

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Gay McDougall

PERSON

McDougall, Gay J.

**Alternative Names:** Gay McDougall;

**Life Dates:** August 13, 1947-

**Place of Birth:** Atlanta, Georgia, USA

**Residence:** New York, New York

**Work:** New York, New York

**Occupations:** Lawyer

## Biographical Note

Lawyer Gay McDougall was born on August 13, 1947 in Atlanta, Georgia to Inez Johnson and Louis Johnson. After graduating from Booker T. Washington High School in 1965, McDougall became the first African American student to attend Agnes Scott College. She transferred to Bennington College in 1967, and received her B.A. degree in social science from there in 1969. McDougall went on to receive her J.D. degree from Yale University in 1972 and her L.L.M degree in international law from the London School of Economics in 1978.

McDougall worked at the firm of Debevoise, Plimpton, Lyons & Gates from 1972 to 1974, before joining the National Conference of Black Lawyers as general counsel in 1975. She served as a staff attorney in the minimum standards unit of the New York City Board of Correction in 1976, worked at the African National Congress Office to the United Nations in New York in 1978, and served as associate counsel in New York's Office of the Deputy Mayor for Criminal Justice in 1979. From 1980 to 1994, McDougall served as executive director of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law's Southern Africa Project, securing the release of thousands of political prisoners in South Africa and Namibia and founding the Commission on Independence for Namibia. In 1994, McDougall was appointed to serve on South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission, where she worked closely with Nelson Mandela. She joined Global Rights in 1995 as executive director; and, in 1997, she was elected to serve a four-year term as an independent expert on the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In 2005, McDougall was appointed the first U.N. Special Rapporteur on minority issues. She served as a distinguished scholar in residence at American University Washington College of Law in 2006 and as the Father

Robert F. Drinan Visiting Professor in Human Rights at Georgetown University Law Center in 2011. In 2015, she was elected to another four-year term on the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and served as vice-chair.

McDougall served on the board of the Southern Africa Legal Services and Education Project, the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation, and Africare. She also served as vice chair of the board of Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) USA from 2001 to 2003, and as chair of the governance committee of CARE International from 1994 to 2003. In 2005, she joined the board of the Global Fund for Women. McDougall also served on the advisory council of Realizing Rights and on the executive council of the American Society of International Law.

In 1999, McDougall received the MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant” for her work on behalf of international human rights. She also received the Candace Award from the National Coalition of 100 Black Women in 1990, the Thurgood Marshall Award from District of Columbia Bar in 2010, and the Goler T. Butcher Medal from American Society for International Law in 2011.

Gay McDougall was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on October 23, 2019.

## Related Entries

**English Avenue Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Anderson Park Elementary School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Booker T. Washington High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Agnes Scott College** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Bennington College** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**B.A.**

**Yale Law School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**J.D.**

**London School of Economics** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**L.L.M.**

**Debevoise, Plimpton, Lyons & Gates** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 2001 to 2011]

**National Conference of Black Lawyers** [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

**General Counsel**

**New York City Board of Corrections** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1997 to 2001]

**Staff Attorney, Minimum Standards Unit**

**African National Congress Office to the United Nations** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Office of the Deputy Mayor for Criminal Justice** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1987 to 1991]

**Associate Counsel**

**Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1980 to 1994]

**Executive Director, Southern African Project**

**United Nations Council on Namibia** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1984 to ?]

**Consultant**

**Commission on Independence for Namibia** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Founder and Director**

**Independent Electoral Commission** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 199401 to 199406]

**Appointee**

**Global Rights** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1995 to ?]

**Executive Director**

**United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Independent Expert**

**United Nations** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Special Rapporteur on the situation of minorities**

**American University Washington College of Law** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 2006 to ?]

**Distinguished Scholar**

**Georgetown University Law Center** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 1993 to ?]

**Father Robert F. Drinan Visiting Professor**

**United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** [EMPLOYEEOf]  
[from 2015 to 2019]

**Vice Chairman**

**Global Fund for Women** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Board Member**

**Africare** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 2005 to 2007]

**Board Member**

[MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Realizing Rights** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Advisory Board Member**

**American Society of International Law** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Executive Board Member**

**Open Society Foundation, Open Society Justice Initiative** [MEMBEROf]  
[from ? to ?]

**Board Member**

**Equal Rights Trust** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 2006 to ?]

**Board Member**

**Open Society Institute** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 2006 to ?]

**Member, Sub-Board on Women's Rights**

**Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Human Rights Award Judges Panel** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 2003 to ?]

**Member**

**Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) USA** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 1991 to 2003]

**Board Member**

**Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) USA** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 2001 to 2003]

**Vice Chair**

**Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International** [MEMBEROf]  
[from 1994 to 2003]

**Chair, Governance Committee**

**The Council on Foreign Relations** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Board Member**

**Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation** [MEMBEROF]  
[from 1994 to 2004]

**Board Member**

**Southern Africa Legal Services and Education Project** [MEMBEROF]  
[from 1994 to 2003]

**Board Member**