



## Gay elders distinctive challenges get closer look

By DAVID CRARY

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NEW YORK (AP) Frank Carter was once a globe-trotting professional dancer; his world is smaller now. He battles multiple health problems, walks with a cane and rarely leaves his compact Manhattan apartment.

As an 86-year-old gay man, with no family nearby and many acquaintances long since dead, he'd seem a likely prospect for isolation.

Instead, he has kindled a deep, five-year friendship with Gigi Stoll, a fashion model-turned-photographer half his age. Stoll helps Carter with medical arrangements, writes to him when she travels overseas, and sat with him for six hours during his most recent hospitalization.

"The other guys in the hospital, no one was coming in to see them," Carter said. "To get that gift, you have to be lucky."

It's not just luck. Stoll came into his life through a program that matches infirm gays and lesbians with volunteers who commit to making weekly visits.

Long overlooked by society at large, and even by younger gays, elderly gays and lesbians are emerging as a distinct community, getting more help and attention as they confront challenges that differ in many ways from their heterosexual counterparts.

Advocacy groups say the estimated 2.5 million gay seniors in America are twice as likely to live alone, four times less likely to have adult children to help them, and far more fearful of discrimination from health care workers.

Many fear anti-gay animosity or bias at senior centers, in nursing homes and from health care providers. Some gay elders even keep their sexual orientation secret from the home health aides who may provide their only sustained company.

A watershed moment comes this month, when the AARP < the largest advocacy group for Americans over 50 < for the first time sponsors a major national conference focused on gay and lesbian aging. It's being organized by SAGE (Service and Advocacy for GLBT Elders), the New York-based organization which counts Carter and Stoll among its thousands of clients and volunteers.

AARP's involvement is "a big breakthrough," SAGE executive director Michael Adams said. "To step forward and sponsor a conference of this high profile and splash your name all over, it's a quantum leap."

There will be workshops on a whole array of issues: mental health care and suicide prevention, transgender seniors, rising levels of HIV/AIDS among gay men over 50, and special challenges facing elderly gays in suburbs and small towns.

**"There are very particular areas that make us a more vulnerable constituency of old people," said Amber Hollibaugh, 62, an expert on aging with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.**

**"We tend to age alone, with no one to call on in times of need," she said.**

**"We don't have a daughter to move in with us, we don't have a kid to call when we're admitted to the hospital because we fall and break a hip."**

Yet some of the somber dynamics are beginning to change. Today's gay elderly do face unique problems but they also remember the bad old days in the closet, and many celebrate the joys of gay life in the 21st century.

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Logically, Garrison Phillips ought to be a lonely man.

Though still handsome and charming as he approaches 79, he is, like most gay men of his generation, childless. His partner died five years ago. His older brother has refused to speak to him for decades.

Yet the former actor emerges regularly from his fifth-floor walk-up apartment in Manhattan to engage in an array of civic activities and volunteer work. He blogs, does public speaking and lobbying for SAGE, helps out at workshops on caregiving with tips learned from assisting his mother and aunts.

Phillips and his contemporaries lived most of their lives in an era where gays feared being too open about their sexuality. Only as elders have they witnessed the activism that has drastically reduced the ranks of closeted gays and built momentum in support of same-sex marriage.

"You were forced to lie every single day of your life," Phillips recalled.

"I lied to my parents, I lied to my teachers, I lied to get into the Army. Now you don't have to lie anymore."

Phillips was raised in West Virginia, and served in Korea during the Korean War. He knew no other gay soldiers, and confided about being gay only to his company commander, a high school teacher.

"He respected who I was < he told me to be careful," said Phillips, who still wears his dog tag and proudly shows the paperwork verifying his honorable discharge.

In his 40s, Phillips joined gay-rights demonstrations for the first time, and came out to his mother, who replied, "Son, what's wrong with that?"

He acted in TV shows, on stage and in a few films, eventually supplementing that career with a job at a New York law firm, and became increasingly engaged in gay activism.

"By the '70s, I reached a point where I didn't stay quiet any more < I got tired and angry," he said.

He notes that his generation of gay men was depleted by AIDS, and many of the survivors have few, if any, close relatives to offer support.

"We're all in the same boat. Maybe there's a nephew or niece who helps out, but that's it," Phillips said. "One of the great things about SAGE is that I feel I have support, because I don't have any from my family."

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Ruth Juster is 85. She's managed to build a family of her own < she and her longtime partner raised a daughter they adopted from Paraguay, and now they're contemplating getting married.

Juster also keeps busy as chief organizer for SAGE's annual women's dance the 25th anniversary gala will take place in late October, and she hopes for a turnout of 500.

"There are always things still left to be done," she said at her West Village apartment. "My advice is to gather up your energy and courage, get involved and suddenly the world will feel open to you."

A Minneapolis native, Juster came to New York in 1945, seeking fame as a journalist. She worked for a news service and for magazines, traveled abroad, and gradually shifted into a long career in market research. Her first lesbian love affair occurred in Italy, in the 1950s; the couple returned together to New York.

"Way back then, being gay or lesbian was viewed as sinful. We hid. There were raids on the bars. Society looked down on us," she said.

"A lot of people remained under the influence of that prejudice and kept their lives secret. We have to reach these seniors and let them know life is much different now. You have to speak up."

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Back in his prime, Frank Carter danced for Earl Hines, the great jazz pianist, and other well-known musical acts. He performed in night clubs and at the famed Apollo Theater in Harlem, even starred on a television show in Venezuela.

Now he has a pacemaker and a slew of daily medications, but his memory and self-deprecating humor remain sharp.

In his tiny backyard patio, he shows visitors a mesmerizing scrapbook filled with photographs of himself on stage and at backstage parties, as well as dozens of portraits of the stars he accompanied or met Eartha Kitt, Lena Horne, Melba Moore among them. Artwork collected from his travels covers the walls of his apartment.

Born in Chicago in 1922, one of eight siblings, he taught himself dancing before moving to New York in 1949. "Use your heart," he remembers his mother telling him. "Do what you want to do."

He recalled some down times < his youthful dismay at hearing an anti-gay epithet, some of his friends contracting HIV years later. But mostly he looked back with delight and pride.

Gigi Stoll, who describes their relationship as "like family," encourages his recollections.

"You were so bad," she teases approvingly.

"I was terrible," Carter replies, with a soft smile, "I had fun. People came after me. Sometimes you said yes, sometimes you said no. I could pick and choose."

"I've had a tremendous life," he added. "Not one moment do I regret."

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If some gays in their 70s and 80s have been emboldened to speak up, the noise level from the generation following them will certainly be louder.

Gay and lesbian baby boomers < sometimes called the Stonewall Generation in honor of the 1969 New York riots that launched the gay-rights movement have been accustomed since young adulthood to being open about their sexuality and aggressive in seeking civil rights.

This means that policy makers and the younger generation of gay-rights leaders are likely to face ongoing pressure from gay seniors to take their priorities into account.

**"The Stonewall Generation is an activist generation," said Amber Hollibaugh.**

**"We had to gear up to fight an epidemic (AIDS). We built the institutions to take care of our own community in the face of government refusal to do that, and we understand what it means to build an infrastructure to deal with our own aging."**

Gay activists now regard the AARP as a valuable ally on aging issues < and welcome this as a turnaround from benign neglect toward their elders in the past.

"It was clear we had to begin to pay some attention to what those different groups bring to the table," said Percil Stanford, the AARP's chief diversity officer.

With a membership spanning the political spectrum, the AARP generally doesn't take stands on gay-rights issues, such as same-sex marriage.

However, Stanford said same-sex partners should be afforded the same rights regarding health care decisions that straight couples have.

Financial security also is a concern < a bereaved gay or lesbian partner receives no Social Security survivor benefits. SAGE estimates that 70 percent of its clients have annual pretax incomes under \$20,000, and Michael Adams says many gay boomers are notorious procrastinators worse than straights when it comes to long-term financial and health care planning.

Another challenge facing gay baby boomers < perhaps more so than their straight counterparts is ageism. They perceive the celebration of youth and good looks, and the relative invisibility of older people, to be particularly pervasive in gay popular culture.

**"It overvalues one stage in your life and underscores a fear of getting old not just 70 or 80, but 40 or 50," said Hollibaugh. "You're terrified. You think, 'It's over for me.' It creates a tendency to lie about how old we are."**

**Gay boomers are apt to shake up this mind-set, Hollibaugh said. "It's not a generation that's going to be quiet in the face of their own community's refusal to deal with aging."**