

Brownstein: Irwin Cotler's many fights for human rights detailed in documentary

*The Montreal activist was adamant that **First to Stand: The Cases and Causes of Irwin Cotler** focus on the work, not the man.*

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“The young people I work with now inspire me. I’ve become their student and their beneficiary,” Irwin Cotler says of his colleagues at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette files

In a captivating new documentary on his commitment to myriad causes, Irwin Cotler credits some words of wisdom from his parents for putting him on his lifelong path to fight for the rights of those wrongly accused and imprisoned around the world.

“My father taught me as a young boy that the pursuit of justice is equal to all the other commandments combined. My mother would say to me, ‘If you want to pursue justice, you have to feel the injustice.’ ”

Cotler took heed.

First to Stand: The Cases and Causes of Irwin Cotler is the latest from the dynamic Montreal spousal filmmaking team of Irene Angelico and Abbey Neidik (Dark Lullabies, The Cola Conquest, Unbreakable Minds). It begins a weeklong run Saturday — appropriately, Human Rights Day — at Cinéma du Musée.

Cotler, the indefatigable former Montreal lawyer, law professor, Liberal MP for Mount Royal and federal justice minister and attorney general, just can’t say no to a cause and continues to fight the good fight. Upon leaving politics and various other endeavours, Cotler — to the surprise of few who know him — opted not to retire on a beach somewhere, but instead to undertake a new career.

Actually, there was someone close to Cotler who was taken aback by this decision: his son Yoni.

“With his cynical sense of humour, my son calls me and says: ‘You know, Dad, 75-year-olds don’t do startups, and they certainly shouldn’t do human-rights startups, and they certainly shouldn’t do them pro bono. You’re affecting my inheritance,’ ” Cotler says in the documentary, jokingly recalling the exchange with his son.

That conversation took place seven years ago as Cotler prepared to launch the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR) in Montreal. And at 82, Cotler is hardly slowing down in his role as the centre’s international chair.

Staffed by a cadre of eager young activists galvanized by Cotler, the RWCHR — whose name is inspired by Swede Wallenberg's humanitarian legacy — has tackled a slew of critical causes. Among them: Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, who, having endured 1,000 lashes for “insulting Islam” and a lengthy prison sentence, still remains unable to travel to Quebec to be with his wife; Iranian women’s protest leaders Shaparak Shajarizadeh and Masih Alinejad; and author/financier Bill Browder, creator of the Magnitsky Act for human-rights sanctions and one of the first to speak out against Vladimir Putin.

While Cotler and his team are among the first to stand, so are those for whom they rally, who are defying some of the most repressive regimes in the world. In Cotler’s case, this activism goes back to his days dealing with the imprisonment of South African leader Nelson Mandela and Russian refusenik Natan Sharansky and coming to the aid of Rwandan genocide survivors.

“I was still a student when I got involved in the two great struggles in the second half of the 20th century: the fight against apartheid in South Africa and the battle for human rights in the former Soviet Union,” Cotler says in a Zoom interview along with Angelico and Neidik. “Then as a law professor, I got involved with the political prisoners represented in these struggles, Mandela and Sharansky. That’s how it all began.”

And it’s not close to ending.

“The young people I work with now inspire me. I’ve become their student and their beneficiary,” Cotler says. “They provide such great expertise and energy and are at the focal point of the work we’re doing at the Wallenberg centre.”

Cotler has never been one to toot his own horn, and points out that he wasn’t initially keen on making this movie.

“Irene and Abbey produced this film despite my reluctance and lack of co-operation,” Cotler notes with a smile. “I have a lot of confidence in them and appreciate their work, but I’m just very self-conscious.”

Fortunately, Cotler overcame his reluctance. We are living in most precarious times, and he feels the need to speak out more than ever.

“We’re in a real historical inflection moment,” he says. “We’re witnessing a resurgent global authoritarianism, the backsliding of democracies and liberal populism, an assault on human rights and, increasingly, political prisoners as a looking glass into all of this. I’m speaking about Russia, China and Iran. There are others, but they are at the forefront of this authoritarian axis, and the democracies, regrettably, have not yet mobilized effectively. They are racked by internal polarization. But I’m at least encouraged that courageous people are rising up in a real people’s movement in Russia, China, Iran and elsewhere.”

Cotler has faced the wrath of those he has opposed. He claimed he was poisoned and left violently ill during a trip to Moscow in 2006, and was subsequently banned from entering Russia.

“You can’t think about those things. Poisonings have happened to so many working for Magnitsky sanctions. These things come with the territory,” a stoic Cotler says.

Neidik concedes it was hard keeping up with Cotler. “We were constantly running, as he was running all over the place with non-stop meetings. We’d be losing him all the time, asking: ‘Where’s Irwin?’ The man is a machine.”

“It was so important to Irwin that the film’s focus not be on him, but on the work now with the Wallenberg centre,” Angelico says. “We agreed. Our motivation was the cases and causes he still spends his life pursuing.”