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A photograph of four people in a film studio setting. In the foreground, several large, black film reels are visible, partially obscuring the view. Behind them, four individuals are looking towards the camera. On the left, a woman with brown hair, wearing a blue patterned top, rests her chin on her hand. Next to her is a man in a light blue button-down shirt. In the foreground, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored shirt, is smiling. To his right, a woman with dark hair, wearing a green t-shirt with a colorful graphic, is also smiling. The background is a dark blue wall with circular cutouts.

Concordia's Mel Hoppenheim
School of Cinema and its
professors still "reeling" in
the accolades after 35 years

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The talent to make a difference

When I met Hillel Neuer, BA 93, at a Montreal café in early spring, he apologized for being a few minutes late. Neuer, executive director of UN Watch, which is based in Geneva, Switzerland, explained that he had been on the phone with a writer from the *Wall Street Journal*.

I was truly humbled. After all, as Neuer soon related, he and UN Watch are quoted about 250 times per year by international news agencies and publications and major TV networks, making him one of the Concordia graduates who is most frequently cited by the media. I wondered how enthusiastic he'd be to meet with someone from a publication with a circulation in the tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands—or more.

It turns out my worries were unfounded. Hillel admitted that he was only too happy to be interviewed because our university is in his blood: both his parents and three of his six siblings are Concordia alumni!

Over the next hour, he described his work at UN Watch (see "Watching the watchers" on page 16). He was so eloquent and forthcoming that only a question-and-answer piece could do his story justice. The non-governmental organization for which he works advocates for human rights, fights anti-Semitism and keeps an eye on the UN and the UN Human Rights Council—a tall order to be sure. The inappropriately named council typically ignores or apologizes for the world's worst human rights offenders—some of which are ironically among its 47 members. Still, Hillel contends that the council wields international influence and must be held accountable for



sticking to its own mandate, which includes upholding the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Hillel said that politics captivated him at age 10, when he and a neighbour recreated historical political scenes, such as the John F. Kennedy assassination, "which we then forced our parents to watch!" he recalled. Hillel added that his time at Concordia's Liberal Arts College and Department of Political Science set him on a path toward human-rights advocacy. Today, he's not recreating but actually helping to shape history.

Our cover story, about the university's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema (see "Honing the art and academic work of filmmaking" on

page 12), is a profile of a different sort. While a film school may not, on the surface, be as influential as a UN watchdog, the Hoppenheim School of Cinema teaches its students to make their mark in the world of cinema, animation and film studies. Some of its grads have tackled controversial international subjects in documentary films, such as *Up the Yangtze* by Yung Chang, BFA 99, which examines the negative impact of China's Three Gorges Dam, while film studies students learn about cinema's social and cultural effects.

The school's alumni have populated the national and international film scenes throughout its 35 years. In the 1980s, I worked on a few local movie productions, armed with a degree in film and communications from McGill University. My colleagues' reactions were always the same:

"You're in the minority; most of the crew are Concordia grads."

Mel Hoppenheim, president and CEO of Mel's Cité du Cinéma and benefactor of the School of Cinema, told our writer that Concordia plays a key role in the local film industry because it grooms outstanding graduates. "Without them, our industry is not going very far. We need a constant flow of talent, which Concordia produces," Hoppenheim said.

Ultimately, there is one trait that Hillel Neuer and Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema graduates share: they chose to study at an institution that both recognized and fostered their talents. ■



Hillel Neuer, BA 93, the executive director of UN Watch, works to ensure that the United Nations and its UN Human Rights Council follow their own ideals.

WATCHING THE WATCHERS

by Howard Bokser

HILLEL NEUER, BA 93 (WEST. SOC. CULT. & POLI. SCI.), is a busy man. Neuer is executive director of UN Watch, a non-governmental organization [NGO] that keeps a close eye on the controversial United Nations Human Rights Council based in Geneva, Switzerland, the UN in New York City and human rights abuses around the world. "And human rights issues arise 24-hours a day," Neuer says.

UN Watch (unwatch.org) was founded in 1993 by Morris Abram, an American lawyer who worked at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal after the Second World War, was a leading advocate in the civil rights movement, served under five American presidents and was the United States' ambassador to the UN in Geneva. UN Watch's stated mission is to monitor the performance of the United Nations by the yardstick of its own charter. It also is often called upon by international media organizations to provide analyses and commentaries on UN and human rights issues. "In a given year, we may be quoted in 250 separate articles, in Reuters, *The Economist*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*. And I've debated on CNN, Fox News, BBC, Al Jazeera and other TV networks," Neuer points out.

Neuer graduated from the Liberal Arts College and also majored in Political Science at Concordia. He then earned civil and common-law degrees from McGill University, completing his final year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He remained in Israel to clerk for an Israeli Supreme Court justice and completed a master's of law degree at Hebrew University. Neuer then took a position at a New York City law firm, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP, and in 2004, became executive director of UN Watch.



Hillel Neuer at the Assembly Hall of the Palais des Nations, the UN's European headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

One of Neuer's former Concordia professors, Frederick Krantz, was the founding principal of the Liberal Arts College. "Hillel was an outstanding student. He was also an intern for CIJR and editor of *Dateline: Middle East*, our student magazine," recalls Krantz, who is also director of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research (CIJR), a Montreal-based think-tank. "As leader of UN Watch, Hillel brings judicial skills and writing and analytical ability, which, I'd like to think, he picked up, at least in part, at the Liberal Arts College and CIJR." Neuer delivered the keynote address and a seminar on human rights advocacy at the Liberal Arts College's 30th anniversary celebrations in 2009. "As a result, several of our students were motivated to pursue human rights law," Krantz says.

Irwin Cotler, a Canadian Member of Parliament and McGill University law professor who taught Neuer at McGill, says the two have remained close. "Hillel has shown exemplary leadership at UN Watch, which holds the UN accountable for its own founding ideals," Cotler says. "He also organized the first and second Geneva Summit for Human Rights, Tolerance and Democracy, which I attended and which brought together human-rights defenders to address important issues, such as genocide. It was a dramatic contrast to the work of the Human Rights Council, which is located right across the street."

Concordia University Magazine met with Hillel Neuer to discuss his time at Concordia, the UN and the Human Rights Council and the role of UN Watch.



Concordia University Magazine: What are your memories of Concordia and the Liberal Arts College?

Hillel Neuer: The Liberal Arts College offered a community dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, truth, philosophy, art, literature. It really developed a community and a culture of culture! I had a number of great teachers, such as professors Fred Krantz, the late Harvey Shulman and Virginia Nixon.

Explain UN Watch's role.

We're an NGO, a UN-accredited organization. We participate at all sessions of the Human Rights Council. We have the right to speak. NGOs do not have that opportunity in New York at the Security Council or the General Assembly. But in Geneva, we're part of the debate.

The mission of UN Watch is to uphold the principles of the UN Charter, a great, liberal document written by idealists working for U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, with the vision of an international organization that would protect principles of freedom and peace. We monitor the UN and speak out when it veers off those principles—which it too often does, unfortunately—and we promote human rights.

A large part of our work was looking at the Human Rights Commission, which had noble beginnings but, unfortunately, veered off track. It became so bad that, in 2005, UN secretary general Kofi Annan effectively killed it. He said it had become politicized and that countries were joining to shield their own records of abuse. He proposed to scrap it and created the Human Rights Council. Unfortunately, this new body hasn't been better. In fact, it's been worse. The government of Libyan dictator Muammar Khadhafi was just elected to sit on the Council for the next three years. Libya will join existing members like China, Cuba, Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia—countries that are widely criticized for their systematic abuses of human rights and who dominate the agenda. It's an upside-down world.

Not surprisingly, this Council often adopts resolutions that undermine human rights. In May 2009, after Sri Lanka killed an estimated 20,000 civilians in their war with Tamil rebels, the European Union triggered a special session of the Human Rights Council to hold Sri Lanka accountable. But because the democratic faction is a minority in the Council, the repressive regimes were able to twist the text so that it ended up praising Sri Lanka. Those who initiated the session had to pull their sponsorship; their good intentions were inverted by the council majority.

How does UN Watch fit into that equation?

The UN needs watchdogs. Canada, for example, is a vibrant democracy because we have institutions of accountability: freedom of speech, blogs critiquing the government, an independent judiciary, free elections, a free press and so forth. But when the Human Rights Council adopts a resolution that is flawed or outright pernicious—like the resolution praising Sri Lanka—there's no recourse, no appeal to bodies like an independent court. So our role is to defend the UN principles just as the Supreme Court of Canada defends the Charter of Rights and Freedoms from any overreach by the government.

Another major issue for UN Watch, which is affiliated with the American Jewish Committee, is to fight anti-Semitism and the unequal treatment of Israel, which we believe hurts not only Israel but also Palestinians, Middle East peace and the UN as a whole.

Israel must be held accountable. The problem at the Council is that we don't see any balance. Israel is repeatedly condemned, yet there's never any attempt to demand the slightest accountability from Israel's neighbours, the Palestinians, Syria or even Iran. This one-sided approach deters Israelis from trusting the UN. While these resolutions appear to be pro-Palestinian, they're not. They've only encouraged the extremists, hindered compromise and harmed the UN's own credibility as an honest broker on the Middle East issue.

Opposite page: Hillel Neuer at the UN in New York City. At right: Neuer, far right, with former UN secretary general Kofi Anan in Washington D.C., in 2006. Neuer argues that the UN Human Rights Council's actions have become diametrically opposed to the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

At the last session of the Human Rights Council in March 2010, there were five resolutions on Israel and only four on the rest of the world combined. That's ridiculous! It's harmful for millions of human rights victims around the world whose situations never see the light of day. There's a very limited amount of time and resources that diplomats will devote to a Council session. Every one-sided resolution on Israel is time, resources and resolutions not devoted to victims suffering in Tibet, Zimbabwe or Chechnya.

Those who introduce or support these resolutions are, themselves, the worst violators of human rights. It's a deliberate strategy to deflect attention from their own abuses.

In March, Canada was criticized for its treatment of minorities by the UN's Independent Expert on Minority Issues, American Gay McDougall. What are your thoughts on that?

The expert, who is appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, selects a few places each year to visit and report on minority rights issues. One place she chose this year was Canada. Canada should be held accountable but it's a question of priorities. Canada is one of the best countries for minorities. Sure, it's flawed. I grew up in Quebec and I'm aware of real issues and concerns. That said, from a global perspective, when the UN has scarce time and resources, the natural priority would be to address countries perpetrating genocide or ethnic cleansing and where there's no one—no free press, no judiciary, no human rights group—to speak out for the minorities. These are the victims who really need help from an international voice like the UN. To divert this attention to Canada, I think, shows a profoundly flawed sense of priorities.

Is the UN still relevant?

The UN is still indispensable. Our world today is globalized. We need a global institution to offer a permanent diplomatic forum for dialogue and to regulate global problems such as health, labour, trade, humanitarian disasters and relief. We need the UN. But we need the UN to work right.

What power does the Human Rights Council have?

The Human Rights Council doesn't have the power of the sword, which is held by the Security Council. It doesn't have



the power of the purse, held by the General Assembly. All they have is the power of shame, to spotlight country abuses that would otherwise go hidden. It's significant. We know that all countries, including major abusers like China, lobby hard to prevent any criticism. This proves that words matter.

What power does UN Watch wield?

The power of truth. We are able to educate a large population by broadcasting our message in the media and building pressure for reform. Our videos have been seen more than one million times on YouTube. If we critique a given issue, the UN will hear about it. It doesn't mean they'll always respond in the right way, but it's heard.

A few years ago, UN High Commissioner of Human Rights and former Canadian judge Louise Arbour issued a statement praising the Arab Charter of Human Rights, after it had been ratified by several Arab states. Key provisions in that text said that Zionism had to be eliminated, along with racism. Equating Zionism with racism is something the UN had once done itself but had repealed in 1991. In his memoirs, Canadian legal scholar John Humphrey, who helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, described that kind of language as anti-Semitism. We spoke out immediately. It was picked up around the world, including in several Canadian newspapers. Within a day or two, Arbour issued a retraction saying she was opposed to those provisions. Because of our media protest, we got that retraction.

Words matter. Word is father to deed. Governments and civilizations are based on a perception of legitimacy. Governments do not rule by might alone; they must eventually rule by right and a sense of legitimacy. ■