

New display features artifacts illustrating Biochemist Gertrude Elion's accomplishments, including her 1988 Nobel Prize



PHILADELPHIA, PA.- Visitors to the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) now have the opportunity to learn about biochemist Gertrude B. Elion and her groundbreaking medical research in the Museum's Only in America® Gallery/Hall of Fame, located on the free-of-charge first floor. The gallery features several artifacts illustrating Elion's Nobel Prize-winning work, which led to the development of medicines used to treat leukemia, rheumatoid arthritis, malaria, herpes, and organ transplant rejection. Her honor is tied to the theme of Jewish American Heritage Month held this past May, which celebrated American Jews in Medical Research.

"On the heels of Jewish American Heritage Month, NMAJH is proud to expand Only in America® to include Gertrude Elion—a medical pioneer who deserves to be a household name," said Ivy Barsky, NMAJH's CEO and Gwen Goodman Director. "At a time when women had few opportunities to participate in scientific research, Elion charted her own path and developed medicines that are still impacting the lives of countless individuals across the globe today."

Four artifacts related to Elion's life are now on view in the first floor gallery. Her 1988 Nobel Prize medal is accompanied by the award nomination form, in which the Nobel Committee recognized Elion for work that "revolutionized both the development of pharmaceuticals and the field of medicine in general." Visitors can view her 1962 patent for "purine derivatives," used for the treatment of leukemia and resulting in a drug that greatly increased the success rates of kidney transplants and treated various autoimmune disorders. Also on view is a vial from her 1978 clinical trial of Zovirax, the first truly effective anti-viral medication. Elion considered Zovirax to be her greatest accomplishment, and she kept this vial from a 1978 clinical trial on her desk until her death in 1999.

Showing signs of brilliance from a very young age, Elion graduated from high school at age 15 and continued her studies at New York City's Hunter College where she would graduate summa cum laude with a degree in chemistry in 1937. Graduate schools and companies in science-related fields during this time in history were largely unwilling to enroll and employ women, but Elion was hired by Dr. George Hitchings with whom she would later share the 1988 Nobel Prize in medicine. Elion and her team made leaps and bounds in the medical field by developing drugs that help combat a large number of diseases including hepatitis, rheumatoid arthritis, herpes, and malaria, as well as devising the first successful treatment of childhood leukemia. At the time of her death in 1999, she was recognized as having been a true trailblazer as a female scientist and her work had touched the lives of those suffering with diseases all over the world.

Located on the first floor of the Museum, the Only in America® Gallery/Hall of Fame illustrates a number of different stories and themes that can be found throughout the rest of the Museum's core exhibition. Using a combination of original artifacts, multimedia elements, and interactives, the Only in America® Gallery/Hall of Fame tells the stories of twenty American Jews and the challenges they faced on their respective journeys to achievement and opportunity. Some of the previous inductees include Irving Berlin, Estee Lauder, Albert Einstein, and Leonard Bernstein; the original list is available at survey.NMAJH.org. Visitors are able to visit the Only in America® Gallery/Hall of Fame for free any day that the Museum is open to the public. Visitors can also explore a database of over 300 individuals on interactive touchscreens throughout the gallery.