

# Documentary filmmaker focuses on area 'PEACE PATRIOTS'

By KATHLEEN MELLEN  
Staff Writer

WHEN Emma Sokoloff-Rubin was 14 years old and just beginning to find her voice as a peace activist at her school in Amherst, documentary filmmaker Robbie Leppzer was on hand to film her. And, when 76-year-old Mount Holyoke College professor Jean Grossholtz took to the streets of New York City to protest the war in Iraq, Leppzer was there, too, with his camera.

Both are part of Leppzer's 78-minute documentary "The Peace Patriots," that will have its theatrical premiere tomorrow at 7 p.m. at the Calvin Theatre in Northampton. The documentary, which follows nine Pioneer Valley residents, and others, through two years of anti-war activities, offers intimate portraits of them as they mobilized forces to first prevent the war in Iraq, and then to end it.

## Something big brewing

Leppzer, 47, of Wendell, has spent nearly half his life recording such voices of dissent as they speak out for peace and justice. He got the idea for his latest project in February 2003 when peace activists nationwide began to call for an end to U.S. aggression in Iraq.

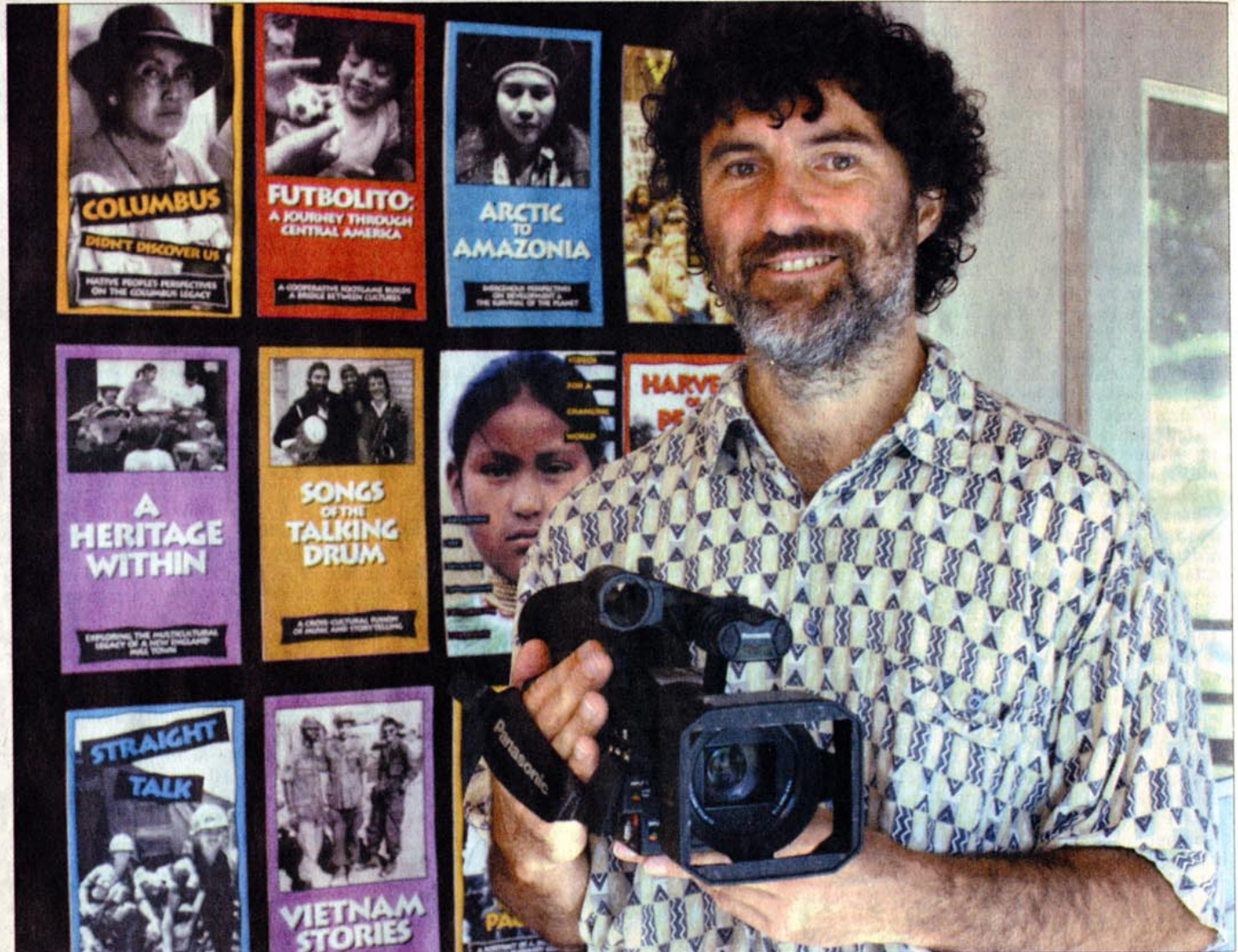
In March, he heard that a group of local people were planning a candlelight vigil in Northampton — one of 6,000 such vigils that were to be held across the country. Though it was still days before the U.S. made good on its threats to bomb Baghdad, Leppzer's years of experience told him something big was brewing. So he grabbed his camera and sound equipment and began filming.

What grew out of those first few hours of footage became the basis for "The Peace Patriots."

Over the next two years, Leppzer filmed some 80 hours of footage, following the local residents to other anti-war rallies, protests, sit-ins, teach-ins and die-ins, as well as interviewing them in their homes and workplaces.

## National context

In the film, Leppzer combines his own work



CAROL LOLLIS

Award-winning independent filmmaker Robbie Leppzer, owner of Turning Tide Productions, based at his home in Wendell, has filmed 11 documentaries during his 25-year career — each one a call for peace and justice. Leppzer's latest film, "The Peace Patriots," filmed in the Pioneer Valley, will have its theatrical debut tomorrow at 7 p.m. at the Calvin Theatre in Northampton.

## 'The Peace Patriots' premiere

"The Peace Patriots," will debut tomorrow at 7 p.m. at the Calvin Theatre in Northampton. The showing is a benefit to kick off the film's national distribution. Copies of the documentary may be ordered directly from Turning Tide Productions, based in Wendell.

Filmmaker Robbie Leppzer will speak at the premiere, which is being co-sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, Traprock Peace Center, the Northampton Committee to Stop the War in Iraq, Veterans for Peace, Arise for Social Justice, Progressive Democrats of America and the International Action Center. Live music will be provided before the screening by Amherst composer John Sheldon.

Tickets are \$10 in advance and are available at Broadside Bookshop in Northampton, Food For Thought Books in Amherst, World Eye Bookshop in Greenfield and the Odyssey Book Shop in South Hadley. They may also be purchased online or by phone. Tickets are \$15 at the door.

For information, to purchase tickets to Thursday's premiere, or for copies of the documentary, visit [www.thepeacepatriots.com](http://www.thepeacepatriots.com) or call (800)-557-6414.

## ON BEING AN ACTIVIST FOR PEACE:



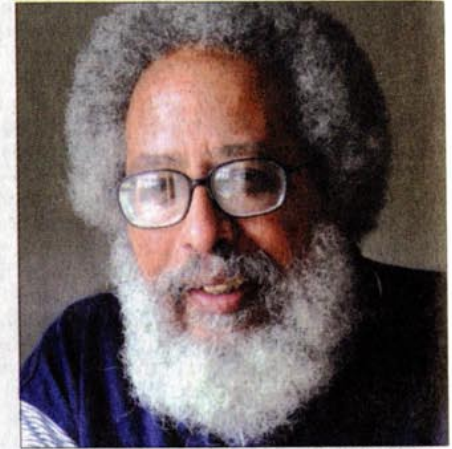
TURNINGTIDE.COM

**JEAN GROSSHOLTZ:** "You can't say you're for justice and peace unless you do something about it. You decide, 'I know what's right and I'm going to live it every single day.' You can't help it. It's part of you. It's who you are. Then you hope enough people will join you and you'll make a difference."

**EMMA SOKOLOFF-RUBIN:** "Often the U.S. tries to enforce our values on other people ... this idea that we have things right. Well, we've got a lot of things right but we need to keep our minds open and learn from each other."



JERREY ROBERTS



KEVIN GUTTING

**JOHN BRACEY:** "You take a position to do something because you think it's right, not because it's the most popular thing to do. You don't wait for that to happen before you say, 'Me too.' You take your position because the world will be better. And you say it all along so it doesn't go away and get lost in all the confusion."

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# Filmmaker focuses on local activists

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with archival footage he purchased from news agencies — the film's first images are of U.S. armored tanks lumbering across dusty Iraqi terrain at the outset of the war.

It was important to place the local movement into a broad, national context, he says. "The local community is a microcosm of many hundreds of communities across the country and the world protesting the war."

Some of Leppzer's subjects are old pros, like Grossholtz, a Korean War-era U.S. Army veteran, who's been stirring things up as a peace activist for as long as she can remember, and John Bracey, a professor in the African-American studies department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, whose activism grew out of civil rights actions when he was a student in the 1960s at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Many of those whom Leppzer interviewed for the film talked about the relationship between patriotism and peace activism. But it was young Sokoloff-Rubin, he says, who "articulated this concept the most eloquently."

## A strong, young voice

Sokoloff-Rubin, now a 16-year-old junior at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School in South Hadley, had her first encounter with activism in 2002, she says, when she lived for a year in Brazil and helped her father, Jeff Rubin, study the growing women's movement there. Rubin, a professor at Boston University, researches social movements in Latin America. Father and daughter returned to Brazil in the summer of 2003 to continue their work.

"I've always had strong opinions and I'm completely opposed to the war," she said in a recent interview in her South Amherst home. She returned from Brazil with a new conviction to speak out about those opinions. "It's really our job," she said.

She was surprised, however, to discover that the war in Iraq was far from the thoughts of most of her classmates at Amherst Regional Middle

School.

"I was convinced they needed to learn something about it," she said. So she and a couple of friends organized a debate about the war and a teach-in at school.

Sokoloff-Rubin had met Leppzer previously at an anti-war event at the Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence, where his films were being shown. Impressed by his work, she invited him to speak at the teach-in at her school.

"OK," he told her, but only if he could bring along his camera. In the end, Sokoloff-Rubin and her efforts at the middle school became an integral part of "The Peace Patriots," which was shaped, like all his documentaries, by events as they unfolded.

"That's the way documentaries are made," explained Leppzer. "Filming is not really planned. It's spontaneous, on the fly as you go."

## A filmmaker's roots

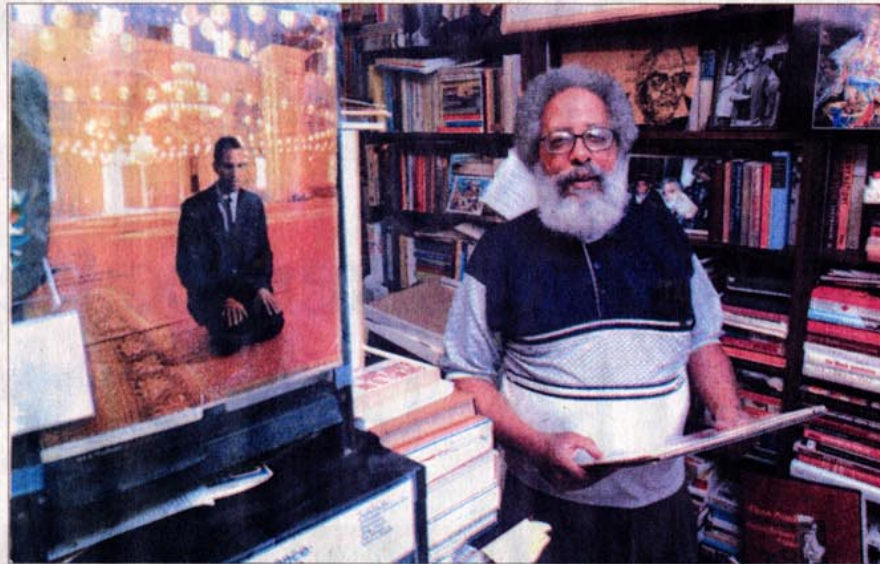
Leppzer has been making documentaries since he was a young boy living in Winchester. In high school he made his first documentary — a radio show, "Roots of the Earth," about the seizure of Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1973 by native Americans. That effort earned him first prize in a National Public Radio young people's festival.

He went on to study filmmaking at Hampshire College in Amherst for two years before producing his first video documentary, "Seabrook, 1977," about a protest at the New Hampshire nuclear power plant that was then under construction.

"I wanted to make a difference," Leppzer said. "This was my way of being part of a larger movement for change."

Other films followed. In 1985, for example, Leppzer traveled to Nicaragua to film "Harvest For Peace," about U.S. volunteers harvesting cotton with local citizens during the Contra war. The film won honors that year at the San Antonio Cine Festival (Best Non-Fiction Film) and the New England Film Festival (Curator's Choice), says Leppzer.

There were others, too,



KEVIN GUTTING

John Bracey, a professor since 1972 in the African-American Studies department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, is one of the local activists featured in Robbie Leppzer's film, "The Peace Patriots." Bracey often speaks to student groups about issues of social justice.

including "An Act of Conscience," the story of Colrain pacifists Randy Kehler and Betsy Corner, whose home was seized after they protested military spending by refusing to pay federal taxes. The film, narrated by Martin Sheen, who volunteered his time, had its world premiere in 1997 at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.

## A little goes a long way

Funding for independent documentary filmmakers is always tight, Leppzer says — especially for those who make films that promote social change.

Most of Leppzer's funding comes from grants, donations and freelance work he does for other filmmakers and production companies. He also speaks on college campuses and to schools, libraries and community groups.

"I've gotten good at going far with little," he said.

For "The Peace Patriots," Leppzer convinced musicians to donate their music, including 2005 Grammy Award winner Steve Earle as well as Pete Seeger, Ani DiFranco and

Jonatha Brooke. John Sheldon of Amherst wrote the film's original music. Air America's Janeane Garofalo volunteered to record the opening narrative.

Jean Grossholtz says Leppzer and other documentary filmmakers like him have been crucial to the peace movement because they help get the message to a larger audience.

"I would like the film to reawaken people on the streets ... so that they would understand that we're now faced with something worth doing something about," Grossholtz said.

## Long-term tenacity

Grossholtz first took to the streets herself in the 1950s as an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University, where she spoke out against racism, and then as a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she rallied against the U.S. government's growing commitment to President Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. "That was not very popular at MIT," she said. "But I wouldn't shut up about it."

It was that tenacity, she thinks, that attracted Leppzer

watching with pride as her fellow students stood up to oppose the war in Iraq.

"When they learned that it is something that really plays a huge role in their lives, like the amount of money that is spent on war instead of books, it became important to them," said Sokoloff-Rubin.

Longtime activist John Bracey, who spoke at the teach-in, says he was so taken with the students' dedication and enthusiasm that day that he agreed to be a part of the film.

## Heartened by the young

Bracey has been a familiar face at peace rallies in the area since moving to Amherst in 1972. "There are enough wars to keep you busy," he said.

And although he has been in a number of films in the past, it's not something he enjoys.

"I have no particular interest in looking at myself on film. I get copies and I don't even watch them," Bracey said.

But, he says, "I was heartened by the young students. You never know what's percolating at that age. I wanted to help give them encouragement — let them know they're not by themselves. That made it worthwhile."

Leppzer says he hadn't planned to have high school and middle school students in his film. But when a group of them spoke at a rally at UMass in early March 2003, part of a nationwide student protest against the prospect of war in Iraq, he quickly decided to include them.

"All of a sudden these high school kids got up and started articulating. Then the middle school kids got up and spoke with such passion," said Leppzer. "I realized I wanted to include how these young people could be so informed and passionate about these issues," he said. "They blew me away."

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