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Serving Among LGBTQ Older Adults

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For over four decades scholars have discussed the importance of transformative learning and its vital role in shaping the lives of students. Cranton (2006) states:

“...an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world.” (p.20)

This quote serves as a point of departure for my experience in a social work course focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) populations, where I had the opportunity to participate in a community service learning experience that changed my worldview on older LGBTQ individuals. In this course I completed a community project where I chose a segment of the LGBTQ population to research and visited the Center on Halsted in Chicago’s Boy’s Town neighborhood in order to research programs they offered LGBTQ older adults.

Prior to this class, I knew I was interested in working with aging populations, but I had not given any thought to older LGBTQ adults. Although I had taken courses focusing on older adults, LGBTQ adults had not been mentioned in my courses. Therefore, this course and community experience prepared me to view the broader scope of aging populations. This community project provided me the opportunity to understand the skills that I needed to develop in order to work with all older adults as well as how to meet the needs of diverse populations. This community service learning experience broadened my perspective on vulnerable older individuals. This project transformed me by helping question societal oppression and discrimination of older LGBTQ adults. In this paper, I will share my reflections on human development and LGBTQ adults, the importance of creating safe places for LGBTQ older adults, and societal implications.

When thinking about human development, I have become increasingly aware of society’s role in shaping the lives of individuals. As stated above, one particular group that has called my attention is the aging population. Through my educational experience, I have learned that as people age they experience different stages in life. I have also learned the

important role that families play in the lives of older adults, but for older LGBTQ adults, family takes on a new meaning. In general, older adults who have had the opportunity to experience a strong family bond tend to feel empowered by this, while those who have not experienced a strong family bond may feel isolated and alone. Research suggests that aging populations disengaged from a strong support system tend to deteriorate physically, emotionally and mentally. However, older LGBTQ adults face additional challenges throughout their lifetime. They face discrimination, sometimes limited support from family and friends, and lack of legal protection.

Thus, due to being outside of the traditional family structure, older LGBTQ adults face an array of special challenges that impact their lives (McInnis-Dittrich, 2009). Yet, older LGBTQ adults also have extensive relationships with life partners and their families of choice, and these support systems need to be recognized as important factors that serve as protective factors (McInnis-Dittrich, 2009). Yet, I now realize that I participated in the oppression of older LGBTQ adults because I had negated their existence. Thus, this community learning experience transformed my views impacting my understanding of oppression, which shaped my subsequent learning. I now realize that older LGBTQ adult's lives are compounded by various societal factors that threaten their wellbeing. For instance, older LGBTQ adults may not "come out," due to fear of discrimination or abuse. And, for aging LGBTQ adults impacted by HIV/AIDS, the diseases makes things much more complicated. For instance, "The guilt and shame they experience may prevent them from disclosing the diagnosis to family and friends until the end of their life cycle." (National LGBTQ taskforce, 2015) "In addition, they may fear total rejection by family and friends at a time in their lives when social support is most crucial" (McInnis-Dittrich, 2009).

Yet, these are factors I had not considered prior to my community engagement experience in this course, specifically the importance of support and understanding that is unique to the LGBTQ older adults. For instance, "thinking family means seeing the older adults as part of complex system of multigenerational relationships that have had a profound influence on his or her life and serve as the primary source of interaction and support. Family roles such as spouse or partner, parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle are important parts of older adult's self-concepts, influencing older adult's lives even when the specific functions associated with those roles have ceased." (McInnis-Dittrich, 2009) Furthermore, I have grown increasingly aware of how policies also serve to discriminate against older LGBTQ adults. For instance, Congress passed the Older Adult Act (OAA) in 1965 to respond to the concerns policymaker's had about the lack of community social services for older persons (Lambdal legal, 2015; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Yet, aging LGBTQ populations are invisible in this landmark law.

I think about the experience I had walking through the Center on Halsted (COH) in Chicago. As I observed each individual seeking services and wondered about each individual and their personal story, I came across an elderly woman who asked about my visit. After describing my project to her, she was compelled to speak of her personal experience. The elderly lesbian woman spoke of the LGBTQ-friendly Senior Housing that was being developed through the Center on Halsted through a partnership with Heartland Alliance. She was ecstatic to know that she had been accepted and would be living there with other LGBTQ individuals. The news was definitely going to lift a financial burden as well as giving her peace

of mind for her own personal safety.

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Although, this conversation was merely coincidental, her experience gave me the understanding that I was looking for. Many individuals find comfort knowing they can be themselves, yet I wonder about older LGBTQ adults who require extensive care in nursing home facilities and the limits of what the COH can do to address their needs. The more I reflect on older LGBTQ adults, I am left in disbelief knowing that some of them who pioneered the civil rights movement for gays and lesbians will now be forced into hiding in order to receive services. My commitment with the involvement of the LGBTQ aging population as a social work student is to be as educated as much as possible to address such needs. In understanding the crisis the LGBTQ community continues to experience, I hope to be the support system that can assist with social services in all areas to achieve a satisfying quality of life. The LGBTQ aging population seeks acceptance in society as respected human beings and not frowned upon for their gender identity or sexual orientation. Aging is a complex process, but aging with lack of acceptance due to identifying as LGBTQ is stressful and can lead to debilitated health. It is unfortunate that the LGBTQ aging population will continue to feel unsafe in such environments because of their identity. I am left feeling that my Social Work service-learning experience provided with me the ability to help bring awareness to the need for safety for older LGBTQ populations who are vulnerable.

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