

THE GRAY PANTHERS MOVEMENT

The Gray Panther movement was initiated in 1970 when Maggie Kuhn and five of her colleagues experienced forced retirement and looked for new ways to address social issues which had concerned them throughout their careers.

Today the Gray Panthers can best be described simply as a rapidly growing network of people old and young drawn together by deeply felt concerns for human liberation and social change. The old and young live outside the mainstream of society. Agism – discrimination against persons on the basis of chronological age – deprives both groups of power and influence. The Gray Panthers believe that the old and the young have much to contribute to make our society more just and humane, and that each needs to reinforce the other in goals, strategy, and action.

The Gray Panthers are distinguished by several special characteristics which are summarized as follows:

1. Their actions are based on a movement instead of an organization. Individuals Gray Panthers and Gray Panther groups are not identified by way of formal membership in a highly-structured national organization – but by common and active support of Gray Panthers ideas and projects. There are no membership dues. Thus, a Gray Panther is a person who, either alone or with others, actively promotes the interaction of young and old people and the maximum involvement of all ages in areas of social and political life. In addition, most local Gray Panthers groups focus upon issues which are of mutual concern to old and young in their respective communities.
2. The movement is based on a struggle against agism – a societal illness which the Gray Panthers contend is as serious and as pervasive as racism and sexism. Agism permeates our Western culture and institutions. It takes many obvious forms (e.g. places of employment which have fixed and arbitrary retirement rules or places which will not hire people for certain special positions because they are considered too old or too young). It also takes very subtle forms (e.g. causing people to feel complimented when they are told that they do not look or act their age.) The root cause of many forms of unjust treatment is agist values and attributes. It is these attitudes and values that the Gray Panthers are determined to identify and change.
3. The Gray Panthers is a coalition of age and youth. Powerlessness and alienation from society affect young as well as old in ways which can be destructive but which have great potential for creative action. Both groups have only to gain when they combine their energies to form a new power base from which to challenge the forces that oppress them. Older and younger persons also have much to gain from interaction with one another, in a society which makes such opportunities increasingly rare. Through interaction the young benefit from the experience and wisdom of the old and begin to view “aging” not as a

problem to be avoided until age 65, but as an experience to be integrated into the total life span.

4. The Gray Panthers are militant. They are militant because they challenge (in non-violent ways) rather than passively accept stereotype of aging (weakness, despair, hostility). These stereotypes are damaging to the lives of people because they become self-fulfilling prophecies. The Gray Panthers also challenge rather than submit to institutions which oppress people by way of agist policies. Many of the institutions and organizations which purport to serve people are afflicted with a deep, insidious paternalism offering little or no voice to the recipients in the governance and planning of their programs.
5. The Gray Panthers are concerned with action for change rather than service. They recognize the need for and the value of services but also recognize that many services accommodate themselves to systems which need to be challenged. The Gray Panthers are radical in that they favor basic changes in systems which are not meeting the needs of people. (e.g. the solution to the problem of nursing homes is, in part, the creation of alternative life styles for older persons.)

Nationally, the Gray Panthers operate out of a small office in the corner of Tabernacle Church in West Philadelphia. From that office a small staff and group of volunteers attempt to maintain a center of information and communications for the entire network. The main organ of communication within the network is the newsletter, The Network.

Since its beginning the Gray Panthers have received financial support almost entirely from small contributions from interested individuals as well as relatively small contributions from church groups. A recent small grant from the Urban Coalition in Philadelphia provided the money for hiring the present staff. The Philadelphia People's Fund (a low-budget fund-raising organization for radical social change groups) provides a small grant for office operations.

In December 1973 the Retired Professional Action Group (supported by Ralph Nader's Public Citizen, Inc.) merged its activities with those of the Gray Panthers. The files of that group were moved to Philadelphia and coordinator of RPAG joined the staff of Gray Panthers. The two groups are united in their common goals of utilizing the wasted and often disregarded talents of older persons, providing opportunities for older and younger persons to work together and working on issues in a manner which reflects broad public interests instead of narrow self-interests. Mr. Nader now partially funds the Gray Panthers. A second year of funding in November 1974 is contingent upon matching funds from other sources, including private donations.

Within the Gray Panthers movement, policies and decisions affecting the national movement are developed by a national steering committee composed of 20 older and younger people. They meet together approximately every six weeks, usually in Philadelphia. Within the structure of

the steering committee, the Gray Panthers strive to maintain the goals of shared or multiple leadership.

The Gray Panthers national office is bringing together materials that may be of interest to people who are, or want to be, involved in social action and the movement against agism. Currently available by mail, upon request, are:

Organizing Manual – Increasing numbers of people are writing to us to ask for help in organizing new Gray Panthers networks. In response to these request some Gray Panthers have develop a preliminary copy of an organizing manual. Cost \$1.00 per copy. Also anyone interested in organizing can receive from the national office a list of names of other persons in his/her area who have expressed interest in joining the Gray Panthers movement.

Newsletter – This is produced several times a year. There is no charge for it, but readers are encouraged to contribute towards the cost of producing and mailing it.

A Basic Bibliography – covering selections pertaining to agism, political action, the positive aspects of aging, important statistics and facts, organizations for social change and social action, and personal and small group growth and development. Cost \$0.25.

An article on the history of the Gray Panthers Movement - \$0.25.

An article on “Liberation from Agism” by Maggie Kuhn, published in Enquiry, Sept.-Nov. 1971. \$0.25

Gray Panthers buttons are available at a cost of \$1.00 each.

Gray Panthers film – Color; 16 mm; 25 min. - \$25.00 rental.

Miscellaneous promotional materials: 1-10 copies, free; over 10 copies - \$0.05 each item.

The charges for these materials are minimal to cover printing and postage.

Requests for these items as well as requests for other information about the Gray Panthers should be directed to: The Gray Panthers, 3700 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19104. Telephone: 215/382-6644.

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