

Outright Radio
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Elders Show

From PRI, Public Radio International, it's Outright Radio, I'm David Gilmore. Today on ORR, stories of folks growing old in the gay community – Portraits of our Elders.

First up, the story of Hannah Blue Heron, an intrepid 76 year old lesbian poet and former nun looks back at her life and the long process of coming out...

"...it was that last year I was in the convent one of the girls asked me if I knew what a lesbian is, she was coming on to me, I had to go look it up."

Later on the story of Maurice, married twice with kids and now, at last, sitting on a rainbow at 75...

"I'm here to celebrate my life as I want to be, as a free spirit. An older man, I'm not old, I'm just a little older."

All true stories and all on a theme of Elders in the Gay Community... Today on Outright Radio. We hope you'll join us for the next hour as we present these extraordinary stories from the heart of gay America.

Music

Today there are 34 million Americans over the age of 65. In the next 25 years, that number will double. So says the US Dept. of Commerce. Now, figuring that roughly 10% of those are going to be gays and lesbians, you've got nearly 7 million aging gay folks looking for some form of assisted care. Considering that the gay civil rights movement is only 34 years old and that half of the gay men of the previous generation were decimated by AIDS, collectively we haven't really had much of a chance to consider our options about growing old. But we are now.

Retirement communities and assisted living centers catering specifically to LGBT folks are sprouting up all over the country. Special needs for HIV care, the unorthodox families that we have, and the fear of having to go back in the closet in order to obtain decent health care after a life of hard won liberties, has many queer baby boomers scrambling to get the doors open in time.

That said, we begin our show profiling the lives of 2 gay elders with the story of Hannah Blue Heron.

Music

Now, it isn't very often that I meet someone who lives with the integrity and authenticity that they espouse. Hannah Blue Heron is one of those rare people. Far out in the desert, tucked behind prickly pear cactus and scrubby mesquite trees, Hannah makes a simple life for herself, living in community much as folks did in the hay days of the hippies. At 76, Hannah has not a hint of pretense and a big toothy smile secreted beneath her nun-like austerity. The day I met her at her house, it was over 100 degrees in the desert. There was no one visible on the property except her and some cactus wrens flitting about. She slowly came up the stairs from her underground house to give me a tour of the property...

HBH: Well, this is my own acre that I bought from Adobe, but right next store is what we call Adobe-land. It's owned by a woman. It isn't a commune or a collective or anything like that. But she allows women to come and camp there and build strange structures and when I came, this was a part of adobe land and she let me start digging my hole. There is some straw bale, over there and she had done a smaller version of mine and there's just all kinds of things over there, some cob building... it's a very interesting place.

1:15: DG – How many women live in the property adjoining?

HBH: Oh, in the summer they all leave except Adobe and a woman called Lightning, she's still there and two women who have a trailer clear on the other corner, Loy and Mary.

But in the winter the population grows.

DG: Hannah relocated to southern Arizona from Oregon in 1986 and had the notion to build herself an underground house – her kiva - as insulation from the intense desert heat...

when I came down here, I thought Oh, I can build my underground house, not thinking of the labor intensity.

:46 DG – I'm assuming you did not dig this with shovels.

HBH – Shovel, Pick and Wheelbarrow.

DG – No kidding

HBH – I did not want to have a machine come in and take all the vegetation. I'm an idealist.

(laughter)

HBH = And I was 60 well on my way to 61. Not too wise really.

Sound changes

DG – Well, it's nice and cool in here.

HBH – Have a seat anywhere.

DG: Hannah and I sat in her home which is basically a large circular room with windows above shoulder height. The feeling was unpretentious and comfortable. The kitchen is above ground to keep the cooking heat outside. We chatted about her life and when she knew she was a lesbian...

:22 I didn't know I was a lesbian, like some people do at 6 or whenever.

DG – When did you figure it out?

HBH : I was a sophomore in college and I fell in love with a woman. Who wasn't a lesbian. In fact, she was catholic and briefly we had a short affair and she told me it was a mortal sin and we had to quit. So, that was lovemaking of course. And It was hard for me to understand that something so beautiful was a sin.

1:06 HBH Having been raised as a Christian Scientist, sin wasn't even hardly in my vocabulary. But I got the message when she said she'd have to change her dorm room if we didn't stop, so I realized it was serious to her.

1:26 HBH – And if you can't beat them join them. So a year later I converted and four years after that entered a religious order.

DG: For 17 years, Hannah lived as a nun in the Good Shepherd order of the Catholic Church. She spoke of the first 12 years in the convent as her honeymoon, taking part in Gregorian chanting and being appreciated for her talents. But eventually, her lesbian tendencies needed to be addressed...

2:24 HBH – The rigidity of it began to get to me and also my sexuality began to assert itself. I took my vows seriously, I did not do anything overtly, but the --- just had all these fantasies that I had no control over and after four years struggle, I left.

2:52 HBH – there were other problems but that was the main one. You know you're not even allowed to show any kind of affection, which is wise, I guess, because affection can often lead to sexuality. So .. but I was starved I think more for

affection, I came from an affectionate family, than I was really for sex, but of course, it expressed itself in the fantasies were sexual.

DG – how old were you when you left the convent?

HBH – 41

DG – So then what?

HBH: :07 Well it was a shock when I got back in the “world.” I – everybody seemed so self centered and the nuclear family, they thought about themselves more than anyone else and when I entered in 1950, we were just entering into affluence, I didn’t know affluent life at all and it did not appeal to me :53 DG – So where did you go?

HBH: 1:01 So after six years, which, I won’t even go to some of my experiences. I had decided I would be heterosexual or die and I just about did die. I found out I could attract men despite my height, which was hard to do when I was a teenager,

1:18 DG – In spite of your height, what do you mean?

HBH – Well I’m 5’ 10” and that threatens a lot of men.

:09 DG – You were having relationships with men?

HBH - Yes, I was absolutely crazy you know, I got pregnant once I wasn’t taking precautions and I wanted a child. But I was by that time 44 and in those days I knew – well I hated the world I was in – I knew I wouldn’t be a good parent. Because I hadn’t adjusted to the main stream anyway and I didn’t even think of another stream.

:44 HBH - Ultimately, it got so bad though and I met this hippy woman working in the hospital and she had me over to the house and I met some other hippies and so I did begin to think of alternatives

But she came through in Spring with some, what she said was primo LSD (DG laughs) and she didn’t have to twist my arm to taking a trip and it was a very good trip until at the end I started screaming, I can’t go back, meaning to my work and my job – I was buying a home, doing all the things you were supposed to, but totally suicidal in fact when I thought about that alot.

1:58 DG What was it you were doing for a living?

2:05 HBH Well that was another thing, I was a teacher and I couldn’t handle the boys, mainly and it was Jr. High, I couldn’t handle those kids, so after six weeks I resigned, but I was broken hearted. I love to teach and by taking a civil service exam, I got a job as a hospital social worker in Stockton.

2:33 HBH – and I just hated it.

So, I did drop out and become a hippy.

Music

Track 14

03: HBH I went up to this commune of artists and musicians and the musicians were mostly three-chord guitarist and they sang and I played with them.

I only did two other LSD trips up there and then I realized I was enlightened enough. I could see people burnout you know and marijuana of course was a part of the lifestyle.

Track 15

DG- So how did you change inside as a hippy now?

HBH – you know we were reading Rachel Carson and doing things, so I became aware of the environment and classes and racism, they were pretty sexist, they were into the roles and I was thinking about building a house on this commune and I kept fantasizing, a woman being with me and I knew it wouldn't be acceptable.

:34 DG – Even among the hippies?

HBH Yeah, I know do your own thing, blah blah blah. but don't be gay. I mean we didn't talk about it, I wasn't going to say anything because I had been denying it anyway. I'd been going with men myself. And I had a hippy lover. And, but anyway, what really got me at that time, you know, they were going to be self-sufficient, but they'd leave the chainsaws out in the rain, when they really got energetic was either when liquor or LSD would come on the land and it was a little too weird for me.

Music

DG: Hannah talked about her growing discontent with the hippies noting that she still was longing to have her first relationship with a woman while the hippies were busy planning their next acid trip...

Track 19

HBH :08 So I answered an ad in Country Women magazine, which doesn't exist anymore on the back cover these two women had this ad "Older Women's Network" for women interested in alternative lifestyles. Nothing about lesbianism.

:36 HBH Well, I was definitely living an alternative lifestyle. And I noticed that they were living at the same address, and I thought well, let's look into this. And I didn't come out as a lesbian either, it was that last year I was in the convent one of the girls asked me if I knew what a lesbian is, she was coming on to me, I had to go look it up.

:56 HBH I knew about homosexuals and I kinda had a suspicion of it, but I had to look it up to be sure if you can believe that. So I wrote them a letter, I had a dog, could come down and see them and bring the dog.

Track 20

HBH :19 yes, yes, come right down. They called me in fact, but nobody said anything about lesbianism. So for the 1st 15 minutes that I was there they were trying to find out and I was trying to find out so finally they came out I mean after all they were on their turf and they had each other and I came out for the first time really. So that was wonderful

Music

Track 21

Anyway... 1:01 HBH - that was such a wonderful time for me. Women going around without shirts, how beautiful breasts are, they don't have to be any particular size, no matter what they -- how they were shaped they were beautiful.

1:10 DG – and for you probably for the first time in your life to be able to openly admire

HBH – speaking over – Right ----- Right

And oh, just had a lot of fun.

Music

DG: Eventually Hannah made her way to the Bay Area and lived in Oakland in the late 70's. There, of course, she found lesbians in droves and was immediately branded as a butch because of her height, though she preferred to think of herself as a feminist...

HBH 1:20 ...you know the feminist in those days, 77, 78.79 we were taking on specism, ableism, agism, sexism, racism, you name it we took it on.

I bought this old truck and a bunch of women were in the back, I didn't have a cover for it and we went thru SF to the ocean and they were whooping and hollering and we did one of the pagan feasts on the beach, that was a lot of fun, but the city --- I was wanting to get back to the country.

I started hearing about these different women's land in southern Oregon and that was my next goal. I'd gone up for a couple of workshops at women's Share just outside of Grants Pass and they had an opening for a dweller, you lived there a year before – they were checking them out and they were checking you out. I lasted there 5 months and went to Cabbage Lane for two months, I knew that was too primitive, you even had to haul your water and there was no electricity.

HBH – I lived on lots of women's lands in Oregon and the thing that kept me there, my family, was this writer's group that I started January of '81 and we met every three weeks and because we came from distances, that's very rural, So. Oregon, Medford is the only town of any size and all of us lived all over and do we'd met from 11 until 4-5 in the afternoon and we'd have a break and have a potluck then go back and it's still going I'm proud to say and ---that was my family while I was there, for sure.

:49 HBH – I wrote a musical Stories From The Other Side of Madness and they helped me put it on, we put it on in several places even up in the Olympia. And , so I loved my life in Oregon but it wasn't healthy for me –

Track 30

HBH: Finally one of my friends who had arthritis, moved down here and I moved her down, so I met Adobe and saw Adobe land and a couple of years after that I wrote to Adobe and thought, I should try it. It seemed like as soon as we hit the state I felt better. So you know, I was building this house within months.

DG: I asked Hannah about relationships – a subject that was curiously absent from her storytelling...

1:00 HBH: Well, I didn't have many long ones, all those years in Oregon and the bay area.

I did have a few. But I was always quite a bit older than people I met.

:38 DG – Do you think age has been a barrier for you to have relationships?

:40 HBH – Well, I for brief ones it was fine. Even in Oregon, that's the way it was, the person closest to my age was 15 years younger. But then I came here and I was in a relationship for ten years with my land partner before we broke up as partner – partners. It got bad and it went worse, we were resenting each other because I got to the place where we couldn't hike, play tennis, I got glaucoma. And she was beginning to resent me, having to do all the driving, I had to quit driving and that wasn't helpful to me and I resented her because she was unsympathetic and so I finally broke it off, mainly thinking she would meet someone her age and she could do the things she enjoyed. She was 17 years younger and ...

I'm just now recovering from a year and a half relationship with a woman that didn't work out. I was the rejected one so that's all I want to talk about that right now.

Music

DG – So do you feel like you still desire to be in another relationship?

HBH – Well not at this time, it's too painful.

Spirituality always has been of primary importance to me even when I was a child. When I was in that writer's group in Oregon, I started having memories of my childhood that I began writing down and it came to me that I'd been a mystic

ever since I was a child. And so I came out at the writer's group as a mystic which was even more important to me than the lesbianism. But I did not believe in celibacy. You can be a mystic and quite spiritual without being celibate.

1:06 HBH – it was partly my spirituality that broke up this last relationship. And there is at Antigone's a Buddhist book club once a month that I've been going to. And my former lover went to and she liked the discussions but she wasn't into the practice and that was one of the things that got in the way.

Music

DG :00 – Do you find there are any special challenges for growing old as a Lesbian? That may be people growing old as straight people don't face that you're feeling?

HBH - Well, when I was in older women's network, we were speaking of possibly having assisted living places for lesbians. Actually after I got here. I realized I didn't have any straight women friends and I didn't intend that to be that way, so I began having a writer's group here with straight women as well as lesbians and the present writer's group is like that, that come here and I have these pagan circles with straight women and lesbians. It seems to me in the battle against sexism all women need to be in on it.

Track 36

Even before I was a lesbian, you know, I was oppressed by being some people thought, like a man just because of my height. I can't handle it. I like to cook I like to do so called feminine things, but I built my house and that's a masculine thing, women don't do that.

:24 DG So you're just not into the label

HBH – I'm not into the label and it seems like we're in a period where some people are

Music

DG – Do you deal with loneliness being your age, being out here by yourself?

HBH – Well, I was in that 10 year relationship. Sigh The thing I guess sigh that's important to me is my art, the writing and the music. I direct the chorus at the Tucson Association for the Blind. I get to arrange things for them and I do compose. I do a lot of writing, I haven't the energy to push like I used to and you don't get published that way. You don't even get published when you do push, but I mean I get magazines and stuff, but I've gotten into writing books and haven't been able to get anything published.

DG: Hannah spoke about being nearly blind and living rurally without the ability to drive and the challenges that presents. She's now considering moving into town to be closer to services that she needs...

HBH –I have some people who will take me in now and then and I pay them a little bit. I can't pay by the hour or something, so it's a favor. They do their shopping too. I was doing that before I met my last lover and of course I was with her 18.5 months and – she lived in town and we were always going back and forth between the places, so that kind of took care of that for awhile, so my future is up in the air, that's the distressing thing now.

DG: Hannah spoke about the joy of growing old, even in light of being 76 and recently single again...

1:47 HBH – I'm very much more comfortable with myself, I love myself more than I ever had, even though right now I'm kinda shattered. She was the one that stopped it. I've been on both sides of that because you know you're going to hurt the other person, but to be the rejected one is devastating. And my spirituality has keeping me from going totally going under, I thought it was the gift of my old age and we'd be together for the rest of our lives. We both thought that at the beginning.

It was the most intense relationship I've had with a woman. And I thought oh wow this is it. But I'm not a mainstream person and she was and it finally got to her. I think she was kinda fascinated for a while, and then it got to her.

HBH 3:32 You know before I met this last woman I decided I liked living by myself and I always have a writers group, you know, I do things,

:01 HBH - and then when I fell in love, I thought how wonderful. There's no fool like an old fool.

DG – laughs

HBH – But I know I'll get over it and I have plenty other things to look forward to.

Music

DG – So at 76 Hannah looking back at your life do you think you have any regrets?

HBH – Well I certainly don't have any great regrets about coming out, I don't hardly have any regrets even about entering the convent, I received many gifts there, I have had a lot of pain in my life, but that's probably true of almost any life, and I feel that I have dealt with it pretty well. I love my life I love where I am now, I really don't have any deep regrets. I mean there are things I would do differently, I think, you're never for sure about what you're going to do differently when the time comes, nothing's ever the same anyway. But to have a lot of regrets I, just don't.

Fade music under out...

DG: Hannah Blue Heron playing her own composition on the fiddle: the Blue Heron Blues. You can see a picture of Hannah on our website at OutrightRadio.org.

Music

In the gay world my god if you're over 30 you're almost over the hill, my god 40 who's gonna want me? Oh no no, no there's a lot of wonderful handsome men in their 40's and 50's and 60's.” Coming up: the story of Maurice – the town bon vivant turns 75. We'll be back with more portraits of gay elders when Outright Radio continues... from PRI Public Radio International.

Break (probably 1 minute)

You're listening to Outright Radio, pause from PRI, Public Radio International, I'm David Gilmore. You can contact us at Comments@OutrightRadio.org or call us toll-free at 866-OUTRADIO. That's 866-688-7234

Now back to our Portraits of Gay Elders...

Maurice Grossman is about to celebrate his 75th birthday. The son of Polish immigrants, born in 1927, Maurice grew up in the Slavic neighborhood of Oakland Westminister in Detroit. He has spent most of his life living as a straight man. First in the navy with a wandering eye, then as a devoted husband, and father of three children. Finally, finally at 63, after everyone was sure that he was gay, Maurice divorced his second wife and blew the closet doors off...

Maurice's story:

DG: Do you remember when you had your first early signs of being Gay?

MG: – I had early signs of being different when I was a little boy, I liked other little boys and I liked other naked little boys and they liked me naked, so we were doing a lot of touchy feely. My whole world was sort of secretive as a young boy. I had an experience with another 10 year old boy and then as the hormones and the juices starting flowing, I had lots of experiences with some of the boys in the neighborhood.

The word gay hadn't even come into our vocabulary, we didn't even think of it as homosexual. I didn't know that word either, we just knew that other boys felt good. So I enjoyed growing up and being a little sexy with a number of boys in the neighborhood. I thought we had our own secret club, but just a couple of years ago I found out the whole

neighborhood knew what we were doing. And I never looked upon it as dirty stuff, I looked upon it as it felt good stuff. So it was a (laughing) an interesting time. But coming out was much much later in my life.

Music

MG: Growing up I was an artist. I liked to draw a lot and growing up I was a tall skinny kid, not very athletic.

that's why I'm an artist today – the art room was my haven, the art teacher was the woman that took me in and took me places and opened up the world to me, museums, she took me to drama, in the 7th grade, 8th grade she took me from the symphony, so all the things I love today didn't come from home, that's for sure,

MG – I left home at fifteen, home was not a good place to be. It was very abrasive and very toxic. And so I packed my stuff and left at 15. Went from Detroit all the way to Los Angeles. I was a movie struck kid. So much of my life revolved around the fantasy of the movies.

I went to Los Angeles, that's where they made the movies.

DG: Maurice spoke about living in Los Angeles in 1942, working in a restaurant and the unpleasant encounters living in a men's boarding house. He says he was naïve...

MG: But I woke up very quickly with some bad experiences in Los Angeles, with men grabbing and men hurting you and so I learned not to trust older men.

I came home at 16 and a half in Los Angeles, signed into the Navy

Because I was away for about a year and a half in Los Angeles, and then, went off for a few years, I was on a ship, I was on an aircraft carrier and then a cruiser and that's when I really became involved with some other gay men, gay young men.

DG – That were in the Navy. How did you find them?

:26 MG – you know, desire, and you look and all of a sudden there's a gentle nod. I learned very early especially at the living at the boarding house that you don't stare at crotches, you get in trouble that way and aboard ship and in training camp I learned to avert my eyes, I didn't stare, but I could see everything from the side view that wonderful gaydar vision that we possess. So I could see what I wanted to see and I fooled around a little in boot camp with the other buys and then I fooled around aboard ship with about 4-5 guys that I met early on with a sort of a gentle nod and gentle touch and we became very, very good friends and so I don't know if all of them were gay or not. It's hard to know whether you were a homosexual in the navy. I knew I was, I knew I loved all the things that were going on but the other guys I wasn't as sure of because we didn't discuss it as gay. Two of the favorite ports in the Navy during the war were Hawaii and we used to come back to San Diego a lot, but Hawaii oh the young guys in that place were just – they drove me up a wall. I mean those beautiful faces, those magnificent bodies, here I am 17, 18, 19 and just enjoyed being gay in that place. Because it was like paradise.

DG – But now, You didn't have terminology like gay

MG – no we didn't have terminology like gay

DG – So you were really not

MG – No you were queer, a homosexual, you were a pansy, you were whatever they used to call us. But we did have some raving queens on the ship. WE did have a few guys, they were so funny that no one wanted to beat them up . They were just hilarious. They were like mascots. One guy used to walk around draped in a flag all the time. I really admired, I admired his guts. I wouldn't dare. You know the fear of someone beating you up in the shower. There were a number of homophobic people. There's no doubt about it – What the hell are you looking at? Not against me because I always in the shower with 20 guys always avoided the look, but I didn't want some 500 lb marine you know accusing me of looking at his goods. And you never went Wow – look at that! You just avoided, learned how to be quiet learned how to avoid the problem of being what we used to call section 8.

Music

Maurice served on board as ship's carpenter but when they arrived in port, ironically he served as Shore Patrol. Oh my, teenage homos with guns in the best possible port of all ports for exploring one's sexuality. Anyway on with the story...

:21 Everyone was rated after the war was over our ship tied up in San Francisco of all places what a town to be tied up in and what a time Finocchio's and cross dressers other gay activities, there.

DG: What year were you in SF?

MG – that was in 46, that's when the ship came back from Japan.

DG – So the gay scene in SF was developed but it was very underground.

MG – it was very underground yeah. You just sort of sensed, because someone was following you. As long as you were in your uniform, there was always someone wanting you. You know. Hi cute sailor. So you learned if you wanted time that was private you just got into civilian clothes and no one bothered you.

So in Finocchio's you had a wonderful bar there and a wonderful bar scene that was gay and Finocchio's was the drags and the female impersonators. This was a real eye opener to me. Seeing this these guys dressed as beautiful women and as SP I was supposed to keep the peace you know and I used to warn some of these beautiful men dressed up as women to be careful of the sailors, cuz sailors would be thinking he's woman and finds out he's a man and they get very disturbed and very ugly so we used to say be careful, be careful, be careful just to keep the peace and a number of times we had to break up fights and things of this nature ...

I used to carry a 45 automatic pistol, but I never had it loaded so in a time of danger I used to pull that thing out and God they'd just wet their pants. "It's OK!" I never put the clip in because I never wanted to shoot someone. I was 19 and chase out people who were not 21 and I never chased anyone out. I just said --- you could always tell they were young cuz they would hunch over their drink and I'd say "It's ok, no problem."

DG – you owe me one.

MG – by keeping the peace then we could go back after hours and get a nice steak dinner and a couple of shots of whiskey from the bar owners as long as you didn't report anybody. So I wasn't there to make trouble, I wanted peace and quiet in my life.

Music

Maurice left the navy after 2 years of service and returned to Detroit. He was continuing to explore his sexuality with men, but then while he was in school studying art at Ohio State, he had a little twist of plot – in 1950 he fell in love and got married. To a woman.

To this day I'm not quite sure what or why, what was my thinking or why a woman --- did I want to be so called "normal," did I want to try that aspect out in my life. I wasn't really bi sexual in that I was having sex with both, I was having sex with the guys until I got married and then all of a sudden that tapered off and then I sort of became semi straight or into my straight drag period I call it. So it was an unknown time as I look back as to where my thinking was. Of course my children think it was great that I went sideways, Dad, like my daughter -- Dad I'm glad you went sideways for awhile otherwise I wouldn't be here.

I'm glad I went sideways otherwise I wouldn't know you, you were one of the great experiences.

Maurice was married for 21 years and fathered 3 children. His wife had a stroke and ended up in a nursing home. Maurice slowly returned to discovering the part of his life that was put on hold during his "heterosexual" years.

DG: So when did you, uh, return to your gay life?

MG: Well during the time I did live here I did have some friends over in San Diego I used to visit and go along with them, I was more voyeuring in those days, I went along with them on their activities, but I wasn't involved with any serious sex, just fooling around, I just went along as just a looker and a toucher and a feeler, my daughter not too long ago said. "Dad, were you screwing men when you were married to mom, Dad?" and I said, no I was just having fun with them but fooling around but not really I said, I didn't want to bring home a little surprise to your mother, I didn't want to do anything to upset the equilibrium. But when she was gone to the nursing home, then I went fooling around with some of the men. From the Navy on, the fear of getting caught, the fear of being found out. As I lived a lot of my life in this fear of who I really was and who I wanted to be. The desire to be gay was always there. The fear of being gay was always there.

Maurice was now working in the art department at the University of Arizona and leading a fairly closeted existence. He would have his conjugal visits to San Diego but was now hiding his sexuality behind the façade of a flamboyant art professor, aided by the sexual ambiguity of the 70s. Yet Maurice made one more valiant attempt at heterosexuality...

2:35 and then I turned around and married again. I don't know what my thinking was,

Track 22

to a woman who turned out to be a gay woman, a lesbian. My kids thought I was nuts. Dad, what is wrong with you? You know get her some jewelry, take her to Hawaii. I was proper.

:27 DG – did your kids know you were gay at this point?

They suspected, cuz I was always hugging men. Some of the local gay men had wonderful parties and we used to get dressed up for and I was there dressed in my easter bonnet or whatever and there was a lot of suspicions that I was – Is he, isn't he? Is he bi – is a wannabe? And when I came out a lot of people wouldn't believe it. Oh you're going through a phase. I played the game so well, by the time I came out to a lot of my friends they knew it they said "we're waiting for you to tell us" All through your hippie years you had long hair you wore beads and we weren't sure if the beads were hippy beads or you know queen beads and (laughter) so I paraded around and wore all the trappings that went with being a hippy, you know my sashes and my bell bottoms and my do dads and my – red bandanas and I personally in my own quiet way was in drag and was having a lot of fun getting away with it. "Oh god, he's a hippie, you know those hippies are like that, but I was just having fun wearing jewelry ad necklaces and it was my own quiet fun. Being married kept me from any serious exchange of fluids that would have gotten me in trouble back in the early HIV days and some of my friends in San Diego were – were dying and it was frightening and we didn't know what the hell was happening.

Music.

In 1990, Maurice and his second wife split up. She went on to pursue her life as a lesbian and Maurice finally was free to be a liberated gay man at the age of 63. He now has a "part-time" male lover and spends the rest of his time being involved in the community and playing the role of the elder bon vivant...

And that's where I'm at now, just enjoying everything, everything came true. It came true. All my desires, I run off to pride in San Diego and I've been to pride in Toronto and pride in LA and pride in Seattle. And I'm there with men, dancing and sweating and smelling and god it's just great so everything I used to dream about now in my older --- it's all coming true!

I'm looking forward to the rest of my life as being an older gay man.

Music

DG – Well, I was going to ask you if you had any regrets about not having had a chance to be fully gay, being younger ...

MG – I have some regrets. I will always have some regrets because I didn't fight some of the battles, I watched some of the other people fight them and then in my quiet way was with them, but I look back now and would have liked to have fought some of those battles, you know, breaking down the barriers and breaking down the door. And yelling and screaming "who we are is what we are" but I was very quiet and very sidelined in those days.

I'm out now, I'm fighting some of those battles now.

MG- . . . in my 70's, I'm part of the stonewall democrats so I'm out now but I wish now in looking back in retrospect that I would have been out as a gay man because that's really who I wanted to be

DG – What about fear of growing old and alone does that bother you now?

No fear of growing old and alone.

MG – well I'm not afraid of growing old and alone. I have so many wonderful friends and two wonderful children, so the fear of growing old alone is not a fear, I am going to go down – they're going to drag me kicking and screaming out of some bar dancing, to go of to the final call, so No, I don't fear that because I'm celebrating my older age.

DG – Well, I was going to ask you How are you perceived by younger men?

To some people a little bit of a role model. I'm going to grow old like that guy. I'm going to grow old at the bar – you know having a good time, dancing drinking, you know having a good time celebrating.

DG – So you're not invisible. MG – I'm not invisible.

Maybe there are younger men that have had bad experiences with older guys, being hit on etc., but there are a lot of younger men who like older men. There is a whole strata of men who like being around older guys, so I've had some of those experiences too.

DG – so you can go into one of these nightclubs where there is hundreds of you know half naked men dancing and not feel inadequate.

MG – No, no. I just go in there and look and smell and the hormones raging in there and I just thoroughly enjoy it. DG – cuz you're not expecting to go home --- MG – I'm not expecting to drag someone home, no. my lover comes 2-3 times a week and that keeps me content I'm not out looking for sex. I'm out enjoying others having a great time being alive.

Music

MG - In the gay world my god if you're over 30 you're almost over the hill, my god 40 who's gonna want me? Oh no no, no there's a lot of wonderful handsome men in their 40's and 50's and 60's. But there should never be a feeling of age as a stopping point in your enjoyment of who you are. Now I could get away with a few things they'd just blame it on age –

Laughter --

Track 35

they'd said oh, oh it's ok. I can make a fool of myself and enjoy it. There's -- I enjoy now and again doing dumb things

Music

I sat on a panel not too long ago about growing old, in the gay community, and what's it's like you know I was the older guy and there were some interesting questions about / from young men and a lot of anger from young men that were at that panel about older men hitting on them. There is a problem there and it's a problem of age, a lot of older men can't stand growing old. They want to be 20 again and they sometimes get in trouble trying to be 20 again so, everyone does it their way. Every one does it their way.

:57 DG – My friend Rusty, who’s – you know Rusty? MG – I know Rusty, yeh. DG: He must be he’s younger than you but probably only by a few years. MG – yeh he’s probably in his 60’s I’m not sure where he’s at, but he’s an older man.

DG – He often has men hit on him and I was saying how do you seduce younger men and he says you never seduce younger men you let them seduce you.

MG – that’s right. Laughter –

Often times they want to hear your story. They want to hear your story. God you remind me of my father. A lot of these young men couldn’t really see their father’s as gay, you know.

God you remind me of my father.

DG: I asked Maurice about how his children factor into his life, in its 3rd major revision now as a gay man...

My daughter is fine with me being gay, she’s fine with it, she just wants me to be careful, but my son is a little more quiet about it.

MG – I know you are dad, I don’t have to put it on a bumper sticker kind of thing and just – they both live in Seattle and not too long ago I was in Seattle and wanted to take my son out to a local gay bar, my daughter goes with – my son says, no I’m not going to be your trophy boy for tonight. I said Steve,

DG – you’re my son – laughter

MG – my son –ohhhh I walk in and these people look at me where did this older guy find this handsome 40 year old man. Well I’m sure it could be in their minds it’s not in my mind. So it makes him a little nervous, but he knows who I am . not quite the humor that comes out of my daughter – oh look at the butt on that one dad ---

Laughter

Dad, a couple of cute guys, don’t turn around too fast, she has that wonderful humor that I enjoy, she knows who I am , she’s married to a marvelous Japanese buy who doesn’t mind me hugging and kissing him as my son in law and she has this wonderful humor that keeps me in stitches when I visit her you know.

MG I’m here to celebrate my life as I want to be, as a free spirit. An older man, I’m not old, I’m just a little older.

natural sound from Maurice’s 75th b’day party as bed for next section:

DG: Each Thursday night in Tucson, a group of men gather to watch Queer as Folk, drink and smoke cigarettes. Maurice says that he’s been adopted by this gang of younger men. I spoke with some of them at his 75th birthday party...

DG: (laughter) So how old are you?

Vincent: 38

DG: How old are you, Ray?

Ray: 41

DG: So umm, you’re roughly half the age of Maurice.

Vincent: and he is my hero, my idol and the only man I look up to in this whole world.

Maurice: aww sweetheart. (kiss)

Vincent: the only one. (laughter)

DG: Now, Maurice, in your interview, we talked about the best way for an older man to hit on a younger man is to not hit on a younger man...to allow him to hit on you, SO, Ray, has Maurice ever hit on you?

Ray: Well (laughter) DG: the truth comes out. Ray: No, I mean he hasn't been a direct hit. He's invited me over to his place to see his studio. It hasn't been any kind of a hit or anything. I don't get that vibe from Maurice at all. I think he's very content with himself. A lot of people that hit on you you think they're really needy – kind of insecure. Maurice is very secure with himself ... and it seems like he really values friendship and getting to know people.

Maurice: and I think hitting on younger men – it sort of destroys whatever kind of trust they have in you as an older man. So I've not hit on any of these younger men. I'm content with the guy I've got. I don't have to hit on anybody. I can look at them and enjoy their youth, their vitality. I could just eat of that energy but I won't go near that part of the relationship to where, Oh God here he comes and he's going to be all over me. If I'm touching him, then it's a friendly touch. It's a beautiful touch. And it's not a lustful thing. Although at times...

Ray: Not that I would mind. Maurice is a very handsome man. He's amazing. I mean gosh, he's hot.

DG So how old are you, Fenton? I'm 48.

DG: So he's got how many years on you? He has 27 years on you. Does Maurice inspire you as an older man?

Fenton Johnson: Umm, sure. Maurice is inspirational. Because he is engaged, he has suffered surely as much the vicissitudes of life as anyone and has the energy of someone who is in his 20s. the commitment to life and happiness. Maurice is such a happy person. It's a pleasure to be around him. I am a dour person. (laughter)

DG: Dour at 48!

FJ: So it's good for me...maybe that's what happens. You get dour in midlife and then if you have strength of character you become like Maurice. And here comes the chocolate penis shaped cake...

(singing) happy birthday to you... applause fade out

Music

Maurice Grossman celebrating his 75th birthday in Tucson, Arizona.

Music

Recently, I ran into Maurice at one of the local gay bars here in Tucson. It was a Saturday night. The place was buzzing and filling to capacity with men on the prowl. Maurice was sitting out back on a bar stool surrounded by a group of lively men half his age. His joy was irrepressible and so I cozied up next to him and sipped my drink while looking around at the swarms of young men. Our friend Fenton was there too. He surveyed the room and then looked to us, pursed his lips, and held up 3 fingers. I shot him a quizzical look. "I'm the third oldest man in the bar," Fenton said...I was pretty sure I wasn't number 2 in the chronological line up, but I knew for sure that Maurice was #1 and yet his joy was not diminished in the least. He said something to me as we sat there – it was one of those statements that sort of goes into my head and waits to be released at the moment of maximum impact – which I guess would be right now. He was gleefully admiring the posse of young men surrounding him and said to me with a 60 watt smile, "these are the men that are going to be with me when I die."

In that moment, I realized that Maurice's perspective at 75 was vastly different from mine at 38. I mean, I'm looking around the bar to see whom I might like to have a few sweet kisses with and he's looking at who's going to be holding his hand while he's taking his last breaths.

Music

Fenton left, unable to hide his disappointment with being the third oldest man in the bar. I walked out realizing that at my age, I can no longer waltz into a bar and be noticed for being young – that I have to really work at being charming and funny to be noticed. So rather than spend the evening putting out the effort to make contact in a smoky bar, I opted for a good night's sleep. Alone. But I wouldn't say it was a joyous decision for me. Maurice walked arm in arm with me down the street on the way to our cars. There was no resignation in his face. He seemed to have completely made peace with the possibility that perhaps in that bar full of young men, there was no one for him to go home with. Is this the reality that I'm going to inherit I wondered? Not wanting to hear the answer, I didn't ask... Maurice, I think, has accepted the aging process in a way that Fenton and I haven't. He hugged me goodbye and I watched as he contentedly ambled up the dark street...a man in love with life itself.

Music

That's all for today's show.

ORR is produced in collaboration with KXCI in Tucson, Arizona. Senior editor for our show is Jesse Rose DeRooy. Our business manager is John Brennan, our marketing director is Sheila Gerzoff, and our production assistant is Sandy Mauck.

Our theme music is by Clark Suprynowicz and performed by the band "Oz." They're on the web at www.gnumusic.net

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This is David Gilmore - thanks for joining us.

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