



GRANDMOTHER POWER

A Global Phenomenon

PAOLA GIANTURCO

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Grandmother Power: A Global Phenomenon

by **Paola Gianturco**

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PAOLA GIANTURCO



powerHouse Books

Brooklyn, NY

Grandmother Power: A Global Phenomenon

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Introduction

Insurgent grandmothers are fighting the status quo, successfully seeding peace, justice, education, health, human rights, and a better world for grandchildren everywhere.

While working in Kenya, Cameroon, Swaziland, and South Africa, I met so many grandmothers raising AIDS orphans that it seemed to me the future of that continent rests with its grandmothers. It was they who inspired this book.

They also inspired me to wonder what other grandmothers around the world are doing.

Grandmothers in India are learning solar engineering and bringing light to their villages.

In Argentina, grandmothers have searched out more than 100 grandchildren who were kidnapped during the military dictatorship, and returned them to their families. Their search continues.

Israeli grandmothers are monitoring military checkpoints to prevent human rights abuses of Palestinians.

In the Philippines, grandmothers who were forced into sex slavery during World War II are demanding a place in history books so their experience will never be repeated.

Irish grandmothers are teaching their grandchildren to plant and cook, encouraging good nutrition, and reducing child obesity.

These heroic stories cause me to ask:

*If I were an illiterate grandmother, would I have the gumption and intellectual discipline to master solar engineering?

*If I were HIV positive, would I have the energy and spirit to support a dozen AIDS-orphaned grandchildren while I grieved for their parents, my children?

*Would I have the courage and moral clarity, as Israeli grandmothers do, to protect the human rights of the people whose land my country occupies?

*Would I be tenacious enough to fight a foreign government after more than 60 years, as the Philippine grandmothers do?

Would you?



This is the first time in history that grandmothers have campaigned universally and vigorously for political, economic and social change.

Grandmothers all over the world are forming and joining groups, 17 of which are featured in *Grandmother Power*. As a grandmother myself, I suspect this activism is stimulated by our tightly-connected, troubled world, which impels us to improve the future for our grandchildren.

The grandmothers in this book are teaching important lessons about values and character. Canadian grandmothers are teaching generosity and collaboration. In the Philippines and Argentina, grandmothers exemplify patience, perseverance, and justice. The South African and Swaziland grandmothers are modeling resilience and mercy. In Ireland, Peru, Laos, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates, grandmothers are sustaining traditions—while their sisters in India, Senegal, and the United States catalyze change. Indigenous and Israeli grandmothers are seeding hope and peace.



A worldwide grandmother movement is underway even though grandmother groups in different countries are not aware of each other.

The grandmother movement results, in part, from demographics. There are more grandmothers on the planet than at any other time in history. For thousands of years, there were none: people simply didn't live beyond the age of about 30.

Now, at least in the developed world, grandmothers are healthier, better off, and younger than ever before. And there are lots of them: in the United States in 2012, there were 38 million grandmothers. There will be 42 million by 2015.

One third of the entire U.S. population is grandparents, the majority of them between 45 and 64 years old. In 2011, Baby Boomers, aged 47 to 65, made up more than half of all grandparents in the country.

Everyday, 4,000 people in the United States become grandparents for the first time, and they can expect to be grandparents for the next 40 years. Thanks to quality healthcare and longer life expectancy, by 2030, five or six generations may be alive at the same time and the majority of children in the United States may have eight great-grandparents and four grandparents.



More than demographics drive the grandmother movement. It may be an expression of the Grandmother Hypotheses, an evolutionary biology theory that women live past their reproductive years to help their grandchildren.

Many grandmothers are raising their grandchildren. In the United States in 2008, close to two million children lived with grandmother caregivers, an arrangement that crossed ethnic and racial lines: 50% of those grandmothers were white; 27% African American; 18% Hispanic; and 3% Asian.



Even if they are not primary care givers, grandmothers often help care for their grandchildren, and they definitely care *about* them. In 2009 the Pew Research Center surveyed 1,300 U.S. grandparents about what they valued most in life. “Time with grandchildren” topped the list.



It should be no surprise that Baby Boomers (called Boomies in Canada and The Bulge in the U.K.) expect to make the world a better place; they are experienced at it.

In the 1960s, United States university students redefined civil rights for Blacks, Hispanics, Chicanos, gays, people with disabilities, and women. They lofted the environmental, population, and anti-nuclear movements.

In the U.S., Canada, England, France, Germany, and Italy, students catalyzed public opinion against the war in Vietnam. Students in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia rose up against Communist restrictions on free speech. French students participated in the largest general strike ever. Students demonstrated in Greece, Holland,

Japan, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and more. Those students are grandmothers today and are not about to stop agitating for change.

Many individual grandmothers play highly visible roles in today's world. The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, grandmother of eight, is President of Liberia. Michelle Bachelet, grandmother of two, was President of Chile and now heads UN Women. Grandmothers Whoopi Goldberg, Mia Farrow, Jessica Lange, and Vanessa Redgrave are all UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors. Jane Goodall, world expert on chimpanzees, says, “I am saving the world for my grandchildren.”



Grandmothers' impact lasts a long time. My Italian grandmother, Remigia, helped when her husband ran for parliament; she wrote his speeches, to his constituents, and letters to newspapers. My American grandmother Emma saved the sugary, sizzling doughnut holes for me, stocked a candy drawer with surprises, and let me play under her bushes where violets grew. Both women, born in the 19th century, live in me, in the 21st.



Similarly, our grandchildren will experience our impact for a long time. Laura Carstensen, Director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, anticipates that half—half!—of all girls born in the U.S. in the year 2000 will reach age 100, “the first centenarians to live into the 22nd century.”



The grandmothers I interviewed for this book are pragmatic problem solvers. They love their grandchildren in many ways. Their wisdom is expressed through vision, energy, creativity, and passion. Determined to improve the present and future, their lives have purpose and meaning. Since I am a grandmother, I met them as peers but they are also my heroes.

It was a surprise to meet those whom I had imagined would be most burdened. When I greeted the African grandmothers who are raising their AIDS-orphaned grandchildren, I asked, “How are you doing?” The response was: “I am strong!”

Grandmother Power tells the stories of 120 activist grandmothers, members of 17 groups in 15 countries on 5 continents. I hope you will feel, as you read each grandmother's words, that you are having an informal chat, just as I was lucky enough to have.

I visited the grandmothers between June 2009 and February 2011. Each chapter is a snapshot of the time I visited; by the time this book is published, the grandmothers will have more grandchildren and years than the text says.

Working with interpreters, I interviewed the grandmothers in their own languages and recorded our conversations, then later sent the chapter drafts back to the interpreters to fact check. Because the grandmothers were so engaged in helping create it, I consider this “our” book, even though my name is on the cover.

If you would like to join or support these grandmother groups, they are listed at the back of the book and on the project website, www.globalgrandmotherpower.com where you will also discover an internet trove: videos; news updates; more photographs; audio interview excerpts; behind-the-scenes snapshots; resources for more information; recommendations about how you can take action.



One of the grandmother groups you will read about is Grandmothers and GrandOthers in Barrie, Ontario. They are among the 245 Canadian grandmother groups that are advocating for, and raising money for African grandmothers caring for AIDS orphans.

The Canadian grandmothers' philanthropy is part of an ambitious program coordinated by Toronto's Stephen Lewis Foundation, called the Grandmother to Grandmother Campaign. Two of their grantees are featured in the Swaziland and South Africa chapters.

You have already helped the Foundation's grantee grandmothers because 100% of my author royalties will go to the Stephen Lewis Foundation's Grandmother to Grandmother Campaign. I am grateful for your collaboration.

An additional way you can help is to give *Grandmother Power* as a present. It comes in both hardcover and e-book form. It's a great gift if you are a grandmother, know a grandmother, have a grandmother, have good memories of a grandmother, plan to become a grandmother someday or, as the Stephen Lewis Grandmothers would say, if you are a GrandOther.

My dream is that this book will inspire grand people to use their wisdom, experience, energy, and power on behalf of grandchildren everywhere, all of whom deserve to live in a better world.

I dedicate this book, with love, to my granddaughters, Alex and Avery, and to all grandchildren around the globe.

Paola Giannone



HIV/AIDS: Canada

The idea for this book began percolating in 2006 when I documented a women's group in rural Kenya. I asked how many children each woman had: "Five and 10 adopted." "Six and 20 adopted." "Four and 15 adopted." Suddenly, I understood the code. The word "adopted" really meant, "I adopted my grandchildren who are AIDS orphans."

Forgetting to be an objective reporter, my eyes swimming in the realization that these women had lost their children, I said: "My God. So much sadness. What do you say to give each other solace?" Silence. Finally, one woman spoke, "We say God is taking care of AIDS. We are alive to care for the children."

I met women like these all over the continent and left convinced that Africa is glued together by grandmothers who adopt their grandchildren even though they themselves are too old to earn money, too weak to carry water, too poor to buy food, and too sad to provide comfort. When the funerals are over, the children run to their grandmothers and those heroic women care for them. Somehow.

The statistics are overwhelming: 14.8 million children younger than 15 are AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. In some countries, 60% of them live in grandmother-headed households.

One person who understands the grandmothers' predicament well is Stephen Lewis, the charismatic humanist who was the United Nations' Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, and then Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF. Profoundly disturbed by the pandemic's effects on African families, in 2003 he founded the Stephen Lewis Foundation to work at the grassroots level.

Another who understands the situation well is his daughter Ilana Landsberg-Lewis, a former human-rights lawyer who worked for UNIFEM and is Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

Travelling in Africa, Stephen Lewis visited orphan care projects and at every one saw grandmothers sitting outside, talking and making crafts. Concurrently, Ilana was receiving grant proposals requesting parenting and grief counseling workshops for care giving grandmothers. "I had just given birth to my second child," Ilana says, "and my strong, feminist, journalist, activist mother was just smitten with my children." Ilana was sure the African grandmothers' plight would resonate strongly for Canadian grandmothers.

The Grandmother to Grandmother Campaign launched with a press conference that included an African grandmother and program director, plus 2 prominent Canadian "elder stateswomen," Shirley Douglas and Adrienne Clarkson, who had been the Lieutenant Governor of Canada.

In 2006, the Foundation called a grandmothers meeting in Toronto. Ilana says, "We wanted them to become acquainted, pool their wisdom, and just possibly put an end to the suffering." One hundred grandmothers from 11 African countries joined 200 self-funded grandmothers from across Canada. During the 3-day meeting, the women told their stories, laughed and cried, sang and danced, discussed the problems, and made plans.

They became friends and they told the truth: African grandmothers were afraid of being charity cases; Canadian grandmothers were afraid of just being The Bank.

The African grandmothers needed "just enough" money: "just enough" to buy seeds to plant a community garden so they could feed the children. Or "just enough" to buy a swing set so they could run an after school care center. Or "just enough" to buy a coffin to give a loved one a dignified funeral.

The Canadian grandmothers wanted to be connected in a deeper way to grandmothers in Africa. They wanted to educate Canadians about African grandmothers, orphans, and AIDS; wanted to improve foreign policies about medicine and aid; wanted to raise "just enough" money.

Canadian grandmothers create and sell crafts to benefit grandmothers in 15 African countries who are raising AIDS orphans.

Kathy Dunn, 72 (2 GRANDCHILDREN), Alix Lipskie, 72 (4 GRANDCHILDREN),
Liz Macadam, 78 (7 GRANDCHILDREN, 5 GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN), Briar
Hepworth, 70, (GRANDMOTHER), Barbara Sikorski, 71, (5 GRANDCHILDREN)



Five women gather at Alix's new, sky-high condominium that overlooks the lake. "I used to live half an hour up the highway. Two summers ago, I went to Ottawa for a march and 2 grandmothers from Africa spoke and sang. I looked at those women and...the spirit! I thought, 'Alix, you can start a group in Midland. There must be women who'd like to help.' When I moved here, I left that group and joined the Barrie grandmothers."

Kathy says, "I met the African grandmothers in Ottawa, too. They are so alive! If it were me, I would be down in the dumps. How could we sit back and do nothing?"

Barbara, who is making monkeys for Just Gifts, checks in: "I moved to Barrie from Ottawa and saw a notice in the newspaper: the inaugural meeting of Barrie grandmothers. I went. Kathy was making teddy bears for orphans in Africa. During my childhood in Poland, I had a very precious teddy bear and I had always been interested in Africa. I thought, 'Africa. Teddy bears. This is it; this is me.' I couldn't stop talking about that meeting."

As we talk, all 5 women are industriously busy. Briar is making stuffed elephants out of socks. "We just put these elephants out and away they go! I was standing next to a lady at the last fair who said, 'Go over there and see the ant eaters!' I looked for the anteaters. She meant elephants, but whatever she wants to call them is fine!"

Kathy is stapling labels to bags of M&M's. The labels read: "Old Age Pills. Green is for forgetfulness. Yellow is for insomnia. Pink is for sex."

The Grandmother group works because, "We accept each other, thanks to our age and life experiences. We are united by a common cause. And JoAnne's 'just-say-yes' philosophy helps. When I told her that I got us into a 3-day expo right after she just said it was time to wind down for December, I thought, 'She's going to have a fit.' But she said, 'That's great.'"

"What do you get from this?" I ask. One woman says, "You're getting older and the body's starting to age. You think, 'Where am I going now with my life?' You go through grieving and regrouping when your husband passes. This work is absolutely therapeutic. We feed off each other's enthusiasm. There's always something you can be part of, if and when you want."

Another says, "I moved here 3 years ago. Without the grandmothers, I don't know how I would have met people." Another says, "This group has given me so much more than I can possibly give back."

"Thinking of all the things you've done...selling ice cream, serving coffee and cookies, making crafts to sell... which has been the most fun?" I ask. There is universal agreement: the Santa Claus parade when the grandmothers rode on a flatbed truck they decorated, pulled by a tractor. Each "waved like the Queen."

As they work, the women reminisce about their own grandparents.

Briar: "One of my grandmothers had a gift for reading stories. I loved listening to her voice. She read for hours and hours. She taught me how important it is to be close to your grandchildren."

Kathy, orphaned at 5, grew up in a cloistered convent. "I was a single mother. I know getting support is crucial when you need it." She has cared for 76 foster children. "One thing the nuns said was, 'To whom much has been given, much is expected.'"

Liz: "My grandfather told how they shared with the people next door. At Christmas, they brought whatever they could, even just an apple. He went to see a family with 9 children every weekend to drop off turnips or potatoes."

Briar: "My parents split up when I was an infant. My mother, sister and I shared my grandmother's house on the Isle of Scilly, 25 miles into the Atlantic off England's lands end. We didn't have much, but my grandmother was always there for us. Making a cake. Making tea. Playing word games around the fireplace. There was no better place to be."



Barbara: "I was born just before the war. My parents owned a large estate just outside of Warsaw and we spent the war years there. Bombings. Shelters. My mother worked in the underground movement; my father was taken prisoner of war. We escaped to England and I was sent to boarding school even though I didn't speak English. I always relate to people who make new beginnings."

The values these women learned from their grandparents serve them well in their roles as GrandMothers and GrandOthers working with and for their sister grandmothers in Africa.



The women gather to stock their Just Gifts stall on Friday, then take a break to attend one member's 50th wedding anniversary party.

On Saturday and Sunday, their booth is swamped. The grandmothers sell in shifts, spelling each other every few hours. Children, elders, and all ages in-between inspect, select, and stagger away with bagfuls of presents.

When the doors close Sunday afternoon and they count what's in the till, the GrandMothers and GrandOthers discover they have made so much money that they burst into a spontaneous gratitude dance. (Check out "Gratitude Dance" on YouTube, and celebrate with them.) I think: these Barrie grannies deserve our gratitude!



HIV/AIDS: South Africa

Tin houses tilt together as if they have melted in the heat. Jerry-rigged electrical wires form black knots against the sky, carrying illicit power from the main lines to the shacks. Laundry flaps on the fences. Barbershops, hair salons, and convenience stores operate from ramshackle stalls. Three men are building a prefab house of corrugated metal: one 9 x 12 foot room with 1 window and 1 door.

Almost a million people live in Khayelitsha, 12 miles from Cape Town. Ninety percent of the population are black and 40% are unemployed. Khayelitsha means “New Home” and here, if your new home is a shipping container, you live in a castle.

The Group Area Act of 1950 prohibited blacks from living in cities. Townships like Khayelitsha sprang up to provide places to sleep for men who did day labor in the city. For 30 years, the government periodically plowed the shacks under to destroy the informal neighborhoods. Residents rebuilt.

In 1983, when then-Prime Minister Botha established Khayelitsha officially, it was an apartheid slum with virtually no infrastructure. A steady stream of people began arriving from the Eastern Cape, building small houses of tin, wood, or cardboard, cooking with kerosene and using candles for light.

Today, goats and cattle wander freely in some Khayelitsha districts but there are also brick houses, water and electricity, shopping centers, clinics, fire stations, churches, and schools. And there are shacks barely large enough for a mattress. Gangs and crime are rampant.



Exiting N2 through the traffic on Spine Road, we drive toward Qabaka Crescent in J Section. There, in a 5-year-old concrete-block compound between a school and a church, is GAPA: Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS.

GAPA is run by and for grandmothers. They make up the management committee, the staff, teachers, facilitators, and participants. Each of some 500 members takes care of her grandchildren and/or at least 1 relative with HIV/AIDS.

Thabo Mbeki (President of South Africa from 1999 to 2008) denied that the HIV virus caused AIDS, and his Minister of Health urged people to eat beetroot and garlic to ward off the disease. The Cabinet overruled Mbeki in 2003 and made antiretroviral medicines available, but the delay was catastrophic.

Today, 5.6 million people live with HIV/AIDS in South Africa, more than in any other country in the world. Swaziland has a higher incidence of infection (26.3% vs. 17.8%) but the numbers in South Africa represent staggering suffering. South Africa has 1.9 million AIDS orphans, more than the entire population of Swaziland.

The sign on the fence around GAPA's compound proclaims, “Together, we are strong.” Inside, grandmothers are sewing, crocheting, and cooking. Kathleen Brodrick, GAPA's founder, and I sit in the midst of the activity. I ask, “How did strong grandmothers emerge from such terrible sickness and poverty?” She starts at the beginning.

In 2001, the Albertina and Walter Sisulu Institute on Ageing in Africa at University of Cape Town hired Kathleen for 4 months. The Institute had done a study about ways Khayelitsha grandmothers were coping, and wanted to give back rather than “just do research and run.” Kathleen, a white Zimbabwean, worked with older people as an occupational therapist.

“I set up a group of workshops that I thought might be helpful,” Kathleen says, “and put out an alert. You couldn't mention the word AIDS. It was so stigmatized in those days that nobody would have come. So

Grandmothers in a violent township outside Cape Town run after-school programs for children who have been orphaned by AIDS.



Human Rights: Guatemala

Village women tape clusters of balloons on the turquoise walls of the village community center: red, green, yellow, blue, orange, pink, aqua, white. Others balance sunflower and poinsettia blossoms on the balloons. Still others sprinkle bougainvillea petals and pine needles on the ground. There's going to be a meeting, but it looks like a fiesta.

We have driven over steep, cobbled roads in the volcanic mountain range outside of Jalapa, Guatemala. Now, we stop to let a man cross with his donkey that is loaded with wood. Anachronistically, a cell phone tower straddles a yard where corncobs dry on the ground. As we approach the village, people applaud.

This is Guisiltepeque. The grandmothers arrived earlier to help decorate for the meeting. A huge vinyl poster promotes their child protection hotline, The Tenderness Line, 79-22-77-31.

Some village women have graduated from Plan Guatemala's 12-session training course that aims to prevent child abuse by promoting good parenting. After receiving diplomas, the women organize community networks to put what they learned into practice. The grandmothers have come to help them teach parents to raise their children with love.

Already, men, women, infants, toddlers and teenagers are vying for the few chairs and benches, among them a woman who claims to have 40 grandchildren.

The grandmothers distribute Loving Parent Lotto cards plus handfuls of beans to use as markers. People whoop as they find graphics that match the words the grandmothers call, all describing behaviors that mark good parenting: "Hugs!" "Smiles!" "Talking!" Prizes are plastic bins, storage containers, and serving dishes. Everyone wants the game to continue until they have won.

As the sun rises higher, people pull the benches forward into the shade of the community center. Pretty soon, the people are virtually sitting on top of each other but nobody seems to mind. Mothers nurse. Women put folded towels on their heads for relief from the heat.

Maria Salome Campos, who wears a white lab coat, steps forward to explain that the grandmothers are administering vaccines today. She teases the crowd: "The vaccine is delivered with a syringe needle so big that it reaches into your heart." Nobody wants one. But when the grandmothers distribute "the vaccine," honey candy, *dulce de miel*, everybody wants some. Maria Salome says, "Put it in your mouths and savor it. That is what raising a child can be like: sweet and loving."

Ten Jalapa grandmothers volunteer with Plan Guatemala. For 6 years, they have run the child protection hotline and taught good parenting. Their first task was to "stop the silence." Sexual abuse of children was a taboo subject and beating was considered normal: parents disciplined children by hitting them; alcoholism and machismo escalated the violence.

In a few villages, local culture made the problems even worse. Some fathers in Hierba Buena and San Pedro Pinula believe it is their right to be first to have sex with their daughters. The grandmothers are working to halt this practice. Some girls who are pregnant with their father's babies have been placed in shelters, and the fathers, jailed. One, who raped repeatedly, was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

These problems are not limited to the Jalapa region. Asociación Casa Alianza Guatemala estimates that 7 out of 10 Guatemalan children suffer abuse of some kind. A 2010 Gallup survey found that most physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse in Guatemala is not reported because people don't believe the authorities can help. Besides, mistreatment usually occurs at home where corporal punishment is legal.

One of the grandmothers told me, "Traditionally, women here were expected to do housework, have babies, and live with machismo and mistreatment. Our training gives them options."

Grandmothers operate a child abuse hotline and teach good parenting practices in a region where family violence occurs often.

Gloria Marina Lopez De Palma, 66

3 GRANDCHILDREN



Pine needles carpet the sidewalk outside Gloria's house. She has recruited her neighbors to toss firecrackers into the street to welcome us. Inside, hand painted welcome posters and palm fronds

decorate the walls and more pine needles make every step fragrant. She has transformed our interview into a celebration.

A successful businesswoman, Gloria operates a small store, a *tienda*, in her house. Shelves hold shampoo, eggs, snacks, whiskey, pastries, and food-to-go, which she prepares.

Her namesake granddaughter Gloria, 10, loves to cook with her and today's lunch results from their collaboration: vegetable, chicken, and noodle soup with fresh tortilla chips, salsa, and guacamole, all served on a table with a cloth and bouquet of orange clivia. Gloria's two grandsons and her mother drop by. After lunch, the cat, Coco, and dog, Boomer, keep us company.

Gloria's daughter-in-law, who lives next door, watches the tienda while Gloria shops at the market for ingredients to cook, teaches classes at the

Catholic Church and works at the grandmothers' hotline. "I am busy," Gloria concedes, "but God doesn't chose lazy people." She is such a stalwart Christian that the church plans to give her an award on Saturday.

When I ask her to tell me more about her life, she bursts into tears. She has scars on her hands because her mother punished her, cutting her with the plate she broke accidentally while washing dishes as a child. Today, her mother, 85, "has nothing," Gloria says, "so I am her refuge."

Gloria's alcoholic husband ordered her to leave their wedding but when she started "to get on a bus in my white dress," he threatened to kill her. He beat her often over the next 30 years, and once tried to cut off her hand with a machete.

A priest recommended a separation 10 years ago. Of necessity, her husband now lives upstairs because their adult son is epileptic and Gloria cannot handle the seizures alone. On cue, the husband opens the door and walks silently through the room. She says he never speaks to her, and indeed, he doesn't even glance our way.

After counseling, Gloria forged her own path. "The grandmother workshops also helped me a lot. Now when I see women being mistreated, I tell them, 'Don't stay there; start working; free yourself!'"

Gloria is determined to stop abuse: "I was abused. My children were abused. I will not allow it. Children are our present and our future." Like the other grandmothers, Gloria argues that parents must talk with their sons and daughters, never insult them or use violence to harm them.

Her own grandchildren are polite and friendly. But she confides, laughing, that when she corrects one grandson, he teases her by pointing at the hotline poster on her wall and promising, "I will call this telephone number!"

When I leave, Gloria presents me with a small hand-woven cloth folded into a pumpkin shell, the oldest container in Meso-America. I am moved by her generous spirit, which thrives despite her difficulties.



Natividad Agripina Berganza De Berganza, 80

6 GRANDCHILDREN, 3 GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN



One late afternoon, we have a Coke with Natividad. If you don't think grandmothers are courageous, read on:

"I was visiting a young family. I knew the father had killed people in the past. He became very aggressive.

His daughter hid behind me for protection. I told him, 'Stop! I will report you.' He grabbed a machete, so I said, 'I will call the police to take you to jail.' Because I always carry fliers, I handed one to him and urged him, 'Read this. You don't have to act like this.' I had been trained. I wasn't afraid."

Born in the department of Jalapa on a *finca* (farm), Natividad describes growing up on "a river where I used to swim at 2 AM. We had horses and I rode sidesaddle wearing a long skirt."

She "always wanted to do something for humanity. When I was young, I visited hospitals to

give patients company and a doctor taught me how to give shots, which I loved. When I was 8, I gave everyone shots.

"Long ago," she remembers, "police did not respect human rights; people learned from their bad example. Domestic violence has improved since I was small. People now know there are laws. But sometimes, a man abuses both his wife and children. The wife gets so angry and frustrated that she also abuses the children. It's a cycle.

"One of the problems in doing our work is racism," Natividad reflects. "I notice that people from town are not welcome in indigenous communities in general and in one, I am not liked because I teach that women have the same rights as men. One day, someone threw a stone at me. A policewoman accompanies me now."



Justice: Philippines

“The Internet blog said this was a haunted house,” says a disappointed woman tourist poking her point-and-shoot camera through the decorative iron gate. The Red House in San Ildefonso, Philippines, is newly painted but it still stands empty. The caretaker, whose goats graze in the side yard, has no key.

My opinion? The house is haunted. Its ghosts are 200 women and girls from Mapaniqui who, 66 years ago, were force-marched to this mansion, locked in, and raped repeatedly by soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army. Mass rape was only one expression of the Army’s violence against women.

Thirty garrisons in the Philippine Islands doubled as “Comfort Stations” where “comfort women” were imprisoned and forced to provide sex to the Japanese soldiers who occupied the country between 1942 and 1945.

Mass rapes and sexual slavery occurred everywhere the Japanese fought. There were comfort women in China, Korea, Southeast Asia, the Southwestern Pacific, even in Japan itself. No one has counted the number of women and girls who were raped but ultimately, some 250,000 were forced to be sex slaves.

In most countries, comfort women were as young as 11; few were older than 20. They were imprisoned for up to 8 months. Typically 10 comfort women served an Army company and each was raped daily by between 5 and 10 soldiers. One third of the comfort women died before the war ended.

The Filipinas went home, got married, had children, found jobs, grew old, became grandmothers, and told no one that they had experienced wartime atrocities which, in their Catholic country, were considered profoundly shameful.

Fifty years later, in 1991, a Korean woman, Kim Hak-Soon, shocked everyone by breaking down at the Asian Conference on Traffic in Women held in Seoul and revealing that she had been forced to be a sex slave of the Japanese Army during World War II.

She and two other Korean comfort women filed a lawsuit against Japan demanding an apology, reparations, and mention of the sex slavery system in Japanese history books, which they hoped would help prevent the practice in the future.

Nelia Sancho, a well-known human rights activist and leader of a Philippine NGO that participated in the Seoul conference, discovered that comfort women also existed, invisibly, in her own country.

In 1992, Nelia was interviewed twice about Japan’s sex slaves on Daqui Paredes’ popular radio program, “This Is Our Age,” which ran on Manila’s station DZXL. At the end of each broadcast, an announcer asked Philippine comfort women to contact the station. “Don’t be ashamed. Being a sex slave was not your fault. Stand up and fight for your rights.”

Sixty-five-year-old Maria Rosa Luna Henson was listening dumfounded that the subject was being discussed publicly. Later, she wrote, “I suddenly felt weak. I lay down on the floor, tears blurring my eyes. My heart was beating very fast. I asked myself whether I should expose my ordeal. What if my children and relatives found me dirty and repulsive?” It was weeks before she took her oldest daughter into her confidence and asked her to request Nelia’s telephone number.

Rosa described her experience on Manila’s Channel 2 TV. Listeners were horrified. Rosa’s other two children wept, hearing their mother’s story at the same time as everyone else.

Former comfort women all over the country resonated to Rosa’s truth and responded to the request to tell their stories. A group of them presented their experiences on television and inspired more former comfort women to come out.

World War II sex slaves fight for reparations, an apology, and a place in the history books so their experiences will never be repeated.



The Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women, co-founded in 1992 by 7 women's organizations, recorded and authenticated the women's histories. In April 1993, the comfort women, assisted by a panel of Japanese lawyers, filed a class action lawsuit against Japan for violating The Hague Convention of 1907, which protected citizens of occupied territories. Like Kim Hak-Soon in Korea, the women demanded an apology, compensation, and inclusion in Japan's history books.

Forty-six Filipinas' testimonies, including Rosa's, were the foundation of the class action suit. I have read many of the 174 testimonies that were ultimately documented: some typed, some handwritten, some in English, some in Tagalog, all authenticated. They are stories of shock, rage, shame, desperation, and strength.

At first the former comfort women did not know each other but they began meeting and in 1994, formed an organization, Lila Pilipina, with six regional chapters. The members called themselves Lolos, the Tagalog word for "grandmothers."

Nelia Sancho was elected Chairperson and her NGO, the Asian Women's Human Rights Council, handled Lila Pilipina's administration, arranged much-needed psychological counseling for the members, and coordinated legal affairs.

Transforming shame and depression into political action, the Lolos began demonstrating in front of the Japanese embassy in Manila. By then in their 60s and 70s, some used walkers. They told their stories to the media, researchers, visitors, and students. The public was outraged.

The Lolos worked indefatigably to pursue their demands, collaborating with feminists internationally and with comfort women in other Asian countries who also filed lawsuits. Despite their ages, Lolos attended strategy meetings in Korea (where 80% of all comfort women lived) and gave testimony in Japanese courts.

At first, Japan denied that a system of comfort stations existed, but a scholar delved into the country's

military archives and proved they did. Then Japan argued that, having signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951 and having fulfilled the 1956 Reparations Agreement between Japan and the Philippines, they had no further obligations.

For 10 years, the Lolos' case progressed through Japan's courts. It was rejected and appealed in the Tokyo District Court. It was rejected and appealed in Japan's Appellate Court. Litigation dragged on.

Japanese politicians were divided on the comfort women issue. Some thought the country should admit, others thought it should deny, guilt. As different parties won elections, different policies resulted in what seemed, fleetingly, like progress.

Textbooks would include mention of the comfort women in one edition—but the references would be excised in the next printing.

Yohei Kono, Chief Cabinet Secretary and spokesman for the Japanese government, issued an apology in 1993, expressing "sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable psychological wounds as comfort women." Over time, that apology was edited, rescinded, disregarded, and reissued.

In 1995, Tomiichi Murayama, Prime Minister of Japan, led his government to establish the Asian Women's Fund, which offered "atonement" money to comfort women who applied and qualified. Each Lola could receive a letter of apology from the Prime Minister plus \$42,000. Japanese citizens donated \$26,000 of that amount; \$16,000 was Japanese government money to be administered through the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development.

Some Lolos, including Rosa Henson, wanted to accept the offer: they were poor and anticipated needing financial help and medical attention as they grew older. Others felt they should not accept while their lawsuit against Japan was still underway; "charity" from citizens was no substitute for government



Spiritual Life: Indigenous Grandmothers

Road signs on Arizona's N17 hint at the American west's past: a town named Bumble Bee; Big Bug Creek; Badger Springs and Bloody Basin Roads; Horse Thief Recreation Area; Dead Horse Ranch State Park; 1000 Trails Road.

North of Phoenix the earth is peach-colored, blanketed by sage and saguaro cactus, bordered by high mesas. Cottonwood, population 3,000, looks like a metropolis. Tall trees with yellow leaves dance in the strong December wind. The highway climbs past emergency off ramps for 18-wheelers.

Suddenly, the road curves into a valley where the afternoon sun strikes spires of red rock. I pull over, awed. Sedona is a glorious place to meet grandmothers who believe that human beings, the earth, and everything on (and off) it, are One.

For a thousand years, this area was home to the Sinagua Indian tribe. Today, it hosts the annual Hopi, Navajo, and Native American Culture festivals. This week, it is the site of the Seventh Council for the Next Seven Generations, a gathering of the International Council of the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers.

It takes more than an hour to navigate the dusty, rutted, 10-mile road that leads to the Mago Retreat Center, a 200-acre sanctuary where participants are already gathering at the Sacred Fire near 2 white tipis. People enter the ceremonial circle from the east where they are smudged with purifying sage; guests sweep the smoke 4 times across their bodies and breathe deeply.

Every 6 months, the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers meet in a different member's homeland. This is Grandmother Mona Polacca's. As our host, she opens the gathering, wearing a ceremonial white deerskin dress with fringed sleeves and a fine beaded yoke. Her mother's people are Havasupai, People of the Blue-Green Waters. Her father's people are Tewa and Hopi, the Sun Tribe.

About 400 participants have assembled from all over the country. Activists. Therapists. An attorney and his wife. A young woman writing a book about dance. Some are bundled against the cold but many wear accessories that reflect indigenous cultures: a porcupine-quill necklace, beaded bracelets, embroidered textiles from China, paisley scarves from India, knitted caps from Ecuador.

The Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers were first convened in 2004 by Jyoti, a descendant of the Cherokee Nation. Jyoti remembers that people in the spiritual community that she co-founded, Kayumari, "started receiving promptings. Many of us started hearing the words, 'When the grandmothers speak...'

"Then people started telling us the prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor," which promised that one day elders would gather to share different traditions, medicines, and healing ways with all humanity.

"In 1998, during a ceremony," Jyoti remembers, "The Divine Mother came to me. She said, 'I am going to give you one of my most sacred baskets. In this basket, I am going to put some of my most cherished jewels. Those jewels represent lines of prayer that go back to the original times. Do not mix them. Do not change them. Protect them and keep them safe. Walk them through the doorway of the millennium and hand them back to me. I have something we are going to do.'"

Over the next few years Jyoti discussed her mandate with two indigenous grandmothers, both healers. She visited Bernadette Rebienot in Gabon and Maria Alice Campos Freire in Brazil's Amazon rainforest. Synchronistically, both women had just signed petitions urging indigenous people to unite and become guardians of the planet once again. They both urged Jyoti to act. "It is time."

Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers conduct healing prayer ceremonies for peace.

Opposite, Nepalese shaman Aama Bombo swallows fire to purify, bring light, and honor God.



JYOTI, 62

2 GRANDCHILDREN



Jyoti, a grandmother, psychologist, spiritual midwife, and healer, helped convene the International Council of the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers in 2004. Today, she is their Traveling Ambassador Charged with the Mission.

After she serves me tea at her house in the California redwoods, her granddaughter climbs onto Jyoti's lap. "My grandchildren Aliya and Jessie were born 3 weeks apart. So one summer, 2 years into the formation of the Thirteen Grandmothers Council, I became a grandmother twice. I call myself 'a grandmother in training,'" she laughs. Her third grandchild is due this week. "I really want my grandchildren to walk on this beautiful earth, enjoy Her, sing with Her, pray with Her."

Jyoti grew up in Texas. She says, "I didn't ever get to meet my Cherokee great-great-grandmother on my father's German side. When the Cherokees came down the Trail of Tears, my great-great grandfather and she got together. She has come to me many, many times, as real as you sitting on this couch.

"My mother's and father's mothers died when I was a young adult. So the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers are my grandmas. Some have adopted me. I'm older than five of them—and younger than all of them.

Jyoti admits, "I didn't go seeking all these things that have come to pass with the grandmothers." On the contrary, Shri Dhyanyogi Madhusudandasji, the Indian sage, told her to be of service when he named her Jyoti ("light") long ago when she was known as Jeneane Prevatt. He told her to wear white always. "White will remind you that you will always be a woman of service. That is all you are to be."

Jyoti tells me how the Divine Mother appeared to her and offered her a basket of jewels; how she was urged by shaman grandmothers in Gabon and Brazil to call the Council. She equivocated, "Were we strong enough? Temperate enough? Finally, Mother said—in this *voice*—'My daughter, the time is now.'" She didn't know how to begin.

"Finally, my grandmother spoke to me. 'Remember, granddaughter, that you must start with the seed of it all, our relations. Begin there. Everything will unfold naturally. Don't worry.'

I spread the word throughout our spiritual community. I said, 'Go to the elders. Let's get their

guidance about how these grandmothers will come to us.' We got 16 names." Thirteen of them came to the first gathering.

"It was profound when they sat down at the round table. The Divine Mother had told me that the grandmothers were Her representatives. Only a few of them recognized each other—yet they knew each other. There were grandmothers at the table whose people had not sat together for generations. There were taboos. One grandmother would honor the snake and another would find it fearsome.

"All of us knew this was not just another conference. Something was opening up. A fire in our hearts was kindled. The next time the grandmothers got together, they cried and hugged each other."

Jyoti reflects on indigenous traditions: "It's a way of life that is not understood. Right here in the U.S., people are still shot, imprisoned, killed, for singing songs to Creator. Our blood, when you cut us, runs the same color. How can people go to someone's house and tell them what they should and should not be doing? What arrogance! Let us reclaim our humility. Remember our compassion. Sit down in non-judgment and listen to how they teach. Listen to how wise they are."

I ask Jyoti why the indigenous women whom she invited to the Council had to be grandmothers. She responds, "When your stone rolls along a certain length of time, you gather things with it. If you've been awake while travelling, even better. If you've put that into spiritual focus, how potent it becomes!

"These grandmothers have done that. Grandmother Agnes was almost beaten to death. As a girl, she was one of only 22 who were left in her tribe. She survived cancer. She is still here with generosity of spirit and warmth of being. She loves you. She says, 'Just keep walking. Pray, my darling. Creator will take care of everything. I prayed this morning, don't worry.' She is so sure of it, you can't not be. Some of our grandmothers have illnesses that could take them at any moment. But their dedication to prayer is a life-work."

The Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers' gatherings have drawn crowds around the world and spawned circles of grandmothers. Jyoti explains, "Sitting in your grandmother's lap when you're hungry, tired, and scared changes something. People go home and connect with their own grandmothers and with the elder wisdom in their communities."



Why was this millennium the right time to gather the grandmothers? Jyoti believes, "The grandmother of us all is coming back into her house. These grandmothers are the first representation of Her embodiment. At the very least, that is salve for us. At the very best, it brings us salvation, a way of life that's about unity, harmony, and peace."

Years ago, Jyoti studied at the C.G. Jung Institute in Zürich. "Jung said that the most difficult time we'd have would be when the archetypes of an old paradigm left the stage. I believe we are in a moment like that. The First Grandmother is pulling us, bringing us home to ourselves. We have to go through purification, shake off false concepts, and embrace our impermanence. As the grandmothers reclaim

their seats as matriarchs, it's good medicine. We will realign ourselves."

"We are living in a time when the grandmothers are called to share. Sometimes when I sit in the tipi and watch my wonderful white friends walk in and sit down...and my native relatives serve them, love them, heal them. When I reflect upon our history between these peoples, such acts of kindness are the most active moments of compassion you can be present for."

Jyoti finishes her tea. "This is a moment on our planet when we are making a choice. I believe the Grandmothers are challenging us to do it while awake. To open our hearts with compassion and acceptance and love and hope and charity."



Health: Senegal

Cars, trucks, busses, and horsecars come to a halt but the cows lumber on. It's 7 AM in Dakar, rush hour, and the road out of town is under construction.

Vendors work their way through the vehicles selling candy, Kleenex, cookies, and newspapers. Young boys crowd around the cars using tin cans as begging bowls.

Somehow, Falilou Cissé finds us and climbs in just as the traffic opens up. The road becomes a freeway, flirts with the sea, then cuts inland through flat, brown scrub scattered with baobab trees. At the animal market, a man leads five horses past a fellow in the ditch lathering his goat, beautifying it for sale.

Falilou is Community Development Coordinator for The Grandmother Project. I have read his view of his country's grandmothers: "They are the guardians of educational wisdom through stories, song, proverbs, charades, riddles, incantations, pharmacopoeia, rites, and recitation. They are the health workers for children from birth (at which they assist) up to adolescence. Grandmothers are the best schools for young women."

His observations dovetail with the experience of The Grandmother Project's Founder/Director, Dr. Judi Aibel, whose training was in medical anthropology, public health, and adult education. Working 25 years in community health programs throughout the developing world, she discovered that involving grandmothers in health improves children's well-being dramatically and permanently.

In 1997 she first discovered that giving grandmothers contemporary medical information to add to their indigenous knowledge could improve children's health. Three examples:

In Laos, grandmothers believed that drinking liquids made diarrhea worse, which put their grandchildren at risk of dehydration. Now grandmothers know it is necessary to drink water and that breast-feeding should be continued, so children recover naturally.

In Mali, grandmothers traditionally told pregnant women to eat less than usual to have a smaller baby and easier delivery. Now grandmothers tell them to eat more than usual; they are stronger during delivery and have healthier babies.

In Senegal, grandmothers believed colostrum (the secretion that precedes breast milk) was bad for newborns. Now they advise their daughters to let their babies nurse immediately. Infants benefit from the high-protein and antibodies that colostrum provides.

The Grandmother Project, an American nonprofit that Dr. Aibel co-founded in 2005 trains NGOs to use grandmother-inclusive methods. The Grandmother Project has collaborated with The World Health Organization, The Red Cross, USAID, The World Bank, UNICEF, World Vision, and others in Albania, Benin, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Laos, Mali, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Senegal, and Uzbekistan.

At the moment, we are driving past small, white mosques with blue doors. There are mountains of peanuts in the fields. We see compounds where reed fences enclose round, thatch-roofed huts; roadside abattoirs where skinned cows hang, exposed to the dust; a horse cart parking lot where all the horses' noses are buried in feed bags. Mamadou, the driver, steers us through an obstacle course of potholes.

Mamadou and Falilou chat in Wolof. The words sound carbonated; bubbling is punctuated by "Wow!" and "Shew!" plus clicks and the sound of air sucked through teeth. What a wonderful language.

We're en route to visit grandmothers near Vélingara, a town in the Kolda Region 10 hours from Dakar, southeast of Gambia. Twenty villages there are part of a 3-year program called "Girls' Holistic Development Project," which the Grandmother Project and World Vision are conducting to improve girls' health and well-being, plus end child marriage, teen pregnancy, and female cutting (which the United Nations terms female genital mutilation).

Grandmothers guide villagers to identify what is good and bad about cultural traditions, then teach what's considered good (dances, stories, values) and help eliminate what's bad (female genital mutilation, child marriage, teen pregnancy).



Aminata Diao, 130

“COUNTLESS” GRANDCHILDREN



As we walk through the village, Fatoumata Baldé asks if I would like to meet the oldest grandmother in Kandia.

We duck into a hut where Aminata Diao sits on a cot wearing only a sarong skirt.

“She is 130 years old,” her daughter says. I have never heard of anyone so old. Aminata has white eyebrows, cataracts, desiccated skin, flat pendulous breasts, and a thick deep voice. She is definitely old but is she really almost twice my age? At first, I am so awed that I can’t think of a single question. Finally, I ask how many grandchildren she has. She has no idea, there are so many.

“You have seen many changes in Kandia,” I say. “Yes, I remember when there were only 6 huts.” (The population is now 1,000).

“Why have you lived so long,” I ask. “We used to eat from the trees. There used to be many in the forest. It’s very different now. Everything I ate was natural. We put it in the sun to dry: no harmful preservatives, nothing from a refrigerator. Lots of milk.”

“What advice do you have for elders?” I ask. She responds, “Have more confidence and stay healthy. Refuse to eat things if you don’t know the source.”

“What advice do you have for young people?”
 “Respect your elders, take their advice. It’s unfortunate that the young don’t listen to their elders. They think we are old fashioned, that our time is over.”

As if to disprove that allegation, after her daughter helps her put on a pink blouse and headscarf, Aminata grips her cane and slowly walks outside to pose for pictures.

Fatoumata Baldé, 60

18 GRANDCHILDREN



Fatoumata was the first girl to attend Kandia’s then-new elementary school. She went to high school in Kolda, then spent many years teaching Pular

literacy classes. As we walk toward her hut at the river-end of Kandia, she tells me proudly that she has 2 grandchildren in university, one of whom is earning a Masters Degree.

Despite her love of education, it was Fatoumata’s dream to work in the Kandia clinic, which she joined in 2004. I ask her about the biggest health problems here. Early pregnancy is a great problem. The normal age for pregnancy is 18 but some girls are 13, 14, 15.

“We advise teenaged girls to abstain from sexual contact until they are married. We tell them pregnancy is natural, but if you are too young, your body will not be ready and it can be difficult to give birth without surgical interventions like a Cesarean Section, which can only be done in Kolda or Tambacounda, not in our village health office where most babies are born. We tell them that the baby and mother can die.

“Some marry and become pregnant before they are old enough. Early marriage is a tradition, but it is a bad one and we decided to fight against it. We grandmothers encourage the mother and fathers not to give their daughters in marriage before they are 17 or 18. Teen pregnancies used to happen very often but in the past 2 years, the cases of teen pregnancy have not been frequent,” Fatoumata says proudly.

“Malaria is also a great problem here,” she continues. “We recommend sleeping in your clothes and using bed nets, but many people spend at least half the night outside because it is very hot. When it rains, there is water in the river and the mosquitoes come. Ten or 12 people a day may get Malaria.”

Her husband is lifting buckets of water from their young granddaughters’ heads as the girls parade in single file. When her ten grandchildren, all those who live in Kandia, have gathered, Fatoumata, still wearing her pink health worker’s uniform, sits with them under a tree teaching them a traditional dance.

The children begin clapping and singing, picking up the pace as they go. They take turns stomping and swirling faster and faster until, finally, nobody can dance fast enough and the children are laughing too hard to try.





Health: Ireland

I make strawberry soup with my granddaughters. I don't have a clue how to forage for seaweed, skin a rabbit, or churn butter. Darina Allen, grandmother of 7 and Ireland's best-known chef, not only knows, she is teaching those skills to packed classes at Ballymaloe Cookery School in County Cork, Ireland.

Darina and her friend, equally famous California chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, both view grandmothers as the guardians of inherited wisdom. When they saw Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food movement, in Turin they proposed sponsoring a "Grandmothers' Day" where grandmothers would teach grandchildren about growing and cooking.

The idea appealed to Petrini so much that he decided Grandmothers' Day was too good to limit to Ireland; he hoped all 100,000 Slow Food movement members in 153 countries would celebrate it.

The first celebration occurred in April 2009. Irish grandmothers ran a small farmers market with their grandchildren; made chocolate and butter; taught the children how to plant vegetable seeds. They baked scones and had tea parties, went fishing and cooked their catches. One newspaper published a supplement of grandmothers' recipes. Schools started edible gardens and Darina donated chicken coops and hens so the students could take fresh eggs home from school.

Now it's April 2010 and I am documenting the second Slow Food International Grandmothers' Day in Ireland, starting with photographing Darina's grandchildren cooking in her home at Ballymaloe, where the southeastern coastal hills are dotted with daffodils.

Ballymaloe ("Bally-ma-lou") translates to "land of milk and honey," which is a perfect description of the Allen family's idyllic 400-acre farm, 100 acres of which are cultivated as organic gardens. Fresh milk and newly collected honey are just the beginning.

Darina has invited me to stay here, so I have an elegant room in Ballymaloe House, the Georgian mansion where Darina's in-laws, Myrtle and Ivan Allen, raised their family. It's been remodeled into a 40-room luxury hotel, but its original 14th-century Norman castle tower is still intact.

Ballymaloe's restaurant, a destination for gourmets, was made famous by Myrtle Allen (who opened it in 1964), Darina (who started her career as Myrtle's sous-chef five years later) and Darina's brother Rory O'Connell (who succeeded Myrtle as executive chef when she retired).

Jim Allen gives me a ride to the Ballymaloe Cookery School, laughing when I ask how he is related, "We are all in-laws and out-laws." Sure enough, Darina's daughter-in-law, Rachel Allen, greets me at the School holding Scarlet Lily, who is not quite 1 year old and is wearing a toast-colored eyelet dress. Rachel, following in Darina's footsteps, has her own cooking show, writes cookbooks and teaches at the School.

This afternoon, Darina is in Dublin chairing a Slow Food Ireland board meeting and she's asked her aunt, Florence Bowe, 71, to show me around. Lunch is food the cookery students created this morning: pasta; sausage; greens with garlic flowers; walnut pie "with a tinge of chocolate and a big dollop of whipped cream." Every morsel is fresh from this farm and is, to borrow the title of Darina's TV cooking show, "simply delicious."

In 3 large, immaculate kitchens, 10 groups (6 students to a teacher) work at individual stations with equipment color-coded for each student. Buckets of tulips testify that it's springtime.

From the deck, Florence points out the "stony and not-so-stony beaches" of Ballycotton Bay, visible beyond a field of solar panels that run everything. There are fields of rhubarb and farther away, grazing cattle. We walk past herds of sheep. Seventy different herbs thrive in the herb garden. We duck into a

Irish grandmothers and grandchildren celebrate The Slow Food Movement's International Grandmothers' Day together, planting, cooking and enjoying healthy food.



Politics: United States

She starts down the aisle. Another grandmother follows. Then another. Four hundred people stand up and cheer. The Raging Grannies are starring in the documentary that is about to be screened at the hundred-year old Victoria Theater in San Francisco, site of the Frameline33 Film Festival.

The oldest theater in the city is even older than the Grannies, who are in good company—celebrated people have performed here: Mae West, Whoopi Goldberg, Michael Moore, many others.

“That was the icing on the cake,” Ruth Robertson admits later, but “The cake is getting our message out to the world.”

The Raging Grannies get their message out with smiles, satirical songs, and skits. If there are Raging Grannies in your neck of the woods, you can recognize them by their ruffled aprons and flowery hats, and because they sing witty, pointed, political lyrics that skewer strategies (and strategists) that could make life difficult for their grandchildren.



The Raging Grannies started in Canada. There are now some 60 groups in that country, the United States, UK, Israel, Japan, and Australia.

Since they began, the women’s attitude has been, “We’re just a gaggle of Grannies, urging you off your fannies.” But that ditty makes them sound tamer than they are.

They first appeared on February 14, 1987 in Victoria, British Columbia, a retirement haven. Calling themselves The Nuclear Emergency Response Team, they presented an “un-Valentine,” a broken heart, to a local member of Parliament who was sanguine about nuclear issues. Railing against having a nuclear submarine in the harbor, the Grannies sang an updated version of *Yellow Submarine*:

*In the town where we reside,
There are certain things we like to hide.
Yes our harbor's very quaint
But at times it seems like what it ain't.
What about these atomic submarines,
Atomic submarines, atomic submarines..*

Kazoos screeching, bells ringing, cymbals crashing, they snared public attention for the issue—and shattered stereotypes of how older women act.

The group soon switched to the name Raging Grannies. “Raging” was a controversial word at first but members were convinced when a founder quoted Mary Daly: “Rage is not a stage or something to be gotten over. It is transformative. Like a horse who streaks across fields on a moonlit night, her mane flying.”

Independent Raging Granny groups proliferated. None had membership fees, bureaucracies, or offices. They don’t follow Roberts Rules of Order and don’t take either minutes or attendance. They rally about myriad issues, most left of center politically.

What they share are wild hats, shawls and aprons, playful protests, and the idea embodied in their song, *Democracy Is Not a Spectator Sport*, which they sing to the tune of *John Brown’s Body*:

A complacent American public means a flaccid democracy, so Raging Grannies belt out witty songs that enhance awareness of the issues they support.



Granny Ruth Robertson, 56

GRANDMOTHER-IN-WAITING

Ruth Robertson's first grandchild isn't due until next January but she's been a Raging Granny since 2002. "Some people at the Unitarian Church in Palo Alto said, 'Ruth, you love to sing. You would love the Raging Grannies.' I said, 'I love the name. What is it?'"

"The group had been working on environmental issues and was powerfully antiwar. I did Vietnam protesting in high school. It didn't take much to convince me. I went to a rehearsal at Granny Shirley Powers' house.

"The rehearsal was mayhem! People were rewriting lyrics and shushing each other. Every rehearsal was chaotic, but it was always fun. At meetings we discussed what kinds of places we wanted to rage. Originally most members of the group were content to stand on a street corner and sing quietly.

"Others of us wanted more action, like facing off with the Minutemen! From that desire to be more outrageous and to confront those with diametrically opposite positions, came the name Raging Grannies Action League.

"We are political wonks," Ruth says. "We identify issues just by being well read: *The New York Times*,

The Guardian, the Internet, mainstream, business, and left-wing media. We have monthly meetings just for yakking: 'Can you believe in San José they are doing racial profiling and arresting more Latinos for wrong left turns...' We've gone to City Council meetings and we do international issues—the full range, whatever grabs us.

"The healthcare situation worries me right now. If they do some little bitty reform, there will still be Big Pharma and big insurers gouging people. The issues change very fast. When Gail and I give the Grannies suggested talking points, we say, 'You're free to say what you want, but here's the latest in case you're not up on things.' Healthcare issues are very complicated.

"Our main goal is to get press attention," Ruth says. "Fifty people might see us standing for an hour on the street, but if a newspaper takes a picture, many more get the message."

When I ask Ruth which of their hundreds of rallies and demonstrations she considers most successful, she says, "When the National Guard invited us to Sacramento to prove they were not spying on us, we took them tea and cookies. The press was already saying how ludicrous it was that the Guard

was spending taxpayers' money to establish an 'information synchronization knowledge management intelligence fusion unit.'"

"A California senator was trying to get the Guard to cease and desist. As we set up tea, we noticed an anti-Muslim poster in a cubicle. One woman took a snapshot, evidence of discrimination. When the press exposed that, it was incredible. We have a saying, 'Grannies like to go where they are not wanted.'"

Ruth has been married for 30 years. She met her husband in Japan where they were both studying for graduate degrees in Japanese literature. When they returned to the U.S., times were not good for people seeking academic careers so they went into business in Massachusetts, then Texas. After their son and daughter were born, Ruth reduced her workload; "I really wanted to be with my kids," she says.

Her husband has voted Republican in the past, but he's so supportive of her, Ruth says, "He sometimes drives what we lovingly call our Grannymobile."

Organizing Granny gigs, researching issues, and managing press relations are the equivalent of a full time job for Ruth since the group does between 1 and 3 events a week. "We plan about 50% of the

gigs ourselves; we join other groups for the rest. I do a lot of Internet networking. Email is a tremendous invention!

"We have about 25 members. We're always recruiting. Sometimes people see us and ask how to audition. That makes me laugh! Others say, 'I'd love to join but I can't sing.' I answer, 'What makes you think we can? We just put someone on the mic who can sort of carry a tune. Everyone sings along, and you can mouth the words if you're tone deaf. You don't even have to be a grandmother. You just have to be a woman and be willing to wear a funny hat.'"

Ruth has 50 Granny-type hats displayed in the family room of her house where we are having tea, plus a collection of Granny aprons in the upstairs hall. I try on a few and can report that the styles are fashion-backward, frumpy, and wonderful fun.



Energy: India

At 6:30 AM the September Indian sun pops up like an orange and the world goes from black to bright in an instant. If solar power had not been invented, surely the sunrise in Rajasthan would inspire it.

Since 1984, the Barefoot College in Tilonia has been teaching solar engineering, aiming to bring light to dark villages. Forty percent of rural Indian households have no access to electricity. They rely on kerosene for light and firewood for cooking.

The Barefoot College teaches the poor to be professionals without requiring them to read and write. Like Gandhi, the school believes that no one should be denied the right to use, manage, and own technology.

At first, the solar engineering faculty taught illiterate and semi-literate village men. Armed with their new technical knowledge, the men left their villages and went straight to Kishangarh, Jaipur, and Delhi to find jobs.

The college did a course correction and began training village grandmothers who also were illiterate or semi-literate, lived off the electrical grid, and existed on less than 50 cents a day. The women were mature and gutsy, cared about their grandchildren's futures, and wouldn't dream of moving away from their families.

Grandmother students came from all over India, which has 22 official languages and several hundred tribal tongues. They couldn't talk to each other or to the teacher.

So they sat together at a table in an electronics laboratory with soldering irons and voltmeters. Their teachers were illiterate local grandmothers who had already finished the training and who shared their knowledge generously via demonstrations, graphic manuals, color-coding and gestures.

After 6 months, the student grandmothers could build, install, repair, and maintain solar lighting systems. They could assemble solar lanterns, parabolic solar coolers, and solar water heaters.

They could also negotiate a "Memo of Understanding" with their communities. Each contracted to install solar panels on 100 houses, run a local repair/maintenance shop for 5 years, and teach solar engineering to their successors.

In turn, their villages agreed to create a Community Energy Development Committee to collect the fees to pay for both the panels and the Grandmother's salaries. Participating households committed to contribute between \$3 and \$10 per month, the equivalent of what they spent previously for kerosene, flashlight batteries, candles, and firewood.

When the Grandmother Solar Engineers returned home, they transformed their villages like a September sunrise in Rajasthan, from black to bright.

I visit one of those villages, Rebariyo Ki Dhani, which has almost as many camels (100) as people (125). Every hut has a photovoltaic panel on its corrugated roof. I am invited into a compound where a woman with 13 grandchildren asks how she can enroll at the Barefoot College.

Four women regale me with stories about how life changed when they got electricity. Youngsters could study without getting black lung disease from kerosene lamps. The chance of fire was reduced and toddlers no longer risked getting burned. Mothers no longer had to walk to town to buy fuel. Midwives could deliver babies at night. Mothers could work longer hours in the fields and earn more money since they didn't need to cook dinner before sundown.

By 2011, the Barefoot College had trained 146 grandmothers from 16 states all over India who brought light to 648 villages with 9,833 households.

Indian grandmothers learn solar engineering and bring light to their dark villages, then teach other grandmothers from developing countries to do the same.



It seemed to Sanjit “Bunker” Roy, who co-founded the Barefoot College with two friends in 1972, that the Grandmother Solar Engineer program could be replicated outside of India.

He knew that 1 in every 5 people in the world (1.5 billion) live without electricity, yet the sun provides 6,000 times as much energy as the earth’s population will need by 2020. Sunlight is universally available and free.

In Kenya, only 15 or 20% of the country’s population lives on the electrical grid and in rural areas, only 5% have electricity. Economic and environmental considerations convinced Bunker Roy to move forward: a rural family in Africa burns about 60 liters of kerosene a year for light—and an average kerosene lamp spews a ton of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in less than 10 years.

With support from the United Nations, Bunker and the Barefoot College’s Village Energy and Environment Committee visited dark villages in the least developed African countries. Partnering with local NGOs and talking through an interpreter at community meetings, they explained solar lighting.

If villagers were interested, they set forth a scheme that would make the community independent of potentially corrupt and usurious “urban experts” who promised solutions. The community would form a local committee, contribute a building as a repair workshop, agree that participating households would pay a monthly fee, and chose 2 illiterate or semi-literate grandmothers between the ages of 40 and 60 to go to Tilonia (at the Indian government’s expense) for 6 months of training.

Bunker developed a sixth sense about the grandmothers. “I would interview them and suddenly, I would know: ‘This is it! She can do it, she can make it happen.’”

In 2008, African grandmothers first arrived. They slept in a small dormitory on campus. The Barefoot College provided everything from bedding to food; supplied each woman and her family with cell phones so they could talk for 10 or 15 minutes a week; provided each woman with a \$100/month stipend to help with her family’s expenses while she was gone; gave every grandmother an eye test and dental exam plus medical care if she got sick.

The African grandmothers’ teachers were none other than the Indian grandmothers who, having brought light to their own villages, returned to share what they knew.

“We are all teachers; we are all learners. There is no ‘us’ and ‘them,’” one told me.

Classes took place in the electronics lab, now renamed the International Training Center. After six months, the African Grandmother Solar Engineers returned to their villages. Because Indian solar panels cost one quarter as much as those manufactured in Africa, panels were transported by ship to African ports, then relayed to the remote villages, courtesy of the U.N.

Soon, the grandmothers’ villages were solar electrified. Their neighbors were elated and local journalists were effusive. The grandmothers’ solar lanterns not only provided light, but charged cell phones so farmers could check the price of eggs in the next village or make electronic bank deposits. Irrigation pumps and maize-grinding mills were equipped with solar power. Sierra Leone soon decided to partner with the Barefoot College to start a satellite campus.

By 2011, 283 Grandmother Solar Engineers had electrified 34,500 houses in 24 countries in Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Asia.

As important as the health and economic benefits that their villages experience, is the fact that Grandmother Solar Engineers themselves are transformed. With every reason, they feel competent and confident. Their villages view them as VIPs.

Bunker Roy smiles, “I meet them as grandmothers. But they return to their villages as tigers.”

