

"Getting blasted" an interview with Bitch

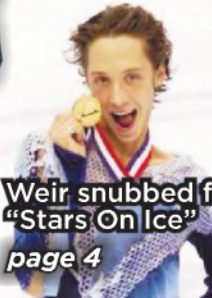
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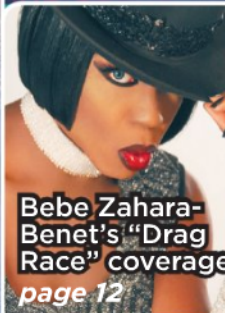
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GROUNDBREAKING STUDY SHOWS GLBT SENIORS NEED SUPPORT

Local

Groundbreaking study on GLBT seniors released at aging in American conference

By Matt Alderton

STAFF WRITER

On any given day of the week, the Center on Halsted in Lakeview is teeming with activity. There are gay and lesbian teenagers from Chicago's South and West sides socializing via instant message in the Cyber Center. There are transgendered men and women assembling for "T" talk, a peer-led trans discussion group. There are Boystown locals lining up for gay speed dating and a smattering of women convening to screen the latest documentary from their favorite lesbian filmmaker.

The faces are familiar, because everyone you see inside at the Center on Halsted you've probably seen outside on Halsted Street. With one exception, that is: the LGBT seniors.

"People don't really think about their own aging and they don't think that there are gay seniors, so the seniors themselves feel quite invisible," says Serena Worthington, senior director of public programs at the Center on Halsted. "Invisibility is a huge issue."

It's huge, but it's just one of more than a dozen key issues facing LGBT seniors, according to a new report by Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders (SAGE) and the Movement Advancement Project (MAP). Titled "Improving the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Older Adults." The study was released at the Aging In America conference March 17 in Chicago, and is the first ever collaboration between GLBT leaders and mainstream senior advocates.

"I think this report is going to be quite impactful in terms of helping people understand the issues that are most pertinent to LGBT seniors," Worthington says. "The unique needs and challenges that face LGBT seniors are very, very real, and this report does a really good job of describing not only what's wrong, but also what we can do to fix it."

According to the SAGE report, there are approximately 1.5 million LGBT adults age 65 and older in the United States—40,000 to 60,000 of them in Chicago, according to Worthington—a number that's expected to double to nearly 3 million by 2030. Because of social stigma and legal prejudice, SAGE concludes, all of them face "unique barriers and inequalities that can stand in the way of a healthy and rewarding later life."

Specifically, SAGE identifies three major barriers—encompassing at least 17 concrete issues—to LGBT senior well being:

First, LGBT seniors face financial barriers; because they can't get legally married in most states, they typically are barred from receiving Social Security benefits, Medicaid protections, veterans' benefits and estate tax exemptions, and generally are disadvantaged by laws governing retirement planning, health insurance and inheritance.

"I've been with my partner for 18 years," Worthington says. "If I die today, she won't get my Social Security benefits. If we were married, that would be a done deal. It's a small thing, but it can make a big difference; my pension could be the difference between her living below the poverty line or a little bit above it."

Second, LGBT seniors face health care barriers; because they're minorities, their health disparities often are overlooked and ignored by governments and service providers, their partners and friends typically are not legally recognized as caregivers, and they often are discriminated against by professional caregivers and nursing homes, very few of which are trained to work with LGBT patients.

"I just got a call from a nurse about a gentleman who's ended up in a nursing home," Worthington says. "Him and his partner of 30 years made the difficult choice to put him there, and they can't afford it because nursing homes are very expensive—\$150 to \$180 a day, to start. To afford that, most married people [get an exemption] for Medicaid.

Because they're an unmarried couple, however, these two have to put a lien on their house. Now the surviving partner is faced with financial ruin."

Finally, LGBT seniors face social barriers; because they're typically shut out of the mainstream gay community and ignored by the mainstream senior community, they often lack access to the social programming that's been proven to help seniors stave off depression, poverty and disease. Plus, they're more likely to be single, childless and estranged from biological family—a significant point, according to SAGE, because 80 percent of long-term care in the United States is provided by family members.

"You're talking in many cases about folks who were activists their whole lives," Worthington says. "They rose to the challenge of the AIDS crisis and helped care for their friends as they died. The people who are now seniors were on the front lines. They're a very strong group of people, but with all these extra vulnerabilities."

To help LGBT seniors overcome their "extra vulnerabilities," SAGE has made several recommendations in its report that it hopes policymakers will heed. First, it calls for providing immediate relief to LGBT elders by increasing funding for LGBT senior programs and increasing education for practitioners and caregivers. Second, it suggests building an advocacy infrastructure with which to raise awareness around LGBT senior issues. And third, it advocates for an increased understanding of LGBT senior issues through research and public education.

The Center on Halsted—which last month received a \$475,000 grant for its own SAGE program—already is doing all of the above, according to Worthington. It offers a bi-weekly senior lunch, for instance; hosts regular senior activities, such as BINGO, yoga classes and foreign language workshops; and provides sensitivity training for professionals in the senior care industry.

"We're all going to age," Worthington

says. "When you go to a bar and everybody's young, what does that say about us as a community? You're going to be 40, you're going to be 50 and you're going to be 60; when you can't go to a bar and you don't have that identity as a young hot gay person, how do you negotiate the world? I think we all need to figure that out together."

For more information about SAGE, visit www.sageusa.org. Or, for more information about SAGE at Center on Halsted, visit www.centeronhalsted.org/cohsage.html.

How You Can Help

If you're interested in helping LGBT seniors, consider these tips from Serena Worthington, senior program director at the Center on Halsted:

- **Get to know your neighbors:** If you have LGBT seniors in your building, in your community or at your office, taking the time to befriend them can make a big difference in their quality of their life.
- **Volunteer your time:** The Center on Halsted is always looking for volunteers in its SAGE program and hosts a two-hour volunteer orientation twice monthly.
- **Write to your elected officials:** Because LGBT senior issues tend to be just as invisible as LGBT seniors, the most powerful thing advocates can do is write to their elected officials to raise awareness on their behalf.

For more information about volunteer opportunities with SAGE at Center on Halsted, visit www.centeronhalsted.org.

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