

HER AARP: Ethel Percy Andrus (1884-1967), born in San Francisco, moved with her family to Chicago so her father could finish his legal education at the University of Chicago.

Ethel graduated from Austin High School, received her two-year Associate Degree in 1901 from Lewis Institute (later the Illinois Institute of Technology) and transferred to the University of Chicago to earn her Bachelor of Philosophy degree in 1903. She returned to Lewis as a faculty member where she taught English and did volunteer work at Hull House and the Chicago Commons, both settlement houses.

In 1910 she and her family returned to California for health reasons. There she taught at Santa Paula High School, at Manual Arts High School and at Abraham Lincoln High School in L.A. Among her students were actors Robert Preston and Robert Young and General James Doolittle.

In February 1916, at age 32, she was offered the position of vice principal at East Los Angeles High School and in June was named principal, the first woman high school principal in California. Her urban high school had a diverse student body which spoke 32 languages, including Spanish, Italian, Russian and Chinese and faced problems of juvenile delinquency as well as cultural, ethnic, and racial conflict.

Andrus was determined to improve the quality of life for her students, their parents, and others in her community. She strove to instill in her students a sense of pride in their own cultural heritage and an appreciation of the cultural life and values in the United States. She encouraged her students to conduct themselves with self-respect and she treated them with dignity.

As a result, the school's delinquency rate dropped dramatically. The County Judge of Juvenile Court awarded Dr. Andrus and her school a special citation for success in youth crime prevention. Years later, one student recalled, "Somehow you found yourself acting the way she wanted you to."

Her desire to achieve harmony in the neighborhood extended to the parents of her students, as well as to the community at large. She established the Opportunity School for Adults, an evening program designed to assist the immigrant parents of her pupils. The popularity of the program eventually led to its expansion into a full-time evening education institution through which people in the community could earn a high school diploma.

Simultaneously, Andrus continued her own education, earning her MA in 1928 and her PhD in 1930 from UCLA. Her doctoral dissertation promoted the establishment of a high school curriculum for girls that would address their needs.

But the education career in which she thrived and loved, ended suddenly in 1944 when her mother became seriously ill. Like so many women then and now, she left work to become a full-time caregiver.

When her mother's health gradually improved after a few years, her mother urged Andrus to focus on improving the lives of older people, as she had done for students. Her mom emphasized that older people, too, often felt discarded and needed something more, the desire to live with purpose, dignity and self-respect. In 1947, at age 63, Dr. Andrus began to volunteer at the California Retired Teachers Association.

She learned from a local grocer that an older woman who came to his store needed food, eyeglasses and dentures. Dr. Andrus set out to visit the woman on a cold, drizzly day. At a sizable bungalow, no one seemed to be home. A neighbor suggested she check on the old woman who lived “out back.” “Out back” was a chicken coop.

Dr. Andrus knocked on the door of the windowless shack. A woman wearing a ragged coat opened the door. Upon learning her name, Dr. Andrus recalled the woman’s reputation as a Spanish teacher of some distinction. They adjourned to the front seat of Andrus’ car, out of the rain where the woman told her story.

Selling opportunities for the scenic acreage she had bought as an investment had been diminished by the Great Depression. The retiree had her \$40 monthly teachers’ pension, but could not afford decent housing or health care. Dr. Andrus got angry. Then she got organized.

She immediately formed the ‘National’ Retired Teachers Association and set about obtaining decent living standards and affordable health insurance for retirees. There was no Medicare yet and most insurance companies saw covering older people as a costly risk. Turned down by 42 insurance companies, Dr. Andrus ultimately found a company willing to take a chance on health care for older adults.

The retired teachers’ health plan and the organization’s focus on financial security were such hits that in 1958 Dr. Andrus created a new organization to serve the needs of non-educators as well. The organization is now known as AARP.



Dr, Ethel Andrus was the national volunteer president of both organizations until her death.

Sources: <http://leanin.org/stories/ethel-percy-andrus-founder-of-aarp/>
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