

# WOMEN IN DERMATOLOGY

A *Chronicle* COMMEMORATIVE ♀ EDITION

First Edition  
Summer 2019  
<http://derm.city/women>



IT TOOK **MORE THAN A CENTURY**

TO BE ABLE TO **SAY THESE WORDS**

**‘WELCOME TO AN  
HISTORIC PUBLICATION’**

# WOMEN IN DERMATOLOGY



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## The Doctors Gagnon Sisters have practiced together for 35 years

Over the past 35 years, the name Gagnon has become a synonym for excellence in dermatology, particularly in the province of Quebec.

“Some people do not know Madeleine, some people do not know Suzanne, but many have heard about the Gagnon sisters,” said Dr. Suzanne Gagnon, co-owner of Dermatologie Face Au Temps in Laval, Que.

For more than 35 years, Dr. Suzanne Gagnon has been practicing aesthetic dermatology with her younger sister, Dr. Madeleine Gagnon. Dr. Suzanne is four years older than Dr. Madeleine. She discovered her love for dermatology during her internship training in medical school, where she shadowed a dermatologist who took the time to share with her the ins and outs of the specialty. Dermatology was still an emerging specialty at that time and Dr. Suzanne is thankful to have been introduced to it through her mentor Dr. Gaston Dumais, who is now in his eighties and still works full time in his private practice.

“In those years there was no way that an intern could be exposed to any kind of dermatology program. I was lucky to be with a dermatologist who was keen to share his experience with me,” said Dr. Suzanne. “I saw patients coming in being hospitalized who looked awful, they were clearly suffering. And then I saw that the patients became better and I saw how thankful they were to their doctor.”

Dr. Madeleine, on the other hand, discovered her passion for dermatology over time. At first, she wanted to pursue a career in law, but realized that she wanted a career that combined both art and science.

“I discovered that I am an artist. I chose dermatology because it is science and art, especially aesthetic dermatology. In dermatology you have form, colour, and you can read the

result on the patient,” said Dr. Madeleine. “My sister went into dermatology and because we share the same values and because she liked it so much, I thought that it was something that I should also try and pursue.”

### How the partnership began

In the early years of their practice when Dr. Suzanne opened their clinic, Dr. Madeleine was still in medical school. “In the beginning Suzanne did mostly everything by herself. I started by helping her at night after classes,” said Dr. Madeleine.

When Dr. Madeleine completed her studies and her training, she was able to work full-time with her older sister. According to the physicians, what makes their clinic unique is their approach of making a human connection with their patients. Before receiving any treatments, their patients undergo an extensive evaluation to determine if they are good candidates for the procedures that they want to have.

“We never treat the wrinkle, we treat the person. We listen very well to the patient. We try to see if what they want is realistic,” said Dr. Suzanne.

“We understand their need. We create natural results and we execute our work in an artistic way. If patients ask for a procedure or treatment that they may not need or that may not look natural, we will not do it,” added Dr. Madeleine.

The dermatologists also make sure that patients understand any further treatments they may need to undergo in order to maintain results. They encourage patients to call or visit

them right away, should they have any concerns. All of this helps to create strong relationships with their patients, many of whom they have been treating for decades.

“Boosting people’s self-esteem is what I enjoy most about aesthetic dermatology. We make people look the way they feel inside. Other medical specialties do not have that privilege, that positive feedback,” said Dr. Suzanne.

### **The perfect combination**

The Gagnon sisters agree that their complementary personalities is a reason why they have worked so well together all these years. They are open to each other’s ideas and hardly ever argue. According to Dr. Madeleine, her sister is more logical while she is more creative.

“We are like yin and yang. I am more yang and Suzanne is more yin. The qualities that one has, shines on the other, helps the other perform better. After more than 35 years of working together I have become more lenient and she has learned to express herself more,” said Dr. Madeleine.

“A large part of my happiness is to be with my sister. Over the years it has become easier to focus on the same direction,” explained Dr. Suzanne.

### **Family values**

Considering their upbringing, it may seem that success was inevitable for the Gagnon sisters. Their grandmother was outspoken and known for being a forward-thinker.

“Our grandmother taught our father that education is very important for a woman. My grandmother was so ahead of her time that sometimes their neighbours burned straw effigies on her lawn because they did not accept her views,” said Dr. Madeleine.

Their grandmother’s views were passed on to their father who encouraged his daughters to pursue whatever it was that they wanted to do in their lives. He was also an entrepreneur who founded his own furniture manufacturing company.

“He was an inspiration, my father, for a man to teach us that women and men can do the same things,” said Dr. Madeleine. “Our mother played an important role, too, and supported us all along.”

This confidence that was instilled in them from a young age proved to be useful, especially at the beginning of their medical careers. Although they felt certain challenges working in a male-dominated field, their trust in their capabilities did not falter.

“I remember one of my close male colleagues saying once, when someone was making a sexist joke, ‘Do not try that with Madeleine, it does not work with her.’ I felt good within myself so those kinds of things did not really hurt me,” said Dr. Madeleine.

Dr. Suzanne sometimes felt like she was perceived as superficial or frivolous by her male counterparts because of her appearance. She also witnessed a double-standard in the media, especially in the early days of her career.

“I have been interviewed for many articles over the years. In the beginning, when I would read the completed article, I noticed that my male colleague was quoted as ‘Dr.’ but I only as ‘Madame Gagnon.’ Unfortunately, even now, sometimes that still happens,” said Dr. Suzanne.

### **Advice for up-and-coming dermatologists**

The doctors say that now is an exciting time to be in dermatology, especially for female physicians. It is a dynamic field with many opportunities for innovation. Drs. Suzanne and Madeleine advise young dermatologists to know their strengths and weaknesses so that they can effectively choose their specialties. They also say that it is important to always be in touch with their motivation for pursuing their careers.

“If you want to embrace the practice of cosmetic dermatology, do it because it is a passion for you and because you love it. If you do it only to improve your income you might find the days very long. It is very

demanding,” said Dr. Suzanne.

The Gagnon sisters credit passion as the key to their professional success. They also actively prioritize maintaining a work-life balance.

“My colleagues know that two years ago my husband, Bob Lavoie, died very suddenly,” said Dr. Suzanne. “The loss was all-consuming, but my work has played a role in the healing process. With the daily support of my family and the satisfaction I derive from helping my patients, I endure and find meaning. I’m fortunate to work alongside my sister, and to draw support from our circle of extended families, including our family of friends and medical peers.”

Dr. Madeleine adds, “Success doesn’t necessarily lead to happiness. But happiness does continue to success.”

To avoid burnout and maintain longevity, it is important to make time for leisure and recovery, especially for female physicians who are constantly juggling multiple responsibilities. Dr. Madeleine, for example, likes to journal, sketch, and read. She likes to take long walks in the countryside, go snowshoeing in the winter, and spend time with her husband. She also practices mindfulness.

“Mindfulness for me is a daily thing. Normally one hour before I have to be at the clinic, I go to a restaurant nearby, I have my coffee, my toast, listen to music, and I write in my journal,” said Dr. Madeleine. “I prepare my energy so when I start my day, I am in the positive field.”

The passion of the Gagnon sisters continues as, in Feb. 2019, they joined the Victoria Park MediSpa Group—a team of specialists in dermatology, plastic surgery and oculoplastic surgery. Orienting their practice to new horizons, they plan to relocate in a larger space to welcome two new doctors and offer a wider variety of treatments to their patients. ♀