Critical Challenges Face Aging Gay Partners
By Nancy Weaver Teichert
(Sacramento Bee, September 17, 2003)

Like many people over 55, Ellen Pontac of Davis would prefer not to give her exact age. Suffice to say, it’s time for her to think about retirement benefits, wills and end-of-life health care decisions.

Her challenge is not just overcoming the usual reluctance by baby boomers to face growing older. It’s a legal quandary for aging gays and lesbians to get their wishes carried out.

While the debate continues over legalizing same-sex marriages, the legal barriers and losses that she and her partner will experience as they age are large and undeniable.

Because they can’t marry, gay and lesbian partners cannot collect spousal benefits or enjoy spousal protections that can greatly affect the quality of their life as they age. Pontac said if her partner of 30 years were injured in another state, she might not be able to visit her in intensive care or claim her body if she died.

Many life and retirement planning goals have to be achieved – if possible – by going through a back or side door, hiring expensive legal help and keeping on top of constantly changing laws affecting the legal standing of gay couples.

“Things create a huge burden emotionally and financially,” said Pontac, co-chair of the Yolo and Sacramento county chapters of Marriage Equality California. “We pay taxes, we pay Social Security just like everyone else, yet we are unable to reap the benefits.”

The rights provided domestic partners will be expanded under AB 205, which has been passed by the Legislature and awaits Gov. Gray Davis’ promised signature. [Ed. Note: This Bill was signed by Gov. Davis at a special ceremony on Sept. 19, at the San Francisco LGBT Center.]

Opponents such as Randy Thomasson, executive director of Campaign for California Families, said most of the estimated 20,000 domestic partners registered in California are people in their 30s and 40s.

“The homosexual activists are using old people as a front, and it’s wrong,” said Thomasson. “Most senior citizens want marriage protected for only a man and a woman.”

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Aging in Transgender People (Excerpts)
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- "Lesbian, Gay Male, Bisexual and Transgendered Elders: Elder Abuse and Neglect Issues" is an exceptional article that contextualizes elder abuse in the LGBT communities. Concerning transgendered elders, providers are cautioned to be sensitive, noting that the term "transgender" is relatively new and that many older people will not identify as such. The author discusses issues around legal realities, intimate relationships, and provider-client relationships. Cook-Daniels discusses issues related to SOFFAs (significant others, family, friends, and allies) as well. In

- "FTM Post Mortem," this personal story describes the transphobic situations encountered by a partner of an FTM transsexual after he died. It provides a human look into the reality of transgender discrimination as it affects partners. "Transgender Elders and SOFFAs: A Primer for Service Providers and Advocates" is a comprehensive and informative article that defines and explains terms used in describing the transgender population. It details issues of transitioning in later life, health concerns for aging populations, legal and economic issues, and issues faced by SOFFAs. The intended audiences are service providers and policymakers, and the article succeeds in clearly outlining the pressing concerns of transgender elders.

Other articles of interest include Joseph M. Schreiber's "Slow Learner," a story of an FTM who transitioned within a marriage to a man. This article provides an interesting account of a perspective rarely vocalized in the FTM community. Shannon Minter provides a brief summary of legal issues transgender people may face concerning marriage in "Transgender Elders and Marriage: The Importance of Legal Planning." This article specifically focuses on how these issues pertain to older transpeople. Any transgender people interested in learning about how transitioning affects marriage privileges should read this article.

Lookin' Good

Did you ever feel guilty for looking at others your own age and thinking "surely I cannot look that old." Enjoy this short story!

Mary was waiting for her first appointment in the reception room of a new dentist, and suddenly noticed his certificate, which bore his full name. Suddenly, she remembered a tall, handsome boy with the same name that had been in her high school class some 40+ years ago.

Upon seeing him, however, she quickly discarded any such thought. This balding, gray-haired man with the deeply lined face was far too old to have been her classmate!

After he had examined her teeth, she asked him if he had attended the local high school. "Yes," he replied.

"When did you graduate?" she asked.

He answered, "In 1954."

"Why, you were in my class!" she exclaimed.

He looked closely and then asked, "What did you teach?"
Book Review

By Dana Rosenberg
Temple University Press

Reviewed by Frank Howell

As the baby boomer generation rolls toward the golden years gay seniors sometimes reject the modern ideas of lavender liberation. Dana Rosenfeld, assistant professor of sociology, Colorado College, has gathered a sample of twenty-five gays and lesbians over the age of sixty-five from across America. The folks assembled here: the discrede, oldsters who grew up before the 1960s, and the accredited, those who came out of the closet after the social upheavals of the 1960s. Some of these elders can become bogged down in the past and experience difficulty adjusting to modern perspectives. One man felt he was “getting too old for gay life” and was attempting to turn straight. Grey-haired gay men can sometimes be lured into the dangers of commercialized prostitution in an effort to find acceptance. Some lavender seniors fear the afterlife and attempt to “repent” when death is near.

Some seniors don’t come out until they are in the latter part of their lives. “Homosexual incompetence” can result from remaining in the closet.

In the Rosenfeld sample the ages range from sixty-four to eighty-nine. Seventy-five percent lived alone. The income level was $10,000 – $100,000. One third had been married. Some couples decided not to live together because of homophobia.

Rosenfeld style tends toward the dry side but she makes her point about the impact of change on those in the final stage of life.

But bashful gays and lesbians can also be liberated by the new technology. Finding companions on the Internet cannot be underestimated. With evolution new paths can bring hope. We must constantly reinvent ourselves. 

An Excerpt from

‘Aging in Transgender People: An Annotated Bibliography’

[Editor’s Note: The following is only a small portion of an extensive annotated bibliography, which we cannot print in full due to space limitations in Lavender Notes. Readers can find the full bibliography online at http://www.trans-health.com/Vol2Iss3/elderbib.htm. The full bibliography includes materials on spirituality, health, politics, and other issues related to transgender people.]

By elroi waszkiewicz

The experiences of transgender people are sorely lacking in the literature on aging and the life course. Research on older populations rarely account for gay and lesbian people, let alone those that are transgender. To complicate this issue further, older people themselves rarely identify as transgender because this term has only recently entered the mainstream discourse on queer experiences. Consequently, it can be challenging to provide adequate services for the gender-different elderly. The following annotated bibliography introduces readers to materials available that relate to the topic of transgender experiences with aging.


This article is a groundbreaking piece into the issues faced by LGBT people in retirement. It provides a framework for understanding the unique needs of older LGBT people. Transgender issues are discussed, but the majority of information pertains to lesbians and gays.


Based on a workshop given at the True Spirit Conference, the author initiates discussion with the presenters to elaborate on concerns specific to older transpeople. The article discusses medical and legal issues, developing community, working for change, and viewing aging positively. The interview-type format places the voices of older transpeople into the forefront.


This piece introduces readers within the field of gerontology to issues of transgender aging. The study discussed was presented to the Gerontological Society of America and is intended to spark interest on transgender experiences within the discipline.


It is necessary to reference this entire website because it contains so much relevant material concerning transgender experiences with aging. Some exceptional pieces are described below.

Loree Cook-Daniels’ contributions permeate this website. In “Growing Old Transgendered,” she briefly introduces readers to the issues facing older transgender people. She describes activism within the LGBT community in “Ageism.” “Elder Abuse” is an abbreviated version of a larger report and describes occurrences of violence against the elderly. It is written in an informal and accessible manner.

‘Aging in Transgender People’ concluded on page 2 (opposite)
Critical Challenges
(from page 1)

Thomasson said gays and lesbians can use existing legal tools such as durable power of attorney for health care decisions and wills to carry out their wishes.

A landmark study published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force three years ago exposed what it labeled inequities facing aging gays and lesbians. Sean Cahill, one of the study’s authors and director of the task force’s Policy Institute, said a growing number of gay senior organizations are lobbying for equal benefits, aside from the issue of proposed same-sex marriage.

Sharon Smith, the partner of Diane Whipple, who was fatally mauled by a dog in San Francisco in 2001, became the first same-sex partner in the United States to win the right to sue for the wrongful death of her lesbian partner.

Polls showed that public sympathy increased when the disparity of benefits given to same-sex partners of 9/11 terrorist victims, including some who are said to have fought their attackers heroically, came to light. Special action was taken by New York state to give spousal insurance benefits to the 20 gay and lesbian partners of 9/11 victims.

Cahill said some states, most notably California, have made reforms through domestic partner laws that give gay and lesbian couples legal standings in a growing number of arenas.

Lora Connolly, chief deputy director of the California Department of Aging, said many couples don’t realize those protections aren’t valid unless they officially register as domestic partners.

And California’s domestic partner law applies only to state programs and would not apply if a couple chose to retire to another state.

Connolly said anti-discrimination language has been extended from hospitals in California to include skilled nursing facilities. She works with the American Society on Aging to educate senior programs about how to encourage the participation of homosexuals in their programs. But many aging gays and lesbians continue to report discrimination and unequal treatment despite this progress, said Connolly. One gay nursing home resident complained that he was told to take his meals in his room, and others reported their friends were told not to visit, Connolly said.

And none of the domestic partner provisions affects federal senior programs such as Social Security and Medicare, which can be crucial for older people, she said.

Under Social Security, widows and widowers can get survivor benefits, but not surviving unmarried partners. A surviving spouse can also get a higher Social Security benefit based on the other spouse’s higher earnings.

A surviving married spouse also enjoys tax benefits, and can get a tax-free rollover of a 401(K) retirement savings plan into another account. A gay or lesbian couple would have to pay taxes on that money.

If one spouse uses the Medi-Cal program to pay for nursing home care, the other spouse can remain in their home until death before the house is used as an asset to reimburse the state for the care. A gay or lesbian couple could be forced to sell a home to pay for care of the other partner in a facility.

And the issues are more than just financial.

Carole Nutt of Sacramento, a licensed clinical social worker, said the question of who will make health care decisions is a big concern for many couples.

Nutt, 68, said she and her partner of 14 years have signed power of attorney forms to act on each other’s behalf, but fears persist.

“What is going happen if something happens to one of us and a family members comes in and says ‘I want it this way’?” asked Nutt, who said she wants to be

‘Critical Challenges’ continued on page 5)
Saturday • 12 Noon • Potluck Meeting
• Program at 1 P.M. • October 11

Your name begins with the letters
A through G – Bring a Salad
H through M – Bring a Dessert
N through Z – Bring a Main Dish
San Leandro BART station shuttle is available. Call voice mail day before: 667-9655 to arrange pickup.

Equality California (formerly known as CAPE) is the official lobbying organization in Sacramento for the LGBT community. The group will be the subject of discussion at the next Lavender Senior potluck. Under the Davis administration several ground breaking pieces of legislation have passed (domestic partners, protection for gay students and transgender folks). What remains to be done? How can we help in the battle for lavender rights? Kevin Dowling, openly gay Hayward City Councilman and board member of Equality California, will enlighten us on the struggle for LGBT rights in California.

Dangers of Falling and Accidents Explored at Sept. Potluck

Tina Scott, outreach worker for the Alameda County Health Department, gave us much to think about at the September potluck. Using a table of props and factual information, she demonstrated how many accidents among seniors could be prevented. According to Scott, one third of older folks over the age of 65 will fall at least once a year. We represent ten percent of the population of Alameda County and we accounted for forty three percent of injuries.

Tina demonstrated how the wrong type of slippers or bathrobes can lead to dangerous slips and slides inside the home. Such items as throw rugs are another taboo. Medications should be monitored to make sure they do not lead to excessive sleepiness. Grab bars should be installed in the showers. Tina showed off a pair of “grabbers,” a long handled scissor-like device that can be utilized to grab hold of items that are difficult to reach.

Seniors who wish further information can call Tina Scott at the Alameda County Health Department in San Leandro by calling 510-618-2050 extension 51 or by e-mailing aloems@co.alameda.ca.us

—Frank Howell

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Cremated or buried next to her partner. “What if a family member is going to come in and say they’ve got to go to the family plot?”

Connolly said senior service programs are reaching out more to aging gays and lesbians to offer advice and direct services.

In Sacramento on Oct. 23, the Del Oro Caregiver Resource Center will host a one-day conference for professionals working with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender older adults. Information on the conference, put on by the Sacramento County Mental Health Board, is available at (916) 971-0893.

This week, San Diego officials will release one of the most comprehensive needs assessments done in the aging gay and lesbian community. Disparity in same-sex partnerships and how they affect the future of older gays and lesbians will be a big part of those needs, said project director Jim Zians. Sponsored by the Alliance Health Care Foundation, the assessment will be used by local organizations to determine how to meet those needs, said Zians.

Gays, lesbians and transgenders are not used to looking to social service programs for help, but they may need to as they age, said Connolly. “Many of them encountered significant discrimination as they were growing up,” said Connolly. “There is a growing sensitivity,” among senior programs.

Our Mailing List

Lavender Seniors does not lend, sell or give away its mailing list to any outside organization.

Your support is crucial to enable the Lavender Seniors to continue its role as a vital resource to our community. Please take a moment and send your donation today.

Here's my gift of: $10  $25  $50  $75  $100  other ______

Name ________________________________________________________________
Address  ______________________________________________________________
City ___________________________ State ______ Zip Code ________________
Home Telephone ____________________________ E-mail address ____________

Please make checks payable to The Tides Center/Lavender Seniors and mail to:
Lavender Seniors 1395 Bancroft Avenue San Leandro, CA 94577

Thank you for your generosity!

☐ Please contact me about including Lavender Seniors in my will. ☐ Please contact me to volunteer.
Community Listings

Senior Men's Afternoon
1:30 – 3:30 P.M.
2nd and 4th Thursdays
October 9 and 23
2712 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley
Co-sponsored by Pacific Center and Lavender Seniors

East Bay Women's Support Group
Meets 2nd and 4th Fridays each month
October 10 and 24: 1:15 – 3 P.M.
Meets at Pacific Center, 2712 Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley

Fellows of East Bay
Second Sunday, 5:30 – 8:30 P.M.
Social Club for mature men and their admirers. Monthly Potluck dinner and social held the second Sunday of every month at Oak Center Towers, 1515 Market Street, Oakland.
Bring food and drink to share and a $4 donation.
October 12

Senior Support Group at
Lighthouse Community Center – Hayward
Meets the 2nd & 4th Tuesdays of each month, 5:00 – 7:00 p.m.
October 14 & 28
Frank Howell & Fred Banuelos
are the leaders
For information call Frank at 510-489-0932

Special Events – Please Mark Calendars

⇒ January 12: Seniors event at LGBT History Museum in San Francisco
More information to come.

⇒ February, date/time/place to be announced: Lavender Seniors Volunteer Recognition Event
More information to come.

⇒ April 14 – 17: 10th anniversary celebration of Lesbian and Gay Aging Information Network, and joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and the National Council on the Aging, in San Francisco
More information to come.

Bert Hendriksen Retires as Editor
New Newsletter Editor Needed

After completing three years as editor of Lavender Notes, with this edition, Bert Hendriksen has announced he is retiring from the position.”

Bert is a true friend to all of us who are concerned about LGBT seniors,” said Jeff Vessels, Director of Lavender Seniors. “Bert has an eye for quality and detail, and we will miss his expertise very much.”

Lavender Seniors seeks a new editor who is interested in LGBT senior issues and is experienced and skilled in layout using any one of the most common computer programs. The editor’s chief responsibility is laying out the newsletter using provided materials. The Director suggests edits and has authority over decisions about content. The newsletter editor is a volunteer position.

Interested persons should contact Jeff at 510-667-9655 or by email jeff@lavenderseniors.org

Notable Generosity

We are overwhelmed by the continuing generosity of the Royal Grand Ducal Council of Alameda County.

The Council presented Lavender Seniors an additional $1,000 gift at the Council’s September 7 event in Hayward honoring its new Duke and Duchess. Lavender Seniors had just received a $1,000 gift from the Council in July.

We are honored and fortunate to have your support, dear friends!