

# BOOKS: Planning for Our Future: Aging LGBTs

BY JACQUELINE S. WEINSTOCK

**Claassen, C. *Whistling women: A study of the lives of older lesbians.* Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press.**

**Hunter, S. (2005). *Midlife and older LGBT adults: Knowledge and affirmative practice for the social services.* Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Press.**

insights. Most significantly, in "Life After Sixty," Claassen paints a picture of the fullness of life being lived and thereby challenges negative stereotypes about aging and about being old. I also appreciate the insight this chapter — along with "Lesbian Spaces, Gay Faces" — offers into the ways older lesbians are creating community in a diversity of hospitable climates (financial and weather-wise; politically the work still remains in some of these locations!). As such, these two chapters might be particularly useful to lesbians looking for a place to live in the later years of life.

Claassen realizes the need to consider life choices and actions in the contexts in which they were made: "I now think no greater number of brave people in 2004 exists, just greater emphasis on identifying a sexuality now than before 1970." Thus Claassen gives appropriate credit to the risks the women took during their lives to love other women "in a quiet, wordless, nascent culture [where] there is nothing to speak." If reading this book helps lead more of us to this insight — which could foster communication between queer generations — then I think it worthwhile. But if you are looking for a broader overview of LGBT adult issues, and especially if you are a social service practitioner, Hunter's book is the one to read.

In *Midlife and Older LGBT Adults*, Hunter reviews and synthesizes available academic research to offer a general picture of midlife and late-life LGBTs' experiences. This review, however, is limited by the existing literature's focus on gay men and lesbians, and on white, middle-class U.S.-based samples. While a review can only be as good as the literature, Hunter does a better job in some chapters (chapters 7 and 9) than in others (chapters 1 and 8) considering the experiences and issues facing bisexuals or transgenders.

There are several strengths to Hunter's book, including the introductory chapter that paints a broad-stroke historical analysis of the LGBT movement, particularly as it has impacted lesbians and gay men now in middle and late adulthood. Other chapters offer an overview of identity-development models and their limits; coming out and living as lesbian and gay in midlife and late adulthood; education, income, work, community participation; and family/friend issues. Ze pays some attention to experiences across racial and eth-

nic groups, but per generalizations may further cloud rather than clarify how sexuality, sex, gender, race/ethnicity, and age interact to shape our experiences and perspectives. (Hunter's limited definitions of key terms such as sex, gender, and sexual orientation doesn't help matters either.)

Hunter's most significant insights are in the second half of the book. Everyone should read per description of age-related positives and "downturns" in Chapters 5 and 6 to better understand the general aging process and issues particular to LGBTs. For social service practitioners working with LGBT adults, Chapters 7 and 8 are essential.

Hunter's final chapter, "Group and Community Practice with Older Lesbian and Gay Persons" is also a must-read. Ze presents two diverse approaches or models (originally identified by Tully, 2000) for working with LGBT older people: "the separate but equal model" focuses on developing and implementing elder services within the LGBT community; the "making services responsive model" works to improve existing elder services to better meet the needs of LGBT people. There are benefits and drawbacks to each approach, Hunter notes, and it is likely that both are needed.

Clearly there is much work to be done. Here in Vermont we need especially to listen to and learn from our own LGBT community members now in late adulthood, to work with current aging-related agencies to challenge heterosexism and rigid gender beliefs, and to address ageism and other isms in the queer community. These two books can offer us some guidance and a push to get going on creating affirmative contexts that support our continued healthy development we age. ▼

*The "Vermont Queer Elders Project" aims to identify and meet the needs of queer elders, raise public awareness of these needs and ensure that existing services for elder Vermonters are culturally competent and queer-friendly. If you would like to join us in this work, please contact Peggy at RU12? Queer Community Center: 802.860.7812; peggy@ru12.org.*

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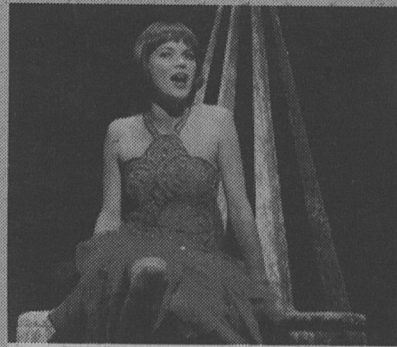
**D**riven by personal concerns (I am in midlife now), academic interest, and my volunteer work with the "Vermont Queer Elders Project," my summer reading has focused on midlife and late-life adults who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. Two worthwhile and distinctive books are *Whistling Women* (Claassen, 2005) and *Midlife and Older LGBT Adults* (Hunter, 2005).

*Whistling Women* describes Claassen's interview-based, qualitative study of 44 lesbians over 59 who lived in or visited Boone, North Carolina (where the author lives) during summers. Most of the women were middle- or upper-class and all but one were white. Hoping to "bring much-needed visibility" to this age group, Claassen examines the women's lesbian life histories, retirement issues, and community experiences. Different chapters highlight different themes within these broad topics. For example, in Chapter 1 Claassen places the women's lives in historical context, dividing the sample into two cohorts — those over 72 (born between 1917 and 1929) and those between 67 and 75 (born between 1930 and 1938) at the time of their interview.

Sprinkled throughout these chapters are some interesting findings, including the tendency for the women in this sample, most of whom identified as Democrats, to be more in tune with either women's or gay rights than queer politics, and the surprising finding that despite the prevailing sexist stereotypes of the times, this sample of women pursued a diversity of careers, many with pension plans. They thus arrived at late-life in an economically privileged position.

While a narrow sample, Claassen's study offers several

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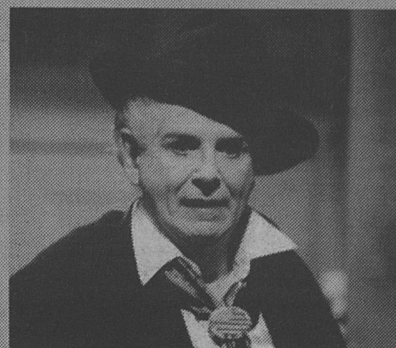
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