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Friendship a pillar of survival for LGBT elders

By **Robert Espinoza**

Family and friends are essential to people as they age, offering social interaction and connectedness, reducing social isolation and loneliness, and assisting with daily tasks of living.

Yet such support may be lacking for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older adults, who are often single and without children, according to SAGE's National Resource Center on LGBT Aging. More recently, the national 2012 study, *Aging and Health Report: Disparities and Resilience among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Older Adults* (<http://goo.gl/GZUxt>), which involved more than 2,500 older adults ages 50–95, found that one in three LGBT elders had no one to help them with daily chores if they were sick, and 29 percent reported that they did not have someone to love and make them feel wanted.

Given limited family supports, what is the role of friendship for LGBT people as they age, and what lessons can be drawn to inform the broader aging network?

I explored these questions with two longtime leaders in LGBT aging. Jesus Ramirez-Valles is a professor and directs Community Health Sciences at the University of Illinois-Chicago School of Public Health. For 20 years he has been a public health researcher with his study focusing on gay men, HIV/AIDS and aging. Ginny D'Antonio is a social worker for SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders), where she has worked for more than 14 years with LGBT elders in New York City.

Robert Espinoza: What is the impact of friendship—or the lack of friends—on LGBT people as they age?

Jesus Ramirez-Valles: Since the [modern] LGBT movement began in the 1960s, friendship has been a part of the building of community. And as one gets older, the importance of friendship multiplies.

We find out that the social spaces we need [to make friends] exclude us. LGBT culture [prefers] young people, and this is hard on older people. The likelihood of losing social connections and friendships is very real and it happens at a moment when you need it most. You're facing challenges such as mental health, physical health, mobility issues and chronic illness—all of which require social support.

Gina D'Antonio: Friendship helps with everything, from taking care of pets when someone goes away, to phone reassurance, to accompanying folks to doctors. I had a situation where a group of friends in Brooklyn had a friend who was no longer able to care of herself and they arranged the homecare, they arranged a couple of days at an adult day center and they did her shopping. Somebody looked in on her at least once a day, and that has been repeated in many circles around the city and around the country. Friends rally and figure out a way to get it done.

RE: Does the loss of friends affect an older person's mental and financial stability?

GD: I'm working with a gentleman now whose partner died last year. They were managing okay when they had two incomes, but now that he's alone, he's facing a huge amount of grief because they were together for 60 years. At the same time, he now has major financial challenges that he didn't have when they were together.

I worked with another couple where one member of the couple had to go into a nursing home. Again, there was the loss of the relationship and the other partner couldn't afford to keep the apartment. It's pretty devastating. In some cases, people can lose just about everything.

RE: What has changed in your work with regard to how people understand the role of friends for LGBT older people?

JRV: Since I first began my research, I saw that friends and connection are important to LGBT people. Most LGBT older people are single, so friendships remain central to their lives—from “coming out” through the process of aging. One aspect that has changed is that friendships have increased in the workplace, since we are more open there and can create those friendships. I also think [society] is now thinking more about aging and why LGBT elders might need more friends. The public policy and social discourse on aging has become more visible in the last 10 or 20 years. We're bringing it to light.

GD: Even here, in places like Chelsea and the Village [in New York City]—both when I started here at SAGE and to this day—there are people who just are not able to come out, they're too afraid. And conversely, there are folks who are out and proud, take it or leave it.

I worked with a wonderful woman a number of years ago who had two very opposite experiences. She finally came out. She was 89 at the time. She came out to a straight woman friend whom she had been friends with for at least 40 years. And the woman just totally walked away and would not have anything to do with her again.

Later she came out in a nursing home to a younger relative who just chuckled and said, “Well of course we've always known. We love you anyway. It doesn't matter.” ■

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SAGE Supports LGBT Elders

As the country's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older people, SAGE leads programs and policy initiatives to promote community, reduce isolation and prevent financial challenges associated with losing critical life partners or friends. Their programs include:

SAGE Story, a national digital storytelling program for LGBT elders. Piloted in New York City—and soon to expand to three unnamed sites in fall 2013—this program offers storytelling workshops that teach LGBT elders to craft and tell their most important life stories. It also collects the stories online as essays, podcasts, videos and photographs for wider distribution; sageusa.org/programs/sagestory.cfm.

SAGE's Spousal Impoverishment Protections Initiative, a multi-year advocacy initiative that aims to extend spousal impoverishment protections to same-sex couples under Medicaid in all 50 states. When enacted, these protections—currently available to married heterosexual couples—prevent an LGBT healthy spouse from having to give up a family home or retirement savings (and live in poverty) in order to qualify his/her spouse for Medicaid; sageusa.org/advocacy/sipi.cfm.

The SAGE Center, the United States' first full-time, innovative LGBT senior center. LGBT older people can find friends and build community at the New York City-based SAGE Center, which provides an array of services and programs related to arts and culture, fitness, food and nutrition, health and wellness and lifelong education for LGBT elders. These types of LGBT-focused services and programs exist in many parts of the country and are growing in popularity; sageusa.org/nyc/thesagecenter.cfm.

—Robert Espinoza