

# The Forgotten History of the Radical ‘Elders of the Tribe’

The Gray Panthers staged rowdy protests against ageism and found common cause with young activists on everything from health care to racial justice. What can they teach us today?

**By Susan J. Douglas**

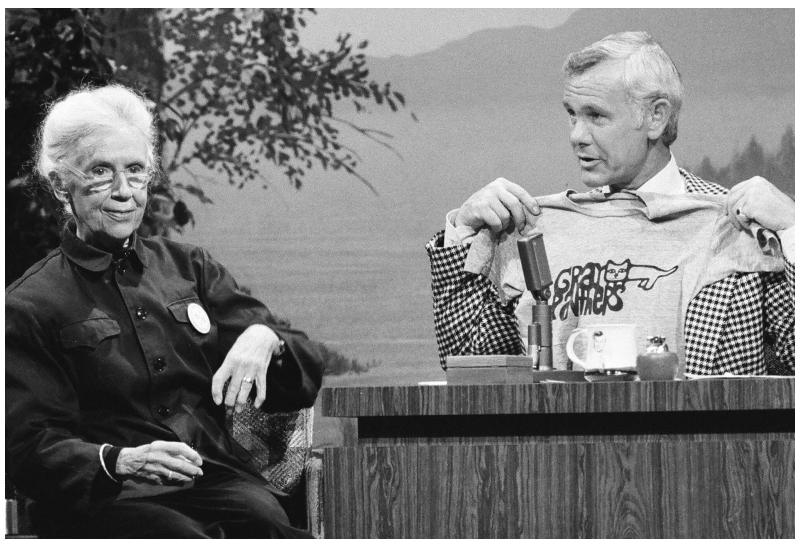
Dr. Douglas is the author of “In Our Prime: How Older Women Are Reinventing the Road Ahead.”

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By the mid-1970s, she was a national celebrity. She had speaking engagements all over the country; she traveled 100,000 miles annually, giving at least 200 talks a year. She was all over the TV: “The Phil Donahue Show,” the “Today” show and “The Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson, multiple times. Media monikers for her included “ball of fire,” “dynamo” and the now-problematic “feisty.” In 1978, the World Almanac named her one of the 25 most influential women in the United States. Shortly before she died in 1995, ABC News profiled her as its “Person of the Week.”

She was Maggie Kuhn, the woman who, 50 years ago, founded the Gray Panthers, a movement to encourage activism — sometimes radical activism — among the country’s older people. Today, both Kuhn and her movement have been all but forgotten. But their mission is worth remembering, commemorating and perhaps even resurrecting, especially in the present moment.

Then, as now, was a time of intense activism. Inspired by demonstrations on behalf of racial and gender equality, and against the Vietnam War, Kuhn insisted it was time that the issues facing older people be included in any social reform agenda. Her passion was to shatter every stereotype she could about older people and, as a lifelong feminist, especially older women.



Kuhn with Johnny Carson on “The Tonight Show” in 1977. Fred Sabine/NBCUniversal, via Getty Images

Infuriated by being forced out of her job at 65 (and even more irked that her parting gift was a sewing machine), and outraged by what gerontologists in the 1970s championed as “disengagement theory” — the notion that it was normal and natural for older people to simply withdraw from society — she took on what was then, and still is, one of the most socially acceptable biases in our country: ageism.

Kuhn was not one to “disengage,” or as she put it, keep “out of the way, playing bingo and shuffleboard.” She was a galvanizing figure, and by the late 1970s, the Gray Panthers had 100,000 members in more than 30 states.

Their tactics combined often-rowdy public protests, political lobbying and grass-roots organizing. Dressed in Santa suits, they picketed a department store for its mandatory retirement policies the day before Christmas, holding signs charging that Santa was too old to work there. Taking on the American Medical Association’s neglect of older Americans’ health issues, they dressed as doctors and nurses and made a “house call” to its convention to issue a diagnosis that it lacked a heart.

Their greatest achievement was getting Congress, in 1986, to ban mandatory retirement ages for most jobs.

But the Gray Panthers also won greater accessibility in mass transportation, fought proposed cuts to Social Security and Medicare, exposed abuses in nursing homes and, ahead of their time, pressed for government-subsidized universal health care.

Kuhn also railed against the rampant negative stereotypes about older people in the media, charging, in testimony before Congress, that “old people are depicted as dependent, powerless, wrinkled babies.” So the Panthers monitored how older people were portrayed on television — if they appeared at all — and then lambasted network executives for demeaning caricatures, and got some eliminated.

But crucial to the Panthers’ progressive agenda were intergenerational alliances to promote issues that remain of pressing concern today: affordable housing, better access to health care, racial equality in employment, economic justice and environmental protection. Their motto was “age and youth in action.” Kuhn was also outspoken about the ravages of racism and sexism.

“We’re the elders of the tribe,” she said. “We are concerned about the tribe surviving.” Older Americans, she said, “are most free to transcend special interests and seek public interests.” She shared her home in Philadelphia with “panther cubs,” youthful activists, and argued against age-segregated housing that isolated older people from the young. She was especially perturbed by how the generations were pitted against each other in the media, with older people cast as getting benefits they didn’t deserve.

So why have she and the Panthers been mostly forgotten? In part, it’s because Kuhn was such a charismatic leader that once she died, the organization began to drift. In the decades since, there’s been a shift away from activism on the part of older people and toward more institutionalized forms of political power; these, in turn, have certainly seen some success. Starting in the 1980s, the American Association of Retired Persons expanded and built up its lobbying activities. Now called simply AARP, it focuses almost exclusively on issues affecting older people, like ageism and preserving their safety net. Its magazine combats stereotypes but emphasizes self-actualization, not activism, a safer and often more comfortable message. It does not seek to unite old and young in the name of broader social justice efforts.

Today we’re seeing the limitations of that narrower agenda.

On the one hand, many older people, including older women, are more visible and powerful than ever before. “Disengaged” is the last word you would use about Nancy Pelosi, Maxine Waters or Elizabeth Warren, not to mention Joe Biden.

On the other hand, the fate of nursing home residents in the coronavirus pandemic — a true debacle — has revealed the persistence of ageism. We’ve seen narratives about the pandemic pit old and young against each other, with the old cast as “expendable” and the young as “irresponsible.”

At the same time, the Trump administration’s cruel, destructive and divisive policies continue to expose great inequities in our country across multiple lines — race, gender, class and age. Kuhn’s activist agenda, both age and youth in action, is more relevant, and more necessary, than ever.

Kuhn and the Gray Panthers have been so forgotten that it’s almost difficult to recall a time when advocacy groups for older people pursued a broader vision of a just society. But the need for intergenerational alliances not just to save Social Security, but also to achieve health care for all, to battle climate change, to combat race- and gender-based violence, to defy ageism and to push for a more equitable and humane economy is urgent. Old people have been organized radicals before; they can be so again.

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