

# Seeking change:

A vision from the past points the way to the future



**What progress have we made in addressing the real needs and potentialities of an aging population? As ICAA enters its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, its founder finds a clarion call for change in a decades-old interview between two visionaries, then dives into the past, present and future of the ‘aging well’ movement with the interviewer, industry luminary Ken Dychtwald, PhD**

by Colin Milner

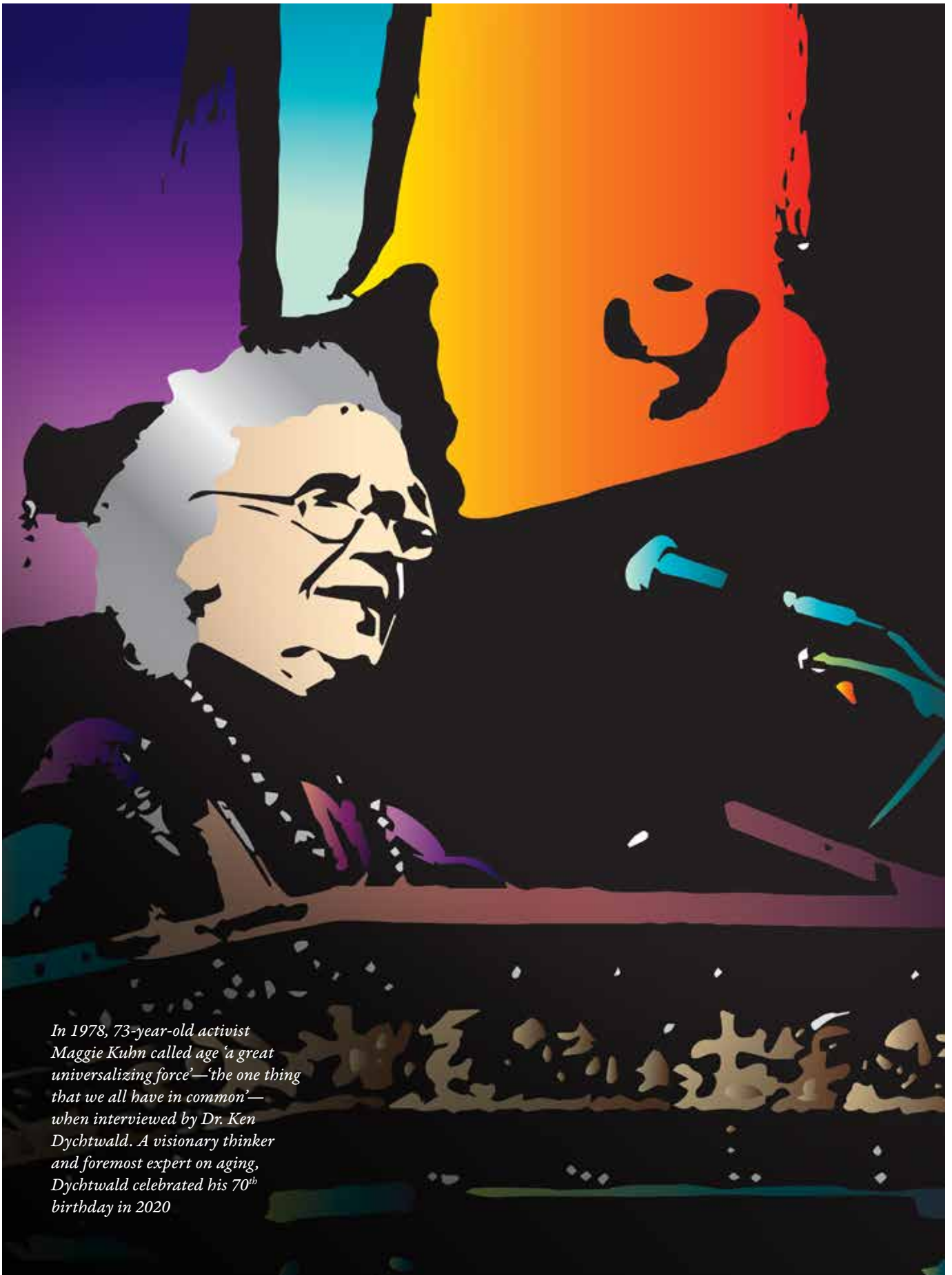
When the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) launched nearly 20 years ago (October 1, 2001), I envisioned a professional association that would bring people together across sectors to foster active, productive, healthy aging. I never imagined that in the years to follow I would have the opportunity to collaborate with many of the most innovative and influential minds of our times. From prime ministers to surgeons general, best-selling authors to titans of industry, and Nobel Laureates to a Pulitzer Prize winner, each in their own right has been a visionary thought leader, futurist, activist or change-maker who has dedi-

cated their life to helping society reimagine its response to rapidly aging populations.

So, I felt intrigued when an advance reading copy arrived of Dr. Ken Dychtwald’s “sort-of-memoir,” due to be published in April 2021. Titled *Radical Curiosity: One Man’s Search for Cosmic Magic and a Purposeful Life*, this book promised glimpses of how the author, researcher, active-aging guiding light, and CEO of the San Francisco-based consultancy Age Wave went from working-class roots in New Jersey to working with people like Senator John McCain and US Presidents Reagan, Carter and Clinton. Yet, in the end, what really captured my attention was a chapter featuring his 1978 interview with then-septuagenarian Maggie Kuhn. It turns out she was far ahead of her time.

In 1970, after working long, productive stints with the YWCA and the United Presbyterian Church national office, Kuhn found herself forcibly retired, according to Dr. Dychtwald. “[B]ereft of her accustomed role and a sense of meaningful life involvement, she transformed into an outspoken and influential activist,” he says. “Banding together with a small group

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*In 1978, 73-year-old activist Maggie Kuhn called age 'a great universalizing force'—'the one thing that we all have in common'—when interviewed by Dr. Ken Dychtwald. A visionary thinker and foremost expert on aging, Dychtwald celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2020*

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*Maggie Kuhn's clarity of vision 'dazzles' industry luminary Dr. Ken Dychtwald today. 'A role model for young and old,' Kuhn was also his 'mentor and dear friend,' he says. They are pictured together here in 1978. Image courtesy of Age Wave*

of like-minded friends, she launched the Gray Panthers, which in a decade became a coalition of more than 10,000 people of all ages who were committed to an activist approach to social change." Together with her fellow Gray Panthers (Dychtwald included at the time), Kuhn stood against people and groups demonstrating ageism, especially in organizations whose mission was to serve older adults.

Earning herself the nickname "America's wrinkled radical," Kuhn never flinched from challenging the "powers that be," Dychtwald continues—whether it be the United States Senate, the American Medical Association, the National Gerontological Society or "countless other groups who displayed varying forms of ageism and age-related prejudice." Despite weighing no

more than 90 lbs. and being "a bit frail with hands gnarled from arthritis," Kuhn was powerful when she went after anything, he recalls, "whether it be a topic or a person." And she continued to speak out about the liberation of aging on platforms ranging from *The Evening News* to *Saturday Night Live* until she passed away in 1995, at age 89.

"Way before all of the current brouhaha about healthy aging, the third age, ageism, modern elders, aging with purpose and the longevity revolution, Maggie Kuhn laid out her prophetic blueprint for the world to come," Dychtwald states. Conducted more than 40 years ago, their interview showcases Kuhn's vision—and clarity—of where we were as a society and where we needed to be. As I read the interview, I understood his comment about being "dazzled" when

he reflects on those things, including "the accuracy of Kuhn's forecasts." I also felt kicked in the gut.

To me, the interview could have been done yesterday. It left me with an obvious question: Have we really changed the way we approach and respond to population aging, aging itself or the way we view aging?

Below you can step into the past with the interview excerpted from *Radical Curiosity* featuring Maggie Kuhn and young Ken Dychtwald. At the end of the interview, I'll ask him for his perspectives on progress.

## **Liberating Aging: Lessons from America's 'Wrinkled Radical'**

**Ken:** Do you have any special feelings about being an elder at this particular time in history?

**Maggie:** This is indeed a New Age—an age of liberation and self-determination. I'm glad to have reached elderhood at this time. I feel free to speak out and act in ways that I was not able to when I was younger. I'm 73-years-old and I haven't dyed my hair and I can't afford a facelift. **When you're young, you have the face God gave you: when you're old, you have the face you made yourself!** I enjoy my wrinkles and I regard them as badges of distinction. I've worked hard for them!

I guess that when I think about it, there are three things in particular that I like about getting old. First, you can speak your mind, as I certainly try to do, but you have to do your homework first; otherwise, you'll quickly be dismissed as a doddering old fool. The second thing I have liked about getting old is that I have successfully outlived a great deal of my opposition; many of the people who were my detractors are not around anymore! And then the

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and illnesses.’*

– Maggie Kuhn

third thing that I’ve especially liked about getting old is that it’s really kind of a miracle to be able to tap into the incredible energy of the young, while making use of the knowledge and experience that comes after living a long, full life. Having the power of these two worlds is an enormously vitalizing and inspiring experience.

I think of age as a great universalizing force. It’s one thing that we all have in common. It doesn’t begin when you collect your Social Security benefits. Aging begins with the moment of birth and it ends only when life itself has ended. Life is a continuum; only we—in our stupidity and blindness—have chopped it up into little pieces and kept all those little pieces separate. I feel that the goal of successful aging is to keep on growing and learning and becoming a mature, responsible adult.

**Ken:** Do you think that most people view aging in a positive fashion?

**Maggie:** Sadly, most people don’t yet view aging in this way, and too many of my older peers are unhappy with their predicament. 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—although there are lots of people and programs that have purported

to serve us, but instead treat us like wrinkled babies, powerless and dependent. 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.**

**Ken:** Many elders seem to feel they are the victims of stereotyping and negative cultural images of aging. Would you agree?

**Maggie:** 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 impact on elders.

First, there is the myth that stereotypes old age as a disastrous disease that nobody wants to admit to having, but that 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 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. If older people could choose to remain workers in the mainstream of society, they might realize more fully their ability to control their own lives while usefully influencing the direction of society.

A powerful negative myth that prevails in our culture is that old age is powerless. But if you really look at the demography of the United States and Canada, there is enormous power in our numbers. What some describe as the “plight of the elderly” will not appreciably improve without basic change in society, including an active and intelligent involvement of our older population.

**Ken:** How is the Gray Panthers different from the many other so-called senior citizens’ programs in existence?

**Maggie:** First, let me say that “senior citizens” is a euphemism that we reject as insulting and demeaning. I prefer to be called by my name, or, if not, I’d like to be identified as an “elder,” for this is what I am.

I suppose that at present our movement has three characteristics that distinguish it from other groups of elders. First, in many ways, we are a relatively radical group, as we are an age-integrated action-coalition working for *change*—not just adjustment or accommodation to the existing order. Second, we are very much concerned about all forms of injustice and oppression, including unjust treatment of citizens because of their age. And third, we are experimenting with new, flexible structures and with multiple leadership, in the belief that human relationships are more important than bureaucratic hierarchies; our network doesn’t require a lot of machinery to keep it running.

**Ken:** Where did you get the name “Gray Panthers”?

**Maggie:** I suppose that we owe our name to a New York television newsman who saw a similarity in the activism of our group, which was originally called the “Coalition of Older and Younger Adults,” to the radicalism of the Black Panthers. As soon as the term was used on air, it caught on and before we knew it, we were being called the “Gray Panthers.”

**Ken:** What is particularly exciting about you and the Gray Panthers is your willingness not only to speak out on significant social and political issues, but also to explore and experiment with new lifestyles and ways of being. Do you find the role of “lifestyle explorer” to be a difficult one to assume so late in life?

**Maggie:** In many ways, it's always difficult to try new things and take risks, but **in our old age we become more free to innovate**; we're free to burst out of our wrinkled skins and be creative. Of course, it takes some planning to do this—and a great deal of support and confidence. It also takes examples. But if we allow ourselves to look, we see that history presents us with countless examples of alive and creative older people.

**Ken:** Maggie, if you boil it down, what should be the role of society's elders?

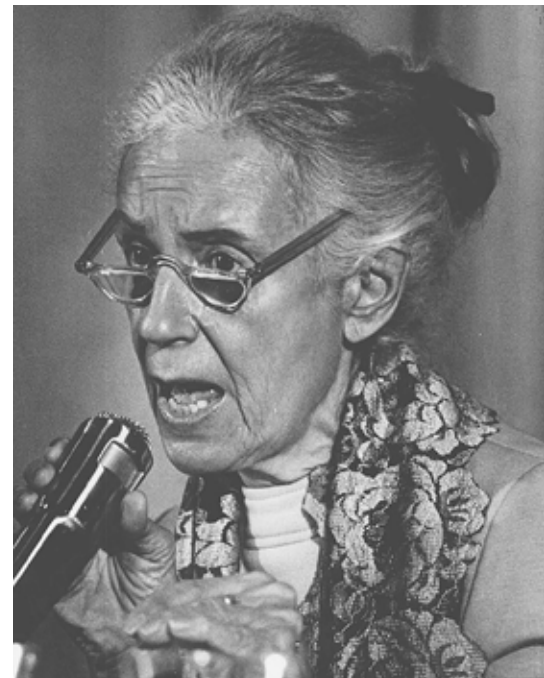
**Maggie: We the elders should be society's futurists.** There are increasing numbers of people in my generation who are equipped and ready to do that, if given an opportunity. We who are older have enormous freedom to speak out, and equally great responsibility to take the risks that are needed to heal and humanize our sick society. I repeat what I said before: We can try new things and take on entirely new roles. Let me describe some of them:

1. *Testers of new lifestyles:* In old age, we don't have to compete. We do need desperately to cooperate, to live communally, to reach out to other human beings we never knew before. Our society worships bigness, numbers, profits. I prefer to esteem smallness—small groups caring for one another, small groups of activists taking on giants. Small can be beautiful.
2. *Builders of new coalitions:* Age is indeed a universalizing factor, enabling us to close ranks among the young and old, black and white, rich and poor—to form coalitions of power and shared humanity.
3. *Watchdogs of public bodies, guardians of public interest and the common good:* Cadres of watchdogs can observe the courts, watch city councils, and monitor the public and semi-public bodies where critical decisions are made, often hidden from public view.
4. *Advocates of consumers' rights and whistle-blowers on fraud, corrup-*

*tion, and poor services:* We need patient advocates in nursing homes, advocates for the hearing-impaired, advocates of elderly residents in retirement homes.

5. *Monitors of corporate power and responsibility:* We can establish media watchers to monitor television and the press. We can organize protests in stockholders' meetings, reminding the multinational corporations of the ultimate ethical questions involved in their operations, the need to protect their workers' safety and the environment, etc.
6. *Healers of a sick society:* We can use our weakness and deprivations as powerful social criticism and levers for change. I'm enormously struck with what antibodies in the human body do to combat disease and put down infection. I'd like to think of us as releasing healers—people working out of their own understanding, their own sense of history, their own freedom from some of the tyrannies of earlier years, to help heal a sick society in whatever way they can.
7. *Critical analysts of contemporary society and planners for its future directions:* We can shrewdly assess our materialism and the values of our too-plastic world. In this age of liberation and self-determination, ministers of homes for the aged, coordinators, nurses, social workers, counselors, and educators have to shift gears! We must overcome the massive paternalism that exists in the helping professions. We are performing best in the public interest when we are enablers, energizers, liberators.

**Ken:** I suppose that in many ways you are the best example of your philosophy and attitudes regarding the potentials inherent in the aging process. Here you are, at age 73, a national celebrity who has been instrumental in effecting a great deal of social and political change. When you were young, did you envision that this would be in store for you in later years?



*'We're all familiar with the problems. What we need now is action,' Maggie Kuhn declared in a 1974 address to Denver's Gray Panthers. Photo: Dave Buresh/The Denver Post via Getty Images*

**Maggie:** To tell you the truth, I can't really believe that it's all happening. All my life I was primarily involved in groups and group activities, and so never was one for celebrity or personal acclaim. It's all so exciting! Often, it's quite frightening, too; now that I am in this position more than ever I need support, friendship, love, criticism, and assistance. My life has become so challenging that I feel more alive now than I ever did. It's just terrific!

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

**Maggie:** We are a new breed of old people and 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,

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Host Johnny Carson interviewed activist Maggie Kuhn on The Tonight Show airing February 18, 1977. Photo: Fred Sabine/NBCU Photo Bank/NBCUniversal via Getty Images

the experienced ones. We are maturing, growing adults, deeply concerned about the well-being and survival of our society. I feel truly honored to be able to play a part in this exciting and challenging transformational process.

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## Perspectives on progress

Maggie Kuhn was a true activist and change agent, but has society's response to its aging population progressed since her interview with Ken Dychtwald over 40 years ago? I discussed this deceptively simple question with him.

**CM:** *Ken, have we made progress in responding to our aging population since you did your interview with Maggie Kuhn?*

**KD:** Well, when I began writing *Age Wave* in the 1980s, I envisioned spreading the word like Paul Revere: "The aging are coming, the aging are coming!" We were in the midst of a revolution unlike any other, and it was being brought about by elevating longevity, which was creating growth in

the number of older people. With fertility declining at the same time, it meant that the cultural weight of youth was also going to decline while the cultural weight of everybody would say, "Okay, let's get ready for this revolution. Let's fix our medical system; let's prepare our schools for lifelong learning; and let's do away with ageism in advertising, because what sense will it make to have ageist ads that are both ignorant and mean? I also saw that there would be more 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds who were going to have the wealth and the spend in the marketplace.

Here we are in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we have more older people. They have more financial power. They have also experienced far more turns around the sun and therefore have greater perspective than any group of men and women in the history of the world. Today's 65- or 70-year-old has seen more, known more and made sense of more than the wisest people ever in the world. We have reached a level of concentration of wisdom and emotional intelligence that the world has never encountered. Yet, when I was gathering up my memoir and I found this interview from 1978, I thought, "Man, oh man! We haven't come very far at all." And how disappointing is that?

Think about the progress we've made with regards to computational technology. Forty years ago, there were no cell phones, no personal computers. We've made massive progress with regard to our technology, but we have not made much progress at all with regard to our psychology and sociology of living full and contributing lives. We still have not created a healthy version of aging—it's even worse than it was. We still have not created a model of lifelong learning and mentoring—it's worse, too. The generations are more siloed than ever. And we have just as much, if not more, ageism in our language and in our thinking.

I would also say, with respect, that the aging field itself has an ecosystem that, despite being well-intentioned, nevertheless

plays a big role in keeping alive the wrong roles, ideas, language and purpose for elders. We treat older people with kid gloves in many instances. Ironically, the field itself is ageist! We just haven't seriously thought about how we create an age-friendly and intergenerationally interdependent world where we challenge people as they grow older to be their best selves, to make their grandest contributions, and to rise up to and become elders. We are missing one of humanity's greatest opportunities: harnessing and integrating the wisdom, emotional intelligence and power of our elders.

**CM:** *What can we do about it?*

**KD:** I'm on the board of XPRIZE, and that's a whole world of people who are keen on innovation. They think of innovation in terms of tech. I think we could take that same spirit of innovation and say, "What's the purpose of a 60-year-old? What could you be doing with yourself when you're 70? What are the possibilities of being 80 today and tomorrow?" We could then build our media and our communities and our residences to be supportive of those things, to bring them about.

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– Dr. Ken Dychtwald

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**CM:** *Do you see signs of this happening?*

**KD:** Well, if we think back to when retirement was introduced in the US in the 1930s, there was a lot of rebellion against those policies. Many older people wanted to keep working because they wanted to earn money, to feel a sense of purpose and to have a socializing force in their lives. So, while there were certainly benefits that came along with emerging retirement policy, there were negatives to it as well. In fact, even then, a lot of older people saw retirement as being pushed away, but it still became standard fare. Today, many elders are beginning to get sick of the ageism in the advertising they see, and many are becoming furious that the healthcare system is not skilled in helping them grow old with optimal health. A lot of older people are infuriated that their points of view and their wishes and concerns are not front and center in their families and in their community life. And a lot of older people are struggling with an absence of purpose. These are the very things Maggie Kuhn was challenging our society about four decades ago.

How could we have made so little progress, especially when the engine driving it—namely, demography—is so predictable? Maggie's comments are as relevant right now as they were in the past. It's almost as though she's sending a battle cry for today. The question is, will we respond?

## **Immense opportunity**

A look at the full picture today brings one word to mind: *opportunity*. "There is a significant benefit to both society and businesses to address the real needs and potential contributions of our aging population," Dr. Dychtwald says. "In many instances, those needs are still unmet and those potentialities are still unrealized."

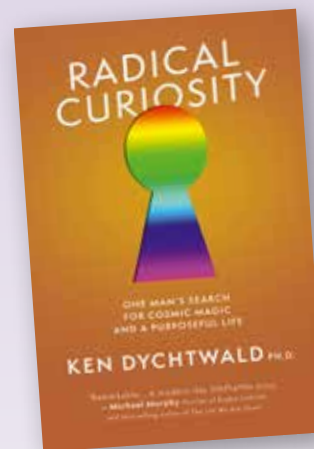
We have more older people alive today than ever before, and they seek innovative solutions, services, products, programs and communities that support them to live well as they age. They control more than 70% of the disposable income today, according

to the *Survey of Consumer Finances, 2019*, "and speak both with their hearts and with their wallets," Dychtwald observes. "Growing numbers—including myself—are fed-up with society's wrongheaded and ageist attitudes and are seeking change."

For communities and organizations, prioritizing a wellness culture can help attract and keep customers as they achieve a higher quality of life. It's an immense opportunity for those who understand and fulfill the aspirations, expectations and needs of an aging population. 🌀

*Colin Milner, CEO of the International Council on Active Aging<sup>®</sup>, is founder of the active-aging industry in North America and a leading authority on the health and well-being of the older adult. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has recognized Milner as one of the world's "most innovative and influential minds" on aging-related topics. An award-winning writer, Milner has authored more than 300 articles. He has been published in such journals as Global Policy and the Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics. He also contributed a chapter to the WEF book Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise? coauthored with the Journal on Active Aging's Jenifer Milner and ICAA Advisory Board Member Kay Van Norman. Efforts by the ICAA CEO have inspired a broad spectrum of groups to seek his counsel, including the World Health Organization, WEF's Global Agenda Council on Aging, US Department of Health and Human Services, and Canadian Special Senate Committee on Aging.*

## **Resources**



*Image courtesy of Age Wave*

## **Internet**

### **Age Wave**

<https://agewave.com>

### **Gray Panthers NYC Network**

[www.graypanthersnyc.org](http://www.graypanthersnyc.org)

### **XPRIZE Foundation**

[www.xprize.org](http://www.xprize.org)

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