

Older and younger members and friends of the LGBTQ community discuss the “LGBTQ generation gap” in a pre-COVID-19 event held in January 2020 at Avenidas.



# Brighter days

## LGBTQ seniors find support through Rainbow Collective

BY CHRIS KENRICK  
PHOTOS COURTESY  
THOMAS KINGERY

To be older and alone is a challenge. For LGBTQ seniors, who are far more likely to be childless and estranged from family, the experience can be even more challenging.

“LGBTQ seniors are more likely to be socially isolated in their later years just because of the nature of society,” Thomas Kingery, a social worker for the senior services agency Avenidas, said. “The younger people — they can get married now; they’re adopting children. But older people grew up in an environment where it was illegal to be gay, or you were considered insane, so that created a mindset that they had to hide and isolate. When they get older, they may not have that family support to fall back on.”

Kingery, himself a gay man, is working to combat that isolation by building a support network among the local LGBTQ community known as the Avenidas Rainbow Collective.

The collective launched in January 2020 as part of a two-year pilot program funded with \$300,000 from Santa Clara County to expand caregiver support, health education, socialization and other specific services needed by the Peninsula’s senior LGBTQ community.

So far — despite rolling out two months before socially distanced protocols became the norm — the collective has successfully hosted a variety of programs that have helped people connect with one another, including pre-pandemic coffee meet-ups, gay and lesbian



and inter-generational discussion groups, walking groups, a virtual LGBTQ “empowerment and connections” conference, an ugly sweater holiday party and a pen-pals program.

For Sarah, who asked that her real name not be published, the Avenidas Rainbow Collective is simply an affirmation that “we exist,” she said. “We are still here, and we are still LGBTQ.”

The longtime Palo Alto resident and homeowner, said she did not want to reveal her name in part because “I have a longtime resistance to being totally out to the world because there was a time where it was simply a very dangerous action. Yes, I understand that is a cowardly stance.”

Now in her late 60s and living without a partner, Sarah said she’s probably not generally perceived as LGBTQ, just “slightly eccentric.” The LGBTQ activities at Avenidas have made her life “so much richer,” she said.

She does not personally feel isolated because she’s active in many organizations and has a close relationship with her daughter and son-in-law. Sarah added, “I think LGBTQ seniors are more at risk than seniors in general.”

Housing can be a particular problem for LGBTQ seniors, Palo Alto resident Rick Kaplowitz, who is a member of the Santa Clara County Senior Care Commission, said.

“The Bay Area is reasonably open to the gay community, but people who are older have more of a tendency not to be as friendly,” Kaplowitz said. “There’s the issue of going into senior housing and having other people living there not be very tolerant. There’s a question of, ‘do you come out and maybe not be very welcomed, or do you have to go back into the closet after having been out of the closet for 25 years?’”

Roger, a longtime Palo Alto resident who was a gay rights activist in San Francisco in the 1960s before moving to the city to help launch Stanford University’s Gay Students Union in the early ‘70s, has lived openly as a gay man his entire adult life. Now, 79 and living alone, he knows firsthand how isolating life can be as a gay senior.

“It’s hard to be a gay senior of my age but, add the lockdown — it’s really destroying the quality of my life,” he said.

## ‘We are still here, and we are still LGBTQ.’

He spoke at length with the Weekly about that experience and readily agreed to have his photograph and name published. But weeks after the interview — after he overheard homophobic comments by others in his apartment complex — Roger asked that he remain anonymous. He said he feared that the publicity could make him a target.

Roger said he’s delighted that some of his former students are thriving in same-sex marriages and good careers — fully in the open and supported by their families.

Life is a completely different story for his age group — many are still in the closet, he said.

“They’re still afraid to be seen that way,” he said.

Roger said he and his partner of 36 years were both disowned by their families.

“When John died (in 2006), there was nobody there to grieve with me,” he said. “In my old age, I have nobody to lean on. Eighty percent of my friends (whom) I thought I could lean on died of AIDS — good people, fantastic people.”

Roger said he battles his isolation by reaching out to others.

Pre-pandemic, he paid almost daily visits to the Mountain View Senior Center or to Stanford campus to chat with friends.

“Looking back, it appears to me that those of us who were really working hard in the (gay rights) movement knew we were working for future generations,” Roger said. LW

For more information about the Avenidas Rainbow Collective, go to [avenidas.org](http://avenidas.org) and click on “programs,” or email Kingery at [tkingery@avenidas.org](mailto:tkingery@avenidas.org).

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