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Go, granny, go

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Abstract (Summary)

Political activist Doris Haddock is profiled. Haddock, a 90-year-old great-grandmother from New Hampshire, is on a cross-country walk to raise awareness of the need for campaign finance reform. She is motivated by both anger and a sense of adventure.

Full Text (1733 words)

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[Photograph]

JUST ONE MONTH AND 250 MILES INTO DORIS Haddock's cross-country walk for campaign finance reform, the blinding sandstorms of California's Mojave Desert nearly took her breath away-permanently. "I never dreamed there was that kind of wind," marvels Haddock, a 90-year-old great-grandmother from New Hampshire with a finely crinkled face, Yankee accent, and bright hazel eyes. "In the desert, when the wind blew, the sand came upon you like little pellets against your face. And I'd remember that song: 'Drifting Along with the Tumbleweed.'"

In February of 1999, shortly after emerging from the Mojave, Haddock awoke in an Arizona hospital, diagnosed with severe dehydration. But Haddock, aka Granny D., was not about to be sidelined. When a supporter called to check on her, a nurse discovered Haddock's bed was empty. "Doris isn't here," the nurse reported after a quick search. "She's walking the halls so her legs won't get out of shape."

Friends offered to carry on for Haddock if she wanted to bail. "No way," she vowed. ("That was just ego, of course," she confides. "I'm very vain.") Four days after being hospitalized, Haddock slipped back into her reflective orange vest and

steel-boned backbrace, pulled on her straw hat, and continued her 14-month, 3,200-mile odyssey to the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C., where she promptly got arrested for civil disobedience.

What makes Granny go? Anger, a sense of adventure, and a memory of life before Big Money reduced politics to "legalized bribery," she says. Today, Haddock asserts, no issue—whether it's civil rights, the environment, or the growing gap between rich and poor—has any chance of getting a serious hearing in Congress. "They're taking away our elections!" she declares, munching an egg salad sandwich on the deck of her A-frame house in Dublin, New Hampshire. "We're losing our democracy! We're living under an oligarchy, and I feel that very strongly."

The National Rifle Association and its allies spent \$14.3 million on lobbying from 1997 to 1999, ensuring that no real gun laws emerged from Congress. During the same period, the tobacco industry coughed up \$120 million for lobbying to protect its interests—which included killing a law aimed at curbing smoking among children. Alcohol industry interests spent \$21.9 million in the last three years, in part to block stricter drunk-driving standards.

Doris Haddock, who lives on Social Security, knew she had to do something dramatic to counter this level of fat-cat politics. So last year, she took her crusade on the road. Emulating Mildred Norman, the "Peace Pilgrim," who traversed the country seven times from 1953 to 1981 to promote world peace, Haddock began her trek at the annual Rose Bowl parade in Pasadena, California, on January 1, 1999. When parade officials deemed her cause too political, the media-savvy Haddock just smiled and dialed CNN. "I'm calling to let you know they won't let me march," she told a producer. "Now that's a story," he responded, and the legend of "Granny D." was born.

Not that anyone in her family calls her that. Haddock, who studied drama at Boston's Emerson College—and once performed feminist one-woman plays—knows the value of a good part. Doris Haddock is forgettable, she wagered; Granny D. is not.

Across 12 states and countless towns, local papers trumpeted Haddock's arrival and travel route, elevating the five-foot, arthritic hiker into a silver-haired Forrest Gump. Carrying a yellow banner that read GRANNY D. FOR CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM, she logged ten miles every day. Sometimes she'd walk alone, reciting Robert Frost poems and thinking about her husband, Jim, and best friend, Elizabeth Foster, whose deaths she still mourns.

But most days she had company: stray dogs, kids on dirt bikes, smalltown mayors, even an occasional legislator. Near Dallas, a young mother braved 105-degree heat to catch up with Haddock, pulling her two-year-old daughter in a small wagon sporting a homemade GRANNY D. OR BUST bumper sticker. In Arkansas, women factory workers coming off the night shift spotted her, silhouetted against the dawn sky, and rushed home to grab their children. Truckers called her support van on their CB radios and gave her standing ovations at truck stops. (Although some, perhaps due to static, thought she was walking for NASA reform.)

She traveled as a pilgrim, relying on a wide network of supporters and friends. In all, she stayed at 200 private homes and happily accepted free lodging at scores of motels, paying for other expenses with small donations from well-wishers. Along the way, Haddock, a former cost analyst for a shoe company, wore out four pairs of sneakers, three support vans, and three managers, including her son Jim, 64, who lives next door to her. "He keeps telling me I've interfered with his life," says Haddock. "But he's having a ball."

The journey wasn't easy: in addition to severe arthritis in her hands and back, Haddock has emphysema from a smoking habit she quit 28 years ago, wears hearing aids in both ears, and has a sore left foot that required frequent taping. ("Aside from that, I'm perfect," she grins.) Every day she'd retire to the van, which followed her as she walked, to take a nap or catch up on her grannyd.com e-mail, some of it hostile. "GET LOST," one man wrote. "Dear Mr. H--," Haddock replied, "If you knew how many wrong turns I take, you would be cheered to no end!" Another wrote: "What a load of crap. What do you propose instead of corporations? Communes?" To which Haddock replied: "I don't want to do away with corporations; I want them to make our cars, however, not our laws."

In the middle of her trip, she flew to Washington, D.C. to witness the Senate's annual slaughter of the McCainFeingold campaign reform bill, which would ban the unregulated "soft money" contributions that corporations, unions, and trade associations give to political parties. The bill passed in the House and scored a majority vote in the Senate but was killed by threat of a Republican filibuster.

Unfazed, Haddock decided to lobby her own representative, Bob Smith (R.-N.H.), an ardent foe of campaign finance reform. As chair of the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee, Smith receives lavish funding from polluters who appreciate his efforts to water down environmental laws. "Well, Granny, I want to tell you, I really admire you," he told her, after turning down her pleas for reform. "I'm so proud of what you've done. It's quite a feat." Haddock wasn't buying it: "I wish I could say the same," she retorted.

"Whenever I grow a little bit weary I think about this woman and what she has done," says Senator John McCain (R.-

Ariz.), whose reform bill Haddock has embraced. "She's made a connection between the corruption associated with campaign finance and the effect it's had on Americans' lives."

"She puts flesh and blood on an issue that makes most people's eyes glaze over," agrees Arianna Huffington, the wealthy socialite and formerly conservative columnist who's emerged as a champion of campaign finance reform. (Huffington was also a convener of this summer's alternative Shadow Conventions, where Haddock and others decried Republican and Democratic big-money politics.)

Haddock cut her activist teeth in the late 1950s on an early battle against nuclear testing and found that-back then, anyway-grassroots organizing, combined with carefully marshaled evidence, could actually sway politicians' minds. At the time, Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb, was hatching a Dr. Strangelove-like scheme: the Atomic Energy Commission would detonate six hydrogen bombs near the tiny Eskimo town of Point Hope, Alaska, blasting a deep-sea harbor out of the polar ice, demonstrating the value of the peaceful atom, and ushering Eskimos into the Atomic Age. Codenamed Project Chariot, the scheme was on the fast track-until Haddock and her husband heard about it.

Jim Haddock, Sr. was an engineer and mathematician. He and Doris drove to Alaska from New Hampshire in an old Volkswagen bus, met with independent researchers, and then contacted every senator and representative in Congress to challenge the project's safety. Together with two scientists at the University of Alaska, Point Hope villagers, and a nascent environmental movement, they galvanized public opposition to the plan-and defeated it.

Forty years later, when Haddock announced that she was going to march for campaign finance reform, Jim, Jr. knew there was no dissuading her. "She stopped six bombs," he said, "I knew I couldn't stop her from walking."

TODAY, HADDOCK HAS HUNG



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[Photograph]

Haddock leads her supporters into Washington, D.C. after her 14-month trek for campaign finance reform.

up her walking shoes. But she's still traveling at a dizzying pace: she's been speaking at "Rock the Vote" concerts, and stirring up trouble at meetings of the Reform and Green parties and at the Shadow Conventions. George magazine recently voted her one of the country's 20 Most Fascinating Women in Politics. There's even talk of a Granny D. bus tour.

And somehow, she's found time to write an autobiography (due out next spring) and keep the pressure on politicians, who aren't treating Granny with kid gloves anymore: in July, she returned to the Capitol to protest congressional inaction-and ended up handcuffed to a wall at the Capitol Hill police station for five hours.

With that level of resistance, Haddock knows she may not live to see the end of "retail politics." But she is heartened by the words of comedian and activist Dick Gregory, who took her hand as she marched into Memphis. "You're planting a seed," he told her. "And I think it will grow "

"That meant a great deal to me," she says softly.

Haddock looks at her watch and gasps. She's got a plane to catch and miles to go before she sleeps. She darts into a back room full of weathered backpacks, Granny D. T shirts, ceremonial keys to 25 cities, and a stand for the hook rugs that she used to make when she had time. She looks over the piles and sighs happily. "Someday I'm going to be home long enough to clean up this mess," she says. "But right now, I'm packing."

[Sidebar]

BIOGRAPHY

BORN: January 24, 1910, Laconia, New Hampshire

RESIDES: Dublin, New Hampshire

EDUCATION: Attended Emerson College, Boston, Massachusetts

GOAL: Get "Big Money" out of U.S. politics

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