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October 2007 CenterPieces Edition

SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders)

In honor of National Coming Out Day, SAGE Center on Halsted collected short, personal stories of coming out from older adults. Here are a few.

- "In July 1964 I had my first gay coming out encounter. I had just finished army basic training (I was drafted). I returned home on two weeks' leave before heading to Fort Gordon for signal school training. My mother had saved all the Life magazines while I was in basic training. One of the issues was devoted to gays. An article mentioned 'Bughouse' Square on Chicago's near north side. I went down there while on leave and had my first gay encounter. I didn't have my second encounter until June 1966 almost two years later after I was discharged. Obviously, I went back down to 'Bughouse' Square and really came out!"
- "Years ago there were almost no bars that openly said they were gay. In our crowd of young teenage girls we said we were in the 'honey business.' My mom knew that I liked girls, so when I dated an older man she took me aside and said, 'I thought you were going to be true to June.' My family accepted me for who I am, so I've been luckier than most. Young people today don't realize all the restrictions that were put on us regarding dress codes, etc. Gays had to

keep their hands above or on the bar. You couldn't touch in public, etc."

- "I was thirteen years old when I realized I wasn't the only one in the world . . . Later, I came out to my brothers and parents in Grant Park at a picnic in 1963. We all cried all afternoon. I lived here and had an apartment on Dearborn Street. My parents made me leave Chicago and go back home. So I left for one weekend and they had me go to the doctor. I did. He told me to go back to Chicago and live my life. He told the parents the same thing and the family accepted me. And I have had a great life. I was 21 years old." -Gene Wright, age 68
- "The year was 1989. February, 1989. The dead of intense winter. I was scared. I attended a Coming Out group at Horizons, at the Rodde Center on Sheffield. It opened up a new life for me; taught me AIDS 101. I made new friends which made it easier for me to go to the bars, etc. After all, I'm so butch no one thought I was gay. Thank God for Horizons and the Center on Halsted." -Greg Neil

Mental Health Program

At Center on Halsted, coming out is celebrated every day of the year. The Mental Health Program is proud to offer an array of services to those not only striving to leave the closet but those who need to remain there for survival or other valid reasons. Here's just a sample of the resources available to our consumers:

- **Monthly Coming Out Workshops.** These workshops provide a safe and confidential forum for individuals to ask questions, receive support, gain insight into the coming out process and weigh the pros and cons of disclosure. A mental health professional with expertise in affirming work with the LGBTQ community facilitates discussion and educates as needed. Workshops are held on Saturday mornings and are 3 hours in length. No advance registration is required and participation is strictly confidential. The fee is \$15 per workshop.
- **Coming Out, Coming Home.** In partnership with SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders), this weekly group provides a supportive environment for adults 45 years of age and older who are beginning their coming out process later in life. Older adults often have well-established careers and families. The struggles of coming out of the closet are often mixed with creating a new family that blends old relationships with a new community and identity. Groups are held on Tuesday afternoons and are 1 hour in length. No advance registration is required and participation is strictly confidential. There is no fee for this offering.
- **Men's and Women's Support Groups.** These weekly groups provide individuals further along in their coming out process a place to explore first relationships, sexual identity, minority stress, families of choice vs. families of origin and other important issues. Groups are held on weekday evenings and are led by mental health professionals. The fee is \$15 per group session and advance registration is required.

These resources have a rich history and enjoy a strong reputation of quality throughout Chicago and the nation. In the words of one lesbian, "the coming out group helped me develop a vision of myself based on what is possible rather than impossible." In addition, the Center provides psychotherapy to individuals, couples and families, as well as a variety of support groups and services aimed at facilitating healthy development across the lifespan.

Let us be a part of your personal journey! You can call the Client Services Coordinator at 773.472.6469, ext. 261 or visit our Web site (www.centeronhalsted.org) for more information.

Jason T. McVicker, LCSW, RDDP
Director of Mental Health Services

Youth Program

We trained a new group of volunteers recently and I spent some time talking about and describing the youth who come to our program. I told them that identifying as LGBTQ often is only one of many issues that our youth are experiencing when they come through our front door. Their sexual orientation and/or gender identity is actually low on their priority list when they are homeless, unemployed, lack a high school diploma, have mental health issues and little family support. So when October arrives and we plan to celebrate National Coming Out Day, it can be with some hesitation. Sometimes, during October, it is much easier to shed the light on domestic violence than coming out. Our youth KNOW violence only too well. At home, in school, in their places of worship, on the campaign trail, in the media, on the streets. They are surrounded by physical and emotional violence.

But perhaps that is why it is so important to celebrate Coming Out. Despite the challenges in their life, despite the violence and insanity, they have come out and are growing and maturing as they discover what being LGBTQ means for them. And as they grow in self-awareness, confidence and self-esteem about who they are, they are also gaining what they need to overcome homelessness, to find employment, to go back to school, to begin therapy and to form alternative families who will support them through it all. Coming Out becomes a transcendent experience, a defining moment, an avenue to a life of fullness and possibilities. And that is worth celebrating.

To attend our coming out group, "Up and OUT," please contact Joe Brown at jbrown@centeronhalsted.org. A new four-week series begins October 9.

Janine Denomme
Youth Program Director

Anti-Violence Project

National Coming Out Day is celebrated each year on October 11. So far in 2007, the Anti-Violence Project has been "out" 67 times in the community, Chicago and

metrowide, providing education and training to anyone who asks. Because the AVP vision is to end violence against and within the community, it is our mission to educate, advocate and counsel our consumers on safety, empowerment and recovery from violence.

An LGBT survivor of violence may face barriers when coming out, mainly fear of revictimization from service providers and the criminal justice system. AVP can advocate for the individual in a sensitive and supportive manner.

If you or someone you know is a victim of LGBT discrimination, domestic violence, hate crime, pick-up crime, police misconduct or sexual assault, please call the **AVP 24-hour crisis line at 773.871.CARE (2273)**.

Laura A. Velazquez
AVP Manager



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