

# *CYNTHIA PRICE COHEN: In Memoriam and Celebration of her Life and Legacy*

## **How Cynthia Price Cohen and I Met**

At an international conference, “Children at Risk” in May 1992 in Bergen, Norway, I met Professor Eugene Verhellen, Director of the Children’s Right Center of the University of Ghent in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> One of his first questions to me was: “Gertrud – you live in New York City, do you know Cynthia Price Cohen, who lives there?” When it turned out that I did not know her, he insisted: “You must meet her, you must.” He made it clear to me that Cynthia was an international champion of children’s rights, an extraordinary legal scholar and woman. He gave me her address and made me promise that I would get in touch with her immediately upon my return to New York City.

Cynthia Price Cohen and I met shortly thereafter in New York City, and I was soon deeply grateful to Eugene Verhellen for having introduced us and promoted our relationship. Cynthia and I became collaborators and friends, and we remained friends until her death. We occasionally saw each other, but we spoke on the telephone several times a week, often daily, or communicated via e-mail. We also spent many hours together at international conferences here and abroad on the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the

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<sup>1</sup> Since I had founded in 1991 both the Sociology of Children as a Section of the American Sociological Association and the new interdisciplinary field of Children’s Studies at The City University of New York, the organizers of the Bergen conference invited me to attend and to lay with them the groundwork for what was to become “Childwatch International Research Net” -- an international organization with major focus on the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its promulgation world-wide. A number of the key European promoters of the CRC -- both representatives of the academy and of the NGO community -- attended this foundational meeting at which we drafted the mission statement of Childwatch International to be presented to the Norwegian Minister of Children, who subsequently officially announced at the conference the establishment of Childwatch. Among the organizers and participants in the drafting committee of Childwatch were Per Egil Matvaaten (Norway), Eugene Verhellen (Belgium), Jens Qvortrup, (Denmark), Ferran Casas (Spain) and myself.

Child. Not only was she one of the much sought-after speakers; often she was also the chief organizer of entire conferences. We worked together on various publications and on special issues of law journals, of which she was guest editor. We travelled together to Poland and to the Vatican in Rome, to conferences at the Loyola School of Law in New Orleans and the Whittier Law School in Los Angeles. And she was one the keynote speakers at a Symposium I had been invited to organize at the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD) of how indeed the research community, especially in the social sciences, could provide research and contribute to the implementation of the CRC.

As Howard Davidson points out, Cynthia – a former singer, dancer and actress -- was a vibrant human being, full of life and laughter, warm-hearted and loving to her friends and colleagues, and always ready to help. Over the years, I had the good fortune that many of her friends also became my friends and close colleagues. And some of these friendships continue beyond her death. We often find ourselves remembering to one another how often we think of her and how much we miss her.

### **Cynthia Price Cohen and the Establishment of the First Interdisciplinary Program and Center in Children's Studies at The City University of New York**

Cynthia was both intimately connected with and imbedded in a vast national and international network of child rights professionals and advocates. She was always most generous with sharing information and helping to expedite new initiatives toward promoting the rights of children. When we first met in 1992, both the establishment of the Sociology of Children Section of the American Sociological Association AND the creation of a new interdisciplinary field which we called "Children's Studies" were well under way.

As I was becoming familiar with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it also increasingly became clear that this international human rights treaty was going to become the framework for both the disciplinary endeavor in sociology and the interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to children and young people in Children's Studies.

Indeed, in the course of the establishment of both fields, I was immensely benefitted by learning first-hand from her about the long years that were entailed in the drafting of the international human rights treaty on behalf of children and young people. Indeed when I drafted the bylaws of the ASA Sociology of Children Section in 1992, I adapted the definition of "children" directly from the CRC. In the same spirit and manner, the human rights of children and the CRC became an overarching framework of our Children's Studies Program and our policy research-based Children's Studies Center. Throughout these pioneering years, Cynthia was there by my side with ready counsel. Moreover, she often would come and address classes of our students on how the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child came about and provided our students in the Children's Studies Program with first-hand historical information as well as substantive insights into the history, mission, meaning and benefits of the CRC.

Cynthia also was helpful with our Children's Studies Center policy research and initiatives over the last decade, and her spirit remains with us in our new projects and endeavors. She was still alive when we held our Policy Symposium on "Children and the Law in New York" in 2004 with its major objectives of establishing a children's ombudsperson in the State of New York and improving the legal representation of children. The Symposium resulted directly in the drafting of legislation for an independent Office of the Child Advocate in New York State.

One day shortly before her death, bed-ridden and weak, Cynthia called to let me know that she wanted to bequeath her voluminous collection of children's rights papers, her own publications and library to our Children's Studies Center at The City University of New York as a resource to be available to students and researchers. She conveyed to me that with this gift she wanted to honor the firm commitment of our Children's Studies Program and Center to promoting the cause of the human rights of children. We felt deeply honored by this trust, and we have since established the *Cynthia Price Cohen Library* as a testimony to and legacy of this extraordinary woman, scholar and advocate whose work and spirit have influenced many of us around the world. Her deep collegial and often joyous friendship with all who have worked on the evolving jurisprudence on the rights of the child<sup>2</sup> and the implementation of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child continues to sustain us.

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2 The Library also includes her last major work, *Jurisprudence on the Rights Of the Child*, four volumes. Ardsley, N.Y.: Transnational Publishers, Inc., 2005.

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