

Abrams: We don't know how to age

Many attitudes
hard to break

By Joan Jacobson
Evening Sun Staff

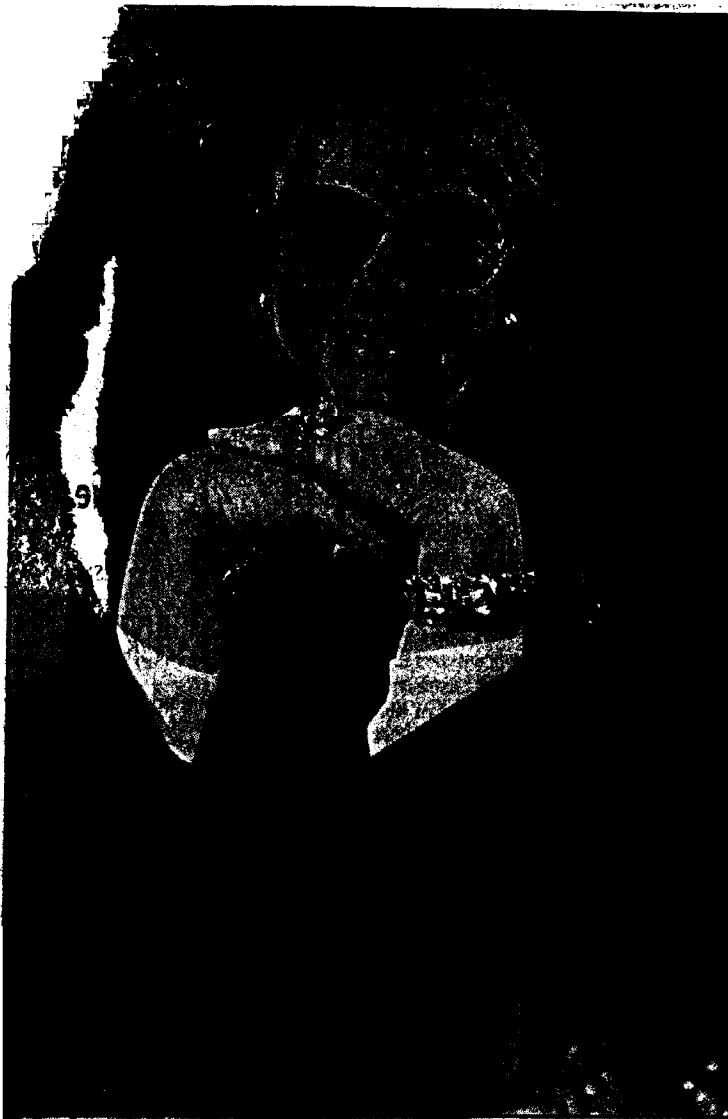
Rosalie Abrams thinks we ought to teach children how to grow old.

As Maryland's director of the Office on Aging, she believes that the attitudes of youth, from health care to diet, to sexism, come back to haunt us when we grow old.

"We've done great with technology, but we haven't done great with teaching people how to take care of themselves," says the 72-year-old member of the governor's Cabinet who is best known for her 16 years in state legislature.

"I see a lot of problems of the elderly as far as lifestyles have contributed to some of the medical problems. Coronary, high blood pressure. We ought to learn how to deal with these things early in life. This generation is a learning period. You know the first child you raise by the seat of your pants and you overpro-

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By George H. Cook — Evening Sun Staff

ROSALIE ABRAMS: "The problems of the elderly are the result of all the problems of the past."

Abrams says we need to teach

ABRAMS, From A1

lect," says Abrams of her contemporaries.

Since taking over the state's Office on Aging in 1983, Abrams has expanded several programs to keep up with the growing number of elderly people in Maryland.

Her agency now helps 3,700 aged people to continue living at home by sending in aides who bathe and feed the residents and make sure they get proper health care.

With federal housing subsidies drying up, Abrams has been successful in getting more money from the state legislature to finance group homes for 400 elderly people.

Her office has also taken over the regulation and licensing of the growing "continuing care" facilities, which provide both housing and health care to residents.

Abrams often visits senior citizens centers around the state to keep tabs on programs her office funds. She views her own past and the past of other women of her generation as examples of a failed social policy.

"The problems of the elderly are the result of all the problems of the past. I grew up with five brothers and two sisters. The boys were encouraged to get in sports. I'm good athletically but I was not encouraged to get involved with sports.

"That's wrong — bad public policy [for the] development of individual ability," she said during a recent interview in her state office.

Abrams has concluded that sex discrimination translates into problems for elderly women, particularly those who are poor.

"One of the highest levels of poverty in this country is older women and the highest is older black women. How did they get there? They don't have any work history, they didn't accumulate Social Security, they didn't accumulate pensions," said Abrams, emphasizing the need for women to be independent workers while they are young to avoid

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Abrams came to feminism late in life.

"I really didn't become a feminist until I was in the Senate," Abrams recalls.

In 1972, she introduced a bill to revise the law that prevented women who had reached the fourth month of pregnancy from collecting unemployment benefits.

To be eligible for unemployment compensation, a person must be "ready, willing and able" to work, Abrams recalled. But under the law, women were classified as being handicapped after they reached the fourth month of pregnancy.

"This was the '70s, my dear. Oh, what discrimination there was," said Abrams. "Some of the senators were talking about why we couldn't expect pregnant women to work because when women are pregnant they shouldn't work.

"This was said on the floor of the Senate and I thought to myself, 'These guys don't have the foggiest notion of what makes women tick and why women work.'"

The bill failed in 1972 and it took

two more sessions for Abrams to it passed.

After running into resistance change the law in 1972, the reality of sex discrimination hit Abrams said.

"I remember going back to the Senate lounge and I was so angry she said. "But I realized that I myself had bought into it [sex discrimination] because my father had said 'I can't send you to college because your oldest brother's a doctor and the next oldest is in graduate school and the younger one was going MIT next year.'

"It didn't matter that I was smart and that I had an interest accepted it. I didn't realize until later how angry underneath I really was. I guess women my age were practically brainwashed."

Abrams said she probably would have become a doctor if her father had been willing to pay for her college education.

Instead, she financed her own education, became a nurse, later helped manage her family's business, Silber's Bakery, and spent decades studying part time to get her undergraduate and master's degree in political science at Johns Hopkins University. Her master's thesis was a case study of Medicaid in Maryland.

children how to grow old

When Abrams was 50 years old, she was elected to the House of Delegates from a northwest Baltimore district that spawned political heavyweights such as Marvin Mandel, Irv Kovens and Jack Pollack, a man who once told Abrams' husband that nobody would vote for a "Jewish housewife."

Abrams later defeated male opponents for the state Senate seat in 1970 and was re-elected three times.

The "Jewish housewife" whom Jack Pollack dismissed as a political long shot went on to become the majority leader of the Senate and the chairwoman of the state Democratic Party.

While in the legislature she was always at the forefront of legislation and regulation for health care and programs for the elderly and the mentally ill.

During a recent interview, she recalled her first year in the legislature in 1967. She served on a joint committee concerned about medical transplants and raised the issue of keeping people on life support systems when they are brain dead.

"I raised the issue on how can you determine when a person's really dead, she said. "When I raised the issue they thought I was being very facetious, but of course it became a real issue with the advance of technology.

"Now that I've been with the office on aging, it's become a very real concern for people who care for older people because technology has outpaced us. Technically you could keep people alive for an indeterminate number of years. But do you want to? And do they want to?"

Abrams recently asked the Maryland Attorney General's office to come up with legal advice for doctors, lawyers and relatives who may not want to use painful feeding tubes to keep terminally ill patients alive.

What resulted is the first comprehensive legal opinion about artificial feeding to be issued by a state

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attorney general. It gives legal guidelines for patients and relatives who don't want to use painful feeding tubes for the terminally ill or the permanently unconscious.

Abrams has often considered social problems long before other politicians, says Mickey Butler, who has been an aide to Abrams since her first year in the Senate.

"She thinks about things that other people don't worry about until five years later," said Butler. "She hurt her knee once and couldn't get into the public buildings. And it made her realize that handicapped people couldn't get into buildings. So she sponsored legislation for the handicapped."

Abrams made the transition from legislator to Cabinet member in 1983.

"I found myself working 365 days a year, 18 hours a day sometimes without letup," Abrams recalled. "And really and truly I thought it's now or never that I was going to move away.

"I found myself, when I was chairman of the finance committee, dealing with legislation — that was old hat to me. It was almost *deja vu*. I felt it was time for me to get into something more challenging," recalled Abrams.

Gov. Harry Hughes was looking for a new director for the Office on Aging, and asked Abrams to take the

position. She resigned from the Senate to take the new job.

As director on aging, she oversees a \$24 million budget and a staff of 63 people. Her profile is not as public as it was when she was in the Senate. But it gives her time to find new ways to deal with the problems of the elderly.

Harry McGuirk, Abrams' former colleague in the Senate who is now the governor's liaison to the Office on Aging, finds her a pragmatic department head with a keen knowledge of state agencies and how to get things done.

"She doesn't come in with dreams. She has full street knowledge of the system," said McGuirk.

Today Rosalie Abrams' resume is 60 pages long and includes lectures she's given, laws she's enacted.

The walls to her state office are covered with her history of achievement: awards from a career in politics and public service.

To name a few, there's the Margaret Sanger Award from Planned Parenthood of Maryland, the Mothers Against Drunk Driving Award, the Mental Health Association Award, the Ladies Auxiliary Tam-mudical Academy Award, the Maryland Nurses Association Award.

"Maybe it's worked out because I've done a lot of things that my brothers haven't done. And now they're known as Rosalie Abrams' brothers, not the other way around."