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Older Gay Men and Lesbians Get a Drop-In Center of Their Own

By [DAVID W. DUNLAP](#)



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Clyde J. Robertson, 82, after dinner in the SAGE Center at Seventh Avenue and 27th Street.

Day was ending. The small businesses scattered through the borderland between the garment district and Chelsea were turning out their lights. But the 15th floor of 305 Seventh Avenue, at 27th Street, was ablaze. Inside, a \$2 meal of grilled chicken, brown rice and vegetables was being served to a few dozen diners ranging from their 60s to their 80s.

Clyde J. Robertson, 82, was recalling one of the gladdest memories of his youth: surviving the crawl under live machine-gun fire during basic training, on his way to Korea. “I was very proud of myself,” he said, “because I was considered a sissy back home.”

BUILDING BLOCKS

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Mr. Robertson was dining at the [SAGE Center](#), run by the nonprofit group [SAGE](#) (Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders), which believes this drop-in center to be the first of its kind in the nation. It is to open officially on Thursday, but dinners were served throughout February, Mondays through Fridays, as a preparatory exercise.

It’s not that there aren’t plenty of senior centers already. And it’s not that there isn’t a lesbian and gay community center. (You can almost see it, 14 blocks south, from the windows of the SAGE Center.)

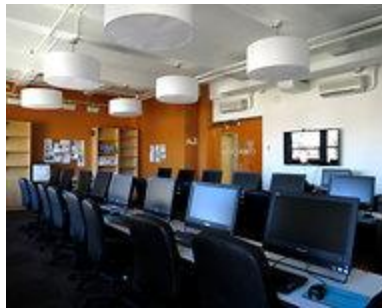


The New York Times Michael Adams

But for SAGE’s clients, about 2,000 a month in New York, it can be “extremely hard to find a space that feels like home,” said Michael Adams, the executive director of SAGE. In existing senior centers, they may feel stigmatized, however subtly. At the [Center](#), on 13th Street, where SAGE continues to offer programs, they may sometimes feel out of place among so many younger women and men. “It’s not about creating a parallel universe,” Mr. Adams said, “but everyone needs a home.”

Because it’s tougher every day to conduct personal business without knowledge of and access to the Internet and e-mail, the center on Seventh Avenue has a computer training room with 15 terminals.

An audio induction loop has been built into the main hall, where meals are served, to assist those with hearing aids. The center also has a medical examination room where a nurse will be on duty. Mr. Adams said nearly one-fifth of SAGE's clients are living with H.I.V. or AIDS, a situation that could not have been imagined 20 years ago. There is concern about the interaction of H.I.V. medications with the battery of drugs that older people take.



David W. Dunlap/The New York Times The computer training room.

To justify the capital expense of an induction loop and a special ventilating system for the exam room — and to ensure that the SAGE Center would stay rooted — the organization bought the space. That was possible at 305 Seventh Avenue, where SAGE already has its headquarters, because it is a commercial condominium. The 15th floor, with 8,200 square feet, cost \$2.7 million, Mr. Adams said. The renovation cost \$1.8 million. Financing came principally from [New York City](#), the [Calamus Foundation](#) and the [Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation](#). The architect was Eric R. Cohen of [Ethelind Coblin Architect](#).

Each weeknight, as many as 130 meals can be served. Those over 60 are asked to pay \$2. Those under 60 are charged \$4. It costs SAGE as much as \$4.50 to put each meal on the table, said Catherine Thurston, the senior director for programs, including \$3.45 to the caterer, [Healthy Heart Food Service](#). The city's Department for the Aging reimburses SAGE \$3.50 a meal.

When it came time to decide which daily meal would be served at the center, SAGE clients voted for dinner. Many are busy during the day and alone at night. Mr. Robertson, formerly the head cashier at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, offers a cat-sitting service under the name l'Ami des Chats. He said he patronizes a neighborhood senior center on Washington Square North, where he can have lunch and where he learned how to send e-mail. "But we have to be out by 5," he said. The SAGE Center is open from 1 to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday.

A 61-year-old diner from Flatbush, Brooklyn, who asked not to be identified, said the center had already achieved its goal, even before opening. "People come here," he said, "and know they can be themselves more fully and more quickly."