Own Your Future

An annual HIV and aging conference highlights the importance of finding support.

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By Jennifer Morton, Managing Editor

The 4th Annual Aging Positively Conference was held at The Josyln Senior Center in Palm Desert, California on Wednesday, September 18, to coincide with National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly half of all Americans living with HIV are over 50, and it's estimated that figure will be 70% by 2030. The conference focused on a variety of topics related to aging and featured a keynote address from Greg Louganis, one of the world's all-time greatest divers. "I've been aging since the day I was born," he joked before delivering a heartwarming speech about his journey and living with HIV for more than 30 years.

The Aging Positively conference was presented by a veritable who's who of HIV/AIDS services in the Coachella Valley: Desert Oasis Healthcare, Desert AIDS Project, Eisenhower Health, The DOCK, The Center, Let's Kick ASS, Gay Desert Guide, HIV+ Aging Research Project, JFS Desert, Desert Care Network, The Josyln Center, Borrego Health, PromoHomo.TV and Desert Arc. Many of these local community groups had set up tables to share information about their own services and other HIV and aging resources in the area.

Brad FuhrJennifer Morton

Hosted by Brad Fuhr of the Desert Gay Guide, the conference kicked off with a presentation by Richard Bass and Brian de Vries, PhD, titled “Own Your Future: Essential Conversations You Must Have Now.” Richard is the founder of Planning Ahead for LGBTQ Seniors (PALS) and the cochair of the social committee for the Palm Springs chapter of Let’s Kick ASS; Brian is professor emeritus of gerontology at San Francisco State University.

Richard Bass and Brian de Vries, PhDJennifer Morton

The pair discussed the importance of having heart-to-heart conversations with your family and friends about your fears and wishes regarding aging. They emphasized the value of having discussions about planning for long-term care and making end-of-life decisions as well as designating someone you trust as your financial and medical power of attorney. (It doesn't have to be the same person.) While it can sometimes be difficult to have these types of talks, doing so will help ensure your wishes are honored and make things easier for those left behind.

The topic of the second presentation was sexual isolation and loneliness, and it was co-presented by Jill Hingston, PhD, clinical internship director at the Scott Hines Mental Health Clinic, and Clay Sterzik, a marriage and family therapy registered intern who runs a long-term survivors' therapy group for gay men at The Center. Sterzik explained that each member of the closed group must commit to attending 12 weekly sessions. Topics addressed each week include building social skills, surviving grief and loss, managing chronic pain, advocating for your medical care, overcoming isolation and growing older with HIV. Participants are invited to share their stories and are expected to listen to others. The group is intended to provide a safe space for support, and it's an

example of the types of services offered to long-term survivors in the region.

Jill Hingston, PhD and Clay SterzikJennifer Morton

After a short break for lunch, Brian Bilhartz of the Bilhartz Desert Insurance Agency gave a presentation about Medicare and prescription drug coverage. He covered the ABCs of Medicare Part A, B, C and D and even discussed the dreaded coverage gap known as the doughnut hole. He told the audience that it's important to do your homework and/or talk to someone to assess your options before choosing your plan. He also stressed the importance of taking into account your lifestyle and your health care priorities when selecting a plan. Medicare options can be confusing, and with all the talk about Medicare for All, it's hard to know where things are headed. Naturally, conference goers had plenty of questions for Brian! He eventually ran out of time, but the good news is that his agency helps residents of the Coachella Valley make educated decisions regarding

their Medicare coverage at no cost! (Check with your local AIDS service organization to find a similar service in your area.)

Brian BilhartzJennifer Morton

Finally, five-time Olympic medalist Greg Louganis took the stage and shared his journey of winning gold and living with HIV since 1988. Like other long-term survivors, Greg has his good days and his not-so good days, and he continues to struggle with issues such as depression and isolation. He shared a letter he had written to his younger self explaining that although life would be a struggle, it would indeed get better. He urged those in the audience to reach out to others who are struggling and reminded them that it’s OK to reach out to others when they are struggling because our vulnerability can be a gift to others.

Greg LouganisJennifer Morton

The conference reminded me of the importance of community and helping one another. We are all aging every day. Don’t be afraid to have tough conversations about what lies ahead or put off planning for your future (and your death). Throughout our lives, it’s important to offer support when you can, and ask for support when you need it. So reach out and find your community and take care of one another. It’s never too soon to own your future.

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