

An International Film Circuit release
of a
Red Square Productions Film

MY PERESTROIKA

A FILM BY ROBIN HESSMAN

87 mins. • 2010 • US/UK
SD mini DV 24p, 8mm, 35mm • Stereo
HDCam Master/DCP

- ⓪ Official Selection - Sundance Film Festival, 2010, US Documentary Competition
- ⓪ WINNER - Filmmaker Award, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival 2010
 - ⓪ WINNER - Special Jury Award, Silverdocs Film Festival 2010
 - ⓪ WINNER- Best Documentary Film, Milwaukee Film Festival 2010
 - ⓪ Official Selection- International Film Festival Rotterdam 2011
 - ⓪ Official Selection - New Directors/New Films 2010
 - ⓪ Official Selection – Hot Docs, Toronto 2010
 - ⓪ Official Selection, Sheffield Doc/Fest 2010
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SYNOPSIS

When the USSR broke apart in 1991, a generation of young people faced a new realm of possibilities. An intimate epic about the extraordinary lives of this last Soviet generation, Robin Hessman's feature documentary debut tells the stories of five Moscow schoolmates who were brought up behind the Iron Curtain, witnessed the joy and confusion of glasnost, and reached adulthood right as the world changed around them. Through candid first-person testimony, revealing verité footage, and vintage home movies, Hessman, who spent many years living in Moscow, reveals a Russia rarely ever seen on film, where people are frank about their lives and forthcoming about their country. Engaging, funny, and positively inspiring, in MY PERESTROIKA politics is personal, honesty overshadows ideology, and history progresses one day, one life at a time.

Long Synopsis

My Perestroika follows five ordinary Russians living in extraordinary times – from their sheltered Soviet childhood, to the collapse of the Soviet Union during their teenage years, to the constantly shifting political landscape of post-Soviet Russia.

At the center of the film is the Meyerson family.

Borya and Lyuba are married and have a son, Mark. They are both history teachers at Moscow's School #57. As we are drawn into the fabric of their everyday lives, we hear stories of two very different Soviet childhoods: Lyuba was a conformist who would salute the TV when the Soviet hymn played, while Borya preferred to subvert the system whenever possible.

Their childhood classmates provide their own perspectives.

Andrei has thrived in the new Russian capitalism and has just opened his 17th store of expensive French men's shirts.

Olga, the prettiest girl in the class, is a single mother and works for a company that rents out billiard tables to clubs all over Moscow. She saves up her money for international travel.

Ruslan was a famous Russian punk rock musician who now plays bluegrass on his banjo in the Moscow metro for money.

At first glance, in today's Russia, everything is different from the lives they would have lived in the USSR. They are the invisible "ordinary" people of Moscow – raising their own children in a world they couldn't have imagined in their wildest dreams.

But have those changes ultimately proved to be only superficial?

In this film, there are no "talking head" historians, no expert witnesses, no omniscient narrator telling viewers how to interpret events. Instead, Borya, Lyuba, Andrei, Olga and Ruslan share their personal stories. They were the last generation of Soviet children brought up behind the Iron Curtain. They take us on a journey through their Soviet

childhoods, their youth during the country's huge changes of Perestroika, and let us into their present-day lives.

The film interweaves their contemporary world with rare home movie footage from the 1970s and '80s in the USSR, along with official Soviet propaganda films that surrounded them at the time. Their memories and opinions sometimes complement each other and sometimes contradict each other, but together they paint a complex picture of the challenges, dreams, and disillusionment of this generation in Moscow today.

ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

BORYA grew up in an intellectual Moscow family and learned at a young age how to deal with the consequences of having a Jewish name (Meyerson). As a teenager in the USSR, he and his friends were intent on subverting the system. Now he teaches history in Moscow's School #57 and manages all the school trips. He lives with his wife Lyuba and their son, Mark, in the apartment in which he grew up in a residential neighborhood of Moscow.



LYUBA was a self-described conformist growing up in the Soviet Union – even saluting when the Soviet national anthem played on TV. She is also now a history teacher with her husband, Borya. She has an enormous course-load and teaches classes six days a week – from pre-schoolers to high school seniors.

RUSLAN was one of Borya's best friends growing up. They got in trouble together in school all the time. Ruslan is a former punk rock star from the band NAIV who now occasionally gives banjo lessons and busks in the underground passages in Moscow. He is divorced from his second wife, but tries to spend time with their 8-year-old son, Nikita.



OLGA was the prettiest girl in their class. She now is a single mom who lives with her sister, nephew and son in their childhood apartment, right around the corner from Borya and Lyuba. Olga works for a company that rents out billiard tables to pubs, clubs and casinos all over Moscow. She often saves up money for international travel. She'd like to go on a safari in Kenya next.

ANDREI has just opened his 17th store of expensive men's dress shirts and ties. He is the only one of the classmates who moved out of his childhood home. His family lives in a new development of large, luxury condos. Andrei's son studies abroad in France. Andrei is often frustrated by Russia's inability to be more like the West.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My connection to Russia

I have been curious about Russia and the Soviet Union for as long as I can remember.

Growing up in the US in the 1970s and early 1980s, it was impossible to miss the fact that the USSR was considered our enemy and, according to movies and television, plotting to destroy the planet with their nuclear weapons.

Interest in the "Evil Empire" was everywhere. When I was seven, my 2nd grade class made up a game: USA vs. USSR. The girls were the USA, with headquarters at the jungle gym. The boys were the USSR, and were hunkered down at the sand box. And for some reason, the boys allowed me to be the only girl in the USSR. And thus, my dilemma. My best friends were among the girls, but I was a curious kid, and I wanted to know what was going on in the USSR. Unable to choose between them, I became a double agent.

So I suppose it was my insatiable curiosity about this purportedly diabolical country that led me to beg my parents to allow me to subscribe to Soviet Life magazine at age ten. (I have no idea how I even knew it existed.) As children of the McCarthy era, they were concerned about the repercussions on my future, but I pleaded and they gave in. It came each month, wrapped in a brown paper wrapper – my political pornography.

I can't say that I read it very closely. It was, after all, published by the Soviet Foreign Ministry and filled with dry, poorly translated articles about new Soviet technological achievements and grain harvests – but the photographs fascinated me. (They were a far cry from the images on the nightly news my parents watched that showed only missiles and tanks parading through Red Square, or lines of people in dressed in gray waiting for bread.) The photographs of children especially intrigued me. They were like me, but they were different. They wore these crazy red kerchiefs around their necks. Or stood in dark glasses getting vitamin D from a glowing green lamp. They also played Chinese jump rope, it seemed. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be one of them. They certainly didn't *look* evil.

In my senior year of high school, the Berlin Wall fell. I couldn't even imagine what it was like to live through such incredible and rapid changes. I felt that I had to go the USSR right away and experience it for myself. Too much was happening to sit and wait until the traditional college junior year abroad. So, at age eighteen, in the second semester of my freshman year of college, I went to Leningrad. It was January 1991.

Although there was no food in the city (we were handed ration coupons as soon as we arrived), there was a palpable sense of hope and optimism. The Soviet Union was opening up. What had been forbidden was now allowed. World peace was at hand! Wandering around the snow-filled streets, where stores called MILK or MEAT or BAKERY # 32 let you know immediately what was sold there (or not sold there*), I was amazed that nothing I had read in the years leading up to this trip had prepared me for what it would be like to actually be there.

*A joke at the time: Man goes into a store. "Don't you have any meat?" he says. "No, we don't have any fish. The store that doesn't have any meat is across the street."

I was amazed that I could stand on a street in the center of the city and not know what century I was in. Out on an island in the Gulf of Finland, the enormous 28-story, mile-long school dormitory looked like something out of Orwell's "1984."

I stayed in the USSR through the summer and got a job at LENFILM, the Leningrad film studios. The film I was supposed to work on was shooting in the KGB building, but I didn't have clearance, so I was transferred to work on an American horror movie. Then one day, I arrived at work only to be sent home. The reason? "Military coup." It was August 1991.

As throngs of people filled the streets, agitated and debating with total strangers on every street corner about what was happening, I wandered around listening to passionate opinions and expressions of hope dueling with fatalistic resignation. I was filled with anxiety that it was all coming to an end so quickly. The borders would close, I would be sent home, I would never see my Russian friends again, and the Cold War would continue. I will never forget being surrounded by thousands of people in a public square, crying and yelling with joy when it became clear that the coup had failed. The euphoria and optimism about the future was overwhelming.

For the next eight years, I lived in Moscow. I went through the five-year directing program of VGIK, (the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography) and made my first short films. For several years I produced *Ulitsa Sezam*, the Russian *Sesame Street*. My community of friends included people who had grown up all over the USSR, and I found myself integrated completely into a world that once had seemed so foreign to me.

All the while, inflation spiked and fell, Western stores appeared and disappeared (The Great Canadian Bagel?), prime ministers were sacked, governments dissolved, bombs were set off, and currency de-valued. But all of that was the backdrop to everyday life, which continued, as it always does...

Making the film

I began thinking about making this film when I returned to live in the US in the fall of 1999, after over eight years living in Russia.

Although the Cold War had ended, information about contemporary Russia still had not permeated into US culture. People were either amazed that I had not been murdered by the mafia, or surprised that there were any problems left, now that Russia was a democratic country and no longer our arch enemy. Friends wanted an easy summary of what it was like, or how Russians had weathered the changes. But the complexity of Russia and its people was impossible for me to sum up in a few words.

I thought a lot about my generation of Russians. They had completely Soviet childhoods in a world no one imagined would ever change. Then, as they were teenagers and coming of age, society's very foundations were shaken. Everything that they had assumed to be true was now in question. And then, as they graduated from college, the USSR collapsed. They had to navigate this already difficult transition to adulthood while everything around them was in flux. They were immigrants in the land of their birth, strangers in a society without guidelines as to how things should be.

Even my film school friends had started the Institute under the assumption that, upon graduation, they would be assigned a film studio job for the rest of their lives. They couldn't predict that new things like music videos and commercials would be born – and that they would need to scramble to earn a living.

In September 2004, I received the position of Filmmaker in Residence at WGBH the Boston PBS affiliate where I began working on *My Perestroika* full-time. Within six months, I was back in Russia.

I spent hours in the state film archive outside of Moscow watching newsreels of the 1970s and '80s. I began to interview dozens of 30-somethings from all walks of life. I thought about how to bring the personal, intimate and human aspects of life in the USSR alive for a Western audience. I searched for home movies of the period. Unlike the Soviet and Western propaganda, they are without an agenda. Part of their beauty is the purity of their intention – to preserve family memories for later generations. There is no better way to gain an intimate view of the past.

After interviewing dozens of people, I found myself thinking a lot about the constant rewriting of history in Russia. There is even a saying: "In Russia, it's the past that is unpredictable." I decided to speak with history teachers of my generation. They had been taught one kind of history as children, and now were teaching a very different history to their students. That's when I found Borya and Lyuba Meyerson.

The Meyersons were incredible. They were completely unselfconscious, very open and were passionate about history. Although they grew up across the street from each other, they had completely different childhoods. The Meyersons had such a wonderful way of tying their larger understanding of what had happened in their country with small, personal details of the effect it had had on them. And their 9-year-old son, Mark, was precocious and funny and even went to the school where they taught. The icing on the cake was when I asked, as I always did, if they knew anyone who had home movies from the 1970s or '80s. Borya opened up a closet stacked with 8mm film cans – his father had been obsessed with making home movies. To my utter amazement, he had even followed Borya into school many times and filmed his classmates!

From there, they introduced me to their former classmates. I met Olga, Ruslan and Andrei. I began filming them at home, at work, and with their families. I also began spending more and more time with the Meyersons. They introduced me to the indomitable Sergei Lvovich Mendeleevich – the director of School #57 – who gave me his blessing to film there.

All in all, from 2005-2008 I filmed just under 200 hours of material, spending three to seven months in Russia each year. I did not intend to shoot the film when I started out, but after two days of working with a cameraman, I understood how differently the subjects behaved when we were alone. From then on, I shot mostly by myself, with the Panasonic DVX 100b. I used a monopod, so I could film for hours without the image being quite as shaky as if it were purely handheld, but I had much more mobility than with a tripod. I used two microphones – a shotgun mounted on the camera, and a radio lav on one of the subjects. (On a few occasions, I used a separate digital audio recorder to get four channels of audio.) Most days I was filming, I would swing the camera bag over one shoulder, the monopod over another, and put on a backpack loaded with additional gear. Then I would unsteadily teeter towards the Moscow metro.

I also gathered 200 reels of 8mm home movies – not only from the Meyersons but also from people their age all over the Soviet Union. These films came via friends of friends, bloggers and online communities, and through train conductors from Siberia. I also sat in several different archives in Russia, looking at “official footage” from the period.

Weaving these different kinds of footage, the personal stories of five protagonists, and of Russia itself over the past 40 years, was quite a challenge. I was lucky to work with two very talented editors over the course of post-production. What was important to me all along was to maintain the intimacy of the personal stories in the foreground of the film. My hope has been to bring the audience into the homes, the kitchens, and the memories of these five childhood friends – to share the complexities of their experiences, their triumphs, their dreams, and their disillusionment.

In a sense, this film is also about how politics and government – the headline events of history that happen during particular moments in our lifetimes – have profound effects on each of us. Although the political events that take place are really in the background of our private lives, they certainly influence us in ways we could never predict, and sometimes don’t even realize. Only at this point, in my thirties, can I really see that had I not grown up at the end of the Cold War, my life would have turned out completely differently.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

1973 - 1975: Borya, Olga, Andrei, Ruslan and Lyuba become Octoberists (Oktyabryati), the youngest level of youth group for Communist kids.

1976 - 78: Borya, Olga, Andrei, Ruslan and Lyuba join the Pioneers, the Soviet youth organization for kids in middle grades. The Pioneers wear a red neck kerchief.

Summer 1980: The Olympics are held in Moscow. The US boycotts in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the year before. Most kids are evacuated from Moscow during the Olympics to avoid contact with foreigners.

1981: Borya gets in trouble in school for refusing to wear his red Pioneer neck kerchief with a turtleneck sweater. He claims it is poor fashion sense.

November 10, 1982: General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev, the only leader Borya and the others – now in their teens – have known, dies of a heart attack after 18 years of uninterrupted rule. The length of his term as Soviet leader is second only to Joseph Stalin. 68-year-old Yuri Andropov succeeds Brezhnev as General Secretary.

1983: Borya, Olga, Andrei, Ruslan and Lyuba join the Komsomol, the Communist Youth for older kids. It is difficult to get into any university or get a good job without being a member of the Komsomol.

February 9, 1984: Less than two years after taking over, Yuri Andropov dies of kidney disease. He is succeeded by 72-year-old Konstantin Chernenko.

1984: Borya, Ruslan and Andrei are drafted into the Soviet Army, as were all young men in the USSR. They serve out the mandatory two years.

March 10, 1985: After just over a year in office, Konstantin Chernenko dies of emphysema. The Politburo selects its youngest member, 54-year-old Mikhail Gorbachev, to be General Secretary of the Communist Party, partly in response to the death of three heads of state in less than three years' time – referred to as the "gerontocracy."

1986: In an effort to revitalize the flagging Soviet economy, Gorbachev introduces "Glasnost" – increased political transparency of Soviet institutions and greater freedom of information. When Borya, Ruslan and Andrei return from the Soviet Army a few months later, they find the USSR has changed significantly while they were gone.

1987 - 1988: Gorbachev introduces a series of political and economic reforms he terms "Perestroika" (Gorbachev publishes a book with this title in 1987). Among the reforms: multiple candidates can run for the same office (though all are Communist Party candidates) and private ownership of businesses is allowed.

1988: Ruslan helps form the punk band NAIV.

1988: Borya and Lyuba quit the Komsomol.

1988: Olga gets married.

1988: Gorbachev launches a series of radical reforms designed to loosen the Communist Party's grip on the government apparatus. The highest legislative body of the land, the Supreme Soviet, dissolves itself and is replaced by the Congress of People's Deputies, where ordinary people began to participate in government for the first time. Families were glued to their television sets watching the sessions where, politicians began to publicly acknowledge what had only been whispered in kitchens before.

1989: Olga graduates from college with a degree in French.

1989 - 1990: A series of revolutions sweep across Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, resulting in the collapse of one Communist government after another. Hungary declares itself a republic. The Berlin Wall comes down. In Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution ends one-party rule. The deposition and execution of Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu quickly follows. Gorbachev's inaction – not sending in the Soviet army – is a major factor in the political wave that engulfs the region.

1990: Olga gives birth to her son Gosha.

March 11, 1990: Lithuania is the first of the Soviet Republics to declare independence from the Soviet Union.

March 15, 1990: Gorbachev is elected the first (and only) President of the Soviet Union. He continues in his role as General Secretary of the Communist Party.

March 30, 1990: Estonia declares Soviet power illegal.

May 4, 1990: Latvia becomes the third Soviet Republic to take a step towards independence when its Supreme Council stipulates the beginning of a transition period towards independence.

1990: Borya and Lyuba get married. They graduate from the Lenin State Pedagogical Institute. Borya immediately starts teaching at School #57.

June 12, 1991: Boris Yeltsin handily defeats Gorbachev's candidate to become President of Russia, the largest of the 15 republics in the USSR. Yeltsin is its first President. The headquarters of the government for the Republic of Russia is the Russian White House – a tall white building near the American Embassy. The seat of government for the USSR is the Kremlin, a few miles away.

August 19 - 21, 1991: With the Baltic Republics openly defiant, and strong separatist movements on the rise in Georgia and the Ukraine, Gorbachev prepares to sign the New Union Treaty, which would convert the USSR into a more loosely knit group of republics (sharing a common president, foreign policy and military but otherwise autonomous). In order to stop the dissolution of the USSR, a faction of Communist hardliners within the Politburo launch a coup, placing Gorbachev under house arrest.

Lyuba, Boris and Ruslan join the crowd of tens of thousands at the Russian White House. These mass demonstrations, along with lack of support by the army, foil the coup. Gorbachev is returned to his position, but all power resides with Yeltsin.

August 24, 1991: Gorbachev resigns as General Secretary of the Communist Party.
August 21 - September 22, 1991: All of the Soviet republics (except for Russia) declare their independence.

November 6, 1991: The Communist Party is banned in Russia by Boris Yeltsin.

December 25, 1991: Gorbachev steps down as President of the Soviet Union. The next day the country officially ceases to exist. Russia, the largest former republic, becomes an independent country, with Boris Yeltsin as president of Russia for the remainder of the decade. Privatization is encouraged. Wealth becomes concentrated in the hands of the oligarchs. Corruption runs rampant. New television channels are started, with voices critical of the government. More Russians travel abroad than ever before.

1992: Lyuba joins Borya and starts teaching at School #57.

1993: NAIV goes on a whirlwind European tour.

1993: Olga and her first husband get divorced.

1995: Mark Meyerson is born.

1996: After a personal tragedy, Olga starts working at the billiard table company.

December 31, 1999: Boris Yeltsin steps down and puts Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in charge. Elections follow shortly thereafter, formalizing the change. Over the next few years, independent television stations are taken over by government, or government-run corporations. Putin is re-elected in 2004 with 71% of the vote.

Under Putin, power is increasingly concentrated in the central government.

2000: Ruslan quits NAIV. His son Nikita is born in October.

2004: Ruslan and his second wife break up.

2006: Andrei opens his first Café Coton store in Moscow. Three and a half years later, he has seventeen stores in operation across Russia.

June, 2007: Putin gives a press conference where he declares that new textbooks will be written for teachers to help inspire a new generation of young Russian Patriots.

2008: Constitutionally barred from running for a third term, Putin selects Dmitry Medvedev to run for president. With television coverage exclusively promoting Medvedev, and several opposition candidates barred from the ballot due to "technical violations," Medvedev becomes President of Russia and immediately selects Putin as his Prime Minister. They rule together, although it is generally acknowledged that Putin has a great deal of control.

BIOGRAPHIES

Robin Hessman – Director / Producer / Cinematographer Red Square Productions

Robin Hessman graduated from Brown University with a dual degree in Russian and Film. She received her graduate degree in film directing from the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow (with a “red diploma” of honors). She received an Academy Award® in 1994 – with co-director James Longley – for their student film, *Portrait of Boy with Dog*. During her eight years living in Russia, Robin worked for the Children’s Television Workshop as the on-site producer of *Ulitsa Sezam*, the original Russian-language *Sesame Street*.

In the US, Robin co-produced the documentary *Tupperware!*, which received the Peabody Award in 2005. Robin also co-produced the PBS biography of Julia Child, *Julia! America’s Favorite Chef*. In 2004, she founded Red Square Productions and was granted the position of Filmmaker in Residence at Boston’s PBS affiliate, WGBH, to develop *My Perestroika*. The project received the Garrett Scott Documentary Development Grant at the Full Frame Festival for a work-in-progress. In 2008 Robin was a MacDowell Colony Fellow.

Her feature-length documentary directing debut, *My Perestroika*, premiered at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival as part of the US Documentary competition and was screened in New York as part of the prestigious film series, New Directors/New Films, curated by MoMA and the Film Society of Lincoln Center. It won the Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award at the Full Frame Festival in April 2010, a Special Jury Award at Silverdocs, Best Documentary at the Milwaukee Film Festival, and a Special Jury Award at Provo Ljudski in Sarajevo. *My Perestroika* was nominated for a 2011 History Makers Award. As of Feb 2011, it has been invited to over 30 international film festivals.

Robin is also an Associate of Harvard University’s Davis Center for Russian Studies and is a Term Member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Since 2006, Robin has served as the Director of documentary programming for Amfest, the American Film Festival in Moscow.

Rachel Wexler – Producer

Rachel Wexler runs Bungalow Town Productions in the UK with her partner, director/producer Jez Lewis. She specializes in producing international feature documentaries for a worldwide audience. She has worked with many award-winning filmmakers including Geoffrey Smith (*The English Surgeon*), Marc Isaacs (*All White in Barking, Men of the City*), and Oliver Hodge (*Garbage Warrior*). She has produced films with support from broadcasters and funders around the world including ITVS, BBC Storyville, Sundance Institute, Ford Foundation, More4 True Stories, Sundance Channel, DRTV, YLE, NRK, and the UK Film Council. Films that Rachel has produced have been screened at many of the world’s leading festivals, among them Sundance, Edinburgh, London, Karlovy Vary, Hotdocs, Silverdocs, and Vancouver.

Alla Kovgan – Editor

Born in Moscow, Alla Kovgan is a Boston-based filmmaker. Films that she directed and co-directed have been presented at festivals worldwide, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, Montreal Film Festival, and numerous others. She edited and co-directed the documentary feature *Traces of the Trade* which premiered at Sundance 2008 and opened the 20th season of POV on PBS. In 2009, together with David Hinton, she directed the award-winning short film *Nora*, based on the life of Zimbabwean-born dancer Nora Chipaumire. Since 1999, Alla has been involved with interdisciplinary collaborations – creating intermedia performances (with KINODANCE Company), dance films (with Alissa Cardone, Victoria Marks and Nicola Hawkins), and documentaries about dance such as *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (with Joan Frosch). Since 2000, she has taught and curated dance film/avant-garde cinema worldwide and also acts as a curator of the St. Petersburg Dance Film Festival KINODANCE (Russia) and as a co-curator of the Balagan Film Series (Boston).

Garret Savage – Editor

Garret Savage's work spans a variety of formats including documentaries, fiction features, film trailers, short films, and television commercials. His documentary editing credits include *Paper or Plastic?* (retitled *Ready, Set, Bag!*; Los Angeles Film Festival 2008), Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern's *End of America*, and an episode of the forthcoming HBO documentary series *My American Dream*. Other editing credits include the fiction feature *Olympia* (Slamdance, Sundance Channel) as well as projects for a variety of networks and studios including Paramount Pictures, ABC/ESPN, Discovery, WE, MTV, and the Style Network. He has directed and edited numerous award-winning shorts and in 2005 he was profiled as one of The Independent magazine's "Top Short Filmmakers." His rural documentary, *4-Cylinder 400*, continues to be broadcast on the Independent Film Channel. As an educator, he was the Program Director of the Nantucket Film Festival's Teen View Film Lab and a mentor with the Reel Works Teen Filmmaking Program in Brooklyn.

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