

West Side Spirit December 8, 2011

West Side's Grannies Fuel Movement

Posted by West Side Spirit on November 30, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

Local activists say media ignores Occupy's seniors

By Allen Houston

Occupy Wall Street protestors may have been evicted from Zuccotti Park, but for three Upper West Side seniors, the battle continues.

To Batya Lewton, Kitty Williston and Nancy Brandon, the OWS movement is only the latest incarnation of a series of protests for equality that they've waged during their lives.

The trio took part in the recent Occupy Lincoln Center protest and marched partway from 181 Street to Wall Street with State Sen. Adriano Espaillat's march Nov. 7.

"What I've learned is that you have to raise hell if you want change," Williston, 69, said. She has also marched at Zuccotti Park with the protestors.

Holding signs reading "Sober, Tax-Paying Older Lady" and "Tax the Rich," they met last week at Williston's apartment to rail against corporate crooks and the undue influence big companies have over the legislative process. The self-described "Granny Brigade" also discussed past activism as well as the experience of being seniors protesting and what excites them about OWS.

"What's been wonderful about OWS is that all this outrage that everyone has been feeling is suddenly welling to the surface," Lewton, 81, said. "It's caused people to think about the rising income disparity and what's happening to the poor and middle classes."

The wildfire nature of the protests remind them of the Civil Rights Movement and rallies against the Vietnam War, in which they took part.

"When the kids were being sprayed with pepper spray at [UC] Davis it reminded me of the protesters in Selma being sprayed with water hoses," Williston said.

Each of the three women has deep activism roots that stretch back to the 1960s.

Lewton's first taste of activism came when she started the "Committee to Save the Schomburg Library" in the early 1960s. The library held a massive repository of old African-American newspapers that were moldering and were in danger of being lost forever. She made a flier for students to take home for their parents to get them involved in the initiative to save a part of black history.

She next protested when a hospital was being built in central Harlem and no black construction workers were being used.

Not long after that, Lewton took part in the March on Washington, where she was up front for Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I have a dream" speech.

She later took part in the sanitation workers strike in Memphis in 1968.

"There were tons of cops with billyclubs waiting for something to happen, but it was a peaceful event," she said. Lewton has been active locally in the Coalition for a Livable West Side as well as the West Side Federation of Neighborhood and Block Associations. She also helped organize a rent strike in her own building on the Upper West Side.

Williston was attending North Carolina Central University in Durham, N.C., in 1963, when she picketed so theatres there would become integrated.

“They called me names and spit on me,” Williston said about the whites trying to stop the integration.

She was later arrested with 500 other students for picketing the local Howard Johnson, the last major hotel chain to become integrated.

“We spent all night crowded into a jail cell and the black community stood outside the windows and sang ‘We Shall Overcome.’ It was extremely moving,” she said.

She later protested for higher wages for social workers and against the Vietnam War.

Nancy Brandon’s first protest was when Rochdale Village in Queens was being built and no black construction workers were being used.

“We marched and picketed. It was very effective,” the 81-year-old retired teacher said.

Brandon has been involved in the community for the past 21 years and has been active in her block association as well as fighting for numerous community issues.

The three protested the Iraq War and have been involved in numerous other protests over the years.

With economic despair being felt around the country, the rise of the Tea Party, big bank bailouts and corporations wielding more and more power, it had been hard for them to keep their spirits up—until the OWS movement came to the forefront.

“I feel like we’ve been going backwards,” Williston said. “Unions are being torn asunder. People feel like it’s permissible to be racist. Poor people have less and less.”

Brandon said that the sense of hope that was there in the past is now lacking.

“During the 1960s, it seemed like change would actually come. There was a movement—now, I’m not so sure,” she said.

All three said the media has underplayed the attention given to older protesters; cameras are quick to pan to the more wild looking fringes of the occupiers rather than focus on the fact that a sizeable number of them are seniors.

“The media have distorted this because it fits the agenda of how they want to frame this,” Lewton said.

She said seniors have a lot to offer to the younger kids organizing now.

“There’s not the institutional knowledge that older protestors have, and a lot of people don’t seem to understand the loss of the rights that are at stake,” Lewton said. “More people have to become involved. You can’t rely on someone else to protest on your behalf.”

She believes one way OWS could strengthen its hand would be to focus on one or two things they want to change rather than having a laundry list of demands.

“I prefer specific reasons to protest rather than every other person holding a sign with a different cause on it,” she said.

Everyone has to get involved though, they said and the best way is to start in your own neighborhood.

“Change really has to start at the local level. People need to get involved in everything from local politics to the community boards. Unless we do that, we run the risk of becoming a plutocracy,” Brandon said.

Occupy Grannies Speak Out

On Protesting

“What I’ve learned is that you have to raise hell if you want change.”—Kitty Williston, 69

On the Rise of Occupy Wall Street

“What’s been wonderful about OWS is that all this outrage that everyone has been feeling is suddenly welling to the surface.”—Batya Lewton, 81

On Seniors at the OWS Protests

“The media have distorted this because it fits the agenda of how they want to frame this.”—Lewton

On the Current Political Climate

“I feel like we’ve been going backwards. Unions are being torn asunder. People feel like it’s permissible to be racist. Poor people have less and less.”—Williston

On Change

“Change really has to start at the local level. People need to get involved in everything from local politics to the community boards. Unless we do that we run the risk of becoming a plutocracy,” —Nancy Brandon, 81

Share and Enjoy:

Tweet This Post

Filed under News, News & Features · Tagged with Allen Houston, News, News & Features, Occupy Wall Street, The Granny Brigade

Apple Visual Graphics

© 2011 Manhattan Media. All rights reserved. • Metro theme by StudioPress • Terms of Use • Privacy Policy



Nancy Brandon, left, Kitty Williston and Batya Lewton. Photo by Isaac Rosenthal