

“It’s All the Rage” exhibit proves activism has no age

Raging Grannies of Madison have been on the frontlines of protests for years, history documented at Nancy Nicholas Hall exhibit

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“It’s All the Rage: Activism, Aging, and the Raging Grannies of Madison” exhibit at Nancy Nicholas Hall. Sept. 20, 2024.

Anyone who frequents the Dane County Farmers' Market may have stumbled across a band of apron-clad, high-spirited elderly women, huddled together and singing enthusiastically. They're hard to miss, donning outrageous, flower-adorned hats, some draped in brightly colored shawls or sporting chunky jewelry. As they sing, Ursula, a hot pink, crocheted uterus mounted on a pole, hovers over them like a guardian angel. It is certainly a sight to behold.

These women are grannies, that's for sure. But look a little closer, and listen a little harder, and you'll realize that they aren't just any old grannies — they're the *Raging Grannies*. And they're not just singing lighthearted songs — they're protesting for feminist and progressive causes. Are they acting their age? Yes. Because, as the Raging Grannies believe, grandmothers don't belong in retirement homes — they belong on the frontlines of protest.

The [Raging Grannies](#), an activist organization of senior women with chapters throughout the U.S. and Canada, have a long and storied history in Madison, protesting for labor unions, reproductive freedom, gun control and LGBTQ+ rights. That history is now documented in a [new exhibition](#) at Nancy Nicholas Hall: "It's All the Rage: Activism, Aging, and the Raging Grannies of Madison." The exhibit opened Sept. 16 and will remain on display through Feb. 7.

Longtime member of Madison's Raging Grannies, Susan Bickley, is one of the exhibit's contributors. Bickley joined the chapter in 2007, four or five years after its conception — the date of which is under dispute, she said. After retiring from her career as a teacher and librarian, Bickley wanted to find a fulfilling way to spend her time. Singing on street corners about things she was passionate about was appealing to her, she said.

The first group of Grannies was formed in 1987 in British Columbia to protest nuclear submarines, Bickley said. Madison's chapter formed in opposition to the Iraq War. Grannies aren't the biggest fans of guns or war, Bickley said.

The Grannies' form of protest is usually their original songs with campy, biting lyrics: "If my uterus were a gun, these guys would leave it alone," for example. Their genre of protest brings together thoughtful, deliberate activism with the upbeat spirit of song. According to [the organization's website](#), to be a Granny one needn't possess singing ability — only a sense of humor, a willingness to make noise, an open heart and "no color sense, obviously."

"We have more fun than we deserve, really," Bickley said.

The Madison Raging Grannies were particularly active during the 2011 protests against Wisconsin Act 10, Bickley said. They protested alongside thousands of peaceful demonstrators opposing [the act](#) for limiting the rights of Wisconsin government employees, including teachers, she said. The Grannies put on "solidarity sings" at the Capitol five days a week for over a year, many of their songs featuring lyrics calling for a recall of Gov. Walker. Eight Grannies were arrested, but their cases were dropped for lack of cause.

"It was one of the most memorable things I've ever done," she said.

To this day, her favorite of her buttons, which the Grannies pin to their aprons to showcase their values, reads "Governor Walker, now you've pissed off Grandma."

It was at the 2011 protests that University of Wisconsin Gender and Women's Studies professor Christine Garlough, who helped curate "It's All the Rage," first encountered the Grannies.

"I was really interested in how people use culture for political purposes," Garlough said.

The Grannies, with their energetic performances and brazen refutation of grandmotherly stereotypes, intrigued her. Now, Garlough said she collaborates with the Grannies through a research group that

studies gender activism and aging. When the Center for Design and Material Culture at Nancy Nicholas Hall had an open call for exhibits, Garlough jumped on the opportunity to share the Grannies' history with the university.

The finished exhibit, which is made up of three display cases on the first and third floor of Nancy Nicholas Hall, features a wide array of artifacts donated by Madison Grannies, as well as QR codes that link some of the chapter's performances and oral histories told by Grannies. Graduate student Svea Larson heavily contributed to curating the exhibition, Garlough said.

When exploring the exhibit, visitors are encouraged to peruse drawers filled with photographs, buttons, embroidered bibs and even miniature Ursulas (considerably smaller but no less furious). There's no shortage of buttons, which are the group's trademark — dozens upon dozens are on display, reading, for example: "Bad politicians are elected by good people who don't vote," "Peace is patriotic," "At my age, I don't have to prove anything," and "If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament!" Garlough loved working alongside the Grannies to curate the exhibition, expressing admiration for their commitment to fearless speech.

"They're advocating for progressive causes in ways that sometimes people wouldn't think that grannies would do," Garlough said. "They take the stereotype of the Granny... and they turn it on its head." Dressed as stereotypical grandmothers in flashy colors and patterns, the Grannies certainly challenge expectations for older women in regards to activism. Rather than filling the passive roles assigned to elderly women, they've forged their own ways of protesting, without trying to appear or act younger than they actually are. They're the Raging Grannies, unabashedly so.

Garlough said she hopes that the exhibition will inform visitors of the importance of documenting activist history.

"This exhibit should start conversations about activism, about aging, about feminist issues and LGBTQ issues," Garlough said. "It's not the end of the conversation, it's the beginning."

Bickley has a very simple message for visitors.

"The Grannies will be weeping if you don't vote!" Bickley said.

Voting is all the rage. Activism is all the rage. And above all, the Grannies are all the rage, and they show no signs of slowing down. Take it from them — you're never too old to raise your voice and make change.

Visit the exhibit's [webpage](#) for more information or check out some [crochet](#) and [protest poster and button](#) craft workshops hosted by the Grannies on campus.