract this kind of attention at the national level in America that it is attracting in the UK. We clearly have much to learn from you.

It is also worth noting that as the programs and services our community needs are developed, one must recognize that the LGBT senior community is extremely diverse

- in ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds
- in the range of support networks available to us as we age,
- in the attitudes towards and comfort level with being out (a critically important issue)
- and in regards to economic resources, and even marital status.

Perhaps the best way to manage this diversity is to allow for the possibility that anyone you are serving could be gay – a radical thought indeed!

At the end of the day however, the success with which LGBT aging issues are addressed rests with the LGBT community itself.

Will our community be there for us as we age? And what does it mean 'to be there for us'?

- Does it mean lesbian and gay specific senior housing – a popular subject in the US?
- Providing in-home services offered by our community to our community?
- Does it mean finding meaningful ways for generations, not tied by blood, to connect and support each other
- How do we ensure LGBT generativity – spiritual and otherwise – across generations?
- What are the rituals we need to develop to ensure that we are not forgotten – to ensure that our community has a sense of its own history – lived through the lives of each and every one of us?
- How do we gain and transmit across generations a sense of our community's own, unique life span and life stories?

These are just some of the questions that need to be answered, the work that needs to be done by our community:

- the creation of no less than a new way of forming and defining community and family
- the creation of no less than a new paradigm for aging in our society – one that challenges ageist attitudes and sees old age as a period of life of equal value to all others.

And I believe our community can lead the way in this work – especially regarding the impact of the break-up of traditional family structures, and of the isolation of the old in society.

We bring unique strengths to these issues because of our status as outsiders. We have had to learn to deal with the impact of marginalization, isolation and discrimination. We have had to build replacement family structures and other new support systems in response to the AIDS crisis. It is these lessons and experiences, and it is our community's creative energies that we must now apply to the LGBT aging crisis.

If we do so, I am quite sure that we will find new ways to define and create our community's own unique aging future – and that future could very well provide a road map for transforming aging in the larger society.

If we have learned anything from the AIDS crisis, surely it is to treasure a long life well lived. Let us now devote ourselves to ensuring that our old age is a place we want to get to and rejoice in – and if not for us, let us do this in memory of all those for whom old age was just a dream.

Q&A session

Question: I just wanted to ask what success, if any, you've had around cross-cultural issues as I am very aware that this conference seems to be very white, which I must say is reflected in my own organisation as well.

Question: My question was about how you actually addressed the issue with the woman you thought might have been lesbian but you weren't sure. That's a very difficult task and has to be done very sensitively. I would be interested to know how you did that.

Question: We've been interested in setting up a volunteering scheme in the past and I am interested in how good a recruitment you have amongst potential volunteers and if you have difficulties of having older people wanting a volunteer and not enough volunteers. Or indeed, even the other way round.

TK

These are great questions. With regard to cultural issues, SAGE, since it was founded in the Village, has been historically seen as a generally white organisation and we're doing a lot of work right now to change that. We are having some success in the way we're doing this, but obviously this applies only to highly urban areas. I think it's a very different issue working in rural areas. We are actually pursuing a community building model by going into neighbourhoods of colour and essentially working with the SAGE members that we have up there and saying, what do people want? What is of interest, what is important to you as you age, and let's try to build that – build what you want. It's been receiving a really wonderful response.

We are also working in collaboration with our sister organisations to outpace social workers in organisations that serve communities of colour and particularly older members of our community elsewhere in New York City, not necessarily gay or lesbian, but who have a strong presence with our community work. So that's how we've been doing it, but we've been finding our way. We've actually just had a town forum about racism and it was very important for SAGE to sponsor that because one of the concerns of many people of colour is that we, the white people, turn to the communities of colour and say: teach us what we're doing wrong, as opposed to taking responsibility for what we're doing wrong.

With regard to confidentiality, it's really a very tricky issue. We are developing a new training curriculum to take into nursing homes and this is one of the issues we've been working on as we pilot it. I think it's one of the reasons why when I said in my comments that it's very important to actually go in and assume, just assume everybody's gay, although don't 'out' them. You have to allow people to reveal that information when they want to, and the key to doing that is being sensitive to the clues. There are a lot of clues that will come forward during an intake process, during conversations with friends – either you're married, you're divorced, you have kids, who are the important people in your life, who is going to make medical decisions for you. You can find a lot of information just by getting information from people that they feel safe in giving. But you certainly do not want to 'out' people, you need to let them find a safe space to reveal it.

Volunteering and recruitment – we have nearly 400 volunteers and there are some areas where we have trouble finding them and other areas where we do not. Our friendly visitor programme for homebound seniors, for example, is all volunteer run and we do have trouble filling that because we screen everybody very carefully. Of course, we're letting volunteers into people's homes and it's really critical that you have a process to screen people. And that sometimes takes longer than some people are willing to wait. It also means that very often there are people who you decide would not be appropriate for the programme. But it goes programme by programme. Of the outreach we do, for example, one of the most effective is during the Gay Pride March. SAGE rents two buses that are filled with SAGE members and it invariably gets the biggest applause during Gay Pride where people are mostly 20 to 30 years old. I actually think it is indicative of the fact that younger people in our community want to know what their ageing future is about. The community has not yet figured out how to make that happen, how to find the places for people to connect. So one way, when you're building something, is to see if you can't have older people of our community walking in visible places such as a Pride march and handing out pamphlets saying: get involved, we need volunteers. We always get a big response from that.

Question: Your website, www.sageusa.org is the best website I've ever seen. It's fantastic.

Question: I would like to know when the September 11th incident happened, were any gay people working in the buildings and whether loved ones are looked after by SAGE.

TK

There were of course members of our community who perished during September 11th. Interestingly enough, regarding the whole issue of provision of services to our community after that, New York had an amazing response to setting up services that were brought in for families. The incredible thing was, there was nothing for our community and New York is considered as very gay friendly. We and a SAGE community organiser, whose girlfriend is a police officer, worked with them to try to get at least a booth or a table where people could go to get information as a lesbian or gay man, and we were not successful. The biggest impact of 9/11 on SAGE members, however, was the isolation of people who lived on Lower 14th Street. We had 'phone trees' as many of the phone systems were knocked out. We had a great deal of trouble getting in touch with people and often when we did, the response was – we're so glad to hear from you because you're the first person who has contacted us in a week. We get that a lot with many SAGE members because SAGE is really like a surrogate family. We are, because of a whole variety of issues, a replacement family and people really depend on that.

The other interesting issue was that, almost without exception, SAGE members were much less traumatised by September 11th than younger people. Probably because, like most older people, they've lived through other horrific experiences and were able to put the event in some kind of perspective that younger people clearly had trouble doing.

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