

# Who Was Maggie Kuhn, Co-Founder of the Elder Activist Group the Gray Panthers?

BY MARILYN LA JEUNESSE · AUGUST 2, 2019

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DAVID TURNLEY/GETTY IMAGES

You're never too old to make change.

Consider the case of Maggie Kuhn. At 65 years old, the petite, gray-haired woman took it upon herself to make history-altering moves after she was forced into retirement. Rather than passively accept the age discrimination she faced, Kuhn committed her retirement — and the remainder of her life — to fighting ageism in the United States.

In 1970, with the help of other older Americans forced out of the workplace because of their age, Kuhn co-founded the Gray Panthers, an organization dedicated to combatting age discrimination. A play on the Black Panthers, the name was originally a press-given nickname

meant to evoke the quick-witted, action-oriented nature of its members; it has since become a world-famous moniker. Kuhn, who was friendly with Black Panthers co-founder Bobby Seale, eventually adopted the name in 1972.

“The name ‘Gray Panthers’ conjures the power of older people to be themselves and to fight for their rights,” Jack Kupferman, president of Gray Panthers NYC, told Teen Vogue. “Not only is there a spunk to our efforts, but often positive change result[s].”

Along with the civil rights and Chicana movements of the 1960s and '70s, Kuhn's fight for social justice and liberation altered modern history for the better. Kuhn's legacy was so impactful, consumer advocate and political activist Ralph Nader once called Kuhn's retirement “the most significant retirement in modern American history.”

Prior to her death in 1995, Kuhn's group worked to enact nursing home reform, successfully lobbied to change Medicare regulations, and helped eliminate forced retirement provisions with an amendment to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967. During the group's formative years, they were heavily involved with protesting the Vietnam War and demonstrated alongside people of varying generations.

The Gray Panthers proudly identify as a militant — though nonviolent — group, forcing their way into the upper echelons of U.S. political power and demanding action. In their first full year of operation, the Gray Panthers stormed the White House and requested access to the presidential conference on aging. Kuhn often threatened to stage trolley-car strikes in Philadelphia and even called out President Gerald Ford when she disagreed with his “patronizing” remarks, according to AARP.

A lifelong activist, Kuhn's passion for equitability began long before her 65th birthday. Her advocacy and social activism seemed to develop during her years working as a teacher for the Young Women's Christian Association in the 1920s and '30s. At YWCA, Kuhn championed progressive ideals, specifically ones that advocated for the rights of working women.

During her time at the YWCA, Kuhn taught a particularly controversial class on human sexuality, which discussed sexual pleasure, birth control, and pregnancy, among many other controversial topics. During a time when feminism and female sexuality was highly stigmatized, Kuhn made it her mission to inform her students about these “taboo” issues.

Kuhn's interest in elder rights seemed to begin in earnest in 1961, after she attended a White House Conference on Aging, according to Kupferman. Throughout her work with the United Presbyterian Church, where she spent 25 years, Kuhn visited numerous nursing homes and became invested in changing the way people saw elders, Kupferman notes. Rather than treating seniors like they were invisible, Kuhn wanted the world to see older generations as a vital part of society.

"The rights and concerns of older people have always been invisible and never taken seriously," Kupferman explained. "Kuhn was one of those iconic activists that said 'enough' and [wanted people] to understand that older people are a part of the world, and they must contribute to the positive progress of humanity."

For Kuhn, aging was not a sign of weakness or vulnerability, but a victory meant to be celebrated. A physically frail woman, Kuhn wasn't interested in complaining about her physical ailments. Kuhn, who never married, was fiercely independent and shared her life with her two cats, Emily and Charlotte Bronte. She also spent part of her life caring for her disabled mother and mentally ill brother.

During her time with the Gray Panthers, Kuhn authored several books and became a national darling after appearing on late-night talk shows. While ageism was at the forefront of Kuhn's activism, Kupferman noted that the elderly icon was also an advocate for seniors embracing their sexuality and for intergenerational cooperation, breaking down stereotypes and barriers often associated with aging. She once suggested that older women who couldn't find lovers should turn to each other, a statement that caused some heated backlash, and was rumored to have had a fling with a 21-year-old man when she was 71.

"Old age is not a disease," Kuhn said in a 1978 interview. "[Old age] is strength and survivorship, triumph over all kinds of vicissitudes and disappointments, trials and illnesses."

Although the fight against ageism started in earnest in the '70s, today, Americans who are 65 years and older remain vulnerable to physical abuse and financial victimization. Politicians frequently threaten to slash the [Social Security benefits on which they depend, and pension plans covering some 1.5 million Americans remain fiscally unstable.

Thankfully, Kuhn's legacy continues to create change for seniors across America. In addition to advocating for accessible Medicare information and holding major drug companies

accountable for safe and affordable prescription drugs, the Gray Panthers have committed to fighting for welfare-workfare reform, economic justice, and against false societal stigmas about aging. The Gray Panthers currently have 25 active chapters nationwide.

Kupferman believes that Kuhn's contributions to U.S. history are as important now as they were when the group started. He says that her influence should inspire future generations to take action against discrimination and elder inequality.

"She should be the inspiration for every generation [to] get up, do something, make sure your voices are heard, and fight for what's right."