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Vocal Supporters Provide Crucial Clout

A recent groundswell of grassroots support has given **openhouse** much of the recognition and political clout needed to build housing with supportive services for LGBT seniors in San Francisco.

Last spring, 15 LGBT organizations rallied to include their members in our Market Survey, which showed strong community-wide support for the **openhouse** concept.

We also used email alerts to generate 800 letters of support from people all over the city. Supervisors, planning chiefs and other local leaders took notice.

On July 12, 2006, dozens of San Francisco's most influential decision makers joined us on the steps of City Hall to announce our plans to build LGBT-welcoming senior apartments as part of a mixed development at 55 Laguna Street. (See photo). They spoke forcefully in favor of our plans.

Supervisors Bevan Dufty and Ross Mirkarimi, whose districts surround 55 Laguna, pledged to help resolve any is-



Photo courtesy Luke Thomas, SanFranciscoSentinel.com

sues about neighborhood amenities on the site.

Supporters of our plans to build LGBT senior housing at 55 Laguna include Assemblyman Mark Leno, Senator Carole Migden, Supervisor Tom Ammiano, Former Mayor and HUD Western Regional Director Art Agnos, several city supervisors and other top local government leaders.

We have powerful support from San Francisco Planning and Urban Research (SPUR), Housing Action Coalition (HAC), Alice

B. Toklas Democratic Club (which named **openhouse** the winner of its Community Service Award on October 12), Equality California, and other highly influential individuals and groups throughout the LGBT and mainstream communities.

Politicians will count our supporters before deciding to approve the Laguna Street site for **openhouse**. To lend your name, contact Trilce Santana at 415-296-8995.

Training Opens Service Providers' Eyes

openhouse sensitizes 300 health and housing staffers

"I was born a male," Felicia Elizondo begins.

In the audience, all eyes widen.

Felicia looks and sounds like what she is: a vivacious 60-year-old heterosexual woman.

Most people think she is younger. But nobody ever mistakes her for a male.

Felicia is one of 17 speakers at **openhouse's** Education & Outreach Trainings. For more than two years, these volunteers have been telling emotional 10-minute versions of their life stories to health, social service, and housing providers who serve seniors throughout San Francisco.

Their purpose is to show that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older adults exist in significant numbers – 17,000 in San Francisco – and can be served more effectively when treated with understanding and respect.

Professionals who are able to do that for LGBT people and others of different ethnicities and backgrounds are deemed "culturally competent."

It's amazing how many aren't.

In just the past seven months, **openhouse** has trained 300 health and housing providers. Almost all of their agencies stay in contact with us after the workshop, often asking for follow-up consultations.

The result is a new set of collaborations between **openhouse** and mainstream agencies that already serve LGBT seniors – but want to know how to do it better.

Each two-hour training is facilitated by Nancy Flaxman, **openhouse** Education and Outreach Coordinator. Nancy is considered the nation's foremost cultural-competency trainer on the subject of LGBT seniors. Winner of a top national honor by the American Society on Aging, she continues to build on work she and others started in the 1990s at Spectrum Center in Marin.

Recently Nancy was appointed to the Advisory Council to the San Francisco Commission on the Aging, where

"I have given my heart and soul to being who I am. I don't want to hide what my life has been."

--Felicia Elizondo



Felicia Elizondo tells home care aides and others how to understand and talk to transgender seniors. See Page 3

she helps key decision makers make sure LGBT people are included in all services for seniors.

The **openhouse** trainings include background information, presentations by LGBT seniors, a list of resources, and 20 practical suggestions for serving older LGBT adults who often are hidden, isolated and underserved after a lifetime of discrimination.

Funded by The California Endowment, the S.F. Dept. of Aging and Adult Services and individual donors, the trainings have become so popular that we receive more requests for them than we can meet. From health and wellness workers at senior service agencies – including the Institute on Aging, the Veterans' Administration, OnLok and 30th Street Services – to graduate students in gerontology and social work at San Francisco State, attendees praise our trainers. "You opened my eyes to many issues I didn't realize still exist in San Francisco," one said.

Even today, those issues include discrimination preventing thousands of LGBT older adults from accessing health, wellness and housing services they need and deserve.

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Executive Director's Update

By Moli Steinert

As I've gotten older I've found it's become harder to recognize myself in photographs.

I ask my partner, Donna: do I really look like that?

"Yup, that's you," she says with her usual directness.

Have you seen your own photo recently? Does it show a face that looks a lot older than you feel?

Welcome to Baby Boomer Aging.

I guess I'm typical of this generation with my sense of myself lagging 10 years behind what the camera sees.

I'm in my mid-50s. But I feel like that 40 year-old who wants to believe there is plenty of time for everything, especially planning for my future.

I'm in denial. I wonder how many others are too.

It was ironically on my 50th birthday when, for the first time, a doe-eyed 20-something store clerk innocently asked if I wanted a senior discount. I was taken aback. I wanted to shout, "Don't you know what a 65 year-old looks like?"

I didn't want to think about getting old. I associated it with a time of loss: losing strength, health, control, power, desirability. Maybe losing friends or a partner. Losing significance in the eyes of society and in the workforce. Facing limitations caused by illness.

But as I look more closely I find the negative stereotypes are not necessarily so.

After becoming Executive Director of **openhouse**, I met a lot of LGBT people who are turning their own aging into something quite exciting. I'm eager to tell you more about what they're doing. They're setting the stage now for becoming more impressive and valuable than they've ever been before, even with some health limitations.

Perhaps you have friends who made brave and wonderful changes in their lives as they approached senior status. My partner, Donna, a nurse, joined Doctors Without Borders and so far has completed two assignments in Africa. A corporate executive I know relinquished her successful business to embark on a new career in documentary films.

This newsletter's page 3 article describes Lorraine Hall, who at age 74 decided to live as a woman and have gender reassignment surgery. She could have given up, thinking she was too old for such a transformation. Instead her attitude was, "If not now, when?"

Those are the kinds of people I want nearby as I age: people who remain resilient and forever open to trying new, healthy ways of expressing themselves.

I don't claim to know the one great secret to successful aging. But part of it might be the ability to respond creatively and enthusiastically to changing circumstances. Perhaps it's an attitude of never giving up the quest for fulfillment. Not disowning the past -- just always being willing to begin something new.

People are contributing this way of thinking plus their time and resources to building **openhouse**. They're leading us toward something that's going to become very valuable.

By avoiding the subject of my own maturing, I had been overlooking terrific opportunities to join with these LGBT visionaries in preparing for an exciting and safeguarded

future.

Now I'm looking forward to participating in **openhouse** focus groups and other community discussions about ways to build better lives that take advantage of our longevity. I won't be alone; over 200 of the people who responded to **openhouse's** recent Market Survey asked to be included in upcoming focus groups.

Once we accept our aging process, we want contact with other people who are figuring it out too. Together we can find creative ways to adapt to change. We can add to our lives, not subtract.

We can make sure the gains outweigh the losses.

To find out about our focus groups and community discussions, call Trilce Santana at **openhouse**, 415-296-8995. For resources on financial planning and long-term care insurance, see www.openhouse-sf.org



Moli Steinert

senior community living with pride
openhouse

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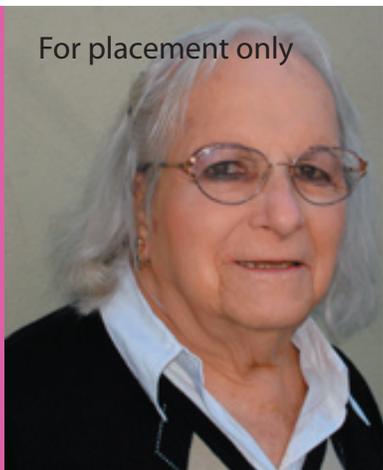
Jeffery Sterman

To Educate, Speakers Tell All

openhouse speaker Lorraine Hall, 80, can no longer climb stairs or do household chores.

She needs an assisted living care facility for her and her ailing wife, whom Lorraine married 50 years before having sex-change surgery at the age of 74.

When family members visit, they call Lorraine by her former male name. They insist she dress and act as Grandpa when her grandchildren are around. So an appropriate assisted living facility will have to have staff – and fellow residents – who will treat Lorraine with respect even though she is forced by her family to exhibit opposite genders on different occasions.



Lorraine Hall, 80, a speaker at openhouse trainings for service providers, needs assisted living

Lorraine says an **openhouse** senior village at 55 Laguna would be perfect for her and her wife. But it won't be open for four more years. She needs assisted living now.

openhouse speaker Felicia Elizondo, who never expects to move out of her apartment, says that as she ages she will need something other than housing. She needs respect and understanding from gays and lesbians as well as the general community.

"Some lesbians treat me as if they are angry at me," she says, "as if I'm not a real woman who had to deal with difficult men. But I am. And I have."

"I don't want to be feared or hated," Felicia says. "I have given my heart and soul to being who I am. I don't want to hide what my life has been."

Molested as a child and as a teenager, Felicia became a male prostitute at age 14. She didn't like it. When she was old enough, she joined the U.S. Navy and was shipped off to fight in the Vietnam War – as a man.

"I played an Academy Award performance. I lowered my voice and tried to be the man I wasn't. Yes, I fooled people, the best way I knew how."

After Vietnam, Felicia returned to San Jose, took a job at the phone company, and began to spend time as a woman. She was present at one of the great moments in gay rights history: San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria Riot in August 1966. (She appeared in the 2005 documen-

tary *Screaming Queens*).

In the 1970s she had a sex change operation, legally married a man who didn't know her past, and could have melted into mainstream society as any other woman. But she wanted to promote understanding of transgender people.

For the next three decades, Felicia devoted her energies to people who needed help. Although she never had much money, she set up garage sales and later organized fundraisers and raffles through the Ducal Court, where she is Royal Crown Princess. Single-handedly at first and then with others who also had few resources, she raised many thousands of dollars for LGBT and HIV organizations.

During a training course to provide emotional and practical support to people with AIDS, Felicia discovered she was carrying the HIV virus. She continued the training and spent years as a volunteer comforting, cleaning, and cooking for people in their final months of life.

"I expected to die in Vietnam, but I didn't," she recalls. "Then I expected to die of AIDS, but I didn't. I moved to San Francisco because I wanted to die here, and all of my friends died, but I didn't. So I must be here for a reason. That reason is to be a caregiver, a fundraiser, a transgender activist, and an educator for **openhouse**."

If your senior social service agency might be interested in participating in a training, contact Nancy Flaxman, MSW, at 296-8995 or nancy@openhouse-sf.org

2006 Milestones

Dramatic accomplishments in 2006 demonstrate our advancement in building comprehensive services for LGBT seniors. Since January, **openhouse** has:

- Completed a major **Market Demand Survey** funded by Kaiser Permanente. Surveyed 1,100 Bay Area older LGBT adults on needs and preferences for retirement living, verifying **openhouse's** service delivery model.
- **Hired Evans Senior Communities, Inc. to develop** LGBT-welcoming senior apartments at 55 Laguna Street.
- **Hired architect firm HKI&T to design** senior housing for Laguna site. Submitted Environmental Impact Review and Planned Unit Development applications.
- **Entered the final phase of hiring an operator** for **openhouse** residence at 55 Laguna.
- **Developed 500-strong community advocacy e-list to inform elected officials** and government representatives about need for LGBT senior services. Strengthened relationships with San Francisco officials who approve projects and coordinate aging services.
- **Trained more than 300 senior service care providers** in San Francisco on needs of LGBT older adults.

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openhouse Adds to Board and Staff

New **openhouse** Board member **Eileen Blumenthal** chairs our Committee on Communications and Public Relations. An executive coach and former Director of Volunteer Services at the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, Eileen is past president of the Board of Directors of New Leaf.

Another new Board member, **Roseanne Strano**, is a Commercial Loan Officer with Wells Fargo Bank and recent Board member of GLAAD. She serves on **openhouse's** Fund Development Committee.

When you call **openhouse**, the friendly voice you'll hear is Trilce Santana, our new full-time office manager. Trilce comes to **openhouse** with over ten years' experience in nonprofit community organizations focused on LGBT civil rights, domestic violence prevention, immigrant rights, and community arts.

Planned Giving = Immortality

Your legacy can make a huge difference in the lives of LGBT seniors for many generations to come. To learn the tax advantages of naming **openhouse** in your will or other planned giving, call Moli Steinert at 415-296-8995.

Circle of Friends

Donors contributing \$1,000 or more become members of the new **openhouse** Circle of Friends.

This visionary group is dedicated to ensuring that **openhouse** can meet the long-term care needs of our current aging LGBT community — and future generations too. With the support of this Circle, no one will have to age alone or without support.

Do We No Longer Belong at the Party?

By Ray Rudolph

Everyone at my gym bustled with anticipatory eyes to see what changes would be made, now that new owners had taken over and major renovations were about to begin.

This gym was one of the first facilities in San Francisco specifically targeted to encourage and promote physical fitness among gay men. When it opened in the Castro almost 30 years ago, it was quite the thing. It quickly became a social meeting site as well as a place to get physically fit.

It was another enduring manifestation of what was possible for us to create and sustain as a gay community.

Now more than a couple decades have passed, the original owners have passed on, and those of us initial members who are still there have aged – considerably. Would there still be a place for us at this re-envisioned gym and social spot?

We saw many changes:

- Closed circuit televisions showing concert videos and loops of studly hunks preening for muscle competitions were strategically hung from the ceiling.
- The sound system was upgraded.
- Fashionable tract lighting was installed to complement the new orange and blue color scheme and the faux industrial décor. The whole thing took on an overstated, hip look.

And the subtle message to many of us old timers, it seemed, was that this gym was now being redesigned to attract and cater directly to a younger clientele – the desirable demographic.

Did we no longer belong at the party that we ourselves had created?

Many long-time members left. But a few of us stayed and waited out the changes, hoping that at least some attention would be paid to reinventing the gym to accommodate an older clientele along with younger men.

After all, an article in the January 2006 American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) Bulletin cited that “Americans over 55 make up the fastest-growing segment of the nation’s fitness industry.” Many gyms are redesigning workout programs and equipment, as well as gym spaces



Ray Rudolph, right, receives workout advice from William Heter

themselves, to meet the needs of this older group.

Certainly gyms that cater to gays and lesbians should be considering doing the same thing.

My gym friends and I noticed that as we aged, our focus changed from building up muscles with intensive strength training. Now we work on restoring and maintaining function with more moderate exercise programs.

We older gym goers are out to stay functionally fit; to counter-balance the effects of aging and disease; to keep hearts, muscles, and joints in optimum physical condition; and to improve flexibility and range of movement.

In some ways we remained the same people we had always been. Yet as our bodies changed, so did our goals. Instead of trying to defy our age and become locked in an ever-losing battle of appearing “young,” we re-invented ourselves to become older gracefully.

We can still dance. But we don’t have to prove that we can do it all night.

We no longer feel indestructible. Nor should we. Other things are more important to us now than competition.

As the painting and construction wound down, we were relieved to see that our gym did add more cardiovascular machines. And then it made trainers available with exercises and lower-impact workout routines designed for older members.

We felt welcome again.

Going to a gym has been very much a part of the lifestyle and weekly routines of many gay men and women for a long time. Fitness club owners do not have to lose our patronage as we age, if we just begin to promote functional fitness along with traditional muscle building.

And turning down the volume of the music from time to time helps too.

-- Ray Rudolph, an **openhouse** volunteer, is helping improve our website at www.openhouse-sf.org.

It's said that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. But whatever doesn't kill you is just your life. As we find healthy ways to adjust, we become more and more alive.