

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

April 2005

Conquering ageism in the LGBT community

By David Bar-Tzur

Until the onset of the Industrial Revolution, all societies revered their elders. This was because of two things: (1) the elders had learned the wisdom of the previous generations, and (2) the elders had more real world experience than the young. After the Industrial Revolution began, technology began to change more and more rapidly, so that old knowledge was being set on its head and experience counted for less and less. In America especially, youth is prized for having a fresh look at things, being more willing to do things in a new way, and maturity is not thought of as being as beautiful.

What can LGBT people learn from their elders? Roots, traditions, and diversity. One of the reasons that LGBT people have lower self esteem than straight people is that we are not fully represented in the media. Everywhere you look and listen, straight love, straight sex, and straight relationships are represented in songs, poems, novels, ads, TV programs, movies, plays, painting, even dance. Long before I ever was told directly that being Gay was a no-no, I saw that what I wanted was nowhere to be seen publicly. Similar messages are sent to other minorities: Blacks, Asians, physically, psychologically, and mentally challenged people. Things have improved since I was a child, but we still are not as well represented as Black people for example, and there is still progress to be made in that arena as well.

Alex Haley wrote a book that he called Roots, wherein Alex Haley traced back his heritage to a slave by the name of Kunta Kinte. It became a mini-series that was avidly watched. For those Black people who read the book or saw the mini-series, Haley awakened or reinforced the idea that we all are the products of various historical influences, especially those that impacted our nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

Learning about your direct ancestors or at least researching your culture or subculture can give you a sense of belonging. Just saying you are an American is probably not enough because America is so diverse and neutral to furthering any religion, even ethical stance, politically that we don't get a lot of guidance in what we should believe unless our parents acculturate us into a specific viewpoint, or we join some group that has one. LGBT people usually don't have parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who were all LGBT, so we often assemble our own "family" from other "people like us." Remember to include the older generation for a proper balance in modern and old-fashioned ideas to see where you came from.

Cultures have traditions and values that do get modified over time. Trying to build a community without keeping or modifying some traditions is much harder and a bit lame. Of course you can start new traditions, but wouldn't you also want those to have a life beyond your generation? We have old traditions like Lesbian and Gay bars, drag shows, Stonewall/Pride celebrations, and genderf**king. We have newer traditions like Gay TV

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parties (Ellen, the L Word, Gay as Folk), drag kings, Gay arts festivals (poetry, movies, painting, and so on). Becoming more involved in these can enhance your self-actualization as an LGBT person, and knowing senior members and what their experiences have been with these traditions can build a more secure foundation in these traditions.

Cultural diversity recognizes that different communities have their own unique history, traditions, values, and perhaps an independent language. The perspectives of these different communities are seen to be equally valid. Ideally, a person would seek to become more aware of these different cultures, especially if the person interacts with members who identify with these communities. There can be diversities within one community; with the LGBT community, there are Black Lesbians, Jewish Transsexuals, Christian Bisexuals, and Asian Gay men. Another element of diversity is seniors. Seniors bring a fresh perspective also, with their awareness of what society was like in the old days as well as a special interest in visitation rights (for medical emergencies), estate rights, and other survivor rights.

In closing, we all should broaden our contacts within the LGBT community. One upcoming opportunity is to hear and interact with an intergenerational panel at AIDS Rochester on April 17 at 4 p.m. This is one of the monthly potlucks of the Rainbow Seniors of Western New York. We meet at 4 p.m. the third Sunday of every month. Normally we meet at the First Universalist Church of Rochester, 150 South Clinton, but April will be special. For more information about RSWNY, see our Web site at www.rainbowseniorswny.org.



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