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Old Peoples' Lib

In Philadelphia last fall, at the site of one of Vice-President Agnew's last pre-election speeches, Secret Service men were faced with a Gray Panther demonstration by about 200 militant old people angrily protesting the Administration's social services budget cuts. Suddenly, one of the group, a sprightly 67-year-old woman named Margaret Kuhn, dashed toward the nearest SS man and, poking him in the chest with her gnarled finger, announced, "Zap! You're getting old!" The young agent backed away as she continued, "Listen to what we're saying. We're trying to change things for you." As the rally was breaking up, a graying federal agent approached her with a personal request: "Look into that federal pension system, will you?"

The Gray Panthers are every bit as unusual as their name and their methods of recruiting support. They employ a rare combination of sophisticated political analysis, pragmatic action, and refreshing whimsy to promote social change. The three-year-old organization, a coalition of the young and the elderly dedicated to the eradication of "agism"—discrimination on the basis of age—bears the seeds of a powerful old people's liberation movement.

"Our decade is witnessing the rise of a whole new generation of elders," declares Ms. Kuhn, the group's spokeswoman. "We live longer. We're more vigorous physically. We're better educated and more articulate. And consciousness-raising has made us aware of how our society puts us down."

Power for the elderly is the long-range goal of the research, organization, and lobbying activities in several cities that are coordinated from the Gray Panthers' cramped headquarters in the basement of Tabernacle Church near the University of Pennsylvania's Philadelphia campus. The group's immediate plans center on making fundamental changes in old-age services provided by callous private institutions and paternalistic government agencies. Banks, nursing homes, retirement developers, and mass transit authorities have already felt the Panthers' wrath. Also in the works is a communal residence

In their most controversial move, the Panthers have called for the abolition of compulsory retirement. "Think of the economic impact if we have compulsory retirement at 65 and we live to be 90," says Ms. Kuhn. "We will be non-productive, in terms of earned income, for as long as we have been employed. Can any society remain free and financially solvent with that kind of demonic wasteful policy?"

While they argue their positions on narrow moral or pragmatic grounds, the Gray Panthers are asking for no less than a broad, almost revolutionary, change. "I would hope that the revolution of the elders, contrary to the other revolutions, would be a unifying force in a society that is fear-ridden and divided," Ms. Kuhn says. "The subject of age affects us all. It's the great universalizer." —**Steve Ditlea**

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