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Meet the 'Raging Grannies' and 'Gray Rangers' Calling for Climate Action

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Mary Lutz and her friends, donned with buttons and holding signs, pull out their instruments and warm up their voices to begin singing to the tune of “Jingle Bell Rock,” but this was no oddly-timed holiday show in mid-September.

Amid an estimated crowd of 250,000 people last weekend in New York City, their lyrics rang out: “Recycling, Recycling, Recycling Rocks...If you don’t want garbage piled up to your chin, Recycling must begin.”



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As the world focuses on Greta Thunberg, Jamie Margolin, Xiye Bastida, Alexandria Villasenor, the Sunrise Movement, and the thousands and thousands of teenagers and children striking, marching, and protesting, the Raging Grannies’ New York metro area chapter were out in the heat en masse to call for climate action, too.

The Grannies are part of a larger, worldwide support group of senior citizens armed with signs, buttons, songs, tips on proper ways to get arrested they perfected while protesting the Vietnam War, plenty of words of encouragement, and a wealth of experience in calling for change within and outside of the system. The Elders for Climate, Mothers out Front, and the Gray Rangers are just some of the groups that make up this overlooked contingent.

In the 2016 presidential election, [71% of Americans over 65 years old voted](#), compared to just 46% of 18-29 year olds, and people like Lutz want politicians to know that. But, as Lutz pointed out to *Fortune*, she is “happy that the youth are leading it. And in this instance, we're happy to be here as followers within this climate strike.”

“In this instance, we're happy to be here as followers within this climate strike”

—MARY LUTZ

Amid the growing number of verbal and [cyber attacks](#) on social media and even [Fox News](#) on Thunberg and the other teenage activists, it may be easy to think all older people feel the same as President Donald Trump and others. But Lutz had a simple message for those dismissing the youth calling for governments to do something about climate change: “They need to wise up, they need to get their act together.”

Lutz said the climate movement “has numbers, it’s a worldwide strike,” but what is crucial is that activists like her see their young counterparts talking about “poverty...and militarism,” which she said are both “intimately linked to” the damaging effects of climate change.

Between the famines in Yemen, Sudan, water and land rights for Native Americans, issues for farmers in the Midwest and south Texas, “the idea of having to fight one issue at a time is not going to work. We have to fight these all together,” she said.



Climate activists march in New York City in September 2019.

Photo: Mythili Sampathkumar

While she cited internet and social media access as one of the most important differences between when she was protesting in her teenage and young adult years, she also noted that “while most of the world was against the Vietnam War, [climate change] is waking up everybody, because it affects everybody in every respect.”

Susan Lee, another of the Raging Grannies, told *Fortune* she was “excited” to be at the climate strike, as well, because of the power she saw in the diversity of the crowd present.

The environmental movement as a whole has traditionally left out Native Americans, other indigenous groups around the world, poorer communities, disabilities rights advocates, and activists of color, but the climate strike and the events all around Climate Week seemed to be far more inclusive and diverse than the usual scene.

“I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time,” she said, adding that “most things that begin out of white-oriented groups begin white and end white but if we don’t have all kinds of people involved in this, we’re not getting anywhere.”

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—SUSAN LEE

Barbara Ford, who works for the environmental group 350PDX.org in Portland, Ore., also said her generation and older senior citizens needed to recognize the opportunity for intergenerational learning about how to make the climate movement more diverse and inclusive.

Ford said there is “internalized and implicit racism” that needs to be worked on by collaborating with younger activists, but also that they can learn from people like her who have a history of organizing community groups and navigating politics.

While Anthony McLean of Nashville, Tenn., is supportive of all of the youth activists, he also saw a gap in climate activism which would allow “anyone with an AARP card” to participate and work together effectively, and so he started the Gray Rangers group to “promote climate as the most important issue of the 2020 election.”

McLean, who organized the first Earth Day celebration at his high school in 1970, told *Fortune* one of the larger points he makes to fellow AARP members to not just say they support youth activists but to take up the mantle of climate action themselves is: “If you’re retired you likely have grandchildren or children who will bear the brunt of this” and leaving them a plot of land will do them no good if that land is underwater or dried out from drought. He also noted a rise in public sentiment about taking climate action.

“If you’re retired you likely have grandchildren or children who will bear the brunt of this”

—ANTHONY MCLEAN

He wants climate awareness among seniors to “feel like a tsunami” for climate deniers in order to make mitigating climate change a top priority among voters his age, especially Republicans.

“There is a joy in confronting the status quo at that age,” McLean said of the high school students who are striking every Friday, and noted the Gray Rangers will support any of them because “there’s more to it than...just kicking ‘the man’ in the butt” when it comes to the urgency of climate action.

June Wink celebrated the youth movement as well, telling *Fortune* she was “just so proud” of all the young people leading it.

A grandmother and lifelong activist and organizer, Wink and her husband, the late Walter Wink, traveled the world working to dismantle the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile in the early 1980s, fighting apartheid in South Africa by running non-violence workshops, working in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, and even getting arrested for protesting in front of the United Nations at one point.

Though Wink’s husband was a theologian she said they were not missionaries, just a couple concerned about people’s lives while “working with evil, power, and money” and writing about it.



Climate activists march in New York City in September 2019.

Photo: Mythili Sampathkumar

Even though age may have limited her to “little things, not big things anymore,” she said she emailed all her grandchildren before heading to the [climate strike](#) in Great Barrington, Mass., to say she “would be representing them” but stopped short of

telling them she was really there because she wants a brighter future for them. “I don’t want to be too preachy,” she said, laughing at herself.

As she spoke on the phone, Wink walked into another room to find “a good poster” to carry for the strike. She read one to *Fortune* that she had carried at a gun control protest not too long ago that summed up how she felt about the youth climate movement:

“The power of our children is much stronger than the power of the people in power.”

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