

Ms. Harris and her sister moved to Montreal because their mother took a job in the mid-'70s conducting research into breast cancer in the Lady Davis Institute at the Jewish General Hospital.

Dr. Michael Pollak, Director of the Stroll Cancer Prevention Centre at the JGH, worked with Kamala Harris's late mother.

As a laboratory scientist, Dr. Gopalan Harris developed a method of assessing cancerous breast tissue that became standard procedure at the JGH and other hospitals.

Dr. Michael Pollak, now Director of the Stroll Cancer Prevention Centre at the JGH and a Professor of Medicine and Oncology at McGill University, worked with Dr. Gopalan Harris and describes her as a mentor.

At the time, he was a clinical oncologist starting a research lab to investigate the roles of hormones that influence cancer growth, a topic related to Dr. Gopalan Harris's work.

"She helped me understand the basics of laboratory work, while I explained to her some of the clinical aspects of breast cancer," Dr. Pollak says. He recalls her as a smart and forceful researcher who made important contributions to understanding breast cancer.

"People were happy to work for her, not because it was easy, but because of the atmosphere of collaboration," Dr. Pollak says. "Everyone called her Shyamala."

Like her daughter, who has described her mother as "the most important person in my life," Dr. Gopalan Harris broke barriers in her own way.

"She was a strong and independent woman and part of a small minority of woman scientists at the time. In that sense, she broke through a glass ceiling. She was a pioneer."

She also embodied the diversity and spirit of collaboration that have become the hallmarks of institute, Dr. Pollak adds. "She was definitely a positive, early influence on the development of the Lady Davis Institute."

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