

Gay & Gray

Where Will Queer Elders Go?

BY KENDRA HENSON-STROUD

Where will we go when we're old and gay? Many of us may dream of being lucky enough and in good enough health to travel the world to see exotic places, join a queer RV convoy and tour the United States, or maybe we yearn to cozy up in a cabin in the woods, just listening to the crickets chirping outside the window. Ah, it all sounds so wonderful! When can I retire??

My grandparents have recently moved from Illinois to a lovely retirement community on the gulf coast of Florida where they have made many new friends and are part of a new community. It's one of those "instant community" situations, like when you live in a college dorm, or at Girl Scout camp.

My grandparents' retirement community features social activities such as boating, fishing, swimming, and of course the old standards: coffee klatch, shuffleboard and bingo. These activities are a way for them to gather and talk about what's going on in their lives and in the lives of others.

Neighbors here seem to pull together as a community in times of trouble. When a neighbor is in the hospital or loses a loved one, casseroles, cards, and visits become part of the community activity. The residents here have reached a point in their lives where it's of ultimate importance to care for each other and look out for one another. They feel safe here.

A majority of the U.S. population is aging during a time when gay and lesbian issues are becoming gay and lesbian rights. Some pieces of queer culture are slowly being seen as queer, as in "peculiar," culture and not queer as in "Oh my God there's something wrong with you!" culture. There is a quickly growing need for retirement communities for the lgbt population.

Millions of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender individuals are in the mix of the baby boomers who are currently between the ages of 39 and 57. As this portion of our population ages, more and more retirement communities featuring a spectrum of care will be needed. This type of community will be especially important to the queer population so that we will have safe places in which to

grow older together.

While there are no retirement communities in Vermont aimed specifically at the lgbt population, they are beginning to spring up in warmer climates. Many of the lgbt communities that are now under construction have long been in the planning process. These communities range in price, level of care, and in the type of housing. A few of the communities I researched seem very much like resort-style living, which can be pretty spendy.

One of these communities, Rainbow Vision Resort Retirement Community in Santa Fe, New Mexico is slated to open sometime in 2005. This community is marketed for the "gay and gray" and will offer three different options for housing, ranging from independent living apartments (rents from \$2,300 to \$3,100 per month) through assisted living rentals (on-site medication management, help with daily living activities, plus meals for \$3,100 to \$4,100 per month).

The third housing option available at Rainbow Visions is condo ownership. The 40 condominium units will sell for an average price of \$235,000 with monthly maintenance fees projected to be about \$300. Condo owners will have use of all community facilities, plus the fitness center, spa, and wellness services. Rainbow Vision began taking reservations in June (www.rainbowvisionprop.com).

Another community taking shape in the Santa Fe area is called Birds of a Feather Resort Community, Inc. It will consist of half- and full-acre lots on over 100 acres of land that can be purchased for home-building. The lots are priced from \$53,000 to \$125,000.

Birds of a Feather's web page states that they initially were planning on being a community of women, but cannot legally exclude anyone. The community will be geared, they say, toward people wishing to live "harmoniously in a non-traditional community" and will be a place for active adults who wish for a place to "live, play, belong, and grow older with friends and neighbors." Plans for a community center including hobby rooms, library, and community kitchen are in the works (see www.flock2it.com).

Parkside Gay Male Retirement Center in Akron, Ohio seems like a more sterile, private

environment than the other communities. It features fully furnished rooms running from \$350-\$490 per week. The amenities include an all-male staff, three meals a day in a shared dining room, a fitness and tanning gym, and a theatre featuring queer films. The tour on the website shows hotel-style rooms with mirrored walls and a grand piano in the reception area. The rooms are available only as singles (so gay male couples are S.O.L. unless they get adjoining rooms), and visitors are welcome only during visiting hours. There's no assisted living, but hospitals and physicians are easily accessible from their location. Further information on this facility can be found at www.gay-retirement.com.

Gay and lesbian retirement communities in Florida such as the Palms of Manasota in Palmetto, Florida are beginning to take shape, as are support groups for gay and lesbian seniors. The Palms' website is currently under construction, (www.palmsomanasota.com), but the community consists of mostly stucco-style homes together in a village. This village claims to be America's first gay and lesbian retirement community and was originally founded and funded by a gay senior, the late Bill Laing.

Trips to the theater and potlucks for new neighbors are a consistent part of the activities there. I am definitely going to have to visit this one next time I'm in Florida visiting my grandparents in their community (and I think I'll bring them with me - they may get some ideas to help perk their place up a bit!).

I for one am very excited to see how these retirement communities targeted to our population turn out. I'm just imagining the "gayed up" version of coffee klatch, and many of us have experienced and love drag bingo. What could be more fabulous than a queer retirement community!?

Look for part 2- the Vermont scene next month...

Kendra Henson-Stroud is a 30-something lesbian who lives and writes in Burlington

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