

## Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

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### **Gay & Grey: "It Gets Bitter"?**

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It's raining on this lazy day. I'm making a big pot of spaghetti sauce, called "gravy" by Italian friends. As I chop and stir, I'm thinking about the spate of recent deaths of cherished lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement leaders, and I'm reflecting on being grey and gay myself. Should I expect that "It Gets Bitter"?

If you're looking for money today, the focus of foundation grants is teenage bullying. If you tell people that you're focused on our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth, it's much easier to get money than if you say you're focused on the needs of our community's seniors. I think a lot about both, but because of what I see in the mirror, in the faces of most of my friends, and in the obits, questions are arising on what my life will be like when I'm completely invisible to the gay community.

A few years ago, when Ray was in the hospital recovery room, an elderly nun walked into his curtained area and asked if she could pray with him. Ray had the strength and courage to say no. But what happens when we're older and feeling less confident? Will we be able to say no to the hospital-roaming young Catholic priest from Nigeria whose ordination only fueled his homophobia? Who will be there to stand at our bedside and help us celebrate the joy and goodness of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender lives?

When I had my "midlife crisis" nearly 20 years ago, I didn't decide to learn Italian or how to play the flute. Instead I told Ray that I wanted to focus on transgender issues and hospice work. I've achieved my first goal of becoming culturally competent and totally committed as a gay ally to cross-dressers, transsexuals, and others whose gender expression or identity are outside the norm. But I haven't done a thing about the issue of aging, except to participate in a focus group on senior housing for gay males, to mentor a friend who wanted to work with older gay people, and to age myself.

Wouldn't it be great to have the skills and knowledge required to be a gay or transgender homophobia exorcist who was called in, like a ghost buster, to rid the room of dark specters and to guide a member of our community into whatever lies beyond, if anything? As a "buddy" to people with AIDS back in the early 1980s, I was trained on how to listen, maintain confidentiality, not proselytize a religious belief, and do what was needed to make life easy and fun for the dying person. A gay or transgender exorcist would need those skills, but also be well-versed in our history, and have worked through their own internalized homophobia and heterosexism. With those skills and temperament, we could be excellent allies of our sisters and brothers in need.

I would cherish the opportunity to affirm the life of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person so that he or she could die feeling great about his or her journey. I would welcome the chance to stand between them and a condescending family member, or representative of a disapproving church.

When we gay and transgender people face death, we should be able to do so without regrets, and with the full conviction that we were "a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars", and that we had meaningful lives.

Wouldn't it be fun to be able to talk with another lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person about our first same-sex kiss, our coming out experiences, of being excited by the sights and sounds of our first gay pride parade, or of how we felt when we walked into our first gay bar. Transgender people might love recalling with another person the joy of finally accepting their gender identity, or the first time they cross-dressed. With a kindred soul bedside, they could recall the "birth day" of their transition surgery and know that their courage was fully appreciated.

If we knew that we had an army of angels to guide us out of a life that was often compromised out of fear, wouldn't it be easier to think about our final days? What if there was an "It Gets Better" YouTube campaign aimed at the elderly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people who are feeling lost and ignored in the current campaign to stop bullying in schools? Isn't there bullying in senior centers, retirement communities, nursing homes, hospitals, and funeral homes, too?

Is there interest in funding efforts to make the final years, months, and days of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender elders more joyful, comfortable, and less bitter? If not, there should be.

These are the thoughts that simmer today along with the spaghetti sauce, as it rains gently outside.