

Healing Ageism in the LGBT Community

05/29/2014 03:16 pm ET Updated Feb 02, 2016

Jesse Brune-Horan, Contributor
TV Personality, Co-Founder/Spiritual Director of Inspire Spiritual Community

The idea for “Ask the Elders” came when a colleague told me about a women’s retreat she attended through her spiritual center. One evening, the reverend’s wife, who was leading the retreat, brought all the grandmas to the front of the main hall and addressed the group by saying,

“Ladies, you have questions and these women have answers.”

An intimate Q&A unfolded as the elders offered guidance on topics like how to move through menopause with grace, how to handle a child suffering from drug addiction, and how to recover from a painful divorce. “It was the coolest thing on that retreat,” my colleague shared, “Why don’t we do the same thing for the LGBT community?”

I’m the spiritual director of Project: Service L.A., a non-profit spiritual community for LGBT’s that meets weekly in a bar in West Hollywood. I’m always looking for fresh ways to engage our community and I loved the idea of working with LGBT elders but there was a problem, I didn’t know any gay seniors. This was the first time I was introduced to my social irresponsibility. Why didn’t I know any older gay people? The myth that all elderly LGBT’s move to Palm Springs until they die couldn’t actually be true. I’ve spent thousands of dollars on life coaches, shrinks, gurus, and yoga retreats; why didn’t I ever think to just reach out to someone in my own community that’s already walked the road? I’m too liberal and open-minded to be an ageist... aren’t I?

My co-founder and I did some research and discovered the “The Gay Elder Circle”, a local non-profit consisting of LGBT activists of a certain age headed by Dr. Don Kilhefner, a legendary activist and community leader known for his brilliance and bite. The members of this organization are men and women who are still active in the community and working to see that we continue to move forward while harvesting the wisdom of our past. We pitched the idea for “Ask the Elders” and they bit. They were interested in having a multi-generational dialogue and we were interested in hosting a Q&A so we could hear the perspective of LGBT trail-blazers.

Working with the elders was a crash course in community leadership. There wasn’t much tolerance for flakiness and if I wanted to be heard I was going to have to stand my ground. I was working with men and women that rioted after the Stonewall raid and walked in the first pride march. They were the first activists to petition, protest, and pass legislation to fight discrimination against gays and lesbians. They were the faces of the Gay Liberation Front, the founders of activist groups with names like “The Radical Fairies”, and survived thousands of friends and colleagues that died in the AIDS epidemic. They’ve been there, they’ve done that and they’ve survived to tell us about it. So why aren’t we listening?

In many tribal cultures elders are considered a valued commodity; the mentors and guides for the adults. “Ask the Elders” became an experiment to see if L.A.’s LGBTQI community had the capacity to align with similar ideals. Instead of rejecting or avoiding the seniors in our community could we see them, honor them, and apply the teachings they offered us? Could our experiment extend the shelf-life of the gay adult?

Since our first gathering in 2012 there have been several “Ask the Elders” events throughout the Los Angeles area. Having a room full of diversity is refreshing, the participants are multicultural gay, lesbian, and transgender people that have come together to learn something new and get insight on situations that feel too perplexing to decode. Popular areas of discussions are marriage equality, racism in the gay community, sex and monogamy, and the evolving role of LGBT’s in a new America. We even hosted an event for the gender studies program at Cal State LA and let college students (of all sexual identities) ask the elders questions about coming out, breaking up, and healing gay-shame.

I'd like to share just a few take-aways from my time with the elders. Some of these gems are things they've shared and others are just my observations. You might disagree with some of these and that's totally great, in productive dialogue there can be more than one idea expressed.

My take-aways:

- According to the Gay Elder Circle there's a difference between an elder and an older. An elder is someone who remains active in the community as a mentor, activist, or volunteer; offering wisdom and insight when necessary. An older is simply someone who's older.
- Just because you're old, doesn't mean you're wise. (That one's mine.)
- A romantic relationship will never, EVER save you.
- Across the board the elder's agree that it's criminal to charge so much for a college education.
- In order for the community to continue to evolve we must create opportunities to mentor one another. The elders should mentor the adults and the adults should mentor the youth.
- Country line dancing is not only fun but it's a great way to get some cardio vascular exercise.
- Sex evolves with age... but don't worry, it's still happening in your seventies.
- "They" want us to stay distracted. Make sure you're paying attention and voting.
- Don't ever be afraid to say "NO, that's not okay and we won't stand for it."
- There should be a much stronger emphasis on inner-development. Technology, though necessary can stifle your mental, emotional, and spiritual growth. In other words, "put down your smart phone and read a book, engage in meaningful conversations, and take a walk in the park... without headphones on."

This just scratches the surface of the pool of knowledge, humor, and ideas the elders have given me. Please tap into a vital resource and reach out to the elders in your community. Developing these relationships not only has the potential to expand our collective perspective, it offers the possibility of a future rich with wisdom.

To learn more about L.A.'s "Gay Elder Circle" visit their website check out what we're doing at Project: Service L.A. here: www.projectservicela.org.

Article originally appeared in www.huffingtonpost.com