

LGBT seniors reinvent the good life at RainbowVision

by Marc Breindel

It's like a country club for 50-plus gays and lesbians: Everything about RainbowVision Santa Fe -- from its location, near an artsy-liberal gay mecca, to the onsite spa and cabaret -- should appeal to queer folk, especially those "of a certain age."

Standard retirement can mean isolation for lesbians and gays, who may find themselves leaving West Hollywood or San Francisco for the predominantly straight retirement or assisted-living facilities that have been the only options until now.



Enter RainbowVision, the first residential community designed for LGBT seniors, which opened October 31 in Santa Fe. Here, same-sex couples won't be the exception -- they'll be the norm. RainbowVision's president, the aptly named Joy Silver, said people crave such an "intentional community" -- even those who are still working.

A rainbow of residents

It seems there was, indeed, a market for such a place. The first 60 condominiums have already sold out, leaving just some of the development's 86 rental spaces available; new homes are currently being built.

The pool of potential residents is large. If 10 percent of the population is gay -- as is often assumed -- then 14 million people fit the developers' profile: LGBT people born between 1912 and 1965.

Still, it initially took some effort to find them, according to Silver. That's largely because so many lesbians and gays do not self-identify, and therefore slip beneath the radar. "You don't count if you can't be counted," Silver said.

Once word of the project spread, things got easier, and people started contacting RainbowVision themselves. Requests for information have come from as far away as Japan, Iran and Fiji. Ages of the first RainbowVision residents range from 48 to 93.

And not only gays and lesbians are moving in: About 20 percent of the first group of residents is straight. Many of them have worked in creative fields alongside gays and lesbians, and therefore feel comfortable in a mostly gay environment. They say they expect a higher quality of life, and more fun, in an LGBT residential community. RainbowVision management emphatically does not discriminate.

Social world

One big draw is the opportunity to socialize. Onsite mingling opportunities include singles clubs, a piano bar cabaret and classes in everything from cooking (with visits by celebrity chefs), arts and crafts (in the common area's studio space) and organic gardening. Field trips include visits to the nearby Santa Fe Opera House and longer excursions in conjunction with Rosie O'Donnell's R Family Vacations.

RainbowVision also has a full-service dining hall, a cafe and a restaurant, the Roof Top Lounge, with a gorgeous view of the dusky desert sunsets over the mountains. For many, the nerve center will undoubtedly be the gym, which includes a spa, a salon and a holistic wellness center.

Home, fabulous home

"We have an amazingly knowledgeable population when it comes to art and design and color," said Silver. "So our own designers have to be at least as good."

Developers employed a designer from Las Vegas to work on floor plans, and even brought in a lighting expert. "Why should we be in a fluorescent bathroom when we could have some beauty and some drama around us?" asked Silver. Southwestern stucco in desert colors prevails, with customized options including rain-style showers, kitchen skylights, and options for walls and carpet.

The community was also designed to meet the health care needs of gays and lesbians, who often face our senior years without the help of family. Here, seniors can avail themselves of as much or as little help as they choose. They can opt for independent-living or assisted-living units, and choose to have most meals prepared for them in the dining hall and delivered to their home. Various other personal services are available, and for critical care, there's a hospital two miles away.

Future seniors

The company is planning new communities in Arizona, South Carolina and Brighton, England, and RainbowVision's founders expect others to follow their lead, developing more communities for queer seniors.

Silver said that, 36 years after the Stonewall riots, the time has come for lesbians and gays to spend their "second 50 years" however they choose. "At this point, we're not asking anybody for our rights. We're just going to live them."

And where else can one live in a planned community with subdivisions named "Chelsea Village" or "The Castro"?