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# B O S T O N S P I R I T

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## Maura Healey

Gubernatorial front-runner  
on key LGBTQ issues

## Prides Across New England

Coming back out to celebrate

## Disney's Magic

Boston Gay Men's Chorus's  
creative collaboration

## Voices that Matter

SpeakOUT Boston turns 50

## Lesbian Nightlife

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Grace Cottage Hospital

## Progressively Rural

### HEALTH CARE AND ASSISTED LIVING IN SOUTHERN VERMONT

Nearly two decades ago in Townshend, Vermont, the home and property of a locally beloved, longtime gay couple was donated to a hospital and assisted living facility, in exchange for lifelong care. This gift also set the stage for a chain of more-recent events that are turning a southern corner of the Green Mountain State into an unexpected leader in inclusive health care for all LGBTQ people—and especially LGBTQ elders—in rural settings.

Now the legacy of that couple is being formally recognized. At a June dedication service, a memorial plaque honoring Warren Kronemeyer and Leon Ingall, illuminated by a rainbow-hued eternal flame, will be unveiled inside their former home, a charming and historical brick building that now serves as offices for Valley Cares, a nonprofit providing affordable housing to area elders. A second plaque will go up down the street at Grace Cottage Hospital, where Kronemeyer spent his final days after arranging for the transfer of the property.

Kronemeyer and Ingall, together for more than 60 years after meeting in the military, became well-loved figures when they moved from New York to Southern Vermont in 1980. Community leaders, they owned a popular antique store in Townshend, a country village just a stone's throw from Brattleboro. While everyone knew them as a faithful and loving couple, they were nonetheless “old school gays” who still needed a little arm-twisting over legal protections to finally get a civil union, according to Leon’s cousin, Andy Ingall. Kronemeyer’s 2007 obituary somewhat obliquely referred to his predeceased husband as his “friend since 1944.”

The half-spoken nature of their relationship was common and understandable given the times (Leon was dishonorably discharged from the military for homosexuality.) A gay man himself, as well as a curator and artist, Andy Ingall understands the importance of celebrating his cousins’ love and fascinating lives—Leon was a Jewish refugee who fled Bolshevik Russia;

“The smallest hospital in the state of Vermont has notched a big national achievement as ‘LGBTQ+ Equality Top Performer.’”

Warren an OSS spy. With grant funding, he accumulated a collection of ancestral papers, photographs and other materials to document on Instagram and eventually turn into a series of pop-up exhibitions. “I want this story of Warren and Leon to inspire the telling of other stories,” he says. “Stories of other queer refugees and immigrants who have so many gifts to bring to the US.”

Back at Valley Cares and Grace Cottage Hospital, folks have been working hard to address the isolation that persists for many LGBTQ people in rural America, particularly seniors. It’s crucial, though, that the work start at the grassroots level, and at local facilities like Valley Cares. “We had a new admission, a gay woman, move in. She recognized being alone, and basically said, ‘Are there any others like me?’” recalls JoAnne Blanchard, executive director of Valley Cares. “We didn’t have

any other residents like her, and we had to figure out how to meet that need for her.”

“That happened shortly before the call came.”

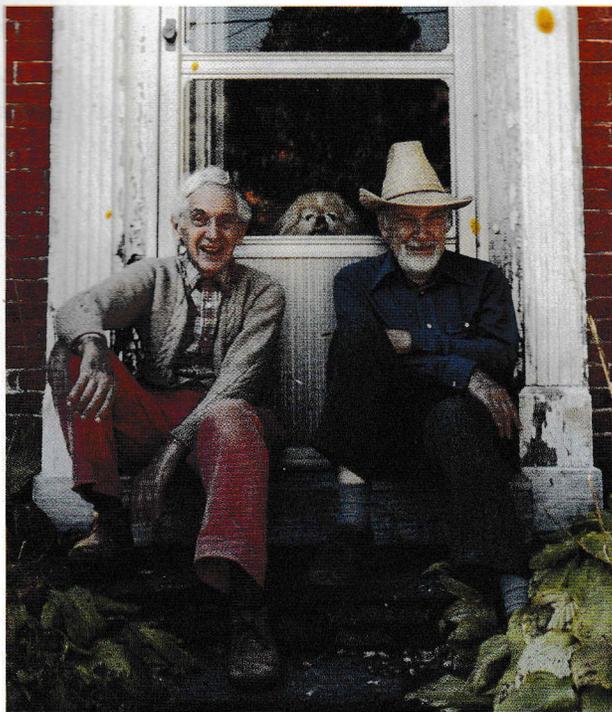
The call Blanchard refers to came from the team at Grace Cottage. The hospital, which actually gave birth to Valley Cares (a now-separate, unaffiliated entity) in 2002, was looking to build up members and collaborative partners for a new equity team dedicated to shoring up LGBTQ-focused services: affirming primary care, gender-affirming hormone therapy, counseling, and inclusivity-minded training for staff, to name a few points.

That was in 2019. Only a few years later, the smallest hospital in the state of Vermont has notched a big national achievement: In March, Grace Cottage Hospital was named an “LGBTQ+ Equality Top Performer” on the Human Rights

Campaign's annual Health Equity Index, a report card for facilities across the country.

It's a major point of pride for folks like Dr. George Terwilliger, chief medical officer at Grace Cottage Hospital. He arrived to the facility about three years ago with plans already percolating to establish an equity team, inspired by the disparities he's seen firsthand in hospitals as well as his experiences with his transgender son. "Things have gotten a lot better everywhere over the last decade, but we've got a long way to go," says Terwilliger. His team certainly isn't resting on their laurels and continues to share resources and best practices with Valley Cares as that neighboring facility gets its staff up to speed on serving LGBTQ+ elders.

That kind of work is deeply meaningful to those who are starting to think about where they'll live and receive their health care in their senior years. Scott Heller and Dave King share a bit in common with the story of Kronemeyer and Ingall. They've been together a long time (30-plus years), they have established a



Warren Kronemeyer and Leon Ingall

successful business (Frog Meadow, a bed & breakfast for men in the town of Newfane), and they're civically engaged and plugged into a rich network of connections. As the community representatives on Grace Cottage Hospital's equity team, they've been

instrumental in getting (and keeping) the ball moving around LGBTQ-inclusive efforts.

There's a good reason for that. They're in their mid-sixties and, like many gay men without children, planning for the future. One thing they're not planning to do, though, is go back in the closet. As members of the equity team, they want to make sure nobody else feels like they have to.

"Somebody asked us, 'Why are you so interested in this?'" says King, who's been a patient at Grace Cottage Hospital since his teens. "We say, 'Well, we're going to end up in Valley Cares one of these days, so we'd like you to be ready for us.'"

"So decide which floor is the gay floor," adds Heller, "and break out the show tunes." [x]

[gracecottage.org](http://gracecottage.org), [valleycares.org](http://valleycares.org); [Instagram.com/warle\\_on\\_lexington](https://www.instagram.com/warle_on_lexington) (Ingall and Kronemeyer archive); [frogmeadow.com](http://frogmeadow.com)

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