

# THE GENDER LADY: THE FABULOUS DR. MAY COHEN

Running Time: 47.23 minutes

*A documentary film by  
Dr. Cheryl Levitt and Dr. Barbara Lent*



MayCohen.com  MayCohenMovie





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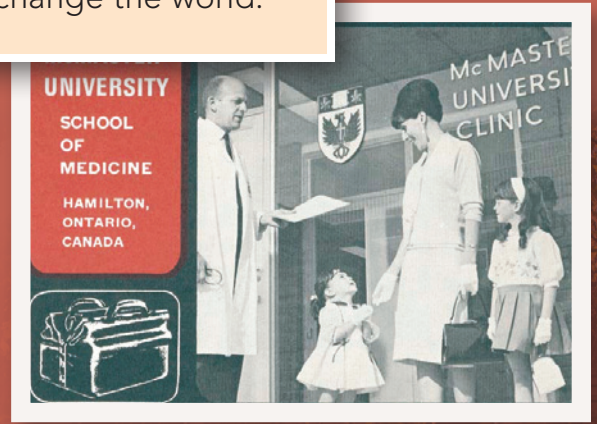
## SHORT SYNOPSIS

When May Cohen started her medical training in Toronto in the 1950's, medicine was a male preserve.

May's parents were Jewish émigrés from Eastern Europe in the 1920's. Her social consciousness arose from their progressive political engagement and activism in Canada and she became a passionate advocate for the pro-choice movement and for the rights of women. Using archival materials and interviews with May's close colleagues and friends, this compelling film explores how influential and inspirational she has been in promoting gender issues in medical schools and the role of women doctors throughout the health sector. May's impact in Canada and internationally simply cannot be overstated. Dr. May Cohen has demonstrated that it is possible for women to balance professional, family and personal interests — and change the world.



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ONTARIO,  
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## FEATURING

### Dr. May Cohen



When May Cohen entered medical school in Toronto in the 1950's, practising medicine was a male preserve. Very few women thought of becoming doctors; fewer still imagined both having a career and also having children.

Now, more than half the medical students in Canada are women. (But this gender change has by no means yet reached all echelons of the medical profession.)

May's parents were Jewish émigrés to Canada from Eastern Europe in the 1920's. Her social consciousness arose in large part from their intense progressive political engagement and activism, and she soon stood out as an extraordinarily accomplished and influential family physician with broad Canadian and international impact.

In the 1970's, May became a passionate campaigner for the pro-choice and women's rights movements. She and her husband Gerry were pioneers in teaching medical students and family physicians about healthy sexual practices and eliminating sexual taboos and gender stereotyping. She established and led the renowned McMaster University Women's Health Office and spearheaded broad acceptance of the notion that gender is a key determinant of individual and societal health.

May advocated powerfully for the meaningful inclusion of women's health in medical school curricula, LGBT rights, and for the equitable involvement of women doctors throughout the health sector. Even now in her eighties she is still sought after as a distinguished speaker at medical events.

May and Gerry raised three children. They also welcomed literally thousands of medical students and young physicians into their home over the years, as an unusual act of fellowship, inspiration and role-modelling.

Dr. May Cohen's impacts as a physician, women's health advocate, agent of social change, citizen and mother simply cannot be overstated. Dr. May Cohen has demonstrated that it is possible for women to balance professional, family and personal interests — and change the world.

## ALSO FEATURING

#### Dr. Eric Cohen

May Cohen's son, Cardiologist

#### Mr. Russell Cohen

May Cohen's son, Lawyer

#### Ms. Betty Delmore

Nurse Practitioner

#### Ms. Robin Edwards

Lawyer

#### Ms. Sharon Hampson

Performer, May Cohen's lifelong friend

#### Ms. Phyllis Helfland

May Cohen's lifelong friend

#### Dr. Barbara Lent

Family Physician

#### Dr. Lynn Nash

Family Physician

#### Dr. Anne Niec

Pediatrician

#### Ms. Margaret Shkimba

Journalist

#### Dr. Allyn Walsh

Family Physician



## DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

We believe as women physicians and activists that Dr May Cohen's story – just like US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's – has special significance for women, for society, and for us all.

During this disturbing era of renewed major challenges to hard-fought women's abortion rights and choice, and increasing threats to gender equity affecting women, the LGBT community and marginalized communities everywhere, this documentary is both timely and pertinent.



In April 2016, Dr. May Cohen was inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame. This struck us as a very big deal in medical circles: disproportionately few women physicians and even fewer women family physicians have been recognized in this way.

It was amazing to us that a remarkable woman like May Cohen was still seemingly invisible and quite late in being fully recognized for such a prestigious award despite many awards named in her honour. We thought of writing an article for a medical journal or a biography about her. Then, our friend and award-winning cinematographer Zoe Dirse suggested we make a documentary film.

And that's how our documentary about the The Gender Lady: The Fabulous Dr. May Cohen began.

We initially planned to film the Hall of Fame induction and interview a few of her family members, colleagues and friends at the ceremony. But as we interviewed May about her early life and the factors that propelled her into a lifelong career of advocating for women, we realized there was much more to May's story.

May's parents' journey from Eastern Europe to Montreal and the ways that their social activism influenced her identity and professional life led us on a unique journey. We delved into the archival material about May's parents and tracked down photographs from various women's rights events. We searched through databases looking for material from the 1930's to 50's when May was a child, a camper at camp Naivelt, a left-wing Jewish youth camp near Toronto, and a medical student at University of Toronto where the academic and clinical experiences of women students differed adversely from that of their male peers.

Our interviews with May's friends, family and colleagues enhanced our understanding of this incredible woman. Her children recall her activism and describe their parents' marriage as an extraordinary model of equitable professional and personal partnership. Colleagues and students describe her as a brilliant clinician. Others describe her as a passionate, tough and fun role model, courageously willing to speak truth to power.

We produced this film to highlight May's profound contributions to advancing women's equity, improving their health care, achieving abortion rights, affirming women's sexuality, and advancing women physicians.

We hope that others will be inspired by our film to pursue their own passions for social change.

Our documentary is dedicated to Dr. Gerry Cohen, May's husband who died in November 2017.

Drs. Cheryl Levitt and Barbara Lent



## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

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## AWARDS IN MAY'S NAME

**Federation of Medical Women of Canada (FMWC) Ortho-May Cohen Award for the Promotion of Women's Health:** The May Cohen Award is presented annually to the FMWC full member that best personifies the legacy of Dr. May Cohen and her unique ability to transfer the FMWC vision into living action in support of women physicians and women's health.

**Eli Lilly-May Cohen Chair in Women's Health at McMaster University:** The May Cohen Chair in Women's Health was announced in 2000 to conduct epidemiological research and clinical trials that address the determinants and prevalence of women's health problems as they relate to vascular diseases. Eli Lilly Canada contributed \$1 million over five years. Additional funding comes from McMaster University and the Population Health Research Institute.

**The May Cohen Lectureship in Women's Health at McMaster University:** Established in 1997 to honour Dr. May Cohen, the lectureship is held every second year.

**Canadian Medical Association (CMA) May Cohen Award for Women Mentors:** The May Cohen Award for Women Mentors is presented to a female physician and CMA member who has demonstrated outstanding mentoring.

**The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada (AFMC) May Cohen Gender Equity Award:** Established as a national award in 2003, this award recognizes the outstanding effort or achievements of an individual(s), program(s), department(s) or faculty in improving the equity diversity and gender environment in academic medicine in Canada.

**Council of Ontario Faculties of Medicine (COFM) May Cohen Gender Equity Award:** Established in 1999, in honour of Dr. May Cohen, who helped establish the COFM Gender Equity Committee.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Dr. Cheryl Levitt, Director and Producer.** Cheryl is a family physician and a tenured Professor in the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University in Canada. Cheryl studied medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand and Baragwanath Hospital in her native South Africa. After further training at the University of British Columbia, she practised in rural B.C. for eight years before becoming an academic family physician at McGill University in Montréal 1984. Cheryl was the Chair of the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University from 1996-2006 and President of the Ontario College of Family Physicians in 2006-2007. She also has worked in leadership and other roles at Cancer Care Ontario, the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, and has advocated and published extensively on primary care policy issues, gender equity, maternal and child health and medical human rights. She has received a number of awards including the South African Women for Women HEALTH Award in 2004, the WONCA (World Organization of Family Doctors) Fellowship Award in 2010, the Jean Pierre Depins Award from the College of Family Physicians of Canada in 2010 and the YWCA Woman of Distinction Award for Health Wellness for the City of Hamilton in 2011. <https://fammedmcmaster.ca/our-people/faculty-directory/bios/cheryl-levitt>



**Dr. Barbara Lent, Co-Director and Co-Producer.** Barbara practised family medicine in London, Ontario, first in a small private office and then in a community-based academic practice in a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood. In 1994 she moved to the academic world of family medicine. She served as Associate Dean of Equity and Professionalism at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry at Western University from 2004 – 2010, where she worked on numerous educational initiatives related to gender issues, boundary issues, and professionalism. She was awarded the AFMC May Cohen Gender Equity Award for this work. She has participated in numerous policy and research initiatives to address intimate partner violence from a medical perspective. Since 2010 she has contributed to the work of Ontario's medical regulatory organization, participating in numerous committees and policy development initiatives. When not pursuing professional endeavours, she enjoys travelling to new places, hiking, playing her trumpet, and spending time with her five young grandsons.

**Mary Kainer, Editor.** Born in Saskatchewan, Mary has lived, worked, volunteered and raised three children in Toronto, working as planner, administrator, community activist and documentary editor. She is an artist and her art is informed by these experiences. She tackles difficult topics – environmental devastation, global corporate domination, fracking, mining, deforestation, and most recently aging and infirmity. In 2015, her Fracking series drew first prize in the John B. Aird's Contemporary Drawing Exhibition. In 2017 she was awarded Ontario Arts Council's mid-career artists grant. Exhibitions of her work have been shown at the Art Gallery of Peterborough, Regina's Dunlop Art Gallery, ASpace Gallery, Propeller Gallery and the Rebecca Gallery. Mary has also edited two documentary films: Finn with an Oyster: the story behind Toronto's City Hall, (2015 feature length film which received the Award of Excellence, Heritage Toronto 2016) and The Gender Lady, The Fabulous May Cohen, 2018. [www.marykainer.com](http://www.marykainer.com)

**Zoe Dirse, Executive Producer and Cinematographer.** A graduate of the University of Toronto with degrees in Psychology and Education Zoe has been a pioneering cinematographer on dozens of documentaries over her award-winning career. She started her career in cinematography by joining the Camera Union IATSE 644 in Toronto in 1979 where she was one of only two female camera assistants. During her time at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) from 1982 to 1997, Zoe worked on over 70 documentary and drama projects, including a number of groundbreaking features produced by Studio D— Wisecracks (1992); Forbidden Love: the Unabashed Stories of Lesbian Lives (1992); and Jane Rule: Fiction and Other Truths (1996). Zoe has been a cinematographer of choice and a respected mentor for many female directors at the beginning of their careers. Eylem Kaftan, Lynne Fernie, Gail Singer, and Brenda Longfellow. Since 2000, Zoe has also helped mentor, inspire, and shape the careers of emerging filmmakers teaching cinematography at Sheridan College. Zoe was recently honoured with the Rogers-DOC Luminary Award and the WIFT-F Crystal Award for mentorship.

<http://www.csc.ca/publications/2005/200506/IssueWeb200506.pdf> | <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0228251/>



**Sharon Hampson, Executive Producer.** Sharon Hampson is a member of Canada's much loved trio *Sharon, Lois & Bram* who have entertained families across North America since 1978. They have been named to the Order of Canada, received the Danny Kaye Humanitarian Award on behalf of UNICEF as well as a "Doctor of Humane Letters" degree from Mount Saint Vincent University. They have sold millions of records had two acclaimed television series and for the past twenty years since Lois' retirement Sharon and Bram have continued to perform. They are currently on a cross-Canada farewell tour.

Sharon, one of the founders of Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada (now part of the Canadian Cancer Society), is a three-time breast cancer survivor and has been active in the breast cancer community.

Sharon Hampson is the recipient of the YWCA 2007 "Woman of Distinction Award" in the area of Health. The award was given for "fighting for the health of Canadian women, and singing her way into the hearts of children."  
<http://www.sharonandbram.com/bio.htm>

**Kirk Elliott, Music Composer and Performer.** Kirk is a musician, arranger and composer from Toronto, with a Bachelor of Music degree from Queen's University in Kingston. Working in his studio with over 60 instruments from around the world, he has composed, recorded and performed music for the National Ballet of Canada, the National Film Board, the Discovery Channel, the Toronto Consort, Oscar winning animated film director Chris Landreth, and CBC, CTV and YTV radio and television. A founding member of Ensemble Polaris, Kirk has composed, arranged and performed with them, playing violin, mandolin, bouzouki, accordions, guitar, double bass, dulcimers, Celtic harp, banjo, balalaika and Flemish, Swedish, and Scottish bagpipes. He has played with Canada's beloved family entertainers Sharon, Lois and Bram for over 30 years, performing in every major venue in Canada and the US.

**Konrad Skreta, On-Line Editor, Colourist, Sound Designer.** Konrad Skreta is a Toronto-based tonmeister, sound editor, video editor, and cameraman. Born and raised in Poland, he studied music recording and sound for film, obtaining his Master of Arts from the renowned Sound Engineering Faculty at the Academy of Music of Warsaw. In 1988, he was invited to Canada to participate as an Audio Engineering and Production Associate at the prestigious Banff Centre for the Arts. Since 1991, Konrad has been engaged as a freelance in-house editor at Toronto's artist-run studio, Charles Street Video, along with pursuing a variety of production and post-production projects, working with Deepa Mehta and Vera Frenkel, among others. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0804849/>

## Cinematographers

**Diego Guijarro Alvarez**  
[www.imdb.com/name/nm10169227/](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm10169227/)

**Monica Guddatt**  
[www.imdb.com/name/nm0345607/?ref\\_=rvi\\_nm#cinematographer](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0345607/?ref_=rvi_nm#cinematographer)

**Edwin Gailits**  
[www.imdb.com/name/nm7227691/](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm7227691/)

## Sound Recordist

**Bissa Skecic**  
[www.imdb.com/name/nm0083834/](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0083834/)

## Graphic Design

**Côté Design**  
[cotedesign.net/about\\_01.html](http://cotedesign.net/about_01.html)

## Student Assistants

**Azucena Mainero**

**Erin Carter**

**Jay Wang**

**Elsbeth McCall**



## CREDITS

The Directors thank the following people who in one way or another contributed to the making of this film:

Katharine Asals	Dr. John Bienenstock
Hy Chudnovsky	Marie Cooper
Lisa Diliberto	Suzanne Dubeau
Susan Emigh	Deb Filler
Lissa Foster	Laura Harrington
Julia Holland	Michael Kainer
Charles Ketchabaw	Veronica McGuire
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Digital Archive at McMaster University Library	– Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University	York University Libraries
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