

Leppzer focuses on social change

There's nothing filmmaker Robbie Leppzer loves to document more than people who stick out their necks in an effort to spur social change.

"When I look back at my 25 years of chronicling social change movements, it has been a common theme to focus on people who take a risk, work for a better world, protest an injustice and push for change," Leppzer said.

Leppzer has always been attracted to filming the "drama in real life," rather than creating fictional pieces.

"I feel like I've been able to make films about real people and real situations that are just as engaging as many fictional dramas," he said.

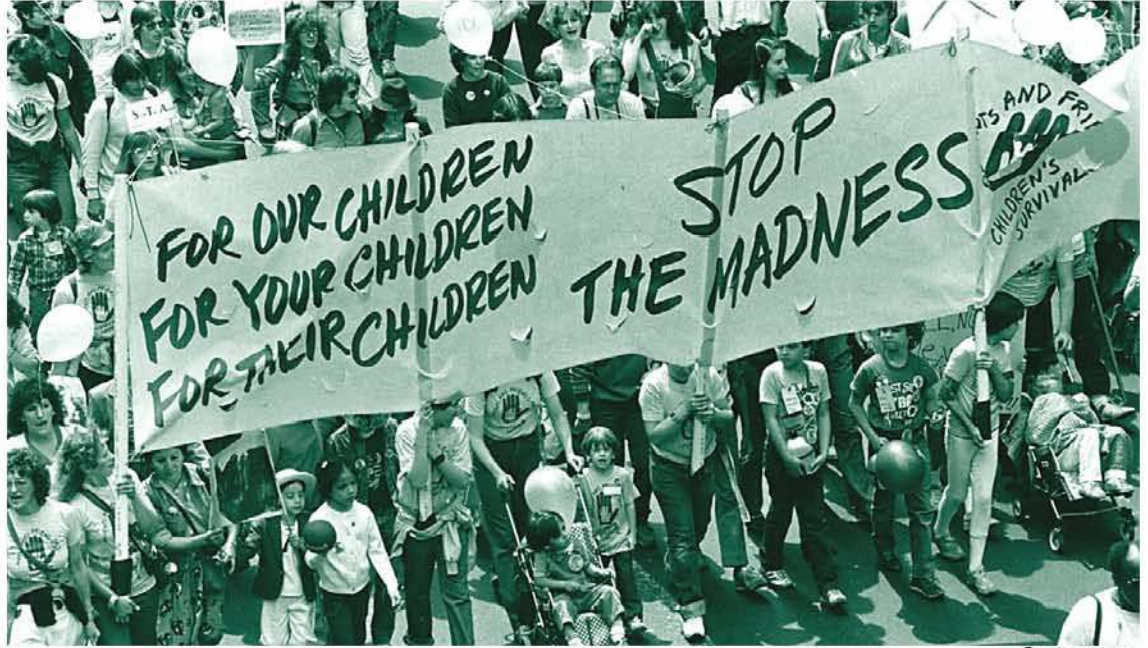
The Plymouth Independent Film Festival, which begins today and runs through Sunday, will include a retrospective of Leppzer's work, from his documentary about a nuclear disarmament movement to his film about protesters of the war in Iraq. A special reception for him will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. tomorrow at Bert's Cove restaurant in Plymouth. (Tickets \$15).

Leppzer, who grew up in Winchester, was in junior high when he became acquainted with his first video camera, a bulky portable Sony, and began filming activities around the school. "I was captivated," he said. Then in high school, Leppzer worked on the school's small FM radio station. While other students spun rock 'n' roll records, Leppzer was interviewing antiwar activists.

"My real education in high school took place by hopping on a train to Boston and going to peace events, rallies and lectures," he said.

After high school, Leppzer attended Hampshire College in Amherst and studied filmmaking for two years, then left to start working on a film. He never returned.

Leppzer's first film, "Seabrook 1977," follows 1,414 people who were arrested in a civil disobedience protest at a nuclear power plant under construction in Seabrook, N.H., and jailed in National Guard armories for two weeks. "It was a seminal 1970s protest," he said. "It helped catalyze a whole anti-nuclear movement."



Robbie Leppzer's anti-nuclear war film "Choose Life" will be featured at the Plymouth Independent Film Festival.

Courtesy photo

And Leppzer was only 18 when he produced it. "I was riding high as a young filmmaker," said Leppzer, now 46 and living in Wendell. "I felt like I was recording history in the making."

That first film led to several others, including a piece about indigenous people from North, South and Central America who speak about the impact of the Columbus legacy on their lives, and a movie about a Japanese and American Buddhist spiritual community in Leverett.

More recently, Leppzer completed a documentary called "An Act of Conscience," which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast on Cinemax and the Sundance Channel. The movie, narrated by actor Martin Sheen, follows a family in western Massachusetts whose home was seized by federal marshals and IRS agents after they publicly refused to pay federal taxes as a protest against war and military spending.

"Little did I know after I started filming that this would take place

over a five-year period and would involve hundreds of people and take many twists and turns," he said. "I knew I had to stick with it."

Leppzer is driven in part by the passion he feels for social change movements. But he also feels a duty to fill in the blanks where he feels the "mainstream media" fall short in their coverage of these events.

"I very much see myself as an activist filmmaker," he said. "The films I'm making are putting out perspectives that are largely ignored or given superficial coverage by the mainstream media."

For instance, in the weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq, Leppzer feels the media failed to adequately cover the growing number of war protesters.

"The protests kept growing and growing, yet the movement wasn't given good coverage," he said.

That led to Leppzer's most recent film, "The Peace Patriots," the story of people living in western Massachusetts who oppose the U.S. invasion and military occupation of Iraq. The film will be available on

DVD in September. Leppzer will spend the next year talking about the movie on college campuses.

"My hope is that this film will be a catalyst for discussions," Leppzer said. "It has the potential of having an impact while this issue is still hot and burning."

Leppzer is able to scrape together enough money to complete films through grants, speaking engagements at college campuses and freelance work.

"I have been able to keep a meager living, keeping my head just above water," he said. "The financial struggle is the hardest part, for sure."

But at this point, a nine-to-five job is out of the question for Leppzer. "It's not in my makeup," he said.

Yet Leppzer doesn't think about the money when he makes movies.

"Most of my films are created as a labor of love," he said. "I see my role as an honest and engaging storyteller. And I'm trying to create a more just and peaceful world."

For more information about Leppzer's films or to order a film, go to turningtide.com.

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