

## **DORIS ROBERTS REMARKS**

### **Senate Special Committee on Aging**

#### **Image of Aging in Media and Marketing**

**September 4, 2002**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for inviting me to speak with you today about ageism, a subject about which I have strong opinions and believe I'm highly qualified to speak. I'm in my seventies, at the peak of my career, at the height of my earned income and tax contribution. When my grandchildren say I rock, they're not talking about a rocking chair.

Yet society considers me discard-able: my opinions irrelevant, my needs comical and my tastes not worth attention in the marketplace. My peers and I are portrayed as dependent, helpless, unproductive and demanding rather than deserving. In reality the majority of seniors are self-sufficient, middle-class consumers with more assets than most young couples and substantial time and talent to offer society. This is not just a sad situation, Mr. Chairman. This is a crime. I'm here to urge you to address the devastation, cost and loss that we as a nation suffer because of age discrimination.

Age discrimination negates the value of wisdom and experience, robs us of our dignity and denies us the chance to continue to grow and to flourish. We all know that medical advances have changed the length and quality of life for us today. We have not, however, changed our attitudes about aging or addressed the disabling myths that disempower us. I would like to have the adjective old as it is currently used deleted from our vocabulary and replaced with the word older. My contemporaries and I are denigrated as "old:" old coots, old fogeys, old codgers, geezers, alta kakas, hags and old timers.

In truth, the minute you are born, you are getting older and the later years can be some of life's most productive and creative. The average age of winners of the Nobel Prize is sixty-five. Frank Gehry designed Seattle's hip new rock museum at age seventy. Georgia O'Keefe was productive well into her eighties. Add to the list Hitchcock, Dickens, Bernstein, Fosse, Wright, Matisse, Picasso, and Einstein, just to mention a few people who produced some of their best work when they would be considered over the hill by current standards.

My profession, the entertainment business, is one of the worst perpetrators of this bigotry, particularly when it comes to women. When I was a young woman some of the most powerful and popular actresses were women past the age of forty. Women such as Joan Crawford, Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck continued to work, getting better and better at their craft as they got older and capable of playing more complex female characters.

It can't be that executives are at a loss to find capable actresses. Many of my friends, talented actresses in the forty to sixty-year-old range, are forced to live on unemployment or welfare because of the scarcity of roles for women in that age bracket. A Screen Actor's Guild employment survey showed that there are three times as many roles for women under forty as there are for women forty years old and older even though forty-two percent of Americans are older than forty.

When a sixty-year-old actor portrays a married man his wife is likely to be young enough to be his daughter. Think of Michael Douglas paired with Gwyneth Paltrow in the remake of *Dial M for Murder* or Sean Connery married to Catherine Zeta-Jones. This is why some of my spectacularly talented actress friends in their forties and fifties have

been forced into the humiliating position of borrowing money from me to meet their mortgage payments and health insurance or begging me to see if there is even a tiny part for them on *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

It also explains why younger and younger actresses are visiting the plastic surgeon. Actresses in their twenties are getting Botox injections to prevent wrinkles from forming. Women start getting tummy tucks and facelifts in their thirties to forestall the day when the phone stops ringing. When a woman hits the age of forty Hollywood executives think she's too old.

I've been fortunate to be one of a handful of actresses who has continued to work throughout my career, but it has not been easy. When I was in my forties I heard of a great part on a new series called *Remington Steele*, but I wasn't considered for it because I was thought to be too old. I got a chance to read for it only because I was friendly with the casting director, and I was *very* persistent. I know many of my friends who have begged and pleaded for similar favors from producers they've worked with over the years and been turned away with that Hollywood euphemism: "We're looking for a different demographic." Even though the part is described as appropriate for a woman in her forties, the casting director really wants someone in her thirties or a bit younger.

The roles for women my age frequently show seniors in insulting and degrading ways, cartoons of the elderly. I recently turned down a movie role where I was supposed to play a horny grandmother who spewed foul language, exposed herself and chased after young boys. Although I turned down the job, I know someone took that part. We actors have let go of our responsibility to see that we are portrayed realistically because we are desperate for any part in any production. There is a coalition to protect the way every

other group is depicted in the media from Italians to Arabs to racial groups but no one protects the image of the elderly.

Hollywood clearly is clueless when it comes to understanding today's seniors, blind to the advances in medicine and self-care, and increases in personal income have made us a force to be reckoned with and a market to be exploited. Twenty years ago it was accurate to show a senior coming in for his check-up dragging his oxygen tank. Today it would be more appropriate to depict him carrying his tennis racket. But the youthful gatekeepers of the entertainment industry haven't caught up with these changes partially because they refuse to hire older writers who could craft story lines that reflect the reality of today's seniors.

Twenty years ago older, experienced writers past the age of fifty were the most sought after in the industry, getting sixty percent of the jobs. Now that percentage has shrunk to nineteen percent. Just six months ago I developed a project with an Emmy award winning writer/producer I knew from my days on *Remington Steele*. When it came time to pitch the project to the studio, he refused to come with me. "When they see my gray hair, we're finished," he said. Why do they think that a man in his fifties doesn't have anything to say about love or youth or relationships? I know he has a lot to say if anyone would listen.

I pitched a project to a cable network a few years back and got a very enthusiastic response. The executives wanted to take it directly into development. But once they found out that the director attached to the project was a woman in her fifties, they stopped returning my phone calls.

What these thirty-year-old executives don't realize is how impoverished their world is by focusing only on the limited perspective of youth. Yes there is energy and excitement and enthusiasm in the young, but there isn't any less among those in their senior years unless society is successful in its campaign to rob us of those qualities by diminishing us. We older people control seventy-seven percent of the country's disposable income yet the entertainment industry has made age something to be feared, even though we are all going to become seniors if we are lucky. It is small comfort to know that those who have perpetrated ageism will some day face it themselves.

As General Douglas McArthur once wrote: "Youth is not a time of life, it's a state of mind. Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People grow old by dissenting their ideals. Years wrinkles the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul. Worry, doubt, self-distrust, fear and despair, these are the long, long years that bow the head and turn the growing spirit back to dust. You're as young as your faith, as old as your doubt, as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear. So long as your heart receives messages of beauty, cheer, courage, grandeur and power from the earth, from man and from the infinite, so long you are young."

Mr. Chairman, I address you today as a person young in spirit, full of life and energy and eager to stay engaged in the world and fight ageism, the last bastion of bigotry. It's no different from sexism, racism or religious discrimination. It is a tyranny that suppresses us all at any stage and serves no one. As my late husband the writer William Goyen said, when we see infirm people, handicapped or older people turn away from them and we take away their light.

Popular culture has taken away our light. I'm here to urge you to bring it back.  
To quote General McArthur again: "Whether seventy or seventeen, there is in every  
being's heart the love of wonder, the undaunted challenge of events and the childlike  
appetite for what's next and the joy and the game of life."