

LGBT elders and allies group opens hearts and minds

The Hebrew Home at Riverdale in New York may have been around for 100 years, but their programming has a progressively modern feel. In 2016, music therapist Liisa Murray sensed the Home needed an LGBT and Allies group, and established one, together with another colleague on staff. Murray now co-leads the group with fellow music therapist Olivia Cohen.

Meetings are structured on a group therapy model, and each begins with

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members reading shared group values aloud: What is said in the group stays in the group; participants are non-judgmental; participants have a shared purpose; participants respect each other; participants treat others as they would wish to be treated; and participants will seek to have some fun in the process.

Opening Minds Through Discussion and Sharing

The LGBT residents and allies, none of whom know which is which, meet twice monthly to learn about LGBT issues through movies, readings, guest speakers and discussion sessions. David Oscar, 85, who spoke on record as a gay man, relayed his delight at the group’s existence. Having spent much of his adult life in the closet, he said, “[The group is] very needed, especially for people who for so many years have not been able to talk about their real selves. I’m so grateful that the staff is wonderful to us, and allow us to be ourselves.”

Group members range from age 65 up into the 80s and 90s. “Different generations have different experiences, which is part of what makes the group so incredible,” says Murray.

People come to meetings with items to share, or to watch relevant movies, recently viewing “The Imitation Game,” starring Benedict Cumberbatch as the closeted gay mathematician Alan Turing, who helped to crack the Nazi’s Enigma code. At another meeting, a member shared a book written by a friend about being closeted in the military in WWII.

Sarah Mittleman, 67, spoke of the uniqueness of the experience for her as a now openly bisexual woman. “I’ve never joined any LGBT group, but I’m definitely gay—actually bisexual—but I had never admitted that to a group. It was fascinating [and] interesting to reveal things about myself, and to come out. I was a children’s librarian and couldn’t have done that. I worked for a steel company and I couldn’t have done that [then]. But now, being retired and having the group to go to is great.”

Oscar agrees. “Going to group and being able to share with others where I am, who I am, what my life has been like; it’s just astounding to be able to talk to people who are sympathetic.”

The staff who run the LGBT group is so encouraging and open with us,” Oscar adds. “The more open a person can be, the happier they are. I’m just delighted that here we have an LGBT group that allows me to be myself.”

A Safe, Supportive Space

The group provides a safe space in which members can express who they are now and who they were before they came into the community at Hebrew Home, and that safety aspect is foundational to the group’s existence.

One recent meeting featured a guest speaker, Hannah, a young transgender woman who shared her life experience and showed media clips on transgender issues. “The residents were so interested in her story, they were really moved to be

a part of it,” says Murray. “They learned how to be respectful of her.”

Sandra Feil, 80, who spoke openly of being an ally, says, “I have learned that I had more things in common with group members than I thought. I have also learned that people are very horrible [against those who are LGBT], and the [group] leaders are terrific.” Feil was pleasantly surprised that a nursing home would be “so open as they are with many of the subjects” discussed in the group.

A lifelong advocate for many causes, including women’s rights and antiwar activism, Feil also was interested in the group because she lived in New York City during the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, and her closest friend was a gay man. She remains “very angry at how people were treated, that doctors wouldn’t take care of them in the hospital and that when [gay men] coughed on a bus everyone would move away.”

Another ally, Arnold Cohn, joined the group because of his dismay over how LGBT people are treated: “I joined because of what happened in Orlando. I thought, [no matter if you’re] gay, straight, everyone has to say something [in defense of the LGBT population].”

The LGBT group members appreciate the allies, despite most of them not know-

Elders who left their community of choice can build a new community in the senior residence.

ing who’s who. “I’m delighted these people who are straight are still so sympathetic to us here,” says Oscar. “And the group is growing ... it’s just wonderful to be able to be in a group and be oneself and not have to be guarded.”

Tapping Into an Activist Spirit

As many allies and LGBT elders are longtime activists, Cohen and Murray brought up the idea of social action, to see if the group might want to get in-



Photo: iStockphoto/Oakozhan

involved in more active ways of advocating for LGBT elders.

“They wanted to start at home,” says Cohen, “so the first big event was to have a Pride table.” The group planned for the table to be set up during the busiest time of the day on the Home’s main floor so the residents could learn about the group; group members ran the table, answering questions from residents and staff.

Cohen and Murray are pleased at how supportive the Home’s administration, directors, supervisors and staff have been—they even passed out rainbow stickers on the day of the Pride table event. “It’s lovely to see family and visitors, who were not aware of the group, helping to celebrate Pride and bringing awareness to the group,” says Murray.

One of the LGBT and Allies group’s crucial roles, according to Cohen and Murray, is to help older adults who have left their community of choice to find where to build a new community within the senior residence. “The group came together after the Pride table, buzzing [about] how positive and uplifting an experience it was,” says Cohen. One group member, after expressing his admiration, gripped Murray’s arms and said, “I’m home.”

“I am happily surprised and enlivened and inspired by these residents,” Murray says, “surprised by the things they say, are open to and what they teach me.” ■

Livable communities summit can help shape vibrant, age-friendly communities

The American Planning Association (APA), AARP and ASA will present the second annual “Summit on Livable Communities: Planners & Aging Professionals Working Together to Plan Livable Communities for All Ages” at the 2018 Aging in America Conference. The Summit will take place on Thursday, March 29, from 9:45 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., in San Francisco at the Hilton

Union Square. Two hundred and fifty professionals in aging services and planning came together in 2017, sparking a rigorous conversation about how to make communities more livable for older adults.

The 2018 Summit will address promising age-friendly practices, prototypes and successful projects that tackle local challenges in domains such as housing,

transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings, and community and health services. The Summit aims to unite city planners and aging services professionals in their work to break down barriers and foster stakeholder collaboration that can advance livable communities for all ages.

New this year, and implemented from attendee feedback from last year, will be conversations with national representatives from the aging services and planning sectors—discussion that will clarify professional roles within these sectors, and illuminate lessons learned and challenges

overcome via local cross-sector collaborations and effective community models. Summit presentations also will enumerate various communities’ best age-friendly city planning practices—strategies that can provide important learning opportunities for communities nationwide.

A large part of the Summit will be held in a “world café” format, fostering dialogue inspired by the presentations and giving participants ample time to interact and share their ideas and experiences. To register for the Summit, go to goo.gl/kg6ZAb. ■