

## **April 16, 2012 – Message to Gray Panthers by Joan Davis**

Thank you for coming this evening. Thank you for all the warmth that is coming my way--especially Jack Kupferman, Antoinette Emers and the whole team who worked so hard to prepare this event. By honoring me with the first "Ageless Warrior Award," you give me the opportunity to show my gratitude for the good things that are in my life and the people who made them possible.

### **How did I come to be interested in social justice?**

Growing up during the Depression, my family knew hard times. Though my father lost his farm, my parents also cared about the suffering of other people. And they knew the value of unions. I'm proud that my family did not look down on other people who spoke a different language or had a different skin color. I grew up with an awareness of the pain caused by the greed and selfishness of some people in society--and the huge brutality of the Nazis in World War II.

My interest in justice for all people was encouraged in the late 1950's, when I began attending classes to study Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the poet and critic Eli Siegel.

Here are two principles of Aesthetic Realism, stated by Eli Siegel, which explain the best thing in humanity and what interferes:

1. The deepest desire of every person is to like the world on an honest or accurate basis.
2. The greatest danger or temptation of people is to have contempt for the world and what is in it, as a means of building oneself up.

My study of Aesthetic Realism strengthened my desire to like the world honestly, to respect and be fair to people. And the explanation of contempt enables people to see the cause of every form of injustice and strengthens our ability to fight against them.

I'm happy now to tell you how I became a Gray Panther.

My life as a Gray Panther began on 59th Street and Columbus Circle, long before I retired. During the 1960's, I participated in a lot of demonstrations against the Vietnam War. While marching on one of these demonstrations, I stopped at that corner to sign a petition and had a lively conversation with the woman holding a clipboard. I had never heard of the Gray Panthers before

and I appreciated her logic and energy. I said to myself, "When I retire, I would like to be as active as she is."

Later, when I joined the Gray Panthers in 1994, I got to work with that woman. Her name was Edna Graig. And, she was as energetic as ever. Indeed, all the members of the Gray Panthers were lively proof that "There is life after retirement."

We held meetings; handed out fliers; made signs; and asked "inciteful" questions at rallies and town meetings. It is quite wonderful to challenge a legislator and let him or her know that something better is needed and possible. And that nothing less will be accepted.

When Sudie George could no longer prepare the Newsletter, Leonore Fine, Bea Haskell and I put together an expanded bi-monthly Newsletter. Since I owned a typewriter, I was the editor.

Putting out a newsletter was not a new experience for me. I had done this at the three adult facilities where I had worked. At two of these places, I was in charge of the resident newspaper. They were the "reporters," and I did everything else.

Our Gray Panthers' Newsletter was **not** a high-tech operation. When I wanted to vary the type, I xeroxed words from newspapers and magazines to insert in the appropriate place. It was literally "cut and paste." Leonore Fine had style. Bea could make any paragraph shorter and more coherent. I called her "Scissors Haskell." With some help from Larry Wood, on the staff at Goddard Riverside Neighborhood Houses, we put out a mighty fine paper. And we had a good time doing it.

Let us "fast forward" a couple of years. As members got older, fewer people came to meetings and membership was dwindling. When a change of administration took place at the "Not-for-Profit" where the Gray Panthers had our office, rent became a problem.

We found a smaller office and moved. However, technology was advancing; and we were not. On the Agenda at every Board Meeting was the topic, "What can we do to get new members?" This usually turned into a very heated argument about "It's time we faced facts and folded."

Edna Graig and a few others would not allow this to happen. Four of us "manned" our small office. One afternoon each week, we came: paid the bills; answered the phone messages and the mail. By then, Lillian Sarno's Macular

Degeneration had advanced. We would read her the letters. And she would dictate the responses which Martha Frankel or I would type. We were a good team.

While we were un-successful at enticing new members, we still had our Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) status at the United Nations. And so, with some members from the New Jersey Gray Panthers, we continued to cover events at the United Nations.

Then, along came Judy Lear. To say the least, Judy Lear has "organizational skills." The Gray Panthers have survived a transition. At the present time, the range in age of our NY Gray Panthers Board Members is from 25 – 81. We are now living up to our motto: Age and Youth in Action. And, our membership is increasing.

And, at the United Nations, we also have an increased number of members. Because of Judy Lear's networking ability, we have Shiuho Lin, who works with the Immigration Working Group and keeps the rest of us up-to-date on all the other meetings and conferences at the United Nations.

Most activists tend to be argumentative. This can be a good thing. However, the better the activist, the more we learn from the arguments that we lose. But, the ability to learn from lost arguments enables one to be a better activist. What kind of activist am I? I try.

Another asset for an activist is stamina. It is a wonderful thing that some people can make a little energy go a long way.

To be an activist, you have to love "Justice" and use your imagination on behalf of other people. Doing this is a warmth that brings people together. Friendships grow where people work together. I have great respect for people who struggle and don't give up.

As activists, we would do better by looking for new ways to express ourselves. And also in new places to do so. It would also help, if there were less rivalry and competition between people and organizations.

Most people who are fighting for social justice, only work on one issue. Me? I'm all over the place. Lillian Sarno said to me once, "Pick **one** topic; study and stick to that." Many people have the same criticism of the Occupy Wall Street movement. "They are all over the place."

Damn right they are! All the issues come under one basic problem: INJUSTICE! And the Occupy people have ignited a worldwide movement to examine injustice everywhere. This includes fighting against so many forms that contempt takes. For instance: bullying by children in playgrounds and by teenagers in schools; CEOs of corporations which produce unsafe or deadly products--including drones used in warfare, or genetically engineered foods which destroy other crops--not caring whether people live or die. And then there is the greed of corporate executives who devise financial schemes to manipulate and exploit people as they enrich themselves.

And as we've seen, contempt is the basis of the recently revealed workings of A.L.E.C. (which stands for the American Legislative Exchange Council). This conservative business and legislative group has secretly been working for thirty years to influence legislation that affects all of America. The good news is that this has finally come into the open, where we can fight it.

New ideas are an absolute necessity. We need to imagine a world in which people everywhere are valued equally, where there is not a battle between "us" and "them." I look forward to working with all of you in this fight for justice.

I am proud to be able to use what I have learned from Aesthetic Realism in my work as an activist. My imagination has flourished because of what I learned from Eli Siegel. I like the world more, and I feel strongly that life on our planet--is worth protecting. This is why I am a Gray Panther.

Aesthetic Realism is a new way of seeing the world, art and people everywhere. It is based on this principle, "All beauty is the making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." This study can help us find what we are looking for. Judy Lear, national convener of the Gray Panthers, has come to several events at the not-for-profit Aesthetic Realism Foundation. She said one time, "What I like is that Aesthetic Realism shows that opposites do **not** have to fight."

My hope for the future success of our efforts is in this great poem by Eli Siegel, and appears in his second volume of poetry, HAIL, AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT. It was written in 1968, when news came that Dr. Martin Luther King had been assassinated.

Something Else Should Die:  
A Poem with Rhymes  
By Eli Siegel

In April 1865  
Abraham Lincoln died.  
In April 1968  
Martin Luther King died.  
Their purpose was to have us say,  
    some day:  
Injustice died.

I hope this poem--and this occasion--inspires us all to work harder for that day to arrive. I am a Gray Panther because I believe Justice **is possible**. If we can envision a world where people see each other fairly, we will be able to find new ways to make it happen. If we care more for the world, we will take better care of it.

Thank you all again for coming. Thank you, Jack Kupferman and the whole team who worked so hard to put this event together. And I thank the late May Musicant for introducing me to Aesthetic Realism. Thank you all.