

# The Mother of all Feuds

BY EMILY J. MINOR

Emmy-Award Winner's Documentary Reveals Personal Journey From Foes to Friendship

Almost everyone at the Boca Pointe clubhouse knows Mildred Kirschenbaum. After all, aging Jewish widows flock to these parts. Boca Pointe is immense and filled with single professionals, busy families and transplanted northerners; with many of its older residents drawn together by Mahjong and matzo ball soup.

But Mildred Kirschenbaum, she's a tad different.

Mildred—who looks downright terrific for her age—is the über-feisty one who shows up at the athletic center each day at 7 a.m. *Hello. Hello. Hello.* she bellows. She does 30 minutes on the stationary bicycle, and sometimes she even throws in a little stand-up comedy. This lady is always good for a laugh.

After her workout, Mildred, who doesn't think twice about wearing gym shorts that might intimidate some of her contemporaries, has her morning coffee and dishes on whatever there might be to dish about. Obama. Isis. "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation." Perhaps even some shmoozing about someone's dinner last night at the new Italian restaurant. Then, she returns to the two-bedroom house that

she purchased in 1995 with her husband, Gerald, who passed away nine years ago. At home, Mildred might play the stock market a little - before setting out for some afternoon canasta or bridge. "Perhaps (buy) a put or an option," daughter Gayle Kirschenbaum writes in her *Huffington Post* blog. "Don't ask me what that is. I only know that she reports occasionally to me when she has made some quick money."

At first appearance, Mildred is a rather average Jewish mother in this Boca Raton mecca, which could be the setting of a *Seinfeld* episode. But there's something that makes this mother stand out.

Mildred is the one with the daughter who's an Emmy award-winning filmmaker and TV producer, the daughter who produced a popular TLC TV series and shows up rather frequently with the fancy video camera and maybe even a small film crew. The daughter who traipses about the complex, asking questions about Mildred and her friendships and her, um,

sometimes challenging personality.

Now, Kirschenbaum is just releasing a full-length documentary called, "Look At Us Now, Mother!" a frank examination of their mother-daughter relationship that has been fraught with tension, sadness, exasperation, anger and even bullying, for as long as she can remember.

"Gayle is a very talented lady," Mildred says, talking to *The Boca Raton Observer* one morning be-

tween her daily workout and a canasta game.

"Her work. The way she pulled this film together, I was just flabbergasted."

Indeed, Kirschenbaum's film - whose seed money came from an online Kickstarter account - is certainly set up for a nice reception. This film is based on a 2007 short film made by Kirschenbaum called "My Nose," during which she and her mother visit different plastic

surgeons, learning about nose job costs and cutting techniques.

That little movie was so well-received that Kirschenbaum decided to go deeper. She realized that she wasn't alone and could really help people. "Look At Us Now, Mother!" plunges further into the Kirschenbaums' emotional world, exploring not only the constant pestering about the nose job, but also the tender, difficult and often hurtful aspects of this mother-daughter relationship.

**"I knew my mother had not had much of a childhood and I worked very hard to see her pain."**

- Gayle Kirschenbaum

Mildred says the first time she saw the 84-minute documentary - which will be publicly released at film festivals this month - was during a private screening in New York.

"So many people came up to me afterward, and it was surprising how many people have their own issues," she says. "This movie triggers so many people's childhood memories. And I'm proud of Gayle. She just went at it and at it and at it, until she got it out."



Photo by Madeline Bey



**THROUGH THE YEARS:**  
THIS PAGE: Mildred Kirschenbaum in her younger days  
OPPOSITE PAGE: Mildred and daughter Gayle

**MOTHER AND DAUGHTER REUNION:** CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Gayle and Mildred Kirschenbaum; A '60s family trip; Gayle in her younger days



Photo by Tino Buckman



## THE GROWING YEARS

The day Gayle Kirschenbaum came home from the hospital, the household was in an absolute tizzy. Mildred and Gerald already had two small sons – Irwin 8, and Robert 4, - handsome, healthy children who were enthralled with the idea of this new sibling.

But all through her pregnancy, Mildred had been convinced she was having another boy. She was certain of it. They'd even picked out a name: Gary.

Baby Gayle, their beautiful 1950s

baby, was a surprise to everyone. "This is Gayle," her mother would say. "She's supposed to be Gary," Kirschenbaum says she "heard that story (her) whole life."

The Kirschenbaum children grew up mostly on Long Island in a traditional upper/middle-class Jewish home, with plenty of friends and family around, but, in retrospect, the neighborhood kids might have been just a touch afraid of Mildred. She was loud, opinionated and a bit unpredictable. As Gayle grew older, she began to record her thoughts and emotions in a diary, pieces of which would later appear in her newest film.

She felt like she was adopted, she

**"Gayle can do anything, and here she's made this movie that shows how everyone has something to say about their childhood. Everyone has baggage. Why keep it in?"**

— Mildred Kirschenbaum

says, brought down and plopped into "the wrong family."

Could anyone understand how she felt under her mother's scrutiny? *Anyone? Please?*

Mildred couldn't stand her daughter's nose. She hated her frizzy hair. She didn't like the way she dressed. She'd never liked her independent nature. "She was a bitchy little girl," Mildred says in the documentary. On at least one occasion, Mildred made one of her sons hold Gayle down so she could rummage through her daughter's belongings. "It was not what I wanted to do," a teary-eyed Irwin says in the movie. "But you did what you were told, when you were told." Once when Gayle broke curfew and showed up in a car with friends, Mildred had what she describes as a "Mommie Dearest" moment and threw a glass of cold water in her face.

Then she went upstairs, pulled everything out of her daughter's closet, and demanded she put it all back.

"All of this affected me tremendously," Kirschenbaum says now, in what might be the understatement of all understatements. "I just existed. I felt like I'd landed in enemy territory."

The scratchy 8mm home movies that her father Gerald loved to capture - today, old, choppy footage in grainy vintage tones - showed Mildred and the kids smiling and his young wife playing at the pool or in the front yard. There were Mildred and Gerald smiling at their son's bar mitzvah as they sailed across the dance floor, their cocktails on the nearby table.

But Mildred's severe attitude toward Gayle was powerful and felt, all throughout the household, even though it was never discussed.

"I knew she was an artist from the word 'go,'" Mildred says now. "She was different."

Once, when Mildred was having a ladies' charity tea, she had her daughter create pictures for the invi-

tation. "She was probably five years old and she drew incredible cups and saucers, that's how talented she was," Mildred says. "She never doodled in her school books. She always drew beautiful and detailed flowers."

But Kirschenbaum never heard that praise, nor did she feel it.

"I have a lot of friends who were raised like this, criticized, and who suffered," she says. "They walked around their whole lives believing there was something wrong with them." She adds: "I never believed that of myself. I knew from my earliest thoughts that I hadn't done anything wrong."

She just knew *something* was wrong.

"I knew my mother had not had much of a childhood," she says, "and I worked very hard to see her pain."

## THE FILM

In Mildred's day and age, "you didn't air your dirty laundry," she says. And that was that.

You didn't talk about your father and his suicide attempts (There were at least two that Mildred knew of). You never discussed sitting for hours in the hospital lobby, away from your mother, the long shiny halls extending to infinity, wondering what was really wrong with your daddy. "Kids weren't allowed in hospital rooms back then," she says. "So I waited."

And you certainly didn't talk about that image, the one that flashed into your mind if you let it, of a policeman bending down to lift up your baby sister, your mother sitting on the curb, inconsolable. Mildred was at Brooklyn's Coney Island with the family when her baby sister, Shirley, died of pneumonia. They'd gone there because the doctor said the baby needed fresh sea air.

And so, four years ago, along with all their emotional baggage, mother and daughter embarked on their incredible journey to create the expanded version of "My Nose."

"That short little film played all over the world and I was shocked when it took off," Kirschenbaum says.



Video still shot by Steven Gladstone

But the healing that would happen during the filming of this second film was anything but light and breezy.

Sure, there is funny stuff in the film. Kirschenbaum and her mother arguing about everything: from driving and parking the car to the makeup she doesn't wear and the children she doesn't have. But the film is also thick with emotion, some of it heartbreaking, maddening and uncomfortably raw, as these women explore their emotions with each other, family members and professional therapists.

In her editing, which Kirschenbaum says she did mostly holed up in her apartment, she doesn't spare us the truth.

"We are now off to go see a therapist... (because) Gayle's harboring things from when she was two years old," Mildred says in the film, "Are we looking for trouble, where trouble is not? I would venture to say so."

But for both of them it was worth it, they say, "People always want to know, 'How did you get to this point where you could forgive your mother?'" Kirschenbaum says.

Mildred says, "Gayle just wouldn't give it up." Kirschenbaum says she made this film in an effort to start a movement of forgiveness and heal-

ing between mothers and daughters.

When Gerald Kirschenbaum died in 2006, Gayle began dialing her mother's number every morning. "She took over the role of calling to see if I'm still breathing," Mildred says. They've traveled together, just the two of them, to Israel, Germany, India, Spain, Italy and Greece. Kirschenbaum now calls her mother her "best friend." Mildred calls her daughter "the most talented lady" she knows. And Kirschenbaum does seminars and speaking engagements on how to transform difficult relationships.

But the getting there? *Oy vey*. "I see Gayle through different eyes now," says Mildred. "I know

her differently. I understand what world she lives in."

And what world is that?

"Gayle can do anything, and here she's made this movie that shows how everyone has something to say about their childhood. Everyone has baggage. Why keep it in?"

*Why indeed.* ○



Gayle Kirschenbaum's documentary, "Look At Us Now, Mother!", will play on April 11 and 13 in Sarasota, first at the Through Women's Eyes Festival and then at the Sarasota Film Festival. Details are available at [lookatusnowmother.com](http://lookatusnowmother.com). A DVD of the movie can be pre-ordered on the website. In a *Psychology Today* blog, Molly Castelleo writes, "The film leaves the spectator in stitches without any surgical suturing. It's emotional graffiti on celluloid." And Author

C.R. Zwolinski describes the film as: "An earthy, intense, tangy look at one mother-daughter relationship. Kind of like a Jewish-American Joy Luck Club. It's even got matzo balls instead of wontons." For more information, email [info@lookatusnowmother.com](mailto:info@lookatusnowmother.com).