

Life Story Documentarian

by Jacqueline M. Duda



Debbie
Brodsky



Debbie Mintz Brodsky, a Bethesda resident and three-time Emmy-award-winning television producer, has interviewed a great number of people throughout her career, including such notables as Senator John McCain, Senator Bob Dole and Tiger Woods. After working as a producer for South Carolina's ETV (PBS) and at WETA (PBS), and after stints at The Learning Channel (TLC), "Entertainment Tonight," "Reading Rainbow" and most recently MHz NETWORKS, Brodsky struck out on her own. She has combined her production know-how with a passion to tell people's life stories via personal documentaries.

InSight: *What is a personal documentary?*

Brodsky: It unveils a person's life story in a way that is entertaining, engaging, and really captures the essence of the person's spirit and their emotions. More people are starting to write personal memoirs and autobiographies, but with video and film you get to actually hear the person's voice and see their expressions. First, I meet with clients to see what they want to do, and to get to know their stories. Then, I tailor the questions toward these objectives and film the interview in the person's home. Clients can also supply memorabilia and old photos; sometimes old home movies add to the film. I did a documentary once for a Holocaust survivor who read old letters during his interview—correspondence that the man (who as a young boy had been sent to live with another family to escape persecution) had written decades ago to his family in Germany. These personal elements are striking. The finished documentary package—typically a 15 to 30-minute video of an interview—includes music, old pictures and words. The end product is an engaging film for future generations to enjoy.

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Artists Among Us

InSight: *Were you always fascinated with filmmaking? And spinning stories?*

Brodsky: I think I always was a journalist at heart. I did a lot of writing in elementary school: pretend newspapers and stories. Then, we got a video camera when I was in high school. My brother was interested in film, so we used the camera to do stop-animation pictures using clay figures. I was also the go-to person who filmed all my friends' video projects in high school. I went to Boston University to study communications. I filmed a documentary on the street performers in Boston during my senior year, which was pretty cool.

InSight: *And where did all that lead?*

Brodsky: After earning my degree in communications, I took my first television production job in

South Carolina and had the opportunity to do some self-teaching. Our editor would sometimes get pulled off our projects to do other things, so I dabbled with the equipment to complete ones we had already started. By working with others in the field and learning new skills, and teaching myself a few new tricks about film, we were able to finish. I asked our experts lots of questions along the way and that truly helped. My real "trial by fire" was producing a video on immigrant teenagers. Funding fell through in the middle of the project. I had all this amazing footage that had been done by two professional videographers, and didn't want to halt production. It wasn't easy, but I finished the film by shooting the rest myself, and it was even nominated for an Emmy.

InSight: *Does new technology make filming easier?*

Brodsky: It does, as far as technical difficulty goes. I remember lugging a huge deck and 25-pound camera around with me. Now, tripods are lightweight and the cameras are much smaller. Editing used to be a painstaking process. But what's

most challenging is being on my own now, and having to be "everything"—to know lighting and composition and to set up all the shots. And with personal documentaries, people are waiting. I can't spend several hours staging the scene. It's about learning the tricks of composing the best shots with the best lighting in someone's home. There's limited space to work with. I manually adjust my camera and bring in professional lighting and microphones to achieve the best effects. A lot goes into the planning before the subject ever sits down in front of the camera.

InSight: *What other things are there to consider with a personal documentary?*

Brodsky: Trying to make it personal, something that has meaning to the subject. Zooming in and out a lot and constantly manipulating camera angles is a sure fire way to tell an amateur from a pro. Let the story speak for itself. Less is more. Doing a documentary like this is usually prompted by a milestone birthday or anniversary. I did a personal documentary of my husband's grandmother, who was in her 90s and sharp as a tack. She would never tell her story to others, she kind of 'pooh poohed' the notion that anyone would find her story interesting or important. She was very humble about her existence. But in the finished documentary, she described things her family never knew or realized. It created a lasting memory. She died about a year ago, and now the family has this wonderful documentary, complete with old photographs and memorabilia, that has preserved her story forever.

Debbie Mintz Brodsky can be reached via her website, www.dmbpictures.com, by phone at 301-547-3490, or email at info@dmbpictures.com.

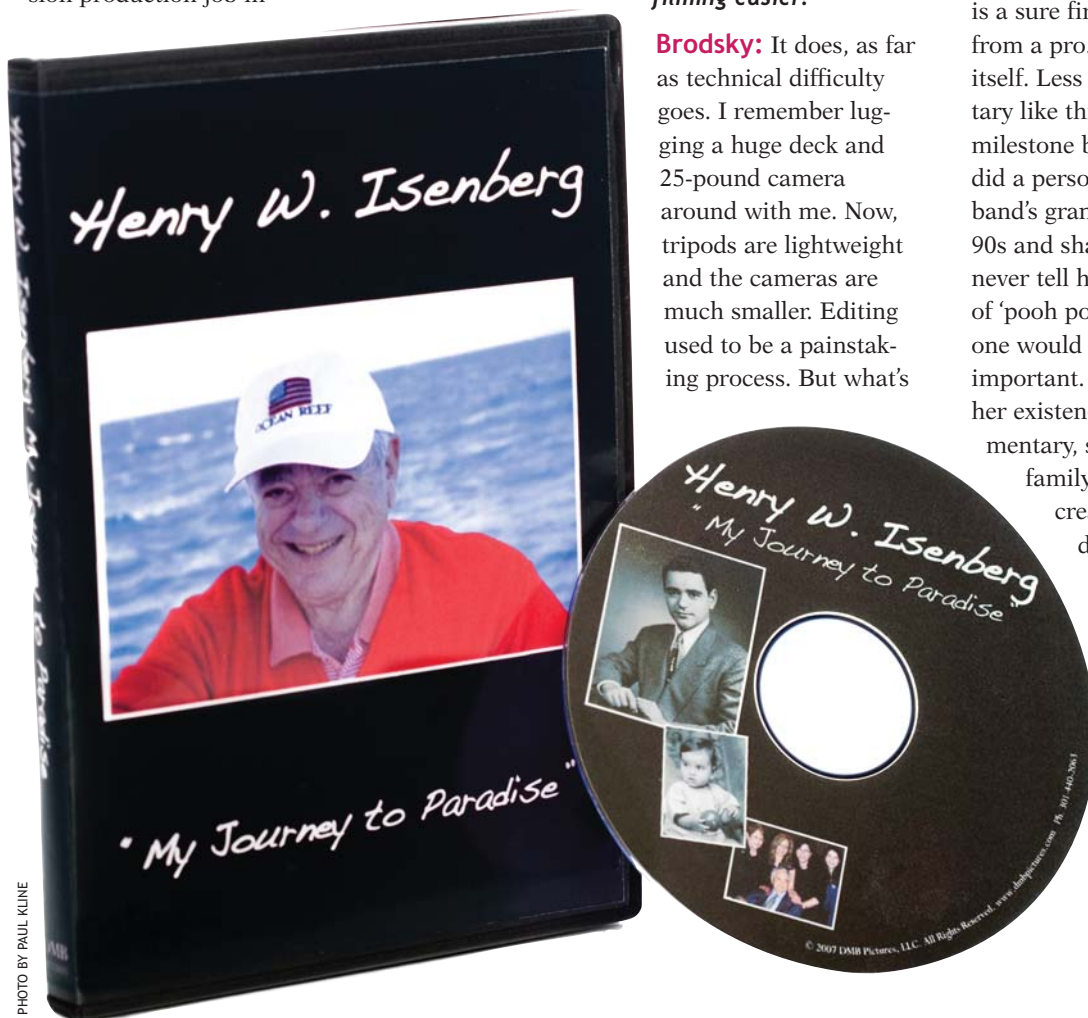


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