

*"We are born into this world with clenched fists,
we leave it with fingers apart- preaching the lesson that
you take nothing with you."*

Ethel Percy Andrus

**Founder, NRTA and
AARP**

A chicken coop was the unlikely place where a woman in her 60s realized she must transition from educating young people to fostering dignity and independence for people as they age.



Ethel Percy Andrus was a young school teacher who, in 1916, was named principal of Lincoln High School in Los Angeles – making her the first female high school principal in California. The school’s diverse student body spoke 32 languages, including Spanish, Italian, Russian and Chinese.

During her 28 years as principal Andrus focused not only on education, but also on knitting the diverse student body and their families together through community service projects – a novelty at the time. Juvenile delinquency dropped. Test scores rose. Andrus used the high school in the evening, inviting shop keepers, carpenters and other parents to serve as guest educators – teaching each other new skills. The American Dream was within reach.

“Our student body became a part of the larger social movements of Lincoln Heights. Our athletes became the coaches and sponsors of their respective elementary schools. Training rules kept prospective delinquents in bed at bedtime to qualify,” she wrote. “Recognition for civic performance satisfied and fed the drives of youth, which like age, wants to be needed, to be praised and be ‘a member of a team.’”

She even bettered herself by earning a Ph.D. through night school. But the education career she loved ended suddenly late in the 1944 school year, when her mother became seriously ill. Like so many women then and now, she left work to become a full-time caregiver.

After regaining her strength, Dr. Andrus' mother urged her to focus on improving the lives of older people, as she had done for students. Her mom emphasized that older people often felt discarded and needed something more: the desire to live with purpose, dignity and self-respect.

Around this time Dr. Andrus began volunteering with the California Retired Teachers Association. She learned from a local grocer 30 miles outside of Los Angeles that an older woman who came to his store needed food, eyeglasses and dentures. With the address in hand, Dr. Andrus set out to visit her on a cold, drizzly day. The address led her to a sizable bungalow where no one was home. Puzzled, she inquired with a neighbor, who 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. The occupant, wearing a ragged coat, slipped through the door and closed it behind her. Upon learning her name, Dr. Andrus recalled the woman's reputation as a Spanish teacher of some distinction. Once settled on the front seat of Andrus' car out of the rain, the woman told her story. Sales opportunities for the scenic acreage she had bought over time as an investment had been diminished by the Great Depression. While the retiree still had her \$40 monthly pension, she could not afford decent housing or health care.

Dr. Andrus got mad. Then she got organized. At age 63, she formed the National Retired Teachers Association and set about obtaining decent living standards and affordable health insurance for them. There was no Medicare yet and most insurance companies saw covering older people as a costly risk. After being turned down by 42 insurance companies, Dr. Andrus 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 – now known as AARP – to serve the needs of non-educators.

She was the national volunteer president of both organizations until her death in 1967. She exemplified AARP's motto, "To serve, not to be served."

By battling age discrimination, fighting for basic security for people as they age and demonstrating that a single individual can make life better for millions, Ethel Percy Andrus helped make impossible dreams come true.