

PROFILE

She points her camera at urban explorers

Who she is: Melody Gilbert of St. Paul is a documentary filmmaker who has made movies about couples who have gotten married at the Mall of America, about people who want to have healthy limbs amputated and about a girl with a rare disorder that makes it impossible to feel pain.

What's next: A film about people who like to crawl into abandoned sewers, tunnels and buildings is her next project. Gilbert started working on "Urban Explorers: Into the Darkness" in 2003 after reading about a group of men dressed in dark clothing arrested in the middle of the night near the Gopher State Ethanol plant in St. Paul.

Police found them equipped with two-way radios, flashlights, night-vision equipment, climbing gear, a gas mask, a camera and a notebook with directions to various tunnels in Stillwater, Duluth and Minneapolis.

The authorities initially suspected terrorism. But the men turned out to be merely urban explorers, people with updated tetanus shots and the underground hobby of worming into the neglected corners of urban infrastructure, fueled by a sense of adventure, curiosity and even an interest in documenting forgotten history.

Gilbert started talking to urban explorers in Minnesota but ended up making contact with the urban explorer subculture around the country and the world.

"It's almost a secret society in a way," she said.

How she ended up in a lunatic asylum: Gilbert attended an urban explorers convention in Scotland, delved into catacombs in Paris and has followed explorers into drains, sewers and abandoned buildings, including a forgotten "house of the future" in Florida.



PHOTOS COURTESY MELODY GILBERT

Documentary filmmaker Melody Gilbert of St. Paul focuses on the underbelly of adventure.



Gilbert's locations often include abandoned tunnels and sewers.

"One of my favorites is an abandoned lunatic asylum in Scotland," she said. "You're walking through history, but it's a different way of walking through history."

Where you can see her film: Gilbert is putting the final touches on the movie, with the goal of a film festival premiere in early 2007. But a rough-cut

preview will be screened Nov. 10 at the Mill City Museum, 704 S. Second St., Minneapolis.

The event, a fundraiser to help pay for the completion of the film, will include a cash bar and a post-screening discussion with Gilbert and some of the urban explorers featured in the film. Urban explorers' photographs of hidden Twin Cities locations

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will be on display, and guided minitours of hidden places in the Washburn A Mill — a destination for urban explorers before it became the Mill City Museum — will be given.

Doors open at 6:30 p.m., and the screening will be at 8 p.m. Admission costs \$12 for Minnesota Historical Society members, \$15 for nonmembers.

For more information: To find out more about the film, go to www.urbanexplorersfilm.com. Some online urban explorers' sites include the Minnesota www.actionsquad.org and www.uer.ca.

— Richard Chin