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Two Dania Beach women open up about their 70-year relationship

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Yes, couples in their 90s still argue occasionally.

This is how it went recently for Caroline Leto and Venera Magazzu as they sipped lemonade on their couch in Dania Beach:

"We're not going to have a party," said Magazzu, 97, insisting they are too old for such things.

"Oh yes we are," responded Leto, 96, who noted the two can still polka. "This is a big one."

Indeed. A party celebrating 70 years together is a big deal for any pair. But a celebration of this couple's love takes on special meaning, considering they had to keep silent about it for decades.

"You just couldn't tell everyone we were lovers," said Leto. "You tell people we're friends, and some thought we were sisters."

Leto and Magazzu downplay their pioneering role in the gay and lesbian community. But many of their friends and relatives talk it up anyway, marveling at how their love was able to transcend a lifetime's worth of obstacles.

To mark their Aug. 17 milestone, members of Etz Chaim, a gay and lesbian congregation in Wilton Manors, are planning a party. They hope Leto and Magazzu will attend and show everyone how to do the polka.

"Honestly, I think they are more in love with each other than they were back then," said longtime close friend and congregation member Gayle Scott. "Look at straight couples. You are lucky if you are married after seven years. That is an amazing love story."

In 1939 Leto and Magazzu met at a party in New York. Caroline thought Venera was stylish. Venera thought Caroline was funny.

After a courtship of about a year, Magazzu, a teacher, and Leto, a telegraph operator, moved into a tiny house in New York. They spent most of their lives there, with only close family members and closer friends knowing about their relationship.

Magazzu, a former Army medic, said she often fought the urge to tell others but feared what "outsiders" would think. She believes society back then was more receptive to two women living together than two men -- or at least less inquisitive.

"I think most people had their suspicions, but they didn't really make a big deal about it because it was just two women," she said. "They didn't ask, and we just didn't talk about it."

Leto's niece, Patricia Dillion, said she grew up believing the two were sisters and referred to them as aunts. One day, at a family party, an apparently tipsy Leto let Dillion in on a secret.

"She mentioned they got married," said Dillion. "I was so happy, but then I got sad thinking that all that time they really couldn't be upfront about it."

In 1996 the couple registered as domestic partners in New York City.

Years later they moved to Florida, where they got more active in the gay and lesbian community, attending rallies and galas and recounting their story. They lead the life of any Florida retiree couple, going on cruises, playing poker on Tuesday nights with friends. At one point, they adopted a pet monkey named Chi-Chi.

In 2006, as age slowed them down a bit, Magazzu put their story in a self-published book called *An Unadulterated Story: Young and Gay at 90*.

During a reporter's recent visit, the two quibbled over where they had last seen a copy. Magazzu insisted it was in a bedroom. Leto said she saw it in the trunk of their car.

"OK, so if you know where everything is, then you look for it," Magazzu huffed as she turned her head toward the kitchen.

Leto smiled. "Cute, isn't she?"

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