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Houston's Gay & Lesbian Monthly Magazine

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Lesbians



Arden Eversmeyer and Charlotte Avery

Over



LOAF at the 1994 Gay Pride Parade

About a decade ago, when Arden Eversmeyer was faced with the loss of her partner of 33 years, she discovered something: Houston didn't have anything to offer in the way of support for her kind—a recently singled gay female, in her mid-50s, and very isolated. “This is the kind of isolation I'm talking about,” she explains. “All of a sudden, you're out there, by yourself and saying, ‘What am I going to do?’” That's when she took a little trip excursion to the West Coast in pursuit of some answers.

“I was looking for community,” recalls Eversmeyer. “I was looking for women my age [and] I was already in my mid-50s, and they just were unavailable.”

It was in San Francisco that she got her hands on some really good information from a couple of senior organizations, including GLOE (Gay & Lesbian Outreach to Elders). She also wrote New York City's senior social and service group, SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment), and again, got some more ideas.

“And with that,” she said, “I came back to Houston and with some younger women in the community, we did a little brainstorming.” And with that, Lesbians Over Age Fifty (LOAF) was born. The group held its first meeting on the third Sunday of October in 1987. Six women attended.

Age 50

“The organization, pure and simple, is a social networking and support system for lesbians 50 years of age or older and their partners, should they be under 50,” Eversmeyer told *OutSmart*. “We have one social [event] a month, usually hosted by a member of LOAF, and we do all kinds of different activities. We do lots of potlucks. It's a good way to get together.”

And LOAF has held its meetings ever since, always on the third Sunday of the month. Over the last 5-6 years, the group's membership has hovered at around 100, with a 50:50 mix of single and coupled women. “There's no restriction on being singled or partnered,” quips Eversmeyer, “and it's not political. As a matter of fact, a lot of these women are apolitical.” LOAF's oldest member is now 83.

So, why an organization of lesbians over 50? “Frequently,” Eversmeyer explains, “the issues and interests of women under 50 are different from those over. Our needs are different.” In addition, Eversmeyer finds that many older gay and lesbian individuals tend to be very closeted. She explains, “It is very definitely true of old, gay women because it's just been so necessary to be discreet

in terms of family and job...and if it's always worked, why should they change?”

“Basically,” she adds, “I think the big thing is to try and provide some kind of a networking system because so many of these women are isolated. It's very, very difficult at that age to start peeking out of the closet a little bit.”

But LOAF has been more than a way to socialize with other lesbians over 50. Over the course of LOAF's existence, Eversmeyer has witnessed some truly memorable moments. “We've had six or seven women over the years who have become ill and subsequently died, and it's been really nice to watch the way the women have been there to assist in any way that's possible.”

“[LOAF] has probably connected with somewhere around 400-500 women in the last 12 years. And [the organization] isn't meant to be the end-all for everybody. A lot of times, women will connect, and because they have found us, they subsequently find other things too, and some of them have become very active in the community, and some of them will find a partner and start nesting. We won't see them [anymore]. But I think that's kind of a normal situation,” said Eversmeyer.

Older Lesbians Find Solace in Sisterhood

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LOAF Members at the 1st Annual LOAF Camp out! 1989

Although she doesn't find it to be a common occurrence for LOAF's members to cross-over memberships into other 50-plus gay organizations, Eversmeyer finds herself the exception to the rule. In fact, she has just returned from San Francisco, where another senior organization—this one much more issue-oriented—was holding its second annual conference.

The group is Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, or OLOC. One must be 60 to join. OLOC is an anti-oppression, politically based organization that fights ageism. Eversmeyer explains her involvement as such: "I think if a woman has been political to some extent, it might be comfortable [for her] to become political in the gay community. But, if you don't have that kind of bent to begin with, I wouldn't think that it would be just the normal thing to have happen. However, sometimes they get inspired by somebody, you know?"

LOAF basically promotes itself through word of mouth. "LOAF has become pretty well known," explains Eversmeyer. "We've done ra-

dio programs; of course, we're in the [Pride] parade [as we] have been for 10 years now; we have a flyer out with gay-friendly therapists; we are known at the women's center. People know or have heard about LOAF and that's just because we've been around for a long time now."

And if you happen to be or to know a lesbian over age 50, perhaps LOAF may have something to offer you. Eversmeyer says: "Listen, [LOAF] saved my life. I had been in a relationship for 33 years and my partner died, and even though I had a very good strong friendship group, I didn't even know there was community."

Living in Houston since 1952, Eversmeyer says that younger gay and lesbians within the community enjoy a visibility that wasn't available to her, or people like her, when she came out. "When I came out in the '40s, first of all, we didn't even have a vocabulary and there certainly weren't any organizations."

So lesbians then didn't even know what to do themselves?

"That's it."

I'd really feel more comfortable with a female doctor

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TIMELINE 1988-90

Each month OutSmart continues its timeline series on the past 30 years of Houston gay history.

1988

Hoping to relieve certain costs involved with the treatment of HIV-positive individuals, **The Assistance Fund** was founded. The organization helps to pay medical insurance premiums and emergency prescription drug expenses for persons with HIV until they qualify for Medicare coverage. "The cost of car-houses of worship," to help put forth the names behind the statistics."

1989 AVES (Amigos Volunteers in Education and Services) added its name to the list of those organizations providing social and healthcare services to HIV-positive individuals. The **Koibe Project** started, distinguishing itself as "a Franciscan Ministry of loving, caring, and sharing to persons who are gay, transgendered and HIV/AIDS as well as their families and caregivers." The group welcomes those from all faiths, it says, or those with no religious affiliation. Koibe sponsors monthly potlucks with speakers on topics concerning the gay and lesbian community. It also holds other various workshops, hosts a wellness center Nelson Vergel, as a support group run by those with HIV for those with HIV to help them to die with some dignity. But over the last two years—just as improved treatments and medications have lengthened the life spans of those with HIV—the center's focus has shifted to helping individuals live healthier lives. "We are truly pioneers," said Vergel of the treatment advocacy program, which is run from the 6th floor of 3400



Volunteers of the 1st showing of the quilt display at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

medical needs." More than a decade later, The Assistance Fund continues to assist HIV-positive individuals with an all-volunteer board of directors. **Body Positive/Houston** began, says director and creator of the organization's **Body Positive** helping individuals live healthier lives. "We are truly pioneers," said Vergel of the treatment advocacy program, which is run from the 6th floor of 3400



Body Positive helping individuals live healthier lives.

Montrose. The wellness center is often one of the first places a newly diagnosed HIV-positive individual contacts for support and information. What began in San Francisco as a type of "folk art" to memorialize those who had fallen to the AIDS epidemic, **Names Project Houston** grew into one of the most visible displays of community strength and support in the nation. The organization's Pete Martinez explained that the AIDS Quilt was first displayed on Mother's Day to assist in the location of gay-owned and gay-friendly businesses and **1990 Houston Gay & Lesbian Yellow Pages** is still used to this day to assist in the location of gay-owned and gay-friendly businesses and **Timeline** constructed from personal interviews, personal recollections, and documented information.