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# Cambridge Arts



Cambridge filmmaker Anna Wexler has seen the powerful effect that a trip to Israel can have on young Jews. She examines it in her first documentary, "Awaken."

## Unorthodox filmmaker

*Anna Wexler examines the draw of Israel in new documentary*

Anna Wexler holds degrees from MIT in brain and cognitive science and in humans and science with a focus in writing and neuroscience. She works part time on a project involving the effects of an eight-week meditation at Harvard. She's been part of a British research team that's studied prosopagnosia (no ability to recognize faces).

### FILM

ED SYMKUS

She's a fan of adventure travel, and she's planning to retrace the route of explorer Fridtjof Nansen across the ice cap in Greenland. She's entertained at parties as a fire spinner.

And the 23-year-old Cambridge resident is putting the final touches on an autobiographical documentary as part of the Filmmaker in Residence program at WGBH.

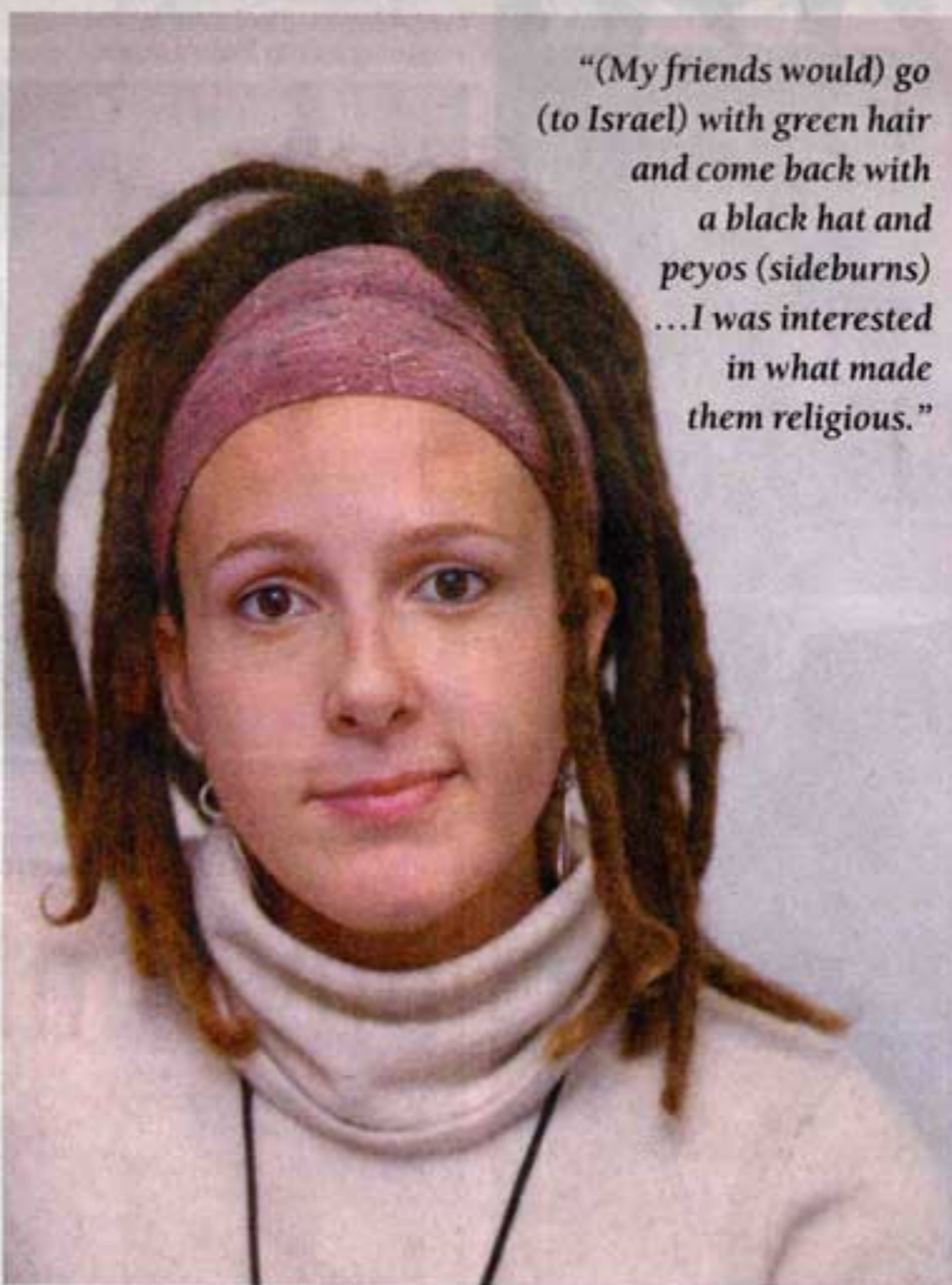
The road to her nine-month residency, which includes a workspace, equipment, professional assistance and a \$5,000 stipend, started about four years ago. As a student at MIT, she was spending Thanksgiving at the home of one of her professors, whose husband, a television producer, suggested to Wexler that the thesis on Israel she was planning to write might work better as a documentary film.

"I didn't know anything about making documentaries," says Wexler, relaxing in a conference room at WGBH. But she started reading up on the technical aspects of the craft, got Nadja Oertelt, her best friend in college on board to read up on cinematography and become co-producer, mixed start-up funds from MIT with their own money, and invested in a camera and some audio equipment.

"Then we started shooting," she says.

What they started shooting is titled "Awaken," and was directly related to her own Jewish upbringing in New York and New Jersey.

"I grew up in an Orthodox community," says Wexler, sporting shoulder-length dreadlocks. "I rebelled when I was 16 or 17, and left the community. My friends had rebelled with me, and everybody went to spend the year in Israel, except for me. I spent a year in Asia instead. During this year my friends became very religious. I'd seen this before with older kids from our community. They'd go with green



*"(My friends would) go (to Israel) with green hair and come back with a black hat and peyos (sideburns) ...I was interested in what made them religious."*

hair and come back with a black hat and peyos (sideburns). This happened year after year. When my friends came back I was interested in what made them religious.

"At first I thought they were getting brainwashed, and I wanted to see if it was brainwashing and then show other people that it was," she continues. "But my ultimate conclusion is that it isn't brainwashing, that there's something way more complex and interesting going on."

These memories were part of what got her interested in the subject for her documentary. She followed three Orthodox teenagers through a year in Israel after they graduated from high school, joining them there on three oc-

casions, and using footage the teens shot of themselves with video cameras. "So it's my story framing the film," she explains, "and then we have the kids' stories and we have their video diaries."

Most of the filming for "Awaken" was done in 2005 and 2006, and Wexler ended up with about 80 hours of footage, which was then cut down to about 10 hours. With a couple of unrelated short films and a WGBH internship at "Nova" during her senior year at MIT under her belt, she found out about the Filmmakers in Residence program online last summer.

"I applied, they called me in for an interview, and I got it," she says. "We thought we'd be able to edit it with a

supervising editor. But now that I am more of a part of the film, I'm finding that it's really hard to edit yourself. So we need a fulltime editor. The next step will be to find money for the editor."

Wexler can usually be found working on the film at WGBH three days a week. She says that her hopes are to aim as high as she can, including film festivals, television broadcast and theatrical distribution in smaller theaters.

"I'm still learning how to be a filmmaker," she says. "It's so hard to break into this business, that there's no other way I would've had this opportunity."

Of course, there are all of those other interests that are taking up pieces of her time and attention.

Her fascination with exploration, and particularly the great arctic explorers, got her reading about Fridtjof Nansen's Greenland adventures. (She recommends the book "Nansen" by Roland Huntford.)

"I like challenging myself," she says. "It only costs about \$2,000 to get to Greenland, and another few grand for the equipment. So it's sort of feasible, even if nobody sponsors me to do it. I'd follow his tracks. It's been done before, but not by many people, and I haven't been to Greenland yet."

She first came across people spinning fire while attending the Burning Man festival.

"You have finger loops made of nylon or leather," she explains. "Those are attached to a chain with a Kevlar wick on both ends. You soak the wicks in fuel — I use white gas — for about two minutes, then you light them up and you just kind of dance with them."

"It's a great party trick," she adds, laughing. "I get invited to do it at barbecues."

With all of this going on, Wexler admits that she hasn't given a lot of thought about a single focused career.

"I kind of want to keep doing everything," she says. "I might as well give it a shot."

For more information about WGBH's Filmmaker in Residence program, visit <http://lab.wgbh.org/filmmakers-residence>.

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