

Sidedoor (S10E06) - Wrinkled Radicals

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Every weekday morning, Maggie Kuhn was up, dressed, and out the door by 7:15. She usually found herself running to catch the train from Philadelphia to New York, her coat unbuttoned, her long gray hair wisping behind her.

Lizzie: On the train, she'd sit with her cohort of commuters—chatting, reading, sometimes snoozing. This was the late '60s—there were no podcasts or noise-canceling headphones. When she reached Penn Station, she'd hustle to the subway and take the express train uptown to 96th Street. Then she'd catch a local bus, hop off at 116th Street, and from there it was still a four-block walk to her office. But she'd be behind her desk, hair smoothed into a neat bun, spectacles in place by 9:45 in the morning—two and a half hours after leaving home.

Lizzie: Maggie Kuhn made this daily commute for 25 years. And she loved it! She loved her life. She loved her job at the United Presbyterian Church, leading the church's public advocacy efforts. She loved knowing that people were counting on her to show up everyday, that her work mattered.

Lizzie: And in 1970, on the eve of her 65th birthday, her supervisor knocked on her door, asked if he could come in, and then ...

Maggie Kuhn: *He asked if I would retire that summer.*

Lizzie: Maggie had never even thought about retirement, but her supervisor insisted he was looking out for her best interests. This is a voice actor reading from Kuhn's memoir.

Maggie Kuhn: *"We mean to be kind," I was told. "We know how hard it has been for you to commute."*

Lizzie: She realized he wasn't really asking. He was telling her it was time to go. And this practice of forced retirement was completely legal.

Maggie Kuhn: *What could I do? What could I say to change their minds? Nothing, I realized. I opted for a graceful exit.*

Lizzie: Maggie's office threw her a retirement party, but no amount of crepe paper or balloons could make this feel like a celebration. Her colleagues said nice things about her, praised her

work and presented her with a parting gift: a sewing machine.

Emily Krichbaum: *And Kuhn is like, "I don't—I don't know how to sew."*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Emily Krichbaum: *And they're like, "That's fine. You'll have plenty of time to learn how to sew!"*

Lizzie: This is Emily Krichbaum, historian of American women, and director of the Center for Girls and Young Women's Leadership at Columbus School for Girls.

Emily Krichbaum: *And she said, "I don't think you understand. This is entirely a miscalculation of how I plan to spend my retirement."*

Lizzie: Maggie took her new sewing machine home—and put it straight into the closet.

Maggie Kuhn: *I never opened it. I set up a makeshift office in my home and got to work.*

Lizzie: Maggie would spend the next two decades showing Americans what she and other retirees were not.

Maggie Kuhn: *We are not wrinkled babies, succumbing to purposeless waste of our years and our time.*

Lizzie: So this time on Sidedoor, how one self-proclaimed "wrinkled radical" created a movement that would bring old and young together to fight for a better tomorrow for everyone, and in the process challenged how we judge and classify the people we call "old." an issue that matters to every single person who is aging at this moment. That's you—and me—and all of us. More on that when we're all 20 seconds older after the break.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, interviewer: *Let me run a few terms by you: golden agers, mature Americans, senior citizens, the aged, the elderly. Any of the above, which do you prefer?]*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *I like just "old people." And I like to say it, you know, with trumpets! We say young people, why not old people?]*

Lizzie: Maggie Kuhn didn't have time for what she called "silly euphemisms" for old age. To her, they masked a deeper problem, which she named in this 1983 interview: gerontophobia, which means ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: Fear of old people and of growing old. And it's an epidemic in America.]

Lizzie: An epidemic fueled, she said, by myths about what it is to be old. Myths like ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: Uh, that old age is sexless.]

Lizzie: And useless ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: Grandma, you don't know computers. [laughs] What you know is dumb.]

Lizzie: And ultimately ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: That old age is powerless.]

Lizzie: In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the era when Maggie Kuhn was forced to retire, Americans all over the country were navigating a period of upheaval.

Katherine Ott: *So many things are happening: civil rights, disability rights, Kent State.*

Lizzie: Curator Katherine Ott says it was a time of social and technological change.

Katherine Ott: *The moon landing.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: We're on our way, Houston.]

Katherine Ott: *Like, we've left the planet!*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Richard Nixon: People have got to know whether or not their president is a crook.]

Lizzie: President Nixon was on the verge of impeachment.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Richard Nixon: Well, I'm not a crook.]

[NEWS CLIP: The three-hour parade takes the demonstrators across the Potomac on their way to the Pentagon.]

Lizzie: The Vietnam War was dividing the nation.

Katherine Ott: *There's the term "generation gap," which is about younger people not being understood by older people, so there's tension. But at the same time, older people are starting to feel a collective identity.*

Lizzie: This was an era of questioning the status quo. Being angry was not just the purview of the young.

Lizzie: *What reason did older Americans have to be enraged in 1970?*

Katherine Ott: *There were so many reasons! [laughs] So many levels of stigma attached to age, legal and cultural, that just pissed people off. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Now it is a fact that people get older, but the concept of age is a social construct. Whether it's childhood or old age, the way we think about aging has changed over time. Let's rewind the clocks. Getting old used to be kind of miraculous. Just a hundred years ago, the life expectancy for both men and women was about 55 years old. 55 years old!

Katherine Ott: *If you reached the age of 50, it was a semi miracle! Something should have taken you out by then, whether it's cholera, infection, childbirth, typhoid, tuberculosis, being kicked by a horse.*

Lizzie: Old age was so rare, people got all schmaltzy about.

Katherine Ott: *Called it poetic things like "The passing of the meridian of life." Old age was revered. It was a blessing.*

Lizzie: And Katherine says until about 1900, if you were lucky enough to live to be old, you'd live with your family. Grandparents would live with their children and grandchildren, not a retirement home. There were almshouses and charities, but the only reason anyone would live there is if they had nowhere else to go.

Katherine Ott: *Maybe they were a spinster who had outlived everybody, but that was really rare*

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because the family was a unit, and it was responsible for all of its members, even if it was second cousin, third removed or whatever.

Lizzie: And this wasn't just a moral obligation, it was the law. Back in Elizabethan England, the Poor Codes of 1601 made children financially responsible for aging parents. And those laws made it onto the books in the United States as well.

Lizzie: But Katherine says a few things changed in the 20th century that started to redefine old age. First, life expectancy grew by 25 years over the course of a century. Medical advancements meant people were living longer than ever before. And this was happening as the emphasis on nuclear family structure meant fewer children were caring for their aging parents. So more old people, less familial support, and industrialization was changing the pace of work, making it faster and less forgiving for aging Americans.

Katherine Ott: *Older workers might work more slowly and intentionally, and that's not a problem in farming or with craft work but it really cuts into profit if it's factory work or piece work.*

Lizzie: Profit drove the need to remove older Americans from the workforce.

Katherine Ott: *So the state gets involved with Social Security and starts to create ways to support people to get out of the labor force, or to support them as they retire.*

Lizzie: And the 1935 Social Security Act made 65 years old a red-letter age: the age of retirement.

Katherine Ott: *Retirement then emerges as an institution, and that's relatively recent.*

Lizzie: Mandatory retirement laws made it possible for employers like Maggie Kuhn's to force workers to retire at age 65. These laws became more and more common throughout the 1900s, so by the 1970s, Maggie was one of millions of Americans forced to retire due to their age. And after retiring ...

Katherine Ott: *There wasn't any such thing as lifelong learning, encore careers.*

Lizzie: Katherine is curator of medical history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. And she says gerontology—the study of old people—was a pretty new science in the 70s. And the prevailing wisdom at that time said it was most natural for old people simply to withdraw from society.

Katherine Ott: *The expectations were you just go quietly. You leave everyone else alone, you disappear basically, you become statistically dead, almost.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *People are defined in our profit-centered society by chronological age. We are also defined by what we do. You know, the first thing you ask a stranger is "What do you do?" And if you don't "do" anything, quote-unquote, if you're "just" a housewife, or if I'm retired, then you are automatically a non-person, less important to society.]*

Lizzie: By the time Maggie Kuhn's colleagues presented her with her sewing machine, she had spent her whole career working as an advocate for others. After graduating from college in the 1920s, she joined the YWCA and worked for the labor movement before heading up the civil rights movement within the Presbyterian Church. She'd battled the isms: sexism, classism, racism. Emily Krichbaum says ...

Emily Krichbaum: *Once she faced mandatory retirement, she decided to start to fight for herself, and not even realizing that this ism, this ageism existed.*

Maggie Kuhn: *Instead of sinking into despair, I did what came most naturally: I telephoned some friends and called a meeting.*

Lizzie: Maggie invited her friends to lunch. All professional women, all activists, all facing retirement.

Maggie Kuhn: *All of us had energy to spare! We knew our lives had reached a sort of climax, not an ending.*

Lizzie: And they suspected they weren't the only ones feeling this way. They decided to call a bigger meeting. And on the appointed night, about a hundred gray-haired people poured into the Philadelphia meeting hall. There was an electric energy in the air. Discussion bounced off the walls for hours. And by the end of the night ...

Maggie Kuhn: *We agreed we should all band together to form a new social action organization.*

Lizzie: They would be, The Consultation of Older and Younger Adults For Social Change.

Emily Krichbaum: *I don't even remember the name because it didn't last for very long because obviously this is not very catchy. [laughs]*

Lizzie: So they canned that name and came up with something with a bit more bite: the Gray Panthers. But not everybody was on board with the name. Maggie got letters from angry members saying they were ruining the movement, and people were gonna lump us in with the Black Panthers.

Emily Krichbaum: *They're going to think that we are this bizarre militant group.*

Lizzie: But Maggie did not see any problem. In fact ...

Emily Krichbaum: *She concluded that those that were turned off by the term "Gray Panther" weren't really with it, and they were the very ones who would not be ready to work towards the group's goal of social change, that they should go back to their golden age clubs, that they should join the AARP.*

Lizzie: In 1972, the Gray Panthers became the first anti-ageist movement in the country. With the wisdom, time and ability to put their bodies on the line, the Gray Panthers saw that they were better positioned than anyone to make change, not just to benefit the elderly but for all. As Maggie put it ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *We need to think as elders of the tribe that we are not just a gray power lobby, but we are tribal elders concerned about the tribe's survival.]*

Lizzie: With Maggie Kuhn leading the pack, the Gray Panthers movement grew quickly. Within a decade of that first meeting, they counted 75,000 to 100,000 members, with 122 chapters in 42 different states. And working together, these tribal elders would be a force to be reckoned with. They are the Gray Panthers, hear them roar—after the break.

Lizzie: I'm serious, they really do roar.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *Now let's do the Great Panther Growl.]*

Lizzie: If you were to attend a meeting of the Gray Panthers in the 1970s, it would probably begin like this ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *Stand tall. Now raise your arms high as you can.]*

Lizzie: ... with Maggie Kuhn at the front of the room, prim gray bun, half moon spectacles, fingers bent like claws.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *And then we open our mouths, ready to cry out against injustice. Now stick out your tongue as far as you can. Way out. Way, way out. Go three times right from the depth of your belly. Arr! Arr! Arr!]*

Paul Nathanson: *I just saw this incredible excitement in her.*

Lizzie: Paul Nathanson was only 29 years old when he joined the Gray Panthers—far from gray himself. As a young lawyer, he'd just founded the National Senior Citizens Law Center in 1972, when he went to hear Maggie give a speech.

Paul Nathanson: *I hadn't heard very much about Maggie, but what I liked about the Gray Panthers immediately was that true intergenerationalists, they cared about young people's issues. I mean, they were picketing the war in Vietnam. They were worrying about school bond issues.*

Lizzie: Maggie took an intergenerational approach to organizing as well as to life. She'd never married, didn't have her own kids, but she lived in a big house she shared with university students. In her 70s, she dated men in their 20s. Her motto was, "Do something outrageous every day." But Paul says that was just one of the things that made her a great leader.

Paul Nathanson: *She was able to explain complicated issues in an understandable way. And in a big way, she had the charisma that drew attention. I mean, if we went to a community, every newspaper in town was there.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: And Maggie understood that when it came to ageism, this relatively new concept, getting public attention was the first step.

Emily Krichbaum: *Right? Because you can't get people to move to act until you show them that this is actually a problem.*

Lizzie: While Maggie turned every stereotype on its head, it bothered her that she didn't see old people like herself, living full, dynamic lives, reflected in pop culture at all. On TV, old people were sexless, powerless and mindless. They were the butt of the joke.

Emily Krichbaum: *There was really no healthy portrayal of an older American, of a vibrant, knowledgeable, caring American who had wisdom to provide to other generations.*

Lizzie: Historian Emily Krichbaum says old people basically fell into one of two groups on television ...

Emily Krichbaum: *The senile and cranky, or the childlike and the laughable.*

Lizzie: And there's probably no better example than this popular character ...

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[ARCHIVE CLIP, Johnny Carson: Would you welcome please, dear, sweet, lovable, old Aunt Blabby.]

Lizzie: Aunt Blabby was a recurring character on the Johnny Carson show. In this clip, Blabby emerges, fighting the curtain with her cane, looking vaguely like George Washington in a frumpy coat and bad wig. In this bit, Aunt Blabby has decided to go back to college. On campus, she organizes a protest to legalize prunes. She says all the senior citizens formed a circle around the faculty building and locked arms.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Johnny Carson: What else did you do to protest?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Aunt Blabby: Well, after an hour of yelling "Prune power," we all leaned over and soaked our dentures in the giant fountain. We called it a gum in.]

Lizzie: Now the idea that the only issue an older person might care about is access to more dried fruits, this was completely out of sync with the communities of courage and rage the Gray Panthers embodied, and that's why they set their sights on one of society's most ageist wildebeests: the media.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: I use a very inelegant term. I talk about the "watchdogs and the watchbitches." And as watchbitches and watchdogs, we have a great deal of watching to do.]

Lizzie: So in 1974, the Gray Panthers launched a nationwide media watch task force. For almost five years, panthers across the country carefully tracked TV, cartoons and ads for depictions of the elderly, noting things like their relationship to the main character, occupational roles, how they expressed emotions. The results were compiled into a report which Kuhn herself presented to Congress. It spurred a federal investigation, and eventually it caused the FCC to adopt new TV media standards.

Lizzie: But Maggie wasn't an effective leader just because she got Congress to listen up. She had charisma, and she knew that looking like a little old granny got her places her younger more radical peers couldn't go. And she used that to her advantage. In 1975, Maggie went on the Johnny Carson show to give him a piece of her extremely sharp mind.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: Many people watch television and listen to radio when they're completely housebound so that what you dish out has really a tremendous effect.]

Lizzie: Kuhn gives Carson a Gray Panthers t-shirt to give to Aunt Blabby. "Let her wear that t-shirt," she says. "It'll liberate her. She needs to be liberated."

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Johnny Carson: She should be more independent, is that so?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: Of course she should be independent. And feisty. And fighting! A life of outrage!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Johnny Carson: Yes! We'll be right back.]

Paul Nathanson: *When you see her on the Johnny Carson piece, you know, she's telling them off, but she's doing it with a smile, you know? And he got it, you know? [laughs]*

Lizzie: Unlike Aunt Blabby's campus cohort and their "gum-in," the Gray Panthers were savvy protesters. To criticize the American Medical Association's neglect of older Americans' health issues, Gray Panthers dressed up as doctors and nurses.

Paul Nathanson: *They interrupted the AMA Convention in Chicago one year, and they brought in what looked like a cadaver. I mean, it was obviously a fake, and it was the—it's supposed to be the AMA.*

Lizzie: They even brought in a real ambulance and tried to resuscitate the dummy labeled "AMA," before opening it up and finding the dummy's chest was filled with wads of cash.

Paul Nathanson: *And there was no heart. And their whole point was that the AMA had no heart.*

Lizzie: *Ah!*

Lizzie: Another time, the Panthers picketed a department store the day before Christmas. Dressed in Santa Claus suits, they held signs that said according to the store's mandatory retirement policy, Santa Claus is too old to work here.

Paul Nathanson: *It was really about advocacy and drawing attention to the issues and getting funding.*

Lizzie: Through grassroots organizing, public protests, political lobbying and theatrical stunts, the Gray Panthers exposed nursing home abuses, changed regulations around ageist media depictions and raised public awareness about the vulnerability of the nation's elderly. But perhaps most poetically ...

Katherine Ott: *It's the Gray Panthers who were really instrumental in removing mandatory retirement.*

Lizzie: The law that spurred Maggie Kuhn to start the movement in the first place. In 1978, Congress outlawed mandatory retirement before age 70, and in 1986, abolished mandatory retirement altogether. All because Maggie Kuhn and a few very capable friends decided to stand up for themselves instead of sit down at a sewing machine.

Emily Krichbaum: *They were really the first to call out, to acknowledge, to recognize, to highlight, that do you realize what we're doing, America? We are putting people in a box based off of their chronological age and that is it. And all they were asking for, similar to the words of King, is to be judged on the content of our character, and potentially too, on the virility of our minds, right? And the capacity of our bodies. But I completely understand. I mean, I wouldn't want Maggie Kuhn at 65 rescuing me from a building that was on fire, right?*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Emily Krichbaum: *But that's not what she was asking for. What she was asking for is that it felt like such, such a bizarre thing to say that now that we've officially hit this birthday, this means this. Once I turn 65, I am not a cute old lady with a sewing machine who's going to spend my final days darning your stinking socks.*

Lizzie: Maggie Kuhn led the Gray Panthers from the 1970s into the 1980s and even '90s. She spent the last two decades of her life working to shatter the myth that old age means decrepitude and powerlessness, and she weaponized the very stereotypes she was fighting to get work done.

Paul Nathanson: *Right. That juxtaposition of the little old lady and a strong advocacy. And a real self awareness. I mean, she knew who she was.*

Lizzie: The night she died in 1995 at the age of 89, Maggie Kuhn was at the home she shared with her younger housemates. She'd been ill, and the way I've heard the story told by people present at the time, she'd been unconscious for a while when she sat up in bed, and with her final breaths stated clearly, "I am an advocate for justice and peace."

Jack Kupferman: *She was one of the most important activists of the 20th century.*

Lizzie: This is Jack Kupferman, president of Gray Panthers NYC. The Gray Panthers are still active today, but Jack says ...

Jack Kupferman: *Since Maggie Kuhn's death, Grey Panthers has changed dramatically. It hasn't had that kind of explosive growth, and there are fewer active chapters than there had been at the day.*

Lizzie: Not only that, few people remember the Gray Panthers today—or even Maggie Kuhn. But in the archives at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, there are two boxes of Gray Panthers meeting notes.

Lizzie: *What's the significance of having these in our collections?*

Katherine Ott: *Let me flip that question to: why is there so little? Why is it only two boxes? Why is there so little interest or care about older people?*

Emily Krichbaum: *The stories of older Americans are not highlighted and centered in the majority of our stories.*

Lizzie: *Why not?*

Emily Krichbaum: *Well, dare I say ageism? I think if Maggie Kuhn were here with us today, she would say ageism. That this isn't something that you're focused on until you're of that age. We don't associate with our future selves very well. This is a significant problem when it comes to consumer spending and various things. We don't think of ourselves as being older. And Maggie Kuhn says that that too is an example of our own ageism: we don't want to think of ourselves as older. We want to figure out how to make ourselves younger.*

Lizzie: But the fact is we are getting older. Second by second by second. And if we're lucky, we'll get really old someday. The elderly population will grow by more than half in the next 30 years, so maybe we should take a leaf out of Maggie's book and start looking forward to it. At age 85, speaking at the Vermont Statehouse, she said there were three things she loved about being old. First ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Maggie Kuhn: *I can speak my mind. And I do! And I say some outrageous things. The second is that I've outlived much of my opposition. [audience applauds] People who put you down and said, "Maggie, that's a crazy idea. It would never work." They're not here anymore! [audience laughs] And the third is that I am privileged and blessed and honored to establish great companies of kindred spirits who are going to continue to work to heal our sick society and help it to be peaceful and just in this age and in the millennium to come. Thank you. [audience applauds]]*

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. If you want to know more about the Gray Panthers, they're still active! Find out how you can get involved by visiting their website. We'll also have more info in our newsletter. You can subscribe at SI.edu/sidedoor.

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Katherine Ott, Emily Krichbaum, Paul Nathanson and Jack Kupferman. Special thanks to Ashleigh Coren at the Smithsonian

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Lizzie: If you want to learn more about Maggie Kuhn's life, I recommend her autobiography, *No Stone Unturned: The Life and Times of Maggie Kuhn*. You can find it wherever books are sold. We'll link to it in our newsletter, and we'll also share a link to the *Maggie Grows* documentary.

Lizzie: Thank you to Orca Media of Montpelier, Vermont, for use of archival audio, as well as to Jim Gambone for sharing Maggie's last interview on intergenerational relations.

Lizzie: Voice acting by Hettie Lynn Hurtes.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Editorial support by Amy Drozdowska. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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