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### Familiar World

By Nick Schaefer

Donna Valentine, LPN, knows all too well the effects of discrimination and prejudice.

As the wellness director at RainbowVision Properties Inc., Santa Fe, NM, reportedly the nation's first retirement village that provides assisted living and services for a gay and lesbian population, Valentine cares for those who've fought to escape these pressures every day.

"Discrimination exists in very deep pockets all over the world and we are a place free from these discriminations where all can live their lives in freedom," said Valentine, a self-proclaimed lesbian.

Valentine and her facility recently found themselves at the center of a controversy between a state association and a religious organization originally slated for a convention in August, a convention RainbowVision had once participated in.

Last summer, RainbowVision staff presented a session on "Designing Communities for the Gay and Gray" to members of the New Mexico Aging and Long-Term Care Department, which for 26 consecutive years held its annual conference in a Baptist-owned conference center in Glorieta, NM. But after last year's presentation, RainbowVision, conference center officials ruled in January that the discussion of gay issues would no longer be allowed in its venue because such issues violated the teachings of the Bible.

The department has since decided to move its conference to the Sandia Pueblo resort complex in Albuquerque, where its 2007 event will be held Aug. 2-4.

"Because the department embraces inclusiveness and diversity, it decided not to return to Glorieta because it cannot legally or philosophically agree to conditions that infringe on the freedoms protected by the First Amendment and discriminate against any particular groups or lifestyles," said John Arnold, director of the department.

Valentine said it's situations like these that led her to a community like RainbowVision in the first place.

### INSPIRED TO HELP THE CAUSE

Before joining the RainbowVision staff in April 2006, Valentine spent 21 years at various LTC facilities across the country. For the most part, she said she had a positive experience throughout her nursing career, but encountered the difficulties that gays face much too often.

"Although healthcare professionals are taught to be open-minded, that is not always the case," said Valentine, who, as wellness director, oversees staff at the facility's assisted living division that houses 26 suites and can accommodate up to 50 people.

"I have seen people separated and not allowed to live together [in healthcare facilities] because they were same-sex couples."

This inspired Valentine to focus on caring for a community that includes individuals among an estimated 2.9 million gays and lesbians nationwide ages 65 and older, according to SAGE (Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders), a nonprofit group that serves gay seniors in New York City. The number could actually be higher as there are approximately 37 million Americans 65 and older who aren't asked about their sexual orientation when the

compiles statistics.

At RainbowVision, a facility that also houses heterosexual residents, Valentine said she gets to practice in an environment that strives to be nondiscriminatory. She has a long way in helping the resident population manage their health conditions and get the most of their retirement years.

"It is such an awesome concept to be able to work in a community that embraces diversity," she said. "At a typical assisted living facility, a person can't tell their same-sex partners because, to a lot of 80-year-olds, that is taboo. However, at RainbowVision, our doors are open for everyone. Residents can speak freely and don't have to keep their thoughts to themselves."

#### **FROM THE GROUND UP**

At her time of hire, Valentine had just 2 months to assist in the hiring of staff and the creating of a hospitable assisted living setting, which was still under construction. She took her position.

But with previous experience as a wellness director at other assisted living facilities in New Orleans, Valentine said she had a solid understanding of how to establish a successful facility from day 1.

Before construction was complete, Valentine was actually involved in discussions regarding the facility's design, such as the layout of patient and medical rooms. She was also involved in purchasing medical equipment including wheelchairs, scales, charts and various office materials.

However, some of the more time consuming projects she initially took on were hiring staff and writing the facility's policies and protocol.

"I know the business very well, so I knew what I needed as far as staff," said Valentine. "I always tell my [perspective] staff that everybody here should be treated with respect and dignity at all times."