

# Younger and Older : Out of Sight, Out of Touch

By Doug Sebesta

Most older gay men that I know and work with say that they don't see many younger gay men around and have no idea where they are, who they are and what they do. But many of these older men and I – I'm 51 – feel a real desire and commitment for younger men to be part of our world and part of a larger multigenerational gay community.

In the community work that I do, I put on a lot of meetings, activities and events that are open to the gay community at large. In my own ways, I try to attract and include an active participation of younger gay men in all of these. But it never seems to work. And because of that, I keep being told that I personally and we older men as a group don't try hard enough to engage younger men and that we are insensitive to the issues younger men are facing. I often hear that by not insuring that young gay men are present, we are being de-facto youth-phobic and exclusionary. I certainly can understand that this is what it looks like from the outside.

When I was a young gay man, I didn't have older generations of out, established older queer men to engage with, so I can't begin to understand how younger gay men today feel about and relate to men my age and older. But I am serious when I say that I want younger men to be part of my life and

my activities, and I have tried to engage them. But as I look at the city and think about ways to bring younger men into my gay world and culture, I don't see them around and I don't know how to reach them. I don't know where younger gay men are or how to find out what they think and feel about the older gays. 75% of "gay" men are reported to be under 40, yet I don't see them out and about on the street, or engaged in visible social activities that men of my generation did and to some extent still do.

In the San Francisco of my youth – my 20s and early 30s --where there were countless gay bars, multiple gay neighborhoods, a real sense of recognition for other gay people, and strong gay political activism, I never sensed a divide between generations or that one particular generation was not part of the same gay culture and community. I saw us all as being part of the same tribe, diverse but together. No matter where I went in San Francisco, I saw queers of all stripes and ages, and they acknowledged me in return. Has the world changed that much in the past 25 years?

Younger gay men have told me that many gay guys their age don't see the need to identify as gay or limit themselves as being part of a "gay" community, a community that they see as an historical artifact of the

past. A very wise young man recently wrote to me that young queers "may see gay culture as stereotypical, hormone-driven, or unnecessary." Some young queers will have nothing to do with a "gay" community since their sexual preference is just one aspect of their lives, but not one of the defining ones. Further, he wrote that for many queer youth, older gays are "an establishment of conformity that rebellious adolescents can lash out against."

Many of the gay men over 40 I know see a real need for gay and queer and same gender loving men of all ages to be part of a vibrant, active and interactive community. So given the different concepts of community held by younger and older gay men, how do we all begin to move forward together?

Younger activist men have told me that it is the responsibility of older men to reach out to younger men, that older men must be the ones to initiate and maintain inclusiveness. Older men must somehow meet younger men where they're at and make them feel welcome in the older men's world. It has been suggested that different strategies be employed by the older, more established, more financially secure older generation of gay men to attract younger men to

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participate in activities, meetings and events. One idea is to pay or offer other incentives to younger men to entice them to give of their time and participation.

But isn't being part of a family the responsibility of all involved? Instead of thinking that we need pay-to-play strategies, maybe we need to ask ourselves, younger and older queers alike, whether there really are a lot of younger men who want to hang out with their older counterparts, who want to sit at a collective table, and who want to try to be part of a world they in all probability feel little connection to. Maybe when we invite younger men to be part of what we're doing and they don't show up in great numbers, instead of accusing ourselves that we didn't try hard enough or that we weren't creative enough or that we didn't pay enough or we didn't break down our own phobias enough, we should find out whether they are interested in being with us at all.

When I was in my 20s, I wouldn't have gone to a "discussion" meeting with a room full of 40- to 60-year-old men (unless I thought the chances of my getting laid would be greatly increased). If it wasn't part of my scholastic pursuits, in my down time away from work and school I wasn't going to "philosophical chats", I was going out dancing, going out to South of Market bars, reading French poetry on foggy days at Land's End, or sadly enough caring for sick friends

who were dying.

There have been times when I have befriended some wonderful committed, community-minded young men who want to teach me about themselves and their lives as much as I want to share my reality with them. But despite my ongoing attempts to bring younger men into a collective intergenerational gay mspace, I am disappointed that my interactions with younger men are relatively few.

In the last SFGMCI Men's Minds survey, 85% of men in their 20s said that it is important that the gay community is united, 62% of these 20-something men believe that feeling part of a gay community is related to their health and well being, and 53% feel that being gay is key to who they are as a person. Yet even with these hopes for unity and wanting to feel part of an identified community, only 32% of these men feel connected to the community and only 36% feel that there is a gay community in San Francisco with which they identify.

I know that our city has changed greatly from when I arrived here not knowing anyone, not having a place to live and not having a way to make money. San Francisco is now oppressively expensive. I know that many younger men have to live in the less expensive parts of the City/Bay Area and that many have to work multiple jobs just to make it here. I also know that the social and political need for a gay

identification and affiliation has lessened over time. Given these realities, it's not surprising that I don't see younger men. I realize that ways of communicating and connecting with people are also very different across generations. I don't text, I don't do mspace; I'm old fashioned in that I find cyber-relating to be impersonal and limiting. Perhaps younger people don't see me and my outdated modes of communication and interaction just as I don't see them and theirs.

I'm left puzzled about how to move forward in my quest for fostering a gay family that includes men of all ages. Or am I barking up the wrong tree? Maybe my dream is one of a nostalgic older man, a dream that is potentially irrelevant to the interests and needs of younger people. Maybe they don't need and want me and my kind as much as I believe we need and want them. Or are we all really interested in the lives of each other and just lacking effective ways of connecting and sharing community? You tell me.

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