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Living out the golden years

New facilities across the U.S. offer the serenity of bias-free retirements.

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The Denver Post

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SANTA FE — Tables and chairs have been pushed to the wall inside the SilverStarlight Lounge at RainbowVision Santa Fe.

It's Friday night, and women of various ages gyrate together to Justin Timberlake's "SexyBack." Soon enough, the Pussycat Dolls tease "Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?" A 20-something sidles up to the bar, clad in a white bra and denim shorts, a tattoo between her shoulder blades.

Two floors above the lounge, 81-year-old Gloria Donadello slumbers through the throb and thump. The juxtaposition of the octogenarian and the girl-party below conjures an alternative lyric: "Don't cha wish your retirement was hot like this?"

RainbowVision Santa Fe is the nation's first planned enclave for aging gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people — as well as, say its founders, anyone else who wants to join the party.

It is not likely to be the last. As many as 28 GLBT retirement communities, from Fort Myers, Fla., to Hollywood, Calif., could be operating by the end of the decade.

What they promise: a chance for the first wave of openly gay Americans to retire in bias-free environments, unburdened from having to explain sexual identities to peers of a generation not raised to be tolerant of them, and who often are not.



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Gloria Donadello reminisces as she looks at a photo album filled with images of her life with Sarah Barber. Donadello, 81, lives at RainbowVision Santa Fe, a retirement community for gays and lesbians. (Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

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"It's been in the last five years that dreams of such housing have really started to come true on the ground," says Gerard Koskovich of the American Society on Aging's Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network.

A year earlier, Donadello was living the nightmare so many fear. No longer able to live independently, she'd gone to a nursing home where she felt isolated and alone.

Only there was a special spin for the woman who had come out as a lesbian in the 1940s. While she could recount her tales of prewar New York City and her Italian immigrant upbringing, the treasured memories of 35 years spent with her partner, Sarah Barber (who died in 2005), went unspoken.

"I hated it. Hated it," she says. "Everybody was old."

At RainbowVision, gay people of a certain age (though RVSG isn't age- exclusive) say they are more able to live their memories and share their life stories without suffering the isolation, insults or awkward silences that can accompany coming out (yet again) in a nursing home.

A more intentional take

Gay history does include stories of retirees flocking together.

There had been women's enclaves. One of the first was in Apache Junction, Ariz., organized by RV'ers. GayCare, a residence for gay men over 60 in Daly City, Calif., has existed since 1981.

But a market-driven community in which to grow old together or solo, in an elder village not unlike Del Webb's Sun Cities? No.

And for many aging Americans, the need was clear. Estimates put the population of GLBT people over 65 at million, with the number set to grow to 4 million by 2030. Many of them — more than one-fourth, according to one survey of gay baby boomers — express "great concern over discrimination" as they age.

The people buying RVSF's 13 acres of patio homes and condos, leasing its apartments or signing up their parents for the assisted-living floor are deeply aware what a pioneering enterprise this "community for the next 50 years" represents — including the 20 percent who are straight.

The 50 years that preceded RVSF's groundbreaking in June 2006 were the most dramatically shifting in the history of U. S. gays and lesbians.

"I think of there having been this kind of gay moment that was produced in the 1970s, where a lot of people wrapped their social lives and identities around being gay much more comprehensively than people before them had," says Yale University history professor George Chauncey.

With a median age of 65, many of RVSF's current residents straddled the divide created by gay liberation. They are the "Stonewall generation."

June 28, 1969, remains a watershed date, and the path that brought many of RVSF's residents to its door was cut that day. Early that morning, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City. Instead of submission, the NYPD encountered resistance. The ensuing fray became a turning point.

"Around the time of Stonewall, most of our energy had been in hiding our past and present. We didn't really think about having a future," says Joy Silver, president and chief executive of RainbowVision Properties.

"Then gay power took that civil rights movement momentum. We began to talk about a future. We began feeling we're going to have a future."

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Many of the people at RVSF had been in touch with Silver for years.

Barb Cohn and Jan Gaynor read about RainbowVision in a newspaper, then attended an investors' seminar in the San Francisco Bay area. Rebecca Smith and partner Karen Butts — who at 46 is one of the youngest residents — learned about RVSF at a booth at San Francisco's gay pride celebration. The two packed themselves and their landscaping business and moved into one of the condos.

"They are the people who said 'I'm taking everything I have and I'm going to the promised land,' " Silver says.

Not just talk anymore

"In the '70s when we were first coming out, we used to talk about aging," says Stephen Kerr, owner of one of the 60 adobe-style condos.

Decades before the gay parenting boom (biological and adoptive) meant that gays and lesbians could have attentive — or neglectful — children like those that heterosexual parents were blessed with, GLBT folk wondered what would become of them as they aged.

"I had a friend in California, and we used to talk about buying a building and we'd all live there together in our old age. But it was just a thought. Nothing was this elaborate," Kerr says, alluding to RVSF's decidedly swank creature comforts.

The lobby in RainbowVision's hub, El Centro, has the understated opulence of a boutique hotel. Prices for the sold-out two- and three-bedroom condos began at approximately \$200,000. Leased residences and assisted-living accommodations with a variety of amenity options can be pricey but are competitive with similar facilities in the area.

Kerr learned of RVSF four years earlier, from an e-mail list.

"I'd been in partnerships at various times of my life, but nothing too long-term," he says. "I thought at my age I'm not going to find a life partner. " He pauses, thinking better of putting a hex on his prospects. "Who knows? But if I do end up spending the rest of my life single, this would be an ideal place."

Kerr sits in the Truman Capote Library, which the former librarian organized. On the shelves: "Get Happy: The Life of Judy Garland"; "The Mayor of Castro Street," Randy Shilts' biography of Harvey Milk, the San Francisco supervisor assassinated along with Mayor George Moscone in 1978; "Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams"; and "The Barbra Streisand Song Book."

If that sounds like title profiling, it's because cultural identity permeates the place. There's the Radclyffe Hall, named in honor of the British author of the incendiary 1928 lesbian novel "The Well of Loneliness." It leads into the Oscar Wilde meeting room.

There are winks and nudges too. A notice in the lobby of the central building seeks donations for the "Liberace Piano Fund for the care and maintenance" of the cabaret's baby grand. And the Billie Jean King Fitness Center & Spa carries a line of beauty products. At a distance the logo for the "Fabulous and Gay" toiletry line reads like an epithet. But the labels affixed to lotions, toners and, yes, pet shampoos are examples of another minority trying to defang a word.

Some are "not quite ready"

"They call me Tombstone Ted," he says.

Ted Ruskin has a Catskill delivery that invites a snare drum ba-da-bum. "Some refer to me as 'you chisler.' " Ba-da-bum.

Ruskin runs Ted Ruskin Memorials out of the Highlands Ranch home he shares with Sinai, a timid calico cat found

wandering Temple Sinai's parking lot 14 years ago.

With a pelt of dark hair, salt-and-pepper beard and mustache, Ruskin looks as if he's just beginning his second 50 years, not 13 years into them.

Like other first RVSF homeowners, he followed the progress of the site. Ruskin and his partner attended the Santa Fe Opera regularly, and he continued the sojourn after Gary Bobb died in 1994 of AIDS complications. On trips to Santa Fe, he awaited signs of clearing, digging, building.

Yet he's one of those people RainbowVision vice president Joyce Bogosian dubbed the "not quite ready yet." He rented his condo until February to a couple who happen to be straight.

Ruskin's ambivalence will sound familiar to anyone who fears the "r word." He's got 40 years of friends in Denver and a business he loves. He has deep roots in "the community" — Denver's Jewish community. He met Bobb in 1978 at Tikvat Shalom, a group for Jewish gays and lesbians.

His final resting place will be here too, beside his deceased partner at the Mount Nebo cemetery.

"I've never been very active in the gay community," says Ruskin. "It was easier for me to be out in the straight community."

Last spring, he plopped down nearly \$3,000 a month to get a real taste of RVSF living. RainbowVision's intimate layout of homes and apartments radiating around El Centro offers Ruskin — who has a degenerative eye disease — a manageable terrain.

After his two-month stay in one of RVSF's transitional apartments, Ruskin's "if I move" trepidation gained a "when I move" clarity.

"My whole opinion changed dramatically," he says. "The people here are absolutely wonderful."

The promised land

To outsiders, RainbowVision can have the feel of a gentle theme park.

For residents, it is a sanctuary.

"People who've been isolated for years are coming here," says Bogosian. "We have people who are just coming out. We have people who've stopped taking their antidepressants for the first time.

"Gloria (Donadello) was at the door before it opened," Bogosian says of the 81-year-old who is one of the only GLBT residents on the assisted-living floor.

"You'd almost expect people of her generation to be more interested in such a place, where they're officially welcome and secure," says historian Chauncey. "Yet it doesn't really seem quite right for their age group, which was much more accustomed to being a part of 'normal society.' "

The very oldest generation, says Brian de Vries, professor of gerontology at San Francisco State University, has been touched least by the "Yup, I'm Gay" gains made in the culture at large in the past decades.

"That includes the heterosexuals with whom these gay men and lesbians might otherwise live," he says. "But also the gay men and lesbians themselves, who probably bring forward with them some of the homophobia in which they've spent almost all of their lives."

In this regard, Donadello is an anomaly.

"Gloria's the reason we exist," Silver says of the one-time social work professor and psychotherapist.

"All her life was full of purpose. She moved GLBT civil rights to the forefront. When AIDS was in the early stages of being discovered and no one wanted to go near people with AIDS, she and her partner created Hope House."

Late on a Sunday afternoon, while a handful of residents on the assisted-living floor watch actress Judi Dench dive brilliantly into an old-school rendition of the predatory lesbian in "Notes on a Scandal," Donadello pulls a wedding album from the corner of her living room.

This plunge into one's past is a simple gesture, repeated in countless retirement communities. Yet, before moving to RVSF, Donadello's memory loss found an accomplice in the disinterest of her former residence.

So as a 3-year-old papillon dog named Billy leaps on the couch and Pink, a tabby cat, naps atop a nearby table, Donadello begins a story.

"I was in the Dutchess one night."

She stops to clarify. "The Dutchess was an infamous women's bar. Everybody knew about the Dutchess."

Once a long, narrow, darkly lit club near Sheridan Square in New York's Greenwich Village, the space is now home to a Starbucks busy with latte addicts unaware of any hallowed grounds besides those in their cups.

Just as Donadello and her friends were leaving, two women approached their table. One was fixed on Donadello, who was lean and handsome in her younger years.

"I'd love for you to come home with me tonight," Donadello recalls Sarah Barber saying. "I looked her up and down. She looked like she was 12. 'You better go home with the person that brought you,' " she told Barber.

"Well the next morning, I got a phone call. She wanted to meet for lunch. She was very, well, what is the word I want?"

Persistent?

"Persistent. Exactly."

They met for lunch. And the rest, as they say, was history.

A happier ending

"What am I going to do when you die?" That's what Barber used to ask Donadello, 12 years her senior.

The expected order of things doesn't always hold.

But the difficulties Donadello struggles with these days are of the body's making, not discrimination's.

Over dinner one evening, Donadello recounted a performance RVSF's journal-writing group gave.

Staged in the SilverStarlight Lounge, "Over the Hill, Under the Rainbow" was a night of personal and communal reminiscence.

Because Donadello's memory is waning, a woman stood nearby prompting her. What was it like to come out, to fall in love in New York City?

She may have needed help recalling the details. But Donadello needed no prodding about how the event, crowded with fellow residents and other Santa Feans, went.

"It was wonderful."

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Lesbian and gay retirement housing developments in the U.S.

Predevelopment

For profit	9*	Estimated numbers. Projects in early stages of predevelopment are difficult to track; abandonment of projects in predevelopment is not generally announced publicly.
Nonprofit	9	

Own land or building (construction not yet underway)

For profit	4	Beau Monde Liberty (Palm Springs, Calif.); Fountaingrove Lodge (Santa Rosa, Calif.); Paradise One (Easthampton, Mass.); RainbowVision (Palm Springs, Calif.)
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Nonprofit	1	Stonewall Communities (Boston)
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Under construction

For profit	1	Barbary Lane Communities (Oakland, Calif.)
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Operating: lot sales

For profit	4	Birds of a Feather (Pecos, N.M.); Carefree Cove (N.C.); Palms of Manasota (Palmetto, Fla.); Resort on Carefree Boulevard (Fort Myers, Fla. — manufactured housing; fully sold)
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Operating: full scale

For profit	1	RainbowVision (Santa Fe)
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Nonprofit	1	Triangle Square/Gay and Lesbian Elder Housing (Hollywood, Calif.)
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*Number of developments

Source: Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network, American Society on Aging

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• Resources on LGBT Retirement Housing

Readers interested in having more information about LGBT retirement housing options across the United States -- and around the world -- will find useful resources on the website of the Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network, including a Web Guide offering annotated listings for more than 30 websites dealing with the topic. Visit www.asaging.org/lgain.