

# Conference tackles problems of elderly lesbians, gay men

## Many cite sense of isolation

By Jim Dickey

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SAN FRANCISCO — When Vera Martin, a 70-year-old lesbian, was a young woman, there was no question of "coming out."

There was no out to come to.

"When we were young, many gays and lesbians ran the risk of being sent to mental institutions because they were considered sick, and their parents were going to 'fix' it for them," said

Martin, who lives in Pittsburg, Calif., in the East Bay area.

Martin's and other stories of older gays were recounted Sunday in San Francisco at a conference on "Meeting the Needs of Lesbian and Gay Elders."

The event was sponsored by the Task Force on Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues of the American Society on Aging. It was part of the society's 40th annual meeting Saturday through Tues-

day, expected to draw 5,000 professionals on aging to San Francisco.

Martin, who is national coordinator of Old Lesbians Organized for Change, was on a conference panel on elder gays who are members of ethnic and racial minorities. Her mother was black and her father was Jewish.

Martin said the conference was dealing with "people who took a great deal of punishment. ... I was one of them. I did all the stuff I was told I had to do. I got married. I had two children."

When she divorced and tried to come out, she was threatened with having her children taken away. "I ran out of the closet and hastily ran right back in," she said.

Older lesbians and gay men are among the most invisible members of U.S. society, said Marcia Freedman, marketing director of the American Society on Aging and liaison to the lesbian and gay task force. Researchers estimate that 1 million to 3 million elderly people in the United States are gay.

"Their health care and social service needs are often overlooked both by providers of services to the aged as well as by the gay and elder communities," Freedman said. "Policies based on heterosexual norms may exclude them from services by failing to recognize their existence and their relationships."

One issue the conference is exploring is gay elders' isolation from both the mainstream culture and the larger gay community.

"One of the needs is for young-

er gay people ... to know they can survive, and we are definitely survivors," one participant said. "They need to sit down and talk to us and find out how we survived. But generally, older and younger gays don't talk to each other, and they disapprove of each other on some level."

Lora Connolly, Sacramento gerontologist and co-chairwoman of the task force, said medical care providers, social workers and others who work with elderly people generally "just aren't aware of the fact that older gays and lesbians exist."