

Our Chosen Family

Circle of friends plays important role in life of gays and lesbians

A RECENT SURVEY OF LGBT boomers reinforces the importance of friends and allies — our “chosen family” — as a significant element of the social support network that our lives may be dependent upon.

I am one of the baby boomers, the 76 million American children born between 1946 and 1964. The LGBT community makes up a significant share of that population.

The MetLife Mature Market Institute's study on LGBT boomers, “Still Out, Still Aging,” pointed out some unique differences from our aging heterosexual counterparts. What got my attention was the study's suggestion that, as a lesbian, my “chosen family” will likely be the folks to see me through my elder years.

Many of us have referred to our circle of friends as our “chosen family” long before this MetLife study coined the phrase. We even have our own song — “We Are Family.”

That's important because the survey revealed that a significantly higher proportion of LGBT boomers live alone and far fewer have a partner or spouse compared to the heterosexual population.

To hear the term “chosen family” used as an expression of security, community and responsibility, I was suddenly proud all over again. The study showed that as a community we are watching over one another.

My circle of loyal and dependable friendships is proof of that. Through thick and thin, good and bad, highs and lows, friends stick together. Some of us have the good fortune of natural families who care about our well being.

But, we know all too well, not all queer people are treated equally. Many gays and lesbians have been snubbed by their families, some even disowned. There are even those who chose to ostracize themselves.

Growing up in the baby boomer generation, we have lived through a period of tremendous cultural change, including significant shifts in social attitudes toward LGBT issues. Society has come to recognize that lesbian and gay boomers share in many of the same hopes and experiences that

characterize the rest of the largest generation in American history.

However, the unique family structures formed in the gay community create friendship role differences regarding care giving, retirement and end-of-life planning. Our “chosen families” have accepted the sometimes arduous tasks, even when our natural families have not. The study revealed that more than three-quarters of LGBT respondents rely heavily on the emotional and social support of their families of choice, the close friends who are our extended family, gay or straight.

As queer retirement communities continue to pop up, we will have options as we age — facilities with accepting attitudes, lesbian retreats and gay retirement villages. The saying “It takes a village” comes to mind. But really, it's more like “It takes the Village People.” And the research reported that LGBT people to be pretty good caregivers.

Gay elders and retirees are still considered a newer phenomenon, creating challenges and opportunities as they live open lives. This group of openly queer people is redefining commonly held beliefs as they continue to come out of the closet. Gay and lesbian elders are gaining visibility since the baby boomer generation is the first with LGBT people living openly gay or transgender lives in large numbers. The research shows nearly two-thirds of homosexual boomers say they have a “chosen family.”

Unfortunately, there are many aging homosexuals who lack the support they need. The research shows gays are twice as likely to enter old age living as a single person and two and a half times more likely to live alone. Sixty percent of LGBT boom-

My Two Sense

Commentary
By Lori Hicks



ers fear being unable to care for themselves as they age and 35 percent fear becoming dependent on others.

Because institutionalized homophobia, discrimination and harassment still exist, these folks are less likely to access health care, housing or social services when they need it the most.

All of these statistics validate the idea that we must stick together. The ties we build with our community could be tied to our dying days.

At a time when gay men and lesbians enjoy an unprecedented degree of acceptance, the elders of our group shouldn't have to age in silence, isolated from the gay and lesbian community and ignored by the senior population. Legal and policy reform is necessary to address our issues as we age. But, in the meantime, there are steps that gay and lesbian elders can take to protect their chosen families and themselves.

So remember, when choosing a family, do it wisely. And if you still aren't thinking about retirement, and believe gays never age, perhaps you might consider including in your “chosen family” an elder, someone to keep an eye on, somebody you can help out on occasion.

Pay it forward to your chosen family, to the friends who will stick with you as you, not only grow old together, but grow. It is our bonds of love, friendship and laughter that keep us connected (not to mention all the memories). It is that link to community that will give us the best chance to age with dignity, self-respect and pride. **-E**

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