

# Gay & Grey

OLDER GAYS AND LESBIANS FACE NEW BATTLES AS THEY ENTER GOLDEN YEARS



Claude Parent (left) Ghislain Morin, Nicholas Jané, Renaud Paré and Gérald Séguin are part of a group for older gay men who hope to break the isolation many feel as they age.

TYREL FEATHERSTONE THE GAZETTE

SUE MONTGOMERY  
THE GAZETTE

Heather-Ann Brown and her lesbian friends don't necessarily envision themselves spending their golden years in an old dykes home, but it sure beats the closet.

The author of a lesbian e-letter called *Fer Da Girlz*, Brown has settled nicely into a 60-plus Toronto building, but she has the distinct sense her lifestyle is frowned upon by the straight seniors she comes across in the elevator and corridors.

"I feel there's a passive-aggressive thing sometimes, comments

like 'You're strange', 'I wouldn't want your lifestyle'," said Brown, who is 65.

Three times she has put up a poster on the elevator wall announcing a Gay Pride event. Three times the poster has been torn down within minutes.

"I realize it's generational, and I wouldn't tolerate the same from the younger generation," Brown said.

At least she's able to close her apartment door to any disapproval and live as she likes. Many gays and lesbians of her generation are heading into the more communal living of nursing

homes, and find they're being forced back into the closet they had left so bravely in the days when homosexuals were labelled criminals, sinners or crazy.

Canada may have just become only the fourth country to legalize same-sex marriage, but it's still a country where support for gay rights falls off sharply among those who are 60 or older.

Montrealer Ghislain Morin often visits acquaintances in nursing homes, and can vouch for the fact there are gays and lesbians living miserable, lonely lives.

The 66-year-old, who was playing tennis in this week's swelter-

ing heat, hopes to avoid the same fate. He envisions staying in his Gouin Blvd. home, where he's lived for 28 years.

"I would have to hide my homosexuality all over again, setting things back 20 years," he said.

"It'd be very difficult to live in a residence where I'm alone and people are pointing at me, saying 'Look at the strange guy'."

"There are already gays in those places who are suffering."

There are men and women who pretend their partners are their sisters or brothers.



# Gay | 'They've done their fighting'

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They steal hugs and kisses in bathrooms and look with envy as heterosexual couples share love openly. They are so fearful of identifying themselves that researchers have difficulty finding any willing to speak about their experiences. They're so invisible that nursing-home staff tell researchers they have no gay or lesbian residents.

The situation is eliciting lively discussion in both the gay and lesbian communities - at least among those who dare face the cruel reality. One idea being bandied about is setting up gay-only residences. But some shun the idea of a ghetto.

"We don't necessarily want an old dykes home," Brown said. "But it would be nice to have facilities with floors put aside for dykes or for gays and lesbians together."

The first generation to tip-toe out of the closet, they have no elderly role models. They're entering uncharted territory - again - at a time of life when many would have hoped to be able to relax, to leave the social and political battles to a younger group.

"They're tired," Brown said. "They've done their fighting and got out of it. Something nasty may be down the road, but they just want to enjoy whatever's left of life."

If one accepts a widely held belief that 10 per cent of the population is homosexual, there are about 100,000 gays and lesbians over 65 in Quebec. Some found the courage to come out even before the activism that sprang from the AIDS pandemic. Others came out much later in life, often after having married and raised a family. Still others keep their sexual orientation a closely guarded secret, shared only with friends and perhaps family.

They suffered discrimination ranging from family rejection to physical violence.

Yet this generation fought tirelessly for its rights. Brown remembers the activist fire being lit after 1981 bath-house raids in Toronto, which 300 men were arrested.

88, which added "sexual orientation" to the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms as an illegal basis for discrimination. Quebec became the second jurisdiction in the world to do so, after the Netherlands. Events like that, combined with the advent of an often anti-gay born-again Christian movement, marked a turning point in the movement's history. Mass protests and rallies evolved into Gay Pride weeks across the country.

"It was a wonderful time to come out, and there was a real feeling of community," Brown said.

There were many battles: The raids. AIDS. Spousal benefits. Same-sex marriage. Adoption.

The younger generation has benefited from the sacrifices made by their elders, both in terms of confidence and rights won. But the seniors, it seems, have come full circle, and are alone in facing ostracization all over again.

"Problems facing aging homosexuals requires an awareness which until now hasn't existed," said Laurent McCutcheon, a gay senior and president of Gaie-Écoute, a Quebec help-line for gays and lesbians. "Not just because the phenomenon is new, but rather because gays and lesbians had always been condemned to the closet."

In many cases, homosexuals have no children, and have long been rejected by family members. Their dependents may not be recognized. They're isolated and vulnerable in old age. Those living in outlying areas are even worse off.

While same-sex marriage and civil union legislation went a long way to giving homosexuals legal power when it comes to questions of a partner's health or inheritance, not everyone gets married or even has a long-term partner.

A challenge facing those working with the elderly is how to adapt their attitudes and work practices so homosexuals can feel safe and accepted. So far, the portrait emerging from nursing homes is one of overly curious or unaware staff, homophobic residents, and home-care workers bent on "fixing" gays

anyone because they treat everyone the same, said Shari Brotman, of McGill University's School of Social Work, who is undertaking a four-year national study on the health and social services needs of gay and lesbian elders.

Seniors, unlike the younger generation, are reluctant to demand or ask for things, Brotman adds.

"Their feeling is if you ruffle too many feathers they'll take away the services."

In a 1997 report, Quebec's department of health and social services admitted gays and lesbians aren't taken into account when it comes to planning for the elderly.

"There aren't any policies for ensuring that homosexuals are supported during hospital visits or when they make medical decisions for their partner," it says.

Advocates say the key is training. Sociologist Line Chamberland, of the Université du Québec à Montréal, said facilities have to take the initiative to reach out to these invisible clients. Simple gestures, like asking clients about their partners rather than about their wives or husbands, and displaying pamphlets or posters that show homosexual couples, can go a long way to putting people at ease.

Diane Heffernan, co-ordinator of the Quebec Lesbian Network, is making a training video for nursing-home staff and residents to show them what a lesbian really is. She has filmed several lesbians from different walks of life, including a 68-year-old great-grandmother who was married twice.

"They think we're from another planet and we need to show them we're just like their neighbours," she said.

While Quebec is the only province to offer a free, but not mandatory, training program to health professionals, it's still possible to get a medical or nursing degree without even hearing the words sexual orientation, says Bill Ryan, who is working on the McGill study with Brotman.

We lag far behind British Columbia and Ontario in terms of in-

biens in two publicly funded long-term-care facilities - a first in North America. And in Florida, an all-gay retirement complex is becoming a model for the United States.

The Toronto move is a major development, says Dick Moore, who does awareness training in care facilities in that city, but it's a drop in the bucket. Attitudes must also be changed - not easy as people get older and more set in their ways.

"You get family members of nursing home residents saying things like, 'You want my father to sit at the same table as a homosexual?'" Moore said.

Our society tends to view seniors as asexual, so the idea of senior gays and lesbians having sex is even more unpalatable to most people, he said.

That elderly sexual drive, interestingly, was what put Serge Brochu over the edge and convinced him to sell Residence à l'infini, the only residence in Quebec that openly welcomed lesbians, gays and straights. He said he had enough after nine years of watching older straight and gay men bring home a parade of young women and men.

"I told them this isn't a bordello," he said. "They're 60 or 70 years old and want to live like 20- or 30-year-olds. They could at least bring home someone their own age."

It's that clash of cultures that has Heffernan of the Quebec Lesbian Network thinking she'd prefer to live in some kind of all-woman cooperative. Discussions are in the works with lesbian businesswomen willing to invest and others looking for a living arrangement for old age. Since lesbians tend to be less financially well off than gays, they don't always have the option of in-home care, she said.

The debate now is whether it will welcome straight women, or be exclusively for lesbians.

"I'm pulling for lesbians only," said Heffernan, 62.

"Straight women try to sell us on men. I like men, but I don't want to live with them."