

Biography of AARP's Founder, Ethel Percy Andrus

In 1944, while driving to a faculty meeting at the Los Angeles high school where she'd served as principal for almost three decades, Ethel Percy Andrus made a decision that surprised even her. She decided to retire and leave the school she loved in order to take care of her mother, Lucretia, who had been in poor health.

That decision, wrapped in a simple act of human kindness, resulted in the founding of two organizations that have made life better for millions of people — the National Retired Teachers Association and AARP.

The Early Years

Ethel Percy Andrus was born in San Francisco in 1884, but spent most of her childhood in Chicago. After earning a Bachelor of Philosophy degree from the University of Chicago, she began teaching. At night, she conducted classes for residents of two pioneering settlement houses — Hull House and Chicago Commons.

After her family returned to California, Andrus taught in Los Angeles at Santa Paula High School and Manual Arts High School. In 1916, she moved to East Los Angeles High School and soon was appointed principal — making her, at age 32, California's first female high school principal. She changed the name of the school to Abraham Lincoln High School, hoping to inspire its large (2,500) and ethnically diverse student body.

She set high academic standards and established innovative community-involvement programs that developed the students' character and skills while breaking down cultural barriers between them. She also offered night-school programs for parents, and continued her own education, culminating in a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from the University of Southern California.

Standing Up for Retired Teachers

Following her many years in education and nursing her mother back to health, Dr. Andrus turned her attention to the needs of people in the second half of their lives. She volunteered time with the California Retired Teachers Association and its committee for retired teachers' welfare. Shocked to learn that so many retired educators had no health insurance and inadequate pensions, Dr. Andrus founded the National Retired Teachers Association in 1947 to give them a national voice.

Until Medicare was created in 1965, there was no national program of health care for people over age 65. Even after dozens of insurance companies turned down her pleas to offer group health insurance to retired educators, she persisted until a company agreed to develop a health plan for NRTA members. The offering became so popular that non-educators sought to purchase it. Dr. Andrus established AARP (then known as the American Association of Retired Persons), in 1958 to meet their needs.

Throughout her life and career, Dr. Andrus sought to foster stronger ties between the generations and encouraged all to view aging as an achievement to be celebrated.

“To Serve, Not to Be Served”

Dr. Andrus, who died in July 1967, lived her life by the motto, “To serve, not to be served,” which remains AARP's motto. She founded AARP on the principles of collective purpose, collective voice and collective purchasing power. Nearly 50 years later, AARP still champions these principles in a world that is rapidly changing — all in the spirit of its spirited founder, Ethel Percy Andrus.

