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NEIGHBORS: Now & Then

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 By KAY LOCKRIDGE | For The New Mexican
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RainbowVision's 'Over the Hill and Under the Rainbow' staged readings tell everyman's—and woman's—story

What started as a journal-writing class for seniors has taken on a life of its own, culminating in two performances for the public Tuesday and Thursday evenings at RainbowVision.

Residents of RainbowVision, which recently celebrated its first-year anniversary as a “community for the second 50 years,” were invited in February to participate in weekly two-hour journal-writing course led by Denise Kusel, former Pasatiempo editor and New Mexican columnist. More than 15 people responded, including at least one nonresident of RainbowVision. The group was open to all, gay or straight, who expressed interest.

“Everyone has a story to tell, and I promised to teach them to write that story and guaranteed them they wouldn’t fail,” said Kusel, a long-time journalist. “Writing is like talking; it just takes the process to the next step. I began the class just as I would an interview: asking them questions, getting them to think and then, instead of my writing it down, they put it on paper for themselves.”

Ranging in age from late 50s to early 80s, the men and women recorded their most vivid, poignant memories. From these writings grew an evening of stories of their lives in poetry and prose, Kusel said.

Kusel first enlisted the help of oral historian Jack Loeffle to record the stories, and that of photographer Cary Herz of Albuquerque, who photographed the recording session. The next step, Kusel said, was obvious — a presentation to a wider audience through a staged reading.

For this, she enlisted Randy Bennett, television and documentary producer/director in Los Angeles and Dallas now living in Santa Fe, where he is chairman of the Desert Academy fine-arts department and

Mainstage director. He also teaches theater, comedy improvisation and film classes.

“It didn’t take me long to decide to do it,” Bennett said. “I was so intrigued by the idea. Aging is, or will be, everyone’s story. How these folks came to be who they are today is vital. And they are able to both write and speak their stories in a way that will reach everyone. Plus, the fact they’re gay was irresistible.”

“These folks” include Roger Bergstrom, Gloria Donadello, Stephen Kerr, Anne Linn, Chris Linn, Judith Mazur and Jeanne Simonoff. Anne and Chris noted that they are not related, despite the same last name. Visitors will see “then and now” photos of the evening’s participants.

A particularly wonderful coincidence occurred when Anne and Stephen discovered they shared the same hometown, Oil City, Pa. Further discussion revealed that they shared much more —the first four grades at the local elementary school. They had not seen each other since they were 9 years old. Anne is 69, Stephen 68.

Their stories were similar — moved away from Oil City and later married. Anne, who came to Santa

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Fe last year from Binghamton, N.Y., has two children and four grandchildren who live in upstate New York. She was an electrical engineer with a specialty in environmental testing of jet-ignition equipment, as well as a hot-air balloon owner and pilot. Stephen was married briefly and also moved to Santa Fe last year, after a 38-year career as a librarian in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. He works part time for the Santa Fe Library.

Their stories differ, as their readings show, as to when they came out: Anne was 51; Stephen was 25. The audience will join them on the journey.

Roger Bergstrom, who is 77 and has two children and three grandchildren, moved to Santa Fe last year from Arlington, Va., where he was a high-school teacher for 27 years. Roger came out in 1985, after his retirement from teaching. Barry, his partner of 15 years, joined him at RainbowVision.

Gloria Donadello, at 81 the oldest participant, hails from New York City, where she was a full professor of social work at Fordham University. She and her late partner, Sarah Barber, moved to Santa Fe in 1990 and founded Hope House, a facility that cared for patients with advanced AIDS. Gloria also was the youngest of the group to come out — when she was “16 or 17.”

Chris Linn, the only non-RainbowVision member of the group, is also the youngest. She celebrated her 60th birthday July 29. Chris said she was “dragged kicking and screaming” from Milwaukee to Santa Fe in 1992. Now, she loves the City Different, particularly, she said, because of their 81/2 years as executive director of the Girls Scouts of Santa Fe. She retired in 2001 because of health concerns. Chris has one child and came out at age 35.

Judith Mazur, 61, hails from Yonkers, N.Y., with many stops along the way to Santa Fe. She came out “finally around 33,” she said. She has been writing and performing, and starting groups for both, since she was a child. She is a personal and professional coach. Judith and her partner, Jessica, arrived in Santa Fe from Prescott, Ariz., in 1997.

Jeanne Simonoff, 66, was a lifelong resident of Los Angeles, where she was a counselor in private practice before moving to Santa Fe in 1993. She recalled coming out at 19. She has been published in literary journals and periodicals, as well as poetry anthologies. Jeanne is working on a novel, as well as a second memoir.

All the participants agreed they joined the class because they wanted to learn more about writing and they admired Kusel’s work. “I figured I would learn something from Denise,” Roger said, “and I have.” That judgment was shared by the group, as was the prospect of getting to know their neighbors better and having a good time.

Regarding the upcoming performances, Chris said she “wanted to tell my story to others.” Jeanne perhaps summed it up best when she commented: “It’s important to tell our stories, which show our lives really are no different than others’.”

Bennett said these stories will have an even wider audience because he is putting together a documentary that will focus on the readings, rehearsals and one-on-one interviews with the participants, assisted by Zach Trevathan, a videographer and student of Bennett’s at Desert Academy.

Kusel, who serves as producer of the show, said she is putting together a book of the readings, which would be available this fall.

For more information on the show and upcoming writing classes, call Kusel at 988-4321 or dkusel@mac.com

For information about RainbowVision and its activities, call 428-7777 or visit www.rainbowvisionprop.com.

IF YOU GO

- **What:** “Over the Hill and Under the Rainbow,” staged readings
- **When:** 8 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, (doors open at 7:30 p.m.)
- **Where:** Silver Starlight Lounge, RainbowVision (500 Rodeo Road, east of St. Francis Drive)
- **How:** Admission free, seating is limited
- **For more information:** Call Denise Kusel at 988-4321 or dkusel@mac.com



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