The Tip of The Spear

Video: Ten More Good Years (71 min)
LookOut Films, Inc., Distributor
A LookOut Films Production
Produced and Directed by Michael Jacoby
Released: 2007

Ten More Good Years documents the experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender aging. Prior to viewing this outstanding film, I wondered why anyone with any sensitivity would lump lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender aging within one now-familiar acronym—LGBT. Categorical thinking, after all, makes far too easy the negative stereotyping and discrimination used so often to create, denigrate, and disenfranchise those who are not “straight.” However, Ten More Good Years uses the LGBT label to great effect. It illustrates an aging experience that is both unique and shared, that is, LGBT individuals are unique in that they share an uncommon and extraordinary path into the later years. Like straight elders, LGBT elders must deal with the usual challenges associated with growing older. Sixty-nine year old Jack Ogg of San Francisco just hopes for 10 more good years of life. But his struggle to achieve them will be different from that of mainstream elders. Unless things change, Jack and other LGBT elders will have a tougher time securing health care, affordable housing, and economic security due to institutionalized heterosexism in the Federal programs and policies governing these service arenas. Terry Kaelber, executive director of Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Elders (SAGE), comments that “LGBT aging is informed by care providers that assume that all old people are straight. The aging of LGBT people is informed by the discrimination of antigay citizenry, which impacts our willingness to access these services.”

This film shares the personal stories of a handful of remarkable elders who manifestly defined the struggle for LGBT rights. Their experiences are shared and validated more widely by a fleet of gerontologists (e.g., Dr. Brian de Vries), lawyers from the National Center for Lesbian Rights (www.ncrights.org), strategists from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (www.nglft.org), service and advocacy groups such as SAGE (www.sageusa.org), the LGBT Aging Issues Network (http://asaging.org/lain), New Leaf Services (http://new.sfaf.org/tspsf/), and Housing and Urban Development administrators. These advocates provide a factual account of the structural bias in the social service system that excludes LGBT elders. A serious proviso is in order here: Sources are not provided for the “on-screen” factual statements that appear throughout the video.

The facts speak to the current disconnects that exist between LGBT elders, social policies, and the broader fabric of American society. Three of these are prominent in the film. Fact: The average annual income for LGBT seniors ranges between $16,000 and $21,700. The film claims that there is a larger gap between their education and income than that in the larger heterosexual population in the nation. Why? Discrimination in the workplace often forces them to take lower paying jobs. Fact: Tax laws, 401K’s, and pensions discriminate against same-sex partners; Social Security does not pay survivor benefits to surviving same-sex life partners. Brian de Vries states that this discrimination costs LGBT elders more than $124 million a year. Fact: Many LGBT elders become more isolated as they age. Some retreat back into the closet due to persistent mainstream homophobia; they are reluctant to reveal their sexual orientation to health care providers for fear of discrimination and concerns about confidentiality. It is “not uncommon,”
according to Kate Kendall, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, “for them to end up destitute, on the street, in a shelter.” According to the film, nearly half of Area Agencies on Aging, which distribute federal funding for senior services, report that gays and lesbians would not be welcome at senior centers if their sexual orientation were known.

In an uplifting, constructive way, Ten More Good Years moves beyond indictment to focus on connections. It documents the sense of community that LGBT elders derive not only from a shared history of discrimination, but also from common aging-related needs that must somehow be addressed. In the absence of formal community support, most straight elders might turn to their families for aid. But very few LGBT elders have 100% acceptance in their families. As Terry Kaebler of SAGE observes, “We, by and large, age like single people, without the traditional community support of spouse and children.” Glenda Russell, clinical director for New Leaf Services in San Francisco describes the unscripted frontier they face:

“We don’t have it all set how we’re supposed to do everything. We have to figure it out. We have to be more intentional than other people. We can’t just sort of let our lives unfold in a predictable fashion. We haven’t been given models for how our lives unfold; we have to invent them. With families in particular, we have the opportunity to be much more creative and intentional about exactly what our families should look like.

Author Suzanne Pharr puts it this way: “We can have the leadership in redefining families; we know how to construct them. Your family becomes the people you are comfortable in space with, that you talk to.” The video illustrates how this new sense of family can extend to community-based services dedicated to meeting their needs. Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center in San Francisco is a prominent example; it works with local volunteer organizations such as the Rainbow Group, which provides additional care and cultural entertainment to its many LGBT elderly residents.

Perhaps, the largest takeaway from this film springs from the elders themselves, in their words and demeanors. I found myself feeling respect and admiration for each of them—for Miss Major, an elderly black, formerly incarcerated male to female who has advocated for the trans community for more than 35 years; for Jack Ogg, forced to fend for himself after his partner died and who now barters work for rent with his landlord; for 80-year-old James Bidgood, an artist whose career was recently resurrected when he discovered that he was “still grant-able!”; and for Harry Barton, who suffered so much for being openly gay as a young man, who was issued an “undesirable discharge” from the Navy for making sexual advances toward another sailor and who spent 18 years billed as “the American Pantomimist” in more than 4,200 performances in the United States and abroad. But Harry is “in plena voce” as an advocate for LGBT rights in this film.

Most remarkable is the equanimity and dignity displayed by each of these elders—remarkable because they were the first generation to “come out,” the first to live so openly through bigotry born of ignorance, fear, and hate. They lived through an era that claimed their sexual orientation was due to mental disorder or moral depravity; yet they have not yet truly crossed to safety. As Glenda Russell, clinical director of New Leaf Services notes:

“This is the first time we’ve had a generation of LGBT elders who identify as resident [i.e., live openly as] LGBT. They have blazed a trail for us and yet most of younger LGBT don’t know much about that history, don’t know much about what that trail is.

They are the first generation of LGBT to openly defend their natural and legal right to pursue health and happiness on a level playing field. They are the tip of the spear, the first to go in, opening the way so that others might follow.

Rick J. Scheidt, PhD
School of Family Studies and Human Services
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506
E-mail: rscheidt@k-state.edu
doi:10.1093/geront/gnt029
Advance Access publication March 25, 2013