

DEBRA CHASNOFF

b. October 12, 1957

d. November 7, 2017

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

“We all know plenty of gay people who have won Academy Awards, but we’re all just quiet about it. I couldn’t imagine having that profound of an honor and not acknowledging my partner.”

She is the first Academy Award winner to acknowledge a same-sex partner in her acceptance speech.

Debra Hill Chasnoff was an American documentary filmmaker and activist. She won the 1992 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject for “Deadly Deception.” In her acceptance speech, Chasnoff became the first Academy Award recipient to acknowledge a same-sex partner during the ceremony’s live national telecast. She came out in doing so.

Chasnoff was born in Philadelphia and grew up in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. Her father, Joel Chasnoff, was a Maryland state legislator and her mother, Selina Sue Prosen, was a psychologist. In 1978 Chasnoff graduated with a degree in economics from Wellesley College.

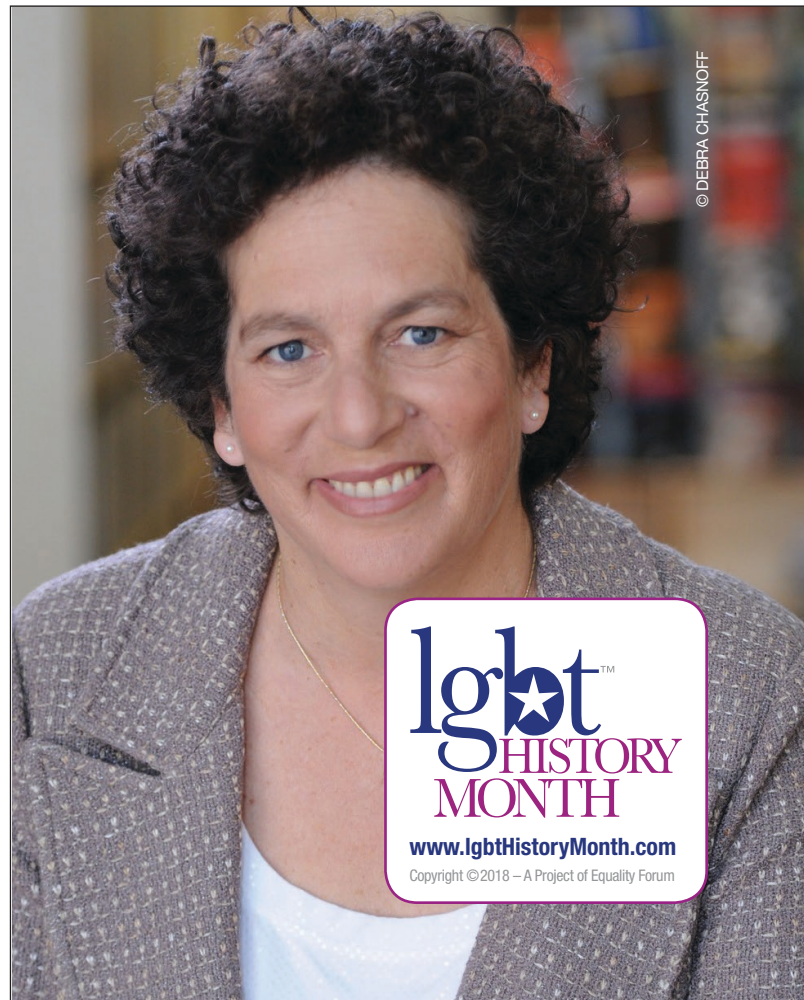
Chasnoff made 12 documentary films. With her production company, GroundSpark, she produced and distributed documentaries covering social issues such as income inequality, environmental rights and LGBT rights. The company’s mission was to “create films and dynamic education campaigns that move individuals and communities to take action for a more just world.” Films like “That’s a Family” (2000) exposed students nationwide to diverse households of multiracial families and same-sex parents.

Chasnoff’s influential first film, “Choosing Children” (1984), showcased six same-sex American couples raising children through adoption, biological donors or fostering. It won Best Short Documentary at the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and First Prize from the National Educational Film Festival. The New York Times reported that the film “inspired many gay and lesbian couples to start raising families of their own.”

In 1991 Chasnoff directed and produced “Deadly Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons and Our Environment.” The exposé earned her the 1992 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. In accepting the award, Chasnoff thanked her then partner, Kim Klausner.

In addition to filmmaking, Chasnoff was a visiting scholar in public policy at Mills College in California. Mayor Art Agnos of San Francisco appointed her vice chair of the city’s Film and Video Arts Commission. She also served on the advisory boards of the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the Jewish Voices for Peace organization.

At age 60, Chasnoff died of breast cancer. She was survived by her spouse Nancy Otto, an artist and nonprofit fundraiser, and two sons from her relationship with Klausner. The New York Times published Chasnoff’s obituary.



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