

## First U.S. gay/lesbian conference on aging hits homophobia, agism

by Amanda Bauer

"Lesbians and gay men have been blazing trails in anti-oppression activism for decades. We recognize agism as another hurdle in our lives," said Del Martin, coauthor of *Lesbian/Woman* (20th Anniversary revised edition, 1991, Volcano Press, Volcano, Calif.).

Martin, who said she is 71, spoke during the keynote session at the first national conference of its kind, "Diversity with a Difference: Serving 3 Million Aging Gays and Lesbians." The American Society on Aging (ASA) conference, at San Francisco's Nikko Hotel, hosted a larger-than-expected crowd of 250.

Martin said that aging fosters new fears for older gay men and lesbians. For example, many worry that if their sexual persuasion becomes known while they are in a nursing home, the institution could refuse them care or even "drug those of us who are able enough to challenge the status quo."

***Because aging gays and lesbians have survived and remained independent, they have less fear of and greater respect for aging.***

She spoke about some of the struggles gays and lesbians of her generation have had to survive: McCarthyism, purges of homosexuals from the U.S. State Department and the armed services, police raids on gay bars and private parties, and police harassment and brutality.

"Those of us who have reached old age—in or out of the closet—are survivors," Martin said.

She said despite many successes in the fight against homophobia, discrimination still exists in many places. "If our society were not so lesbophobic, lonely old widows might find satisfaction in a woman-to-woman relationship," she said. Martin cited figures from the Older Women's League showing that women make up 85% of all surviving spouses over 65 and 80% of the elderly who live alone. These are the women who face death and dying alone.

Martin also mentioned the legal challenges homosexual couples face. While updating her will, she and her partner found that eight legal documents were necessary to cover property protections and allocations that are taken for granted by married couples.

Morris Kight, founder of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center (GLCSC) in Los Angeles, said that 20 years ago he felt that gay and lesbian persons needed a social services agency sensitive to their needs, because they were "the most underserved part of society."

In 1971 Kight's group overcame numerous obstacles, such as Internal Revenue Service resistance to granting them nonprofit status, and established the nation's first and largest social service center for gay and lesbian persons.

The GLCSC eventually outgrew its first building and recently moved into a five-story site—formerly occupied by the IRS. "And we own it," he declared.

Marcia Freedman, author of *Exile in the Promised Land*, an account of her role in Israel's feminist movement during the 1970s, said that although "diversity has become the buzzword of the aging world, when the issue of gay and lesbian aging comes up, we are not included" in the list of minority groups.

Freedman, who is the ASA's director of public information and marketing, said that older gays and lesbians "have a lot to teach the heterosexual world about aging successfully."

She said because aging gays and lesbians have survived and remained independent, they have less fear of and greater respect for aging. Also, because many have been estranged from their families for decades, they are used to forming innovative mutual support systems.

Shevy Healey, a founding member of the Old Lesbian Organizing Committee, based in Houston, Tex., said that agism undermines the individualism of all elders and creates "a common agenda for all old people." A high priority is "getting professionals not to define us but to listen as we define ourselves."

She emphasized, "When professionals, regardless of their area of expertise, attempt to structure their interactions as experts rather than equals, they dismiss rather than empower."

Healey pointed out that in our culture old age is "medicalized," viewed as a condition requiring professional treatment rather than as a natural and valuable part of the life cycle. "This means that problems of daily living become categorized as medical problems," she said.

She expressed frustration with a system that overmedicates, undertreats and dismisses old people and said she is dismayed that the old are being pitted against the young in proposals to ration health-care.

Older people should be included as paid researchers—starting in the planning and design stages—and as staff members of social service programs or as faculty at conferences and seminars. She declared, "We are the only experts on aging."

One way of promoting social change, Healey believes, is by developing intergenerational communities rather than housing segregated by age and sexual orientation. "Building intergenerational communities is a task for lesbians and gays of all ages," she said.

Kate Dyer, former legislative assistant for Massachusetts' openly gay Democratic congressman, Gerry E. Studds, stressed that aging gay men and lesbians can make public policy responsive to issues involving them by becoming visible and being heard in the political mainstream.

Dyer, who is now pursuing a law degree, said that older gays and lesbians can take the lead in advocacy against both homophobia and agism, "because old people vote and everyone knows it."

Co-sponsoring the event with ASA were the National Association for Lesbian and Gay Gerontology and San Francisco's Coalition of Agencies Serving the Elderly. For information about audio cassettes of the 11 sessions, contact Conference Audio Services, 806 Lombard St., San Francisco, CA 94133; (415) 775-TAPE.

*This article is reprinted with permission from Aging Today, the newspaper of the American Society on Aging.*



Pictured from left to right are Kasey Cole, 1st runner up; Gena LaTate, the new Miss Southern NC U.S.A.; and Brittany Gwynn, 2nd runner up. The pageant was recently hosted by Oleen's in Charlotte, NC.

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