

The Rainbow Seniors Logo



**Promoting and addressing life issues affecting the  
general welfare of older gay, lesbian, bisexual,  
transgender, and intersex (GLBTI) individuals**

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## *The Empty Closet*

**December 2003 / January 2004****So When is a Senior a Senior?****By Meredith 59 Reiniger, senior**

Rainbow Seniors of Western New York (RSWNY) is a group of people. And the very name has brought up a dilemma: we don't know what, exactly, a senior is. We do certainly know the issues that we are addressing and plan on tackling. But we do not have a ready answer to the question: at what age does one become a senior?

Here is how the question and its **not-quite-answer** evolved.

We, the RSWNY, sponsored the opening film of the ImageOut series. Our vice president spoke to the gathered people and announced the existence of our group, both as information and invitation. She declared that the group was primarily people 40 and older who would establish a support system, investigate issues of equality and their solutions, and develop long term goals to enhance the quality of life for senior gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) constituents.

The two women sitting behind me gasped. "Forty?" declared one in disbelief, "that isn't a **senior**." The other agreed, opining that even fifty was too young to be a **senior**.

After the film, we Rainbow people discussed those reactions. We have struggled to define "senior."

There are many questions as we explore the various permutations of "SENIORness." Is it chronological, mental, physical, social, personal? Does it coincide with retirement or disability? Does it come after we have downsized our living space or after we agree to wear comfortable shoes.

If we were hoping for a senior citizen discount, we might want the number to be low, like 37. But even the discount givers have not settled on a specific number. Various stores and places that charge an entry fee have used age 60, or over 62, or age 65. AARP is willing to sign us up at 50 or 55. So far, then, I still have no firm answer, no idea how to pinpoint **SENIORness**.

a.) **50** I guess 50 must be the answer

I investigated several methods to discover that age at which a senior becomes a senior. If we were looking for a birthday card, the "over the hill" number is either 40 or 50. But that insulting metaphor doesn't help define our lives or our chronological status. Clearly, a specific number is illusive.

b.) **40** So maybe 40 is the answer

I was even hoping that a little logic and the ever truthful numerical system would help. So I figured that I could divide a life span into quarters and that the winter would be that last

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quarter. Using round numbers, if I were to live to be one hundred, my personal winter starts when I am 76. Now there's a real senior number.

However, taking into account that not a single relative has lived past 88, my personal winter season would start at age 67. And middle age, the autumn of my life, started when I was forty-five years old. But wouldn't I want to get ready for My Winter during My Autumn? So maybe the middle of my autumn would be the beginning of my senioritis.

c.) **63** yes, I've got it; the answer is 63

I decided to try another model. If life has a beginning, a middle and an ending, and I live as long as my mother (78) , then my ending segment started when I was 53. So it seems that the vice president of RSWNY was right on target.

d.) **53** is clearly the answer now that you've explained it to me.

Another possible problem solving technique is to use the analogy that life is a five act play (act one is the introduction, act two is the rising action, act three: climax, act four: falling action, act five: conclusion).

Using a life span of 75 (because I can do the math in my head), the falling ACTION happens from age 46 though 60 and the conclusion goes from 61 until death at our hypothesized 75.

Continuing with this analogy, we can understand that act four, the falling ACTION, going from ages 46-60, is the period in which the action would continue. It is a period during which we would take action. We would start preparing the way before we would expect to use the way.

To prepare the way, we will initiate whatever actions are needed to assure that our "conclusion years", ages 61-75, are years of comfort, safety, pleasure, companionship, assistance, and other factors that add to the quality life.

e.) **46** yes, yes, this is really my final answer

**So when is a senior a senior?  
a or b or c or d or e or f.) all of the above**

We do realize that the WHEN is not easy to pinpoint.

When one would want to address the Conclusion Issues to be faced?

When would one want to look at the future as an elder?

When would one feel comfortable BEING a senior?

Perhaps it is some age in the middle of life; perhaps it is a kind of Middle Age Moment. At this moment, one would be aware, in a keener sense, that life is terminal. The Middle Age Mortality Awareness Moment. But my goodness, there are many fine years between that understanding and the end.

And there are many positive ways to insure that those numerous fine years are as good as we can make them.

And that's what **Rainbow Seniors of Western New York** is addressing: many positive ways to insure that those numerous fine years are as good as we GLBT people can make them.

So what is the number, what is the age that delineates SENIOR? There is none.

Numbers are not going to help us.

Instead, we all must use our minds and our hearts as we explore what "older" means to a

specific person, to our whole GLBT community, to our Self. And then this question follows:

When would we,

**when would you like to work with** others in the GLBT community

to address the needs of older GLBT people.

Those needs, as we age, go from simple to complicated. There are older GLBT who can no longer drive, older GLBT people who are single and need help with a chore, older GLBT people who have limited dexterity or strength, older GLBT people who have a limited support group, older GLBT people who have no remaining family (elder orphans), older GLBT people who have limited access to social gatherings with other GLBT people. This list covers some of the reality, some of the current complications experienced by our older GLBT community members.

Another list identifies social issues that, we, as rainbow Seniors of Western New York, might address. These issues faced by the whole GLBT community, might include: lack of equal access to health insurance coverage, lack of equal access to survivor benefits, lack of equal access to shared (as a couple) subsidized housing, lack of equal access to ICU units, lack of equal access to "family only" health care conferences, lack of equal access to shared assisted living accommodations, lack of equal access to funeral decisions, lack of equal access to the selection of the wording in the obituary notice. In a society that does not honor our unions, these are some of the complications that might arise for older GLBT people. These are some of the complications that GLBT people might meet every day. These problems do exist; we just haven't been talking about it. We just haven't been talking about it out loud, yet.

You decide when you would like **to join RSWNY**. Look at yourself, at your partner, at your children, and then you decide when it is time to address the issues of inequality, when it is time to work on gaining the respect that equality implies.

You decide when you want to join a group of seniors. Rainbow Seniors of Western New York will welcome you.

Remember it is not just the serious life events that we Rainbow Seniors of Western New York share.

We laugh. We play. We work.

We look forward to sharing with you, whatever your age.

Remember that Rainbow Seniors gather to break bread, literally and symbolically, the third Sunday of every month, gathering at Aids Rochester at 4:00 p.m. for our potluck dinners and to share good conversation, to share interesting connections, and to share food as various in content and tastes as we the participants, the Rainbow SENIORS of Western New York.

P.S. The answer is g.



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