

# Mommie Dearest and then some

Documentary shows life with abusive mother

BY PHILLIP VALYS  
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Gayle Kirschenbaum has endured a lifetime of criticism from her mother, Mildred, a Boca Raton retiree whose favorite pastime is inflicting guilt. Her daughter's hair is too frizzy. Her love life is nonexistent. And her nose, Mildred wise-cracks in the new documentary "Look at Us Now, Mother!" is like "the nose of the Indian on the buffalo-head nickel."

It gets worse: Mildred is what Gayle describes as a Jewish "Mommie Dearest" in the autobiographical film, a project woven together from decades of home-video footage, family photos and her own teenage diary entries. In interviews with family members and therapists, Gayle uncovers a cycle of parental abuse. In one scene, Mildred admits to once ordering Gayle's older brothers to hoist their sister atop the refrigerator "to get her out of the way." Her father, whom Kirschenbaum describes as "the German shepherd she would sic on me," was little help. "One of the reasons I might not have been nice to her as a child is that she was a bitchy little girl growing up," Mildred barks to someone off-camera.

"When I was born, my mother looked at me as if I was the devil," Kirschenbaum recalls, speaking by phone from her New York apartment. "Yes, there was physical abuse, but honestly, that never stays as much as the emotional abuse."

Kirschenbaum calls "Look at Us Now, Mother!" the "toughest project of my life, no question." It is also a comedic reconciliation with her widowed mother, now 92 and still sharp-tongued as the resident gadfly at her daily hangout, the Boca Pointe country club. The



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Filmmaker Gayle Kirschenbaum and her mother, Mildred, co-star in the documentary "Look at Us Now, Mother!"

film will screen Feb. 6-7 at the Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival.

In setting out to confront and forgive her mother, Gayle, 60, pointed the camera at herself, digging through sepia-toned home videos captured by her father, a "die-hard documentarian" who recorded "just about every moment." Gayle says she was struck by the wealth of footage that pointed to her "torture."

"I would watch my baby videos and go, 'Ooh, look how she's holding me,' or 'Look how she's pulling my arm' and 'Look at how miserable I am,'" Gayle says. "I went back to being that abused little girl."

Midway through the film, Mildred, sounding not at all apologetic in a conversation with a therapist, recalls one of her daughter's most traumatic moments: When a teenage Gayle came home hours late from a date, Mildred splashed her face with a glass of water.

"She says, 'Go walk the dog. I don't care if you get raped, if you haven't already,'" Gayle recalls. "That night never ended. Editing that part of the film took a long time. I actually developed this skin sensitivity problem on my hands, this autoimmune disorder. I was in a constant state of crying."

Gayle, who is an unmarried TV producer (she believes her upbringing led

to fears of intimacy), says she buried most of the parental abuse for decades. During screenings for her funny documentary short "My Nose," which made the film festival rounds in 2007 and tackled Mildred's lifelong obsession with getting Gayle a nose job, the filmmaker says audience reactions caught her off-guard. Why did Gayle tolerate her mother's abuse?

"So I knew the next film would be about her," Gayle says. "Very young, I knew something was wrong with her, and so I picked my brothers' brains. My nose, my curly hair never bothered me. I think I look OK. This was really my mother's problem. This was about my mother growing up and not feeling loved, feeling alone. My mother always wanted a boy named Gary. Women who were like my mother's character — and people can call her narcissistic — when another female arrives in the family, they're not so comfortable."

Mildred, full of endearing humor when she isn't cutting down her daughter's looks ("appearances always count. Doesn't that look like a schnoz-ola?") is hardly a villain in "Look at Us Now, Mother!" Both have since reconciled, and Gayle took precautions in the editing room to shift the film's tone from sob story to tragic comedy, including a scene

in which they answer a Craigslist ad for a mother-daughter double date.

"This guy picks up the phone and propositions us. And my mother asks him straight up, 'Will [the date] lead to a 'roll in the hay?'" Gayle says with a laugh. "Watching the early edits of the film, I was like, 'Stop! I'm going to slit my wrists. I need to lighten this up.' So we worked very hard to make this emotional journey funny, as well."

"Look at Us Now, Mother!" will screen 7 p.m. Feb. 6 at Delray MarketPlace Stadium 12 in Delray Beach; and 4 p.m. Feb. 7 at Cinemark Palace 20 in Boca Raton, before going into theatrical release on March 25. Admission, which varies by theater, includes a Q and A with Gayle and Mildred Kirschenbaum.

Go to [PalmBeachJewishFilmFestival.org](http://PalmBeachJewishFilmFestival.org) and [LookatUsNowMother.com](http://LookatUsNowMother.com).