

THE MAGAZINE OF SERVICES & ADVOCACY FOR GLBT ELDERS

SageSM

Matters

SPRING 2016



1ST EVER
*Summit of
LGBT Elder
Advocates &
the U.S.
Administration
on Aging*

HONORING
*Pioneers
Ruth Berman
& Connie Kurtz
in Miami*

FAITH, HOPE AND JUSTICE
A Conversation with Bishop Tonyia Rawls

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A conversation with Bishop Tonyia Rawls, an LGBT faith leader and SAGE partner in North Carolina.



www.ProfileArtistMoye.com

"I view this role as an elder as one of the highest honors one can hold. I believe the world needs us."

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Celebrating LGBT veterans, stepping up for transgender health and more.



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20th Anniversary Awards & Gala held in October.



Dan Klein

Toys Party

In December Whoopi Goldberg, Ellie Kemper and Barbara Corcoran joined hosts Robby Browne, David Tufts and SAGE Board member Chris Kann for the 30th Anniversary Toys Party in New York City. The benefit raised more than \$270,000 for SAGE and collected thousands of toys for children in need.



HeyMrlason Photography

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SAGE Matters is the triannual magazine of Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE), the country's largest and oldest nonprofit agency dedicated to serving LGBT older people. Our mission is to take the lead in addressing issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) aging. In partnership with its constituents and allies, SAGE works to achieve a high quality of life for LGBT older adults, supports and advocates for their rights, fosters a greater understanding of aging in all communities, and promotes positive images of LGBT life in later years.

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Our Stories, Our Voices

SAGE is proud to lead the charge on behalf of LGBT older people, whose stories are most powerful when LGBT elders themselves tell them. In this issue you'll hear an extraordinary array of voices.

The cover features Bishop Tonyia Rawls—a religious leader whose Charlotte congregation is part of Unity Fellowship Church, which was born from a need to minister primarily to LGBT African Americans during the height of the AIDS crisis. For the third year in a row, Bishop Rawls enlisted members of Charlotte's faith community to participate in the SAGE Storytelling Summit, which harnesses the power of stories to advance anti-discrimination efforts in North Carolina. In this issue, Bishop Rawls talks about working with clergy in North Carolina and leveraging those relationships to build a system of mutual respect and hope for LGBT communities.

You'll also hear from several participants in SAGEWorks, a national employment initiative for LGBT people 40 and above. This initiative ignites the potential within members of our community who have fallen out of the workforce late in their careers and are having a hard time getting back in.

We're particularly proud to share a conversation with Ruth Berman and Connie Kurtz, who have transformed countless lives through their work as activists, certified counselors, and founders of chapters of Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in Florida and New York. Ruth and Connie were recently honored with the SAGE Pioneer Award, which recognizes LGBT



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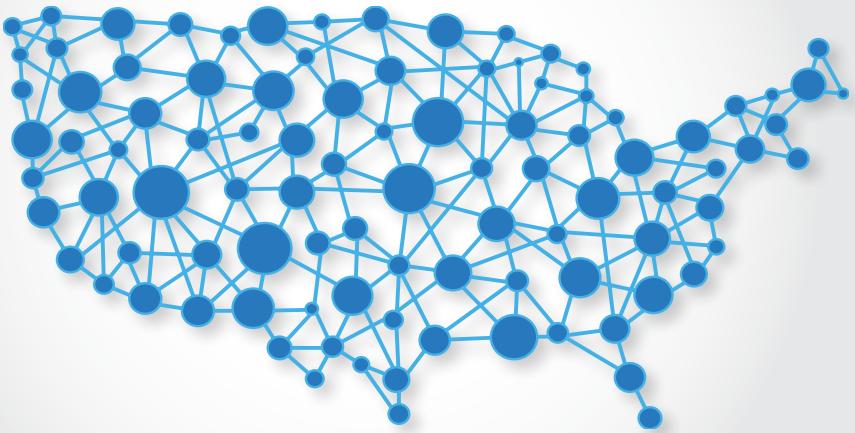
SAGE CEO Michael Adams at the first-ever summit of LGBT elder advocates and U.S. Administration on Aging in Denver. More on page 8.

older people who pave the way for LGBT equality.

And lastly, we're honored to share an essay by Tim Maher, who reflects on his late mother's final days on Fire Island, the LGBT summer community where his family eventually came to accept him as a gay man. SAGE's cart service made Fire Island accessible to his mother during that time, just as it does for other older people, including those who need assistance moving around the car-free community. Tim's essay is the first in a series of stories about caregiving within our communities.

I hope you're as moved and inspired by these voices as I am. They are the sources of strength, resilience and warmth that enrich our communities, year after year.

MICHAEL ADAMS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



SAGE Nation

Making an Impact Across the U.S.

Giving LGBT Vets the Honor They Deserve

LGBT veterans made headlines on Veterans Day with the announcement of proposed federal legislation entitled "Restore Honor to Service Members Act," which addresses the unfair treatment of LGBT veterans discharged because of their sexual orientation. The Act seeks to undo historical discrimination under the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy by making it easier for vets, many of whom are now elders, to receive a clean and honorable record

of service. The bill was introduced by Sen. Brian Schatz (D, Hawaii), Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D, New York), Rep. Mark Pocan (D, Wisconsin) and Rep. Charles Rangel (D, New York) and has 109 cosponsors, including four Republicans, in the House, and 37 cosponsors in the Senate.

SAGE OF THE ROCKIES celebrated the introduction of the "Restore

Honor Act" during its first annual Veterans Celebration, and **SAGE CLEVELAND** has reached out to its local Veterans Administration (VA) for programming. For those in New York State, **SAGEVETS** improves access to VA benefits and helps to find legal support in overturning less than honorable discharges. Visit sageusa.org/vets for more info.



SAGE of the Rockies Veterans Celebration (back, from left): Lori Leah, James Switzer, Lee Lobel, Glen Nelson, Paul McMullen, and Christopher Leach; (front left) Leonard Aubie and a guest.



Gen Silent Hits the Small Screen with Big Results

SAGE, GLAAD, OUTMagazine, The Huffington Post and many others promoted the Logo premiere of *Gen Silent* for a special LGBT Elders Day celebration on November 9. *Gen Silent* follows the lives of six older LGBT people for a compelling look at the community's relationship with aging. The #GenSilent campaign reached over 3 million Twitter impressions and sparked an intergenerational conversation on aging. The film had such an impact on Gil Evans and Don Nadel that they made a \$20,000 gift to **SAGE METRO DETROIT** after the viewing. If you haven't seen the film, it's available to view online for a limited time. Watch now: sageusa.org/gensilent.



Logo @LogoTV 15Nov2016
"LGBT seniors are going back in the closet because that fear is real." Watch #GenSilent now: logo.to/1RLvuTN



Vanessa Clark @FoxyGlamKitty
@LogoTV 20-something or 80-something we're in this together. The ageism needs to stop for everyone's survival and state of mind. #GenSilent

SAGE of PROMO Steps Up for Transgender Health

SAGE OF PROMO FUND sponsored the 2nd Transgender Spectrum Conference held at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in November.

The organization has been involved with the Transgender Spectrum Conference since its inception. The idea came out of the Gender Studies Department at the University of Missouri at St. Louis led by its Director, Sally Ebest, and co-chaired by



Brenda Bredemeier, from Continuing Education. SAGE of PROMO Fund secured notable keynote speakers—Loree Cook-Daniels (FORGE and the

Transgender Aging Network) in 2014, and Abbilyn Miller (HUD) in 2015. Additionally, SAGE was able to provide financial support through its Health Access Grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health.



SAGE of Promo Fund provides financial support for the Transgender Spectrum Conference. From left: Brenda Bredemeier, Eugene Potchen-Webb and Sally Ebest.



Glen Wilson, courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Year of the LGBT Elder

Explaining culture's growing interest in LGBT elders, *Slate* critic June Thomas says,

"If you marginalize people long enough, they will eventually seem mysterious."

The critically acclaimed *Grandma*, starring Lily Tomlin (pictured above with Laverne Cox), and smart and successful TV shows like *Vicious* (ITV), *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix) and *Transparent* (Amazon) made 2015 the Year of the LGBT Elder.

Stonewall Set to Become First National Park Site for LGBT History

Legislation was recently introduced that would make the historic site of the 1969 Stonewall Uprising the nation's first national park site dedicated to LGBT history. The events around Stonewall in 1969 now symbolize the birthplace of the LGBT movement. Last year a national campaign was launched to push for the creation of a Stonewall National Monument.

SAGE CEO Michael Adams says the site "will help ensure that we do not forget the legacy of Stonewall, the history of discrimination against the LGBT community, or the impassioned individuals who have fought to overcome it."



Scott Beale/Laughing Squid

SAGE Maine/AARP Survey on LGBT Aging

In an effort to better meet the needs of LGBT older people in the state, AARP Maine conducted a needs assessment that included a survey of individuals who identified as LGBT, followed by focus group work in four categories: health care, personal safety, social services and social well-being.

These results led to **SAGE MAINE** providing LGBT competency trainings to Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) across the state. The goal of the trainings is to help the agencies understand the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment for LGBT older people.



SELECT RESPONSES FROM SURVEY ON LGBT AGING IN MAINE

RELUCTANT TO DISCLOSE LGBT STATUS

While a majority confided their LGBT status to their health care provider, nearly 22% feared that disclosure would result in discriminatory attitudes and care.

FEAR LIMITS ON VISITATION

More than half feared residential and nursing facilities would limit visitation for same-sex partners, even if married, because of facility regulations or staff bias.

FEEL ISOLATED

25% reported feelings of isolation, citing rural life, lack of friends and family, and their LGBT identity, along with poor health, the recent loss of a partner, and lack of transportation services.

PREFER LGBT-FRIENDLY AGENCIES

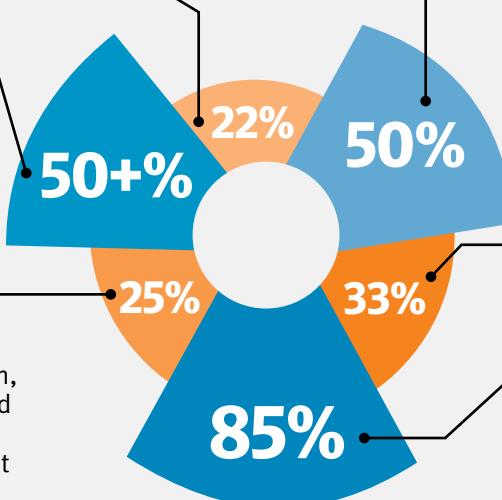
About half said they would be more likely to ask for home care and other services from an agency that identified as LGBT-friendly.

LACK LGBT-FRIENDLY SUPPORT

One-third of respondents felt they did not have access to LGBT-friendly health care, housing or social support services.

PREFER AGENCIES WITH LGBT TRAINING

85% said they would choose an agency that specifically trained its staff to be knowledgeable and sensitive to LGBT concerns.



Cast of *Fun Home* Sings for SAGE

With the help of SAGE partner Sing for Your Seniors, cast members of the Tony Award-winning show *Fun Home* performed songs for an emotional crowd of LGBT elders at **SAGE CENTER MIDTOWN** in December. As actor Joel Perez said before he sang, “We feel very fortunate to be asked to come sing at a place like SAGE, mostly because it’s great to acknowledge the work that our previous generation has done to give my generation the liberties we have. I think a lot of people in my generation don’t give the right recognition to the people who really suffered and fought and set the groundwork for the kind of life that we’re able live now. So thank you.”



Amanda Taraska



From left: Rowe Iliescu, Antonio Gonzalez-Sanchez, Hector Zuazo and Bob Medina at the Older Adults Town Hall in Ft. Lauderdale.

SAGE in the Sunshine State



In December SAGE cofounder Chris Almvig spoke at the grand opening of **SAGE TAMPA BAY**. Tampa Bay is the newest addition to the national SAGE affiliate network and is one of several LGBT community service providers in Florida that is partnering with SAGE and Our Fund to participate in the Protect Our Elders (POE) Training Initiative. This initiative seeks to ensure welcoming and discrimination-free services and care for LGBT elders. In February SAGE Tampa Bay hosted the second in a series of SAGE-AARP LGBT Older Adults Town Hall meetings.

The first SAGE-AARP LGBT Older Adults Town Hall was held on December 7 at the Pride Center at Equality Park in Fort Lauderdale. In partnership with AARP Florida, Equality Florida, Our Fund and SAGE, the Town Hall featured expert panelists, who examined the challenges facing LGBT older adults, and how aging providers and LGBT organizations in Florida are addressing these challenges.

“AARP knows that for too long, LGBT elders have faced challenges that others do not. It’s imperative for us to know what issues this community is facing and how we can collaborate to address them.”

— JEFF JOHNSON, STATE DIRECTOR OF AARP FLORIDA



Chris Almvig

SAGE Center on Halsted and SAGE at Creating Change

Creating Change is the largest annual gathering of activists, organizers, and leaders in the LGBT movement. This year it was held in Chicago, home of **SAGE CENTER ON HALSTED**.



SAGE's Elder Institute, *LGBT Elder and Ally Advocacy and Movement Building: Towards Equal Treatment for All*, drew 65 attendees who learned how to share their powerful stories. Attendees learned about the importance of non-discrimination protections in employment—the theme of the SAGE Story video shown at the conference featuring Chrissie and Charlotte from **SAGE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA**.

SAGE staff also presented workshops on a variety of topics, including Safe and Affordable Elder Housing; Building Age Inclusive LGBT Centers and Services; and the first-ever Creating Change workshop focused on LGBT elders of color, *Rage Against the Dying of the Light: LGBT Aging Diverse Perspectives*.

Honoring Katherine Acey

At Creating Change, CEO Michael Adams presented the **SAGE AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP ON AGING ISSUES** to Katherine Acey

for her work with GRIOT Circle, an intergenerational, community-based, LGBTQ people of color elders' organization.

Previously, Acey was Executive Director of Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice for 23 years.





Faith, Hope and Justice

A Conversation with Bishop Tonyia Rawls

Held in partnership with the Freedom Center for Social Justice, a day-long SAGE storytelling training in North Carolina recently convened LGBT activists, aging service providers, movement builders and faith leaders. SAGE's Susan Herr sat down with Bishop Tonyia Rawls to talk about the social justice mission of the Freedom Center, founding a church, and becoming an elder in a community of faith.

Q **The Freedom Center has partnered with SAGE for three years as part of the SAGE Story project. Let's start by talking about the work of the Freedom Center.**

Tonyia Rawls: The Freedom Center for Social Justice works at the intersection of race, faith, gender identity/expression and social justice. We are committed to the growth, safety and empowerment of the LGBTQ community. Our mission is accomplished through education, programs, partnerships and advocacy. We have three major programs.

The first is the *Do No Harm* campaign, which asks clergy, public officials and small business owners to sign the *Do No Harm* Pledge promising that they won't use religion or religious text to create unsafe spaces or violate the law.

Second is the Transgender Faith and Action Network, which is a social network for trans people of faith and allies.

It is currently in the testing stage and will have its national launch in spring 2016. The network will provide resources, research, opportunities for connection and tools to build stronger trans-affirming spaces on the ground. We also host an annual transgender retreat that offers an opportunity for refreshing, learning and strategizing.

Finally, we work with key partners like SAGE, NAACP, Southerners on New Ground, Campus Pride and others who share our vision of a world where equal protections and opportunities exist for all.

Q **I was lucky enough to meet you and to learn more about the Freedom Center at this year's Storytelling Summit in Charlotte. Tell me about SAGE Story partnership between Freedom Center and SAGE.**

TR: We have captured the stories of more than 30 LGBTQ seniors through these summits, many of which we included in a mini documentary produced by the Freedom Center organizer AJ Williams called "Quiet As It's Kept." The majority of participants are people of color. However, the group is diverse. The 2014 and 2015 cohorts went through a six-week training period and learned the skills needed to not just tell their stories, but to turn those stories into positive change and power.

Q **The keynote speaker for this year's event was the Reverend Nelson Johnson, Pastor of the Faith Community Church. He described his decades-long journey from homophobia to the leadership role he now uses to counter oppression of LGBT people in some**



Christian denominations. As a recovering fundamentalist myself, I was moved to tears by his story. Why did you invite him to be the keynote speaker?

TR: One of the things we are committed to is not working in silos. While we are unapologetic about our work with and for LGBTQ people, our general concerns are bigger than that. He may be a Black preacher who once held fundamentalist anti-gay views, but he is also an elder who lives in the South. We have far more in common than not. The only way we can cross those bridges to one another is to be willing to let ours down. Reverend Johnson is committed to justice, period. He is a longtime civil rights activist and has been willing to do the often hard work of self-reflection. I honor that part of him, which is why we invited him to share his journey.

Q You and your wife Gwen moved to Charlotte from D.C. in 2014 to establish Unity Fellowship Church Movement's first flock there. The denomination, founded in 1982, was born from a need to minister primarily to LGBT Black people during the height of the AIDS crisis. How is the genesis of Unity Fellowship alive in your church today?

TR: Unity Fellowship Church Charlotte was the first church in the denomination to be established in the Bible Belt. The Founder, Archbishop Carl Bean, established a phrase that "God is Love and Love is For Everyone." In 2014, I founded Sacred Souls Community Church, which is now entering the United Church of Christ. We have been able to expand our reach to all of the members of our community in a way that looks beyond race, class, land of native birth and any other measure that keeps people marginalized and oppressed.

Q Do elders play as powerful a role in your church as they do in other faith communities?

TR: Elders are those 45 and older who play a vital role in every aspect of our ministry. In addition to their

experience and spiritual depth, they have skills that can come only with time. I have grown to depend on them as a pastor and they are

Bishop Rawls at the North Carolina NAACP America's Journey for Justice Rally.



At the SAGE Storytelling Summit (from left): Susan Herr, Chief Engagement Officer, SAGE; Reverend Nelson Johnson, Pastor, Faith Community Church, and Executive Director, Beloved Community Center; Bishop Tonyia Rawls; Joyce Johnson; and Gwen Rawls.

some of our strongest advocates for spiritual and social justice for all.

Q Do you consider yourself an elder?

TR: My mom died at 58 years old and my grandmother at 56. They were both amazing women who impacted not only my life but the life of so many others who looked to them for wisdom, guidance and support. At 57, I find myself functioning in a similar role. I celebrate my life and appreciate the opportunity I have been given to share my experiences, resources and support to those coming along. I view this role as an elder as one of the highest honors one can hold. I believe the world needs us.

Q SAGE works to ensure that LGBT older people are represented in a wide array of anti-discrimination efforts across the country. North Carolina, where SAGE has two affiliates in addition to our partnership with the Freedom Center, is one of the states where we have focused our efforts. Do you feel hopeful about North Carolina's ability to advance policies that protect LGBT people of all ages?

TR: North Carolina is going to surprise many people because we have been working together across lines of difference to stand strong against those forces that seek to distract citizens from the real issues that harm them. We also are holding together to reject the notion that the differences between us far outweigh the needs we have as a state. The Freedom Center is working together with groups as diverse as the Latin American Coalition, Time Out Youth, historically Black colleges and other "unusual suspects" to look at politics, justice, faith and hope through a lens of new possibility. LGBTQ issues are being taken out of the box and now applied to life in general. •



AJ Williams

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

First-ever Summit of LGBT Elder Advocates and the U.S. Administration on Aging

If you can think of a public program that supports older adults, chances are it is at least partially made possible by federal funding. Whether it's transportation assistance or a local senior center, these federally-funded programs have a tremendous impact on the daily lives of older adults. The problem is—it's hard to get the federal government to pay attention to the specific needs of LGBT elders.

That's why SAGE pushed aggressively at last summer's White House Conference on Aging for the first ever Summit meeting of LGBT elder advocates with the senior leadership of the U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) and state and local aging network leaders. The purpose of the Summit was to share testimony from elders, advocates and experts about how publicly-funded aging services can better serve LGBT elders and to push for even more federal leadership.

The Summit, co-hosted by SAGE and AoA, took place at the Gill Foundation in Denver and featured an electric panel of LGBT elders; compelling testimony from aging leaders in New York, Georgia, and Florida, and powerful presentations from the country's leading researchers on LGBT aging issues. Assistant Secretary for Aging Kathy Greenlee



Attendees at the Denver Summit meeting (from left): Corinda Crossdale, Director of the State Office for the Aging (NYSOFA); Linda Levin, CEO Elder Source; and Deborah Stone-Walls, Executive on Aging, Maui County Office on Aging.



Kathy Greenlee, Assistant Secretary for Aging (left), and Nora Super, White House Conference on Aging Executive Director, addressed the gathering.

and White House Conference on Aging Executive Director Nora Super attended the full-day Summit, with both addressing the gathering. Among the issues highlighted were discrimination against LGBT elders in federally-funded services, lack of cultural competence on the part of service providers, and the particularly acute challenges facing transgender elders and older adults living with HIV.

"Rarely do we get the undivided attention of two of the federal government's most senior-ranking

Updating the Older Americans Act

WHY DO LGBT OLDER ADULTS NEED SUPPORT?

policymakers on aging for a full day, so we took full advantage of the opportunity," said Aaron Tax, SAGE Director of Federal Government Relations. "Since the federal government is funding the programs that older Americans most rely on, they have the power to improve the day-to-day well-being of LGBT older people on a massive scale."

The Administration on Aging announced during the Summit that it would soon issue new guidance to State Offices on Aging that would be a positive step forward for LGBT elders. The impact of that proposed guidance is unclear, so SAGE is energetically advocating with AoA for progress during the final year of the Obama Administration. Stay tuned for more in the coming months. •

"The Denver Summit was a unique opportunity to make sure federal leaders know why they must act to address poor treatment of LGBT elders in the services that the government is funding."

—AARON TAX, SAGE
DIRECTOR OF FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS



The Older Americans Act (OAA) is the nation's primary law for funding, organizing, and delivering social and nutrition programs

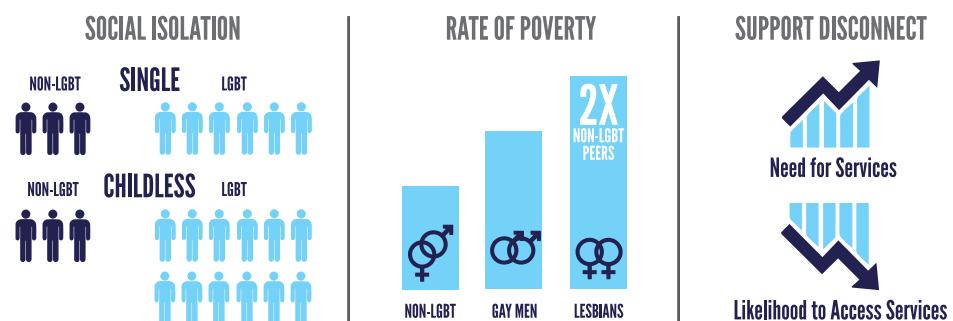
(like *Meals on Wheels*) to older adults and their caregivers with the goal of enabling people to age in-place in their communities.

PROBLEM

The OAA, a \$2 billion-a-year program, makes no mention of LGBT older adults.



LGBT Older Adults suffer disproportionately from their non-LGBT peers.



SOLUTION

In order to better serve LGBT Americans, the OAA needs to be amended to include LGBT older adults as a population of "greatest social need."



Power of a Graying Workforce

National trends are opportunities to advocate & educate

Retire at 65? Not so fast. Economic need and increased longevity keep many Americans working longer than their predecessors, and LGBT people are no exception.

According to the Department of Labor, employment of workers 65 and over increased 101% between 1977 and 2007. Research indicates this is not an isolated trend: Gen X and Millennials will also wait longer to retire. As the LGBT population ages with the rest of the country, this phenomenon will have an increasing effect on our communities.

In response to the trend, SAGE now educates employers about the value of older LGBT employees. Working in concert with corporate partners like Genworth, Mercer, Google, Merrill Lynch and Johnson & Johnson, SAGE facilitates workplace conversations, and participates in corporate sector conferences like *Out and Equal*. SAGE also uses focus groups of LGBT mature workers to explore how our SAGEWorks program can better support their needs.



SAGE presentation at 2015 Out & Equal Workplace Summit on “Valuing, Engaging and Serving LGBT Older Adults as Clients and Staff.” Panelists (from left): Lynn Faria, SAGE; Andrew Werner, Johnson & Johnson; Gia Owens, Genworth Financial; William Moran, Merrill Lynch; Hilary Meyer, SAGE; and James Campbell, Mercer.

EMPLOYERS REPORT THAT WORKERS OVER 50 ARE:



Ultimately, an older workforce is good news for everyone involved. Older people offer irreplaceable insights, experience and dedication. According to AARP¹, employers report that workers over 50 are less likely to quit, are more punctual, and often serve as valuable mentors for younger staff. They are also well equipped to help companies understand and serve a rapidly growing number of mature consumers.

PBS reports that almost half of unemployed workers over 55 face long-term unemployment, defined as a period lasting longer than 27 weeks². The situation can be worse for LGBT older workers, who have to worry not only about age discrimination but also about anti-LGBT discrimination, given that there is still no Federal law protecting against workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Through programs like SAGEWorks, SAGE continues to empower LGBT older employees, while educating corporate leaders. This is how SAGE helps to ensure that a graying LGBT workforce is a benefit for all. •

¹ “The Value of Older Workers,” by T.P. Reid, *AARP Bulletin*, September 2015.

² “How To Help The Older Long-Term Unemployed,” by Ofer Sharone, *Next Avenue*, January 1, 2016.



Blazing New Trails

A Report from the 2015 SAGENet Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh

SAGE makes an impact in communities across the country through its robust network of 28 affiliates in 20 states and Washington, D.C. Established and emerging leaders meet annually to advance their knowledge of LGBT aging issues, promote collaborations within the network, share the latest trends in research and policy, and bond with each other.

Workshops focused on exchanging best practices and program ideas, incorporating principles of diversity and equity in service delivery and fundraising, while group trainings brought spirited discussions on various topics including: addressing bullying, creating trans inclusive programming, and reaching isolated elders. •



From left: David Jobin, Our Fund; Yasmeen Hatcher and Bob McGrogan, Persad Center; and Joseph Foster, PNC Bank.

PARTICIPANTS REACT

“I returned to Albuquerque with a greater dedication, challenged to accomplish what others are doing so well.”

— Katherine Palmer, SAGE Albuquerque

“It was motivating, educational, helpful, fun, friendly, productive and validating—now I feel even more connected to the work I do.”

— Alyssa Cottone, SAGE Long Island

“I learned that there are many ways to accomplish a goal. The sincere willingness and the way everyone shared was very moving.”

— Kip Swan, SAGE Utah

“For anyone struggling to grow a SAGE affiliate program, there can be no better learning experience. The attendees shared their own experiences and poured out encouragement and inspiration by the bucketful. I feel I can call any one of them for advice now.”

— Anne Tischer, SAGE Rochester

“The SAGENet gathering was sleek and sophisticated. The wisdom, knowledge, and support helped me rethink how I advocate for LGBT older adults. It was a perfect combination of networking, learning and laughter.”

— Ed Miller, SAGE Philly



Honoring Two Remarkable Lives

Ruth Berman & Connie Kurtz receive the SAGE Pioneer Award

by Kevin Wood

Ruth Berman and Connie Kurtz were young housewives when they met in 1959 in Brooklyn. Both were mothers and community leaders, so they became fast friends. In 1974 they fell in love.

They later left their marriages for each other, despite their struggle with homophobia, both social and internalized. In 1988 they sued the New York City Board of Education for domestic partner benefits, and in 1992 they won. Later they established a PFLAG chapter for retirees in their new Florida community and in 2002 they were the subjects of the critically acclaimed documentary, *Ruthie and Connie: Every Room in the House*.

In October 2015 they were publicly spotlighted when Congressman Patrick Murphy introduced the House version of the LGBT Elder Americans Act as the Ruthie & Connie LGBT Elder Americans Act. The bill seeks to improve the Older Americans Act (OAA) by better serving LGBT elders.

At the SAGE & Friends: Miami 2016 event in February, Ruth and Connie were presented with the SAGE Pioneer Award, which recognizes LGBT older adults who paved the way toward LGBT equality and the allies who have supported that effort. I met with Ruth and Connie to talk about their remarkable lives and how this moment had special significance for them.



Q Did you play a role in the Ruthie & Connie LGBT Elder Americans Act? How does it feel to represent the LGBT community in Congress?

RB: We knew nothing about it until we got the call! We were touched by such an honor. We called people in the community and asked, is this kosher? Should we be proud of it? We didn't know how revolutionary we were. Now, of course, I get the chills even mentioning it.

Q When you became a couple in 1974 it was a very different time. You were out and part of a tight-knit, conservative, Jewish community. Where did you find the courage to make such a bold move?

CK: For me it wasn't hard, I felt good about myself finally. I couldn't put anyone else first anymore, no matter how selfish it seemed.

RB: It was a nightmare. Luckily I had Connie at my side. I was so overtaken by my love for this woman. But it was very difficult. I got very ill, I ended up in

the hospital. I was sick from that closet. The nature of a secret doesn't allow you to be.

Q Ruth, in 1988 you sued the Board of Education (BOE) for domestic partner benefits. Sexual orientation wasn't yet a protected class, and at that time any curriculum mentioning gay people was highly controversial, and this institution is subject to heightened scrutiny because it's about educating children. What was it like teaming up with Lambda Legal in order to sue the BOE as a high school guidance counselor with no guarantee of job protection, in what seemed to be an already hostile environment?

RB: I was outraged that straight colleagues had benefits that Connie couldn't have! When it went public that we had filed suit, my boss in the counseling department hugged me and said, "Congratulations, that's wonderful." A lot of the teachers were very proud and said "good luck." A social studies teacher asked me to speak to her class. Some students even started coming to my office to "come out."

Q You're both certified counselors and have led support groups for people who are still in the closet or otherwise struggling with shame. What was it like working with people in such an intimate way?

CK: The most intimate thing is being intimate with myself—to feel good enough in myself individually. Once I live up to my honesty, then I can work with everyone. But they have to go forward and identify for themselves. Foremost I am a lesbian, not a partner of Ruthie. It's very simple. You have to come out. People give excuses. They use negative stories to justify. They say, "Should I come out?" I would like someone to just say, "I'm scared, hold my hand."

Q Even with job protection and the legal rights of marriage, many people in the public eye who feel vulnerable to criticism—politicians, school teachers—choose to stay in the closet. What would you say to them?

RB: I can be sympathetic and sensitive to the hardship and risk. But I cannot affirm their thinking. There must be an acceptance that we all come from different places.

CK: We can't guarantee that everyone will be supportive. Coming out doesn't mean everything is "hunky dory." But it was the most important thing for us to do.

RB: Find a community where you can share the difficulty.

CK: When you come out, it's not only for yourself.



Above: Kurtz and Berman receive the SAGE Pioneer Award in February 2016. Right: SAGE Board Co-Chair Elizabeth Schwartz (left), SAGE CEO Michael Adams, and SAGE Board member Damien Pardo.



Q You married two days after marriage for same-sex couples was legalized in New York State in July 2011. How did it feel when nationwide marriage equality came to pass in 2015?

CK: It was beautiful, special. Even in Florida? The South? It was the cream on top. It's wonderful that we have the option now, but it should be taken seriously.

RB: And you can't just take, you have to give back. Our community has to recognize that they must volunteer, because not all the laws are in place yet.

CK: Give whatever you can. Collect coins in a pishka* if that's all you can do!

Q At your 2011 wedding, the rabbi proclaimed that for the two of you "the personal is political." Do you agree? How have your lives represented this?

RB: We represent what any family wants. Coming out is so important. A friend said to us once before a party, "don't be affectionate." It's crazy that people need to protect themselves from the affection of two women. You can't mandate attitude. But you have to take action.

CK: People have a face for work, another face for friends, maybe a different face for the community, yet another for family. What happened to one face? Why separate them?" •

*a charity box, from Yiddish

SAGEWorks

Inspiring & Energizing Older LGBT Job Seekers

by Kira Garcia

“I became unemployed literally overnight. I was a paycheck away from desperation. I did not have enough confidence to navigate a sophisticated job market.”

When 60-year-old Chicago resident Nelli Vahter describes being laid off after more than 10 years as a minister, it's hard not to feel moved. Today, Nelli's future looks brighter—her perseverance through hardship has been supported by SAGEWorks, the only nationwide employment assistance program for LGBT people age 40 and older.

Jobs are so much more than where we are from 9 to 5. They can define our identities, our communities, and our legacies. Just as important, careers can determine access to housing and healthcare—two of the most significant needs among LGBT older people. So it's no surprise that losing a job later in life can feel painful, scary and even desperate, according to many SAGEWorks participants. Unfortunately, unemployment is far too common among older members of our communities. And anti-LGBT discrimination and age discrimination can add up to serious barriers for LGBT older people.

As the name suggests, SAGEWorks energizes and inspires older LGBT job seekers across the country. Funded with significant support from the Walmart Foundation, SAGEWorks sites in Chicago, Fort Lauderdale, Denver, Chicago, Philadelphia, Palm Springs and New York City have served more than 1,500 people since 2010. This year, the intensive two-week SAGEWorks Boot Camp program will expand beyond New York City and reach people in Chicago, Detroit, Wilmington, NC and Rochester, NY. SAGEWorks goes beyond job listings and networking events to create a unique, personal job-hunting experience that's tailor-made for our communities. Through job fairs, resume workshops, personal counseling and our signature Boot Camp program, SAGEWorks helps to transform disheartened participants into skilled, confident job seekers.

SAGEWorks participants have a lot in common, and these shared characteristics inform the program's approach. Many struggle with long-term unemployment. About 70% have been out of work for more than 6 months and 53% for a year or more. Program participants also share a high level of education; 74% hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

To program manager Michele D'Amato, SAGEWorks is key to fulfilling SAGE's larger mission. “Many SAGEWorks activities happen in small groups or one-on-one, so we can really focus on each participant, improving lives one person at a time. And this has a ripple effect. Economically empowered individuals go on to build stronger, happier communities.”

SAGEWORKS QUICK FACTS

1500

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
SAGEWORKS HAS HELPED
SINCE 2010



40%

OF PARTICIPANTS HAVE
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD
INCOMES BELOW \$14,000



70%

OF UNEMPLOYED PARTICIPANTS
HAVE BEEN OUT OF WORK FOR
MORE THAN 6 MONTHS



Brian Trout agrees. At age 56 he relocated with his partner to Palm Springs, where he thought it would be easy to find work. An anxious two-month job search with no results led him to SAGEWorks, where he found “caring, talented people truly interested in helping others.” Brian also took comfort in the camaraderie of the group—something many participants comment on. Whether they turn to each other for commiseration or congratulation, SAGE job seekers find strength in numbers. Brian found work in the healthcare industry before completing the program—a source of inspiration for other SAGEWorks participants in Palm



SAGEWorks is...



“IMPACTFUL,
GROWTHFUL,
SUPPORTIVE”

—Brian Trout, Palm Springs

SINCE 2010, SAGEWORKS SITES IN CHICAGO, FORT LAUDERDALE, DENVER, CHICAGO, PHILADELPHIA, PALM SPRINGS AND NEW YORK CITY HAVE SERVED OVER 1,500 PEOPLE.

Springs. Brian now works for Stonewall Gardens, an LGBT-inclusive assisted living facility, while he works on his Medical Technician certificate. “It’s been such a pleasure to work for Stonewall! The residents are amazing and I’m learning so much about assisted living and how much need there is in this community.”



SAGEWorks is...



“MODERN,
SUPPORTIVE,
WISE”

—Petrena Lewis, NYC

SAGEWorks participant Petrena Lewis, 55, signed up after being terminated from her job of 10 years at New York City’s LaGuardia Airport, well aware of the restraints age discrimination has put on her career. “I don’t like to talk about my age because it gives most people a chance to place me in a box, and I want to defy limitations,” remarks Petrena. She struggled to find work, despite having two college degrees. Petrena wanted to transform her love of food into a new career, and turned to SAGEWorks for help. After experiencing the SAGEWorks Boot Camp program for herself, she says she is now conducting a more “competent and action-oriented” job search.

Petrena’s experience as an unemployed older worker is food for thought. She says that while “things are changing for the LGBT workers, there are still stigmas and isolation in many work environments.” She feels that legalizing marriage for same-sex couples can ultimately help LGBT people stay employed, because “having a stable and recognized home and family, where one does not have to hide, makes a better employee.”

Nelli Vahter now feels better equipped than ever to face the challenges of looking for a job. Though once afraid she’d wind up homeless, Nelli has blossomed, thanks to the SAGE Works program at Chicago’s Center on Halsted. “It’s amazing how things have sprung up from inside of me—things I never expected!” It’s a powerful testament to a program that transforms communities by tapping into the strength within each of us. •

Successful Aging Around the Country

Jerry Chasen, Director of Legacy Planning at SAGE, went on a cross-country trip to provide information on the Successful Aging initiative in Los Angeles, Chicago and Washington, D.C. The series provides lessons and resources to facilitate proper planning and to inspire a new frame of mind on aging. Learn more at sageusa.org/successfulaging.

Jerry Chasen with Successful Aging participants in Chicago.



SAGE EVENTS



One Last Visit

by Tim Maher

The ferry slowly pulled out of the harbor. For years, I'd noticed the "happy boats" bringing revelers to Fire Island Pines on Thursdays and Fridays, and the "sad boats" leaving the harbor on Sunday. As I watched this ferry carrying my mother, father, and other family members out of the harbor, I couldn't yet decide if this was a "happy" or "sad" ferry.

Years earlier, I had first invited my parents to visit me at the Pines, a gay vacation community on Fire Island, for a Tuesday afternoon lunch visit. I was raised nearby on Long Island, yet in those years of hiding and the closet, this renowned LGBT mecca felt far, far away. Once I discovered it, I wanted my parents to share in the beauty of the island.

In 2003, my mom finally agreed to a visit. When I spoke with my mom to confirm her visit for the following day, she had asked if the house was on "regular Fire Island or, you know...the gay part?" When I asked her which part she thought, she answered correctly.

My phone rang the next morning; it was mom again, saying she had forgotten that she was supposed to visit my aunt and uncle that day—an unfathomable excuse from an extraordinarily organized woman. She apologized, but I knew she'd been frightened about being in a gay environment. I didn't feel angry. Instead, I had a sense of relief mixed with disappointment. She just wasn't ready, and perhaps, neither was I.

The following week she called and sheepishly admitted she'd messed up. It had been my last week on the Island that year, but she asked if she could visit the following summer. Of course I agreed.

This led to the start of an annual tradition. My parents, my aunt, my sisters and their kids began making a yearly summer visit to my house at the Pines for lunch, loving every minute. Between the pool, the bay,



This article by SAGE community member Tim Maher is the first in a series of first-person stories about caregiving relationships.

the ocean, and the homes with their beautiful gardens, my parents were taken by the Island's beauty. For me, these visits symbolized their acceptance of me as a gay man. For them, what began with discomfort grew to acceptance and in time, a longing for this magical place.

We learned of my mother's terminal cancer two years before she succumbed. As we entered her first summer with the disease, her mobility was limited and I knew that she would need help getting to the house. That was when I discovered the free cart shuttle service offered by SAGE from the harbor to the heart of the Island, operated by a wonderful SAGE ambassador. The same mom who made excuses to get out of her first visit to the Pines was devastated at the thought of missing a visit. When I mentioned the shuttle service, she was ridiculously excited. Friends met her at the ferry and rode with her, sharing laughs, probably mostly at my expense. SAGE volunteers treated her like a queen. My housemates adorned her with a required boa, which she loved.

Just weeks before her passing, mom was bent on one last visit. Without SAGE, this visit would not have been possible. We knew that she was close to the finish line, making this last visit so special. I drank in every moment: the ferry arriving, her getting in the cart and then sitting in the shade by the pool. She always told us that her getting cancer was a gift which allowed her to see the very best in people. I am certain that she included the people at SAGE as she thought of this.

As my mother departed Fire Island for the last time, the ferry was carrying her away from a place where she saw her son as the man he really was: no masks, no lies, no closets. The ferry, the SAGE cart, and the island were all vital parts of my coming out story and ultimately my relationship with my family. It was a perfect ferry. •



Tim's parents Patrick and Patricia Maher, riding the SAGE Cart in 2009.

ON OCTOBER 19, 2015, SAGE HELD ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY AWARDS & GALA AT GOTHAM HALL IN NEW YORK CITY.

With a record \$750,000 in donations, the event brought together LGBT pioneers and allies to recognize SAGE's achievements throughout the country, and to honor leaders committed to improving life among diverse LGBT aging populations.

Honorees included Jim Obergefell, who was presented with the LGBT Pioneer Award by SAGE board member emerita Edie Windsor. The Jack Watters Corporate Advocate Award went to Stephen Simcock of JPMorgan Chase for his leadership on LGBT elder housing. Assemblymember Deborah Glick—the first openly LGBT member elected to the New York State legislature—received the Paula Ettelbrick Community Service Award. SAGE also honored Ted Snowdon and Duffy Violante for their continuous support of LGBT community programs, and the Macquarie Group for its commitment to SAGE Center Harlem, SAGE Center Bronx and SAGE's national programs.



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1. Honoree Jim Obergefell and SAGE board member emerita Edie Windsor
2. Mary Fournier, Phyllis Davie Mack, SAGE CEO Michael Adams and Patricia Tradd
3. Honoree Steven Simcock and SAGE Board Secretary Kevin Williams
4. Honorees Deborah Glick, David Canter, Jim Obergefell, Duffy Violante and Ted Snowdon
5. SAGE Board Members
6. Gabby Pizzolo of *Fun Home* and Edie Windsor
7. Kevin Curry and Abdou Seye



6

7

Visit sageusa.org/awards2015 for more photos.

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New York, NY 10001

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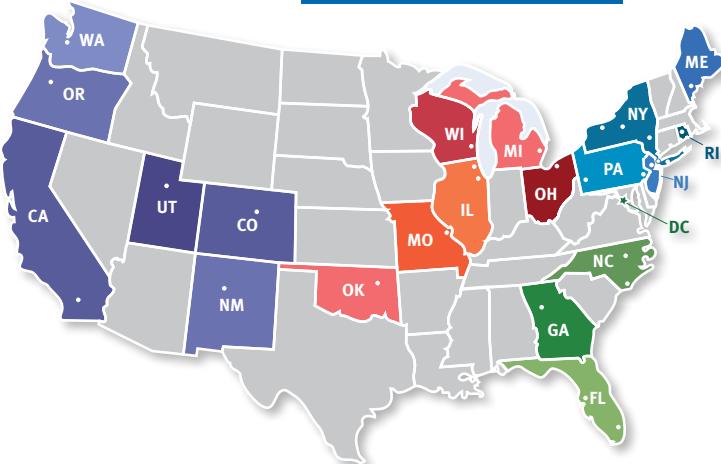
SAGE Center Bronx
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