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Shooting Star

St. Paul filmmaker Melody Gilbert focuses on underground and unseen worlds **BY KERMIT PATTISON**

MELODY GILBERT HAS SPENT more than her share of time crawling through odd places: sewers, abandoned mental hospitals, and the Paris catacombs. Recently, she found herself crawling under a table.

The Twin Cities filmmaker was trying to show a clip from her current project, a documentary about urban explorers. But there was a technical glitch—no sound.

"This kind of stuff not working just drives me insane," said Gilbert as she fumbled with cables. "Oh my God, it's *still* not working."

Such is the life of an independent documentary filmmaker. As the founder of the production company Frozen Feet Films, Gilbert juggles many roles: camerawoman, director, producer, editor, promoter, and techie. At the moment, she's handling three documentaries in various stages of production and distribution.

Gilbert has established herself as one of the top documentary filmmakers in the Twin Cities and earned a national reputation, too. Her work has been featured at the South by Southwest and Los Angeles film festivals, as well as on *Oprah*.

One winter afternoon, the 47-year-old filmmaker sat in her office on Selby Avenue in St. Paul beside a display of antique cameras. Her cell phone vibrated incessantly. The Sundance Channel called about airing her latest documentary. An urban explorer known by the code name Max Action phoned with details about a mission planned for that night. Her 16-year-old daughter asked permission to go to the mall.

"No, no, no," Gilbert said. "Sorry to sound like a mother, but you have to (a) clean up your room; (b) find the clothes you need for this weekend; (c) study for the SATs. And (d) basically, no. Any other questions, madam?"

Speaking of questions, Gilbert addresses some pretty bizarre ones in her films. What drives a person to amputate a healthy limb? How does a child cope with a rare neurological condition that makes it impossible to feel pain? She spends months following subjects with her camera to create empathetic documentaries about lives that otherwise might be unimaginable to viewers.

Gilbert moved to the Twin Cities in 1991 and worked in TV for nearly a decade before leaving to freelance and teach. She began her first documentary, a piece about couples who married at the Chapel of Love at the Mall of America, she says, "just to see if I could do it." Her second documentary, *Whole*, profiled a group of men who struggle with an urge to sever their own limbs, known as body integrity identity disorder. *A Life Without Pain*, completed last year, followed three girls in Minnesota, Germany, and Norway with a neurological condition that renders them unable to feel pain.

"I don't know what drives me," Gilbert says with a shrug. "Something strikes me, and I can't stop until I'm done."

This obsession sometimes lands her in strange places. While filming for her latest project, *Urban Explorers: Into the Darkness*, she accompanied the adventurers as they snuck into an abandoned government building. Suddenly, their lookout spotted the police. Gilbert scrambled over a 10-foot fence with her camera as the squad car approached.

"I ran to my car, called my husband, and said, 'Hey, what a night! That's the closest I've ever gotten to being arrested!'" she recalls. "And on the other end of the line, I heard, 'Mom?'" **MM**

Kermit Pattison contributes to *GQ*, the *New York Times*, and other publications.