

Morton Cohen, civil rights attorney and law school professor, dies

By [Steve Rubenstein](#)

April 20, 2018

Morton Cohen, a civil rights attorney and law school professor whose tireless devotion to the underdog helped improve treatment for mental patients, jail inmates and poor tenants, has died.

Cohen died April 12 of cancer in his Berkeley hills home. He was 82.

“I represent what I consider to be powerless people,” Cohen often said. “Being a bridge between society and that invisible group of folks makes you feel like your life is useful.”

Working pro bono — which is legalese for unpaid — Cohen filed many lawsuits on behalf of jail inmates, battling overcrowding and understaffing. His work led to the construction of new jails, including one in San Francisco. He also represented seniors and nursing home residents.

“People with physical impairments and mental illnesses — he cared very much about how they were treated,” said his longtime friend, retired U.S. District Judge Thelton Henderson. “His clients couldn’t pay him. He did it from the heart.”

In 2012, Cohen successfully argued before a state appeals court that California counties must provide judicial hearings before administering drugs to some county hospital patients. The following year, he received the Jefferson Award recognizing his lifetime of work on patients’ and inmates’ behalf.

“Even prisoners ... are given the right to autonomy before the state can forcibly treat them,” Cohen said at the time, maintaining that mental patients who refuse medication are “engaging their autonomy.”

Much of Cohen’s story is told in the new movie “[55 Steps](#),” an account of his work on behalf of a San Francisco mental health patient. In the movie, Cohen is played by veteran actor Jeffrey Tambor.

Nursing home reform advocate Patricia McGinnis called Cohen “the ultimate civil rights attorney,” and said his courtroom victories were “lasting legacies.”

A native of Brooklyn and a graduate of New York University and of Harvard Law School, Cohen was a teacher at Golden Gate University School of Law in San

Francisco for 44 years and was teaching until shortly before his death. He specialized in criminal law and evidence. Friends recall his devotion to his students and their careers, how his office door was always open to them and how he stayed in touch with countless students from decades past.

Before coming to the Bay Area, Cohen worked for Legal Aid and for law offices that served poor clients around the U.S. In New York, he represented clients who had been illegally evicted and, in Los Angeles, he represented would-be renters who were denied apartments because of racial discrimination.

A passionate fisherman, Cohen cast his lines in rivers, lakes and oceans around the world and brought back his catches to his Berkeley home, where he kept two freezers for the purpose. Each year, he invited family and friends to a huge fish fry featuring what Henderson fondly recalled as “beer and cheap wine” and that year’s catch.

Cohen was also a runner, participating in local 10-kilometer races, and a fan of the symphony and ballet.

His wife of 54 years, kindergarten teacher and private school founder Harriet Cohen, said she met her future husband on a blind date and agreed to go out with him only after the two spent an hour on the phone discussing a book about World War II.

“I was intrigued,” she recalled with a smile. “Who was this stranger whom I could discuss history and politics with?”

His son, Thomas, said his father was “always a champion for the underrepresented, and a man who wanted to change the system — and he did.”

Cohen is survived by his wife; by his daughter, Laurel Cohen of San Jose; his sons, Edward of Vallejo and Thomas of Los Angeles.

A memorial celebration will be held April 29 in Berkeley.

Steve Rubenstein is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: srubenstein@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [SteveRubesf](#)