



INTERNATIONAL LONGEVITY CENTER - USA

Written Testimony of

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Thank you Senator Breaux for the opportunity to appear at this hearing about the image of aging to discuss the problem of ageism. The term "ageism" was introduced in 1968 and is now a part of the English language. Ageism can be defined as a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people simply because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender.

I originally coined the term ageism in 1968 as chairman of the Washington D.C. Advisory Committee on Aging. During an interview with the Washington Post, I used the term to describe the stormy opposition to the purchasing of public housing for older people in Northwest Washington D.C. The causes of the neighborhood's negativism could have been mixed, for many of the future tenants were old, but also black and poor. But in this instance, I thought it was more a function of ageism than racism, since similar opposition to housing had arisen on other occasions in which race and socioeconomic status were not factors. Indeed, neighbors spoke openly and negatively about old people cluttering the streets and stores. The best way to describe this reaction was ageism.

The underlying basis of ageism is the dread and fear of growing older, becoming ill and dependent, and approaching death. This leads to denial and ambivalence. The young dread aging and the old may envy youth. Behind ageism is a corrosive narcissism, the inability to accept our fate. Ageism is manifested in a wide range of phenomena, on both individual and institutional levels – stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, simple subtle avoidance of contact, discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and services of all kinds, and of course elder abuse.

I understand this hearing is focused in particular on images of aging in media and marketing, in which ageism certainly exists. Older persons are often stereotyped in print and on television as feeble, ineffective, helpless, and irrelevant. They are robbed of dignity by the words and cartoons used to portray them. It is time to change the language and imagery of old age in the media. We must challenge the advertising, news, and entertainment industries to end ageist stereotypes and alter the climate toward older persons in a positive manner. My organization the International Longevity Center is

working to combat ageism by speaking out against negative images of older persons, such as the “greedy geezer.” I have enclosed with my testimony some images of aging in various forms of media, both negative and positive. The negative images are just examples of some of the ways in which older people are viewed. The positive images represent how older people can be just as dynamic and glamorous as younger people. In addition, the ILC conducts seminars with journalists, called Age Boom Academies, intended to deepen their understanding of the longevity revolution and to dispel the negative myths associated with aging and older people. Our society needs to change the erroneous and hurtful images such as ‘geezer’ to truer images of older people who are active, flexible, relevant, culturally involved, and an increasingly important segment of our society.

Ageism should be considered a psycho-social disease, one that can be addressed. As we all know, it is increasingly within our power to intervene directly in the physical realm of older persons (i.e. age-related disorders) with prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. However, it is *also* within our power to intervene in the social, cultural, economic, and political realms influencing the lives of older persons. If, however, we fail to alter negative imagery, language, stereotypes, myths, and distortions concerning aging and the aged in society, our ability to exercise these new possibilities will remain sharply curtailed. Fortunately, we can treat the psychosocial disease called “ageism” - those ambivalent and negative attitudes and practices that lead to hatred, discrimination, abuse, and even murder of the aged - by working to transform our cultural sensibility and through legislative initiatives. But until we effectively do so, ageism will remain, despite the fact that prejudice against age is basically a prejudice against everyone. We all chance to become its ultimate victims as longevity increases.

In order to treat this societal and personal disease, we first need to realize what is really true about older persons: The antidote to ageism is knowledge.

One myth is that all old people are senile and debilitated. But senility is not inevitable with age; rather, it is a function of a variety of brain diseases, most notably Alzheimer’s

disease and multi-infarct or vascular dementia. There is a clear distinction between aging and diseases that occur in old age. Unfortunately, there may always be some residual ageism resulting from discomfort and distaste for age and its disabilities. Some profound and common disorders of old age - mobility problems, dementia, and incontinence - are unattractive and provoke disgust and fear.

There is also the myth that old people are affluent. An examination of income data, however, reveals that our nation's older people are not a particularly wealthy segment of the population. Although there are pockets of wealth, about 70 percent of older households have an annual income below \$35,000 and almost 30 percent have an income of between \$10,000 and \$20,000. In addition, older women and minorities have very high rates of poverty, around 20 percent. It should be noted that the Census Bureau uses a different income threshold to calculate poverty among older people, with the result being that older people must be poorer to be officially counted as poor. This too is ageist, in that it assumes older people can and should get by on less.

If we are to fight ageism, older persons themselves need to be productive and develop a philosophy of responsible aging. For many of us retirement must be marked by a new kind of responsible aging. Through paid and unpaid work, people must continue to contribute to society, and they must be encouraged to do so. A strong enforcement of the laws to ban age discrimination in employment will help in this regard. The simple ability of older people to have some control over their own lives helps dispel myths that the older population is unproductive, depressed, disengaged, inflexible, sexless and senile. This is also beneficial to their own health and well-being, as highlighted by one of today's other witnesses, Dr. Levy. Of course, given the recent events involving individual retirement accounts, the need to protect and promote older workers is important for reasons of financial security as well.

Another key intervention against ageism follows the recognition that older people themselves are a market, an economic power. Japan has the most rapidly growing population of older persons in the world, as well as the highest life expectancy. As a

result, it has created a new industry of goods and services geared towards older persons called the silver industries. There is a lot of “gold in geriatrics,” as *The Wall Street Journal* once wrote, when one considers capitalism as a vital connection between producers and consumers. Thus, the so-called high cost of health and social services produces jobs and consumption. Looked at another way, the health care industry is the second largest producer of jobs and makes a significant contribution to the gross domestic product.

A continued heavy investment in biomedical, behavioral, and social research is another important intervention to address the roots of ageism. Through research on the biological processes associated with aging, as well as on diseases commonly associated with older people like Alzheimer’s disease, we can gain freedom from senility and enhanced independence, which will combat negative perceptions of aging.

It is also important to address the ageism that is rooted in medical schools and pervades the medical system. In fact, it is there that a medical student may first become conscious of the medical profession’s prejudice toward age, where he or she may first hear the term “crock” - originally applied to patients with no apparent organic basis for disease and thought to be hypochondriacal. The epithet is predominantly applied to middle-aged women and older people. Other terms in this cruel lexicon exist as well and may be applied to other unwelcome patients: “gomer” (“get out of my emergency room”); gork (“God only really knows” the basis of this person’s many symptoms), “vegetable,” and “geek.” Worst of all are “dirt ball” and SPOS (“semi-human or sub-human piece of s***”).

Medical ageism also includes a not-so-benign neglect, such as declarations by physicians like “what do you expect at your age” or such injunctions as “take it easy” – which is generally bad advice. Between 1955 and 1966, Morris Rocklin, a volunteer in the NIMH Human Aging Study, was studied until he was 101 years of age. Rocklin complained about his painful right knee to his physician who said, “What do you expect at your age?” To this typical statement by a physician, Rocklin replied indignantly, “So why doesn’t

my left leg hurt?" These common occurrences can be addressed by ensuring that all medical students receive appropriate education and training in geriatrics, so that they better understand the diverse health needs of older people and how to relate to them.

Most difficult of all, our nation must alter our deep-seated fear, our shunned responsibility, and harmful avoidance and denial of age. Our conscience should be burdened by our obligations to those who have gone before us. Strict legislation and enforcement against age discrimination and elder abuse are essential but insufficient. We must change how we think, feel and behave about late life. We must help people deal with their fears of aging, dependency and death. We must have a sense of the life course as a whole. Our family life, our educational system and our media must help transform our sensibility, and moral values held by each of us must drive this transformation of the culture and experience of aging in America, and beyond. We are in the midst of a wonderful new world of longevity. It is in our power to make it a celebration.

Thank you very much. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Negative Image of Aging in the Media

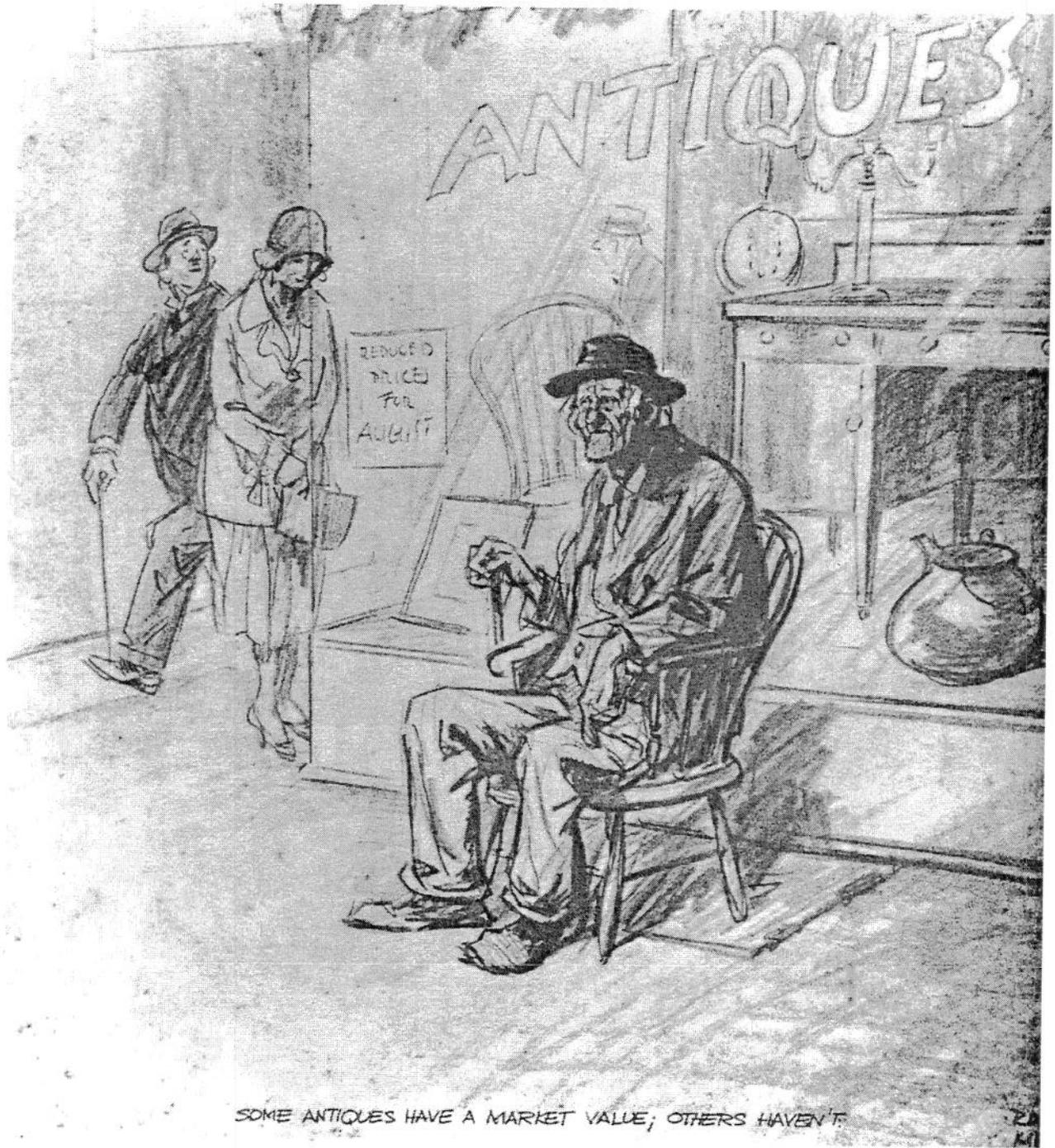
The New Republic / March 28, 1988

GREEDY GEEZERS



This magazine cover is a classic negative depiction of older people. When this 1988 cover article appeared, criticizing American society for pampering the “affluent” older population, the “greedy geezer,” the virus of ageism erupted again. The article began: “Thirty percent of the annual federal budget now goes to expenditures on people over the age of 65. Forty years from now, if the present array of programs and benefits is maintained, almost two-thirds of the budget will go to supporting and cosseting the old. Something is wrong with a society that is willing to drain itself to foster such an unproductive section of its population, one that does not even promise (as children do) one day to be productive.”

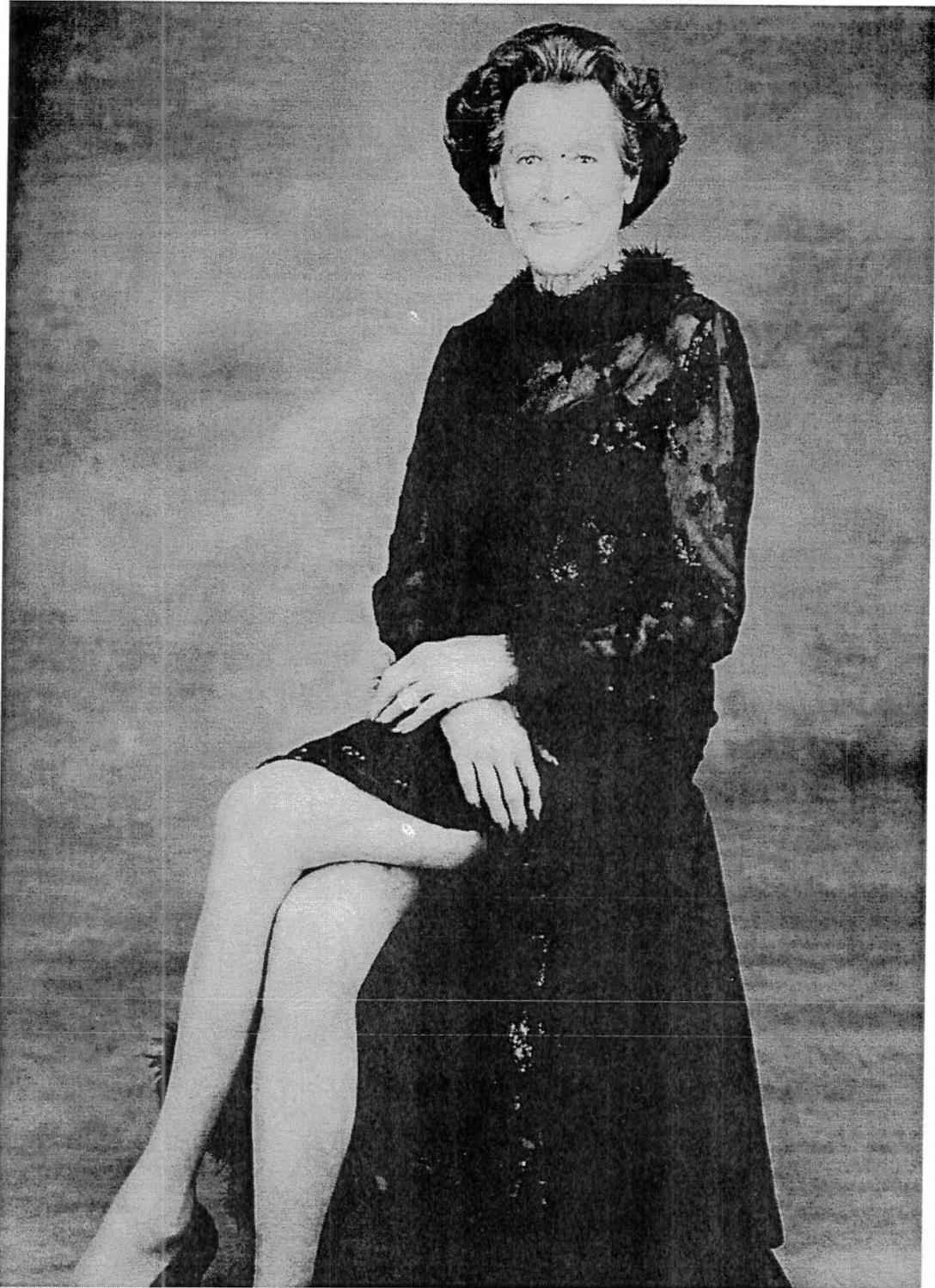
Negative Depiction of Aging



SOME ANTIQUES HAVE A MARKET VALUE; OTHERS HAVEN'T.

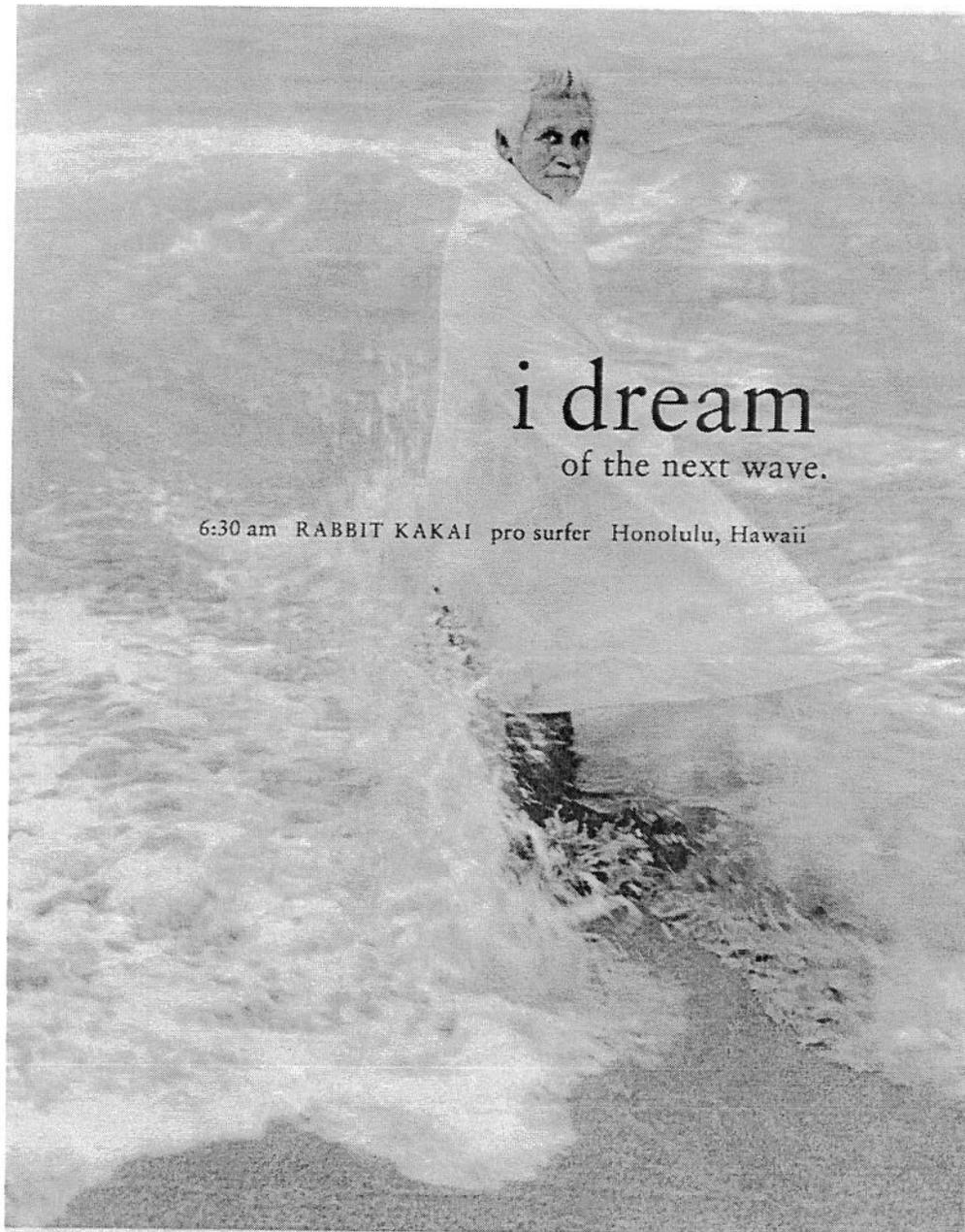
Ageism is not a new problem. This cartoon is from 1929, when the radical changes to American society brought about a focus on older people as a population. Unfortunately, one result was an increasing perception of old people as useless and obsolete.

Positive Image of Aging



This photo of Kitty Carlisle Hart at age 90 depicts the beauty and grace that can accompany old age. The photo is from a new book entitled "Wise Women," by Joyce Tenneson. The book contains photographs and statements about the experiences of aging from women between the ages of 65 and 100 in the United States, highlighting their power and wisdom.

Positive Image of Aging in Advertising



i dream
of the next wave.

6:30 am RABBIT KAKAI pro surfer Honolulu, Hawaii

springs.com

Springmaid®
BED AND BATH™

This ad depicts an older individual as active and vibrant, a person who still has hopes and dreams. Rabbit Kakai is one of the founding fathers of modern surfing and was recently featured in a critically acclaimed documentary "Surfing For Life." He began surfing in 1925 at the age of five and continues to surf into his 80s. He says that his eyes "still light up" when his wife says "Go Surfing."