

Remembering Maggie Kuhn: Gray Panthers Founder On The 5 Myths Of Aging

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This post is the second part of a recently unearthed interview I conducted with prophetic Gray Panther Founder Maggie Kuhn in 1978. You can read [part one here](#). Her compassion, vision, wisdom and futuristic ideas can be found in every passage. Enjoy!

Ken Dychtwald: Many older men and women seem to feel that they are the victims of stereotyping and negative cultural images of aging. Would you agree?

Maggie Kuhn: Yes, absolutely! And in many cases, we elders are just as responsible for creating and sustaining those beliefs. To my mind, there are several myths that are the most debilitating in their effect on elders.

First, there is the myth that stereotypes old age as a disastrous disease which nobody wants to admit to having, but which affects us all. Old age is not a disease -- it is strength and survivorship, triumph over all sorts of vicissitudes and disappointments, trials and illnesses.

Another myth is that old age is mindless; you know, you can't learn anything more after 30, and then after 50 it's just a question of time before senility sets in. That kind of thinking makes me furious. I recently saw some statistics from a study at Harvard where a group of men at the age of 71 who were tested over a period of 12 years scored at least 15 points higher on the IQ average than they did in the beginning. Psychological studies have shown that there is no limit to learning.

Another wrong and cruel myth is that old age is sexless. I can tell you that it's not that way. Sex need not wither. In fact, it may take a whole new turn. Indeed, it ought to be flourishing right up to rigor mortis! A growing number of us older women are involved sexually, in varying degrees of intimacy, with men who are younger than us. What is known about such relationships? Old age can certainly be a time for sexual and sensual pleasure and discovery.

A fourth myth is that old age is useless. This myth comes because our technological society scrap-piles old people as it does automobiles. We elders have all sorts of skills and knowledge, and I submit that if we got our heads together, there wouldn't be a single problem that could not be solved. Mandatory retirement -- such as what I experienced -- is a perfect example of this type

of ageism. It results in and perpetuates the image that old people are useless and unproductive and at best only capable of rest and play.

Fifth is the myth of the powerlessness of old age. We must be proud of our age. We can be proud of our history and our experience. We can be proud of our survivorship and our capacity to cope with change. We're not wrinkled babies. Our goal should be responsible adulthood. We're the elders of the tribe, and the elders are charged with the tribe's survival and well-being.

Dychtwald: What do you think about all of the retirement communities and "seniors-only" recreation centers that are springing up these days?

Kuhn: I think they're glorified playpens. While I admit that they help to keep elders safe, I don't like how they segregate older men and women from mainstream society. As you know, I live in a co-ed, intergenerational commune in Philadelphia. We all share our life experiences and help each other - and everyone has chores and responsibilities they're responsible for. We benefit from our inter-dependence. In our modern society, there's too much emphasis placed on "independence." As we live longer lives, I strongly believe we'd all be better off if we were more "inter-dependent."

Dychtwald: What do you think about the phrase "senior citizen?"

Kuhn: "Senior citizen" is a euphemism which I reject as insulting and demeaning. I prefer to be called by my name, or, if not, I'd like to be identified as an "old person" or an "elder" for this is what I am.

Note: After this discussion with Maggie Kuhn, I took serious note of her emphasis on the word elder. At that point in my career, I was trying to envision and describe the emerging challenge of more and more people providing support and care to their older loved ones. "Eldercare" is the word I invented more than three decades ago... Today, with 5+ million hits on Google, I guess the word stuck.

Dychtwald: Maggie, I'm inspired by your boldness, sensitivity and strong commitment to social change. I believe that your lifestyle and philosophy will go a long way to encourage other elders to energize and expand the quality and experience of their lives and, by doing so, transform the process of aging for all of us.

Kuhn: Thank you Ken. We are a new breed of old people. There are more of us alive today than at any other time in history. We are better educated and healthier, with more at stake in this society. We are the elders, the experienced ones: we are maturing, growing adults, deeply concerned for the well-being and survival of our society. Instead of retiring from life, I am pleased and excited to be able to recycle and redirect my goals. I continue to realize that old age is a time of great fulfillment -- personal fulfillment -- when all the threads of life can be woven together.

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