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Do-It-Yourself Film Ethic Empowers Ithaca

By Bill Chaisson Jun 20, 2012



Provided

Shira Golding Evergreen studied film theory and production at Cornell and then secured an internship in New York City that turned into a real job. After several years in New York she moved back to Ithaca in 2008 and started Shirari Industries with her partner Ari Moore Evergreen. In September 2011 they released *Empowered: Power From the People*, a film about Ithaca area folks who are incorporating alternative energy technologies into their homes and businesses. Among other things the film has gained notice for doing a lot with relatively little money, with bringing the DIY ethic to film making within the broader progressive community of Tompkins County.

It premiered at Cinemapolis to large audiences last fall, and the most recent screening of *Empowered* was at the monthly meeting of Back to Democracy at the Trumansburg fire hall on June 15. Regional screenings can be arranged through Finger Lakes Bioneers (wemakeourfuture.org).

“We rushed out a rough cut to get into the Green Homes tour,” recalled Evergreen. “The final cut was released in December 2011. It was screened at Cinemapolis during the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival [FLEFF]. Since then we've shown it in all kinds of interesting community spaces, like Kendal, a Sustainable Cortland meeting, the Danby town hall, and at Mann Library for student groups.”



Evergreen made *Empowered* with CSA farmer Suzanne McMannis of Earthwalk Farm in Dryden. “She had a little money,” said Evergreen, “and she gave us a CSA share, and she continues to be generous. It was enough to allow me to have the time to spend on making the film.”

McMannis's initial concern had been hydraulic fracturing for natural gas. “But she wanted to make films that were *for* something,” said Evergreen, “not just against frac'ing.” According to Evergreen, MacMannis had been saying to a mutual friend, “I wish I knew a film maker,” and the friend had suggested she contact Evergreen.

Evergreen made her first documentary film for a thesis project, *In Search of Golding Street*, which took her to South Africa where her father comes from, and Israel, where her mother was raised. She moved to New York to work for Arts Engine, the organizer of the Media That Matters film festival and a contributor of content to school curricula. In 2005 they were awarded Best Non-Profit/Green Website at the South By Southwest festival in Austin.

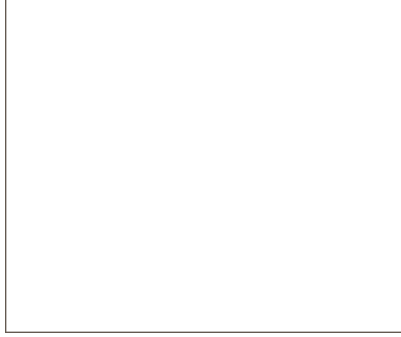
In 2006 Evergreen shifted to film production, editing the trailer for *Election Day*, which follows the experiences of 11 Americans on November 2, 2004, and *Gypsy Caravan*, which follows a tour by Roma musicians organized by the World Music Institute.

After moving back to Ithaca in 2008 Evergreen made *Frac Attack: Dawn of the Watershed*, an 18-minute “environmental thriller” about the effects on the local population when Ithaca's water goes “sour” after the onset of hydraulic fracturing. The zombie film won an award in 2009 from Sustainable Tompkins for being a “Sign of Sustainability,” that is, a contribution to the expansion of a local film making community.

Evergreen shoots her movies with video equipment. “I shot [*Empowered*] on a Canon GL2, which has a frame mode that approximates film,” she said. “Video is a difference in cost [versus film] and much more practical, especially in cinema verité, where you are following people around. And the quality keeps going up.” She has since invested in high-definition cameras.

Evergreen and her partner moved upstate from the city for both professional and personal reasons. “All the physical spaces gave us the financial and emotional space to tackle film making,” she said. “We started out in Ithaca and set up a graphics business, and we now live in Dryden. It's less than an acre, but it seems like so

much coming from the city." She has been applying the energy efficiency lessons that she learned while making *Empowered* to her own house.



What advantages are there to making films out in the hinterlands? "Well, the overall pace of life is a relief," Evergreen said. "It promotes creativity and collaboration. There's a big word-of-mouth community, and everyone is eager to tell a story that reflects pride in the community. *Empowered* quickly became more about the people than about the [alternative energy] systems."

In the six months since the release of the final cut (which Evergreen edited using Final Cut Pro) the screenings of the film have been arranged by request through the progressive community of upstate New York. The reception has varied. "In Cortland and Rochester there was more skepticism," Evergreen said. "The audiences came in with more of the myths. You know, the financial ones, 'we can't afford this.'" Part of presenting the film entails filling in the audience about the incentives and programs that exist to reduce the cost of installing solar systems and looking for creative alternatives like biodiesel.

Evergreen's next project centers on the convictions and actions of the clerk in the Town of Ledyard, an elected official who has refused to do the paperwork for same-sex marriage licenses. A deputy clerk has been hired to do it instead. "It's not an indictment," Evergreen said of the nascent film. "It's an exploration of small town politics. She views herself as an activist."

To learn more about Empowered and other Shirari Industries projects, see their website shirari.com

