

Vancouver Sun

Raging against the night

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Illustrations: CORI HOWARD/ FRAN Thoburn (centre) and the Victoria Grannies entertain the crowd at the Saltspring market

Flowing skirts, gloves, shawls and outrageous hats brimming with flowers and feathers in a cacophony of reds, blues, purples and greens round the corner to the Saltspring market. The Raging Grannies have arrived for their annual convention.

They weave their way through the market, chat to the vendors and talk excitedly about gardens and the Gulf Islands, freshly baked pies and old clothes. One, wearing a bright pink sequined peace sign on her shirt, a long frilly apron and a nightcap dangling hundreds of little ornaments, strolls down the aisles in solitary splendor, head held high and smiling from ear to ear.

Whispers sweep through the crowd as information is exchanged about these little old ladies who really don't act their age. A man who would look more at home at the corner of Robson and Georgia turns to his wife and asks, "Who are these pinkos?" He must have forgotten the Cold War is over.

His answer comes in the form of a song sung to the tune of My Grandfather's Clock as the Grannies' voices pierce the air:

These grandmothers squawk but don't sit on the shelf while there's so much work to be done./

There's the question of peace while arms

sales increase./

Ain't political rhetoric dumb?/

So we'll bitch, rage and roar even more/

'til we change our country's course . . .

These Grannies, who squawk but don't sit on the shelf, range in age from 60 to 86 and have convened on this recent September weekend to plan for the future, meet old friends and learn new techniques of "creative disobedience."

Because of mortality and poor book-keeping, estimates of their number vary. But like seeds scattered in the fall, there have sprung up 11 groups of Raging Grannies, from here to Montreal.

Since their organization in 1987 they have appeared from the steps of Parliament Hill to the remote logging roads of Clayoquot Sound. With satire and humor, they sing their sometimes-out-of-tune songs in malls and corporate boardrooms and at environmental protests.

"I think in the heart of every Granny there is some rage," says Pat Easter of Beacon Hill. "That's why something like the Raging Grannies has such a wide appeal. Because everybody is saying 'Yes, I feel

that way too.' "

Defying all stereotypes of the gentle senior citizen, these women rage about issues like peace, justice and the environment. No little old ladies in rocking chairs biding their time knitting and watching TV, these Grannies have made their name through advocacy and civil disobedience, proving false the theory that radicalism is synonymous only with youth.

This balmy weekend proves also that communal living is not only a youthful phase. After their parade through the market, the Grannies return to the Saltspring Centre, a gracious old house with a New Age mission.

Organic vegetables are grown in the greenhouses out back. There are yoga workshops. And you have to take your shoes off before entering, which the Grannies do, leaning on one another.

They pad down the hall to the meeting room. Cushions are scattered on the floor. Listening to a talk on sustainable gardening, one of them falls asleep. She awakens herself and others with a loud snore. She looks up sheepishly as all the others giggle.

One brings her a special seat that "puts your pelvis in just the right position" and another brings her an extra pillow.

A youthful Granny wearing jeans and a T-shirt jumps to her feet and explains one reason for their success.

"Our society has a hard time coming out against older women. We're supposed to respect authority and we don't," says Fran Thoburn, 60, of the Victoria Grannies.

"We're skeptics. We speak out and we don't stay home and bake pies. We're out doing something weird."

The first weird thing that brought the idea of a Raging Grannies group together was when Doran Doyle of Victoria dressed up as E.T. and stood outside Woolco giving out pamphlets on the effects of radiation. Walking around in her hot rubber mask, she chanted "E.T. doesn't want nuclear ships in our harbor."

She called it a wild leap, a moment of truth that helped propel her to consider the effectiveness of creative disobedience. "People came straight toward us. A kid even dropped a Smartie in my mouth. That gave me the insight that we should be more playful in our approach."

Playful is the only word to describe their next "action." A group of Grannies dressed up as NERTS ("nuclear energy radioactive technicians") and pretended to test puddles for radioactivity outside a shopping mall near the military base in Victoria.

Then Chernobyl happened. "And then I had a flash - not a hot flash - an inspired flash," says Doyle. "I began to look at the business of being Grannies and of feminist rights and then at the legacy we're leaving on the planet and we began to realize that to rage is the correct reaction."

Vancouverite Doris McNab, 70, heard the Grannies' songs while visiting Victoria and remembers thinking, "What a wonderful way to bring joy into a movement. Working for peace can be so depressing. This is a way to bring your message across in a way people remember." So she started a similar group in Vancouver.

What the Grannies share is a strong sense of duty to point out the mistakes made by their own generation. "We are responsible for the situation we're in," says Alice Coppard, 86, the oldest Granny. "We allowed it to get here so we should try to turn it around."

For Coppard this is not an unusual stance - she has been politically active all her life. In 1969, she hitchhiked with a friend to Ottawa and then to Washington, D.C., with a petition against the Alaska oil pipeline. "We didn't stop the pipeline, but we delayed it," she says.

Virginia Newman of Saltspring says, "We have time. We are retired. We can take part and do more than just vote. But young people can't do that because they're working so hard to keep up with the cost of living.

"We have to face the fact that in society, there's an inbred system of machismo. We should have the same attitude toward competition. We have to work toward cooperation."

After dinner comes the highlight of the weekend, the entertainment special where new songs are showcased. The differences among the groups becomes apparent when the more hang-loose Victoria Grannies yell, "Show your tits!" Some respond with disapproval.

It is a long and exciting day for the women, who though tireless, are still old. It is, in part, their age that gives the Grannies their effectiveness and nonpluses their opposition. Many people simply don't know how to deal with them.

Some months before the convention, Jean

McLaren from Gabriola dressed up as Mother Earth and joined the anti-logging protestors in Clayoquot Sound. The police had a hard time arresting her. "I was looking very dignified. And when they took my fingerprints, they told me to be careful not to get ink on my dress," she laughs.

"We try to think of different, creative ways of civil disobedience. That's what the Raging Grannies are all about."

Founding Vancouver Granny McNab says, "You're freer when you're older. I still cook, bake, knit and love my grandchildren. But, you know, grannies don't have as many responsibilities. They can't get fired."

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