

INSIDE



MARDI GRAS

Behind the pageantry of Mardi Gras lies a world defined by tradition, class, race, and above all, family. Rebecca Snedeker '95 stepped over its boundaries when she decided to tell the story through film. **BY EVE ABRAMS '93**

Aside from the four years she spent at Wesleyan, Rebecca Snedeker has lived in New Orleans her entire life. Snedeker's family lines in the city trace back to just after the Louisiana Purchase, and if you ask her to explain Mardi Gras, she'll tell you first and foremost that it's a day you spend with family. While growing up, Snedeker's Mardi Gras included going to parades to see her father, grandfather, and uncles, masked and beneficent atop a line of floats, throwing beads and other trinkets into the hands of cheering crowds.

After the parades, the women—Snedeker's mother and grandmother and aunts—changed into ball gowns and kid leather gloves and met the men at private balls that were the destinations of the public parades. These balls were lush affairs: full of beautiful fabrics and colors and ballroom dancing, and most important, people who'd experienced life together for generations. Membership in this community offered an intense feeling of connectedness to both the present and the past, and Snedeker relished the intergenerational socializing.

"We were always learning about our elders," she marvels, "because all our families have known each other for so long."

Snedeker's first documentary film, *By Invitation Only*, which was filmed before Hurricane Katrina but released afterward, takes a deep, insider's look at the traditions of her tribe—a white, privileged world of old, Christian families whose network of family, social, and business relations are articulated in an elaborate social milieu with clear expectations and rules. This network is in part connected through organizations called krewes, whose purpose is to finance

and orchestrate parades each Mardi Gras. Membership in krewes is exclusively male as well as secret, and it generally happens in one of two ways: either by birth or, given the proper pedigree, via marriage.

New Orleans' Mardi Gras shares characteristics with Carnival traditions found throughout the Americas, but it is also imbued with a very particular Southern twist. After the Civil War, white Southerners, nostalgic for their Confederate way of life, incorporated royal characters into the Carnival traditions in order to soothe feelings of loss and re-elevate their toppled status. White kings became rulers of the parades, while queens were established as the centerpieces of the balls.

In part, Snedeker's film traces the path of Emily, another insider whose grandmother made her debut with Snedeker's grandmother. Emily is presented as a debutante in her community and eventually, as the queen of a Mardi Gras ball. But even more, the film is about Snedeker, steeped in these traditions yet ambivalent about them.

When Snedeker turned 20, she chose not to make her debut. She was in her junior year at Wesleyan; commuting to weekly parties in New Orleans would have been logistically difficult as well as expensive. Even more important, she did not want to participate in a series of rituals meant to symbolically offer her up as a virgin to a group of men who were, without exception, from a specific economic and social class, Christian, and white. But saying "no" carried a price. Snedeker missed out on a number of family events and rituals.

Her grandmother has since died, and Snedeker sometimes regrets having opted out of experiences that would have meant time spent with her. She contrasts her deci-

sion with that of her cousin Charlotte, who considered the same questions as Snedeker did but chose to make her debut. "Part of me wishes I could have been like Charlotte and just gracefully done it," Snedeker muses. "But the truth is, that wouldn't have been okay. In my soul and my spirit, I wouldn't have felt well."

After graduating from Wesleyan, Snedeker returned to New Orleans and began cobbling together a post-college career. She had a studio in which she painted (her major at Wesleyan) and she also wrote art reviews. Through her filmmaker boyfriend, Isaac, Snedeker landed a job working on the documentary film, *Desire*, and promptly fell for the medium. In documentary film, she found the perfect combination of visual and verbal, along with the incorporation of two other passions, history and research.

Desire explored how environment affects what young women want in life, and Snedeker, now in her late 20s, was thinking about how her own upbringing shaped her. Specifically, she was considering the ritual of coming out, and her identity as a Southern white woman. These thoughts led her naturally toward making her own film.

"Once I went away to Wesleyan, where we asked so many questions about race, class, and gender, there was no going back to an insular comfort zone here in New Orleans." As she spoke, Snedeker sat curled on her couch in her Mid-City neighborhood, half a block from Bayou St. John. "Either I had to leave New Orleans behind and never come back, which many people do, or forget everything I'd learned in college. I couldn't do either of those. In making my film I was reconciling my Wesleyan education with my upbringing here in New Orleans."

Part of what needed to be reconciled came from a very

personal place. Isaac, her boyfriend at the time, is black. Being an interracial couple in New Orleans brought on a host of challenges. Snedeker knew that she and Isaac would not be welcomed, as a couple, by some members of the community in which she'd been raised. Even more personally, her grandmother, after "searching her heart," told Snedeker that she wasn't comfortable with the relationship and couldn't accept it. Long before meeting Isaac, Snedeker had closed the door on many of her tribe's traditions because their insularity didn't jibe with her chosen identity. Being with Isaac meant nailing that door shut.

But it was Isaac who encouraged Snedeker to understand what lay behind that door. Initially, she didn't see the value of researching an affluent world when so many other communities were struggling, but Isaac maintained that it was worth exploring. Snedeker began to wonder what it meant to choose *not* to learn more about her family history. "He's a writer and he's always drawing on his ancestry for inspiration," says Snedeker. "It just brought into relief that I was not doing that."

Snedeker began thinking about how her tribe's kinship networks related to her present-day challenges of being in an interracial couple. On top of this, she wanted to understand her grandmother. What kind of a world was she raised in that made accepting her granddaughter's loving relationship so difficult? Snedeker knew the vague answers: racism, lynching under the guise of protecting white women, and the sexual threat of the black male. This was the world her grandmother inherited, and carried with her, at least vestigially, into the 21st century. Snedeker found herself in the frictional space between the present and past, and she realized she needed to get more information. "Part of whiteness is not having to consider these questions because you're in the mainstream," she says. "Because Isaac and I were together, I had to look at our relationship in a way I don't if I'm with someone who's white. So these ideas which were important and worthy suddenly became really personal."

In the film's opening moments, Snedeker repeats the words that provided her and her camera access to private balls and parties: She's one of us. This insider status situates the entire film, which weaves together verité footage of debutantes, interviews with Snedeker's family, historical information about the origins and evolution of the traditions, and Snedeker's ongoing narration explaining her relationship to all of this. The film captures explicitly

racist images and language used by members of these exclusive organizations both contemporary and historical, in the form of party invitations and pictorial representations of Mardi Gras.

About midway through the film, Isaac and Snedeker appear together in a series of affectionate images. "Sometimes when I see the film, I feel like it's this whole construction around these loving images of an interracial couple," says Snedeker, "because it's so rare that we see that." When Snedeker first saw those images projected on a big screen in front of an audience—many of whose members were from the tradition—it was powerful in a very political way. "Even though I didn't think that's why I made the film, the more time that passes the more aware I am that it is. It's like, I'm one of you and I'm asking you to look at this."

The decision to include these images was anything but easy. Isaac and she never intended to make their relationship the topic of their art. "We wanted to be a loving couple, not an interracial relationship," Snedeker explains. But every time Isaac was taken out of the film, something was missing. "The film felt too brainy, too heady, with no real impact on anyone's life," she says.

On the other hand, with Isaac present, the film portrays a very real conundrum: how can a daughter of this tradition still participate when the components of her modern life are at odds with its anachronistic customs? "One of people's defenses about the privacy and the exclusivity is that it's about family, not about race," explains Snedeker. "But what if your family doesn't fit in? What if your partner is different racially or religiously or is the same gender as you?" These questions weren't abstractions. "I wondered: what will we do when my cousin makes her debut?"

One attribute of documentary, as a form, is that through exposure to the lives of others we relate to situations very different from our own. In introducing Isaac, *By Invitation Only*'s audience gets a hearty, empathetic taste for how exclusivity causes very real pain and separation. This is crucial, because Snedeker made *By Invitation Only* for precisely the people who take part in these traditions.

In the film, a curator from the Louisiana State Museum leads Snedeker through a collection of ornate gowns and refers to the ritualized act of dressing up as "make-believe." Snedeker is quick to confess her own love of dressing up, but she's also aware of the act's implications. "When you grow up, so many girls play princess or teacher. It's this fictional thing," she explains. "But in New Orleans, it's some-

thing you are actually going to do with your family and everyone you know. It's not just make-believe. When we do it together and keep doing it together on such a grand scale, annually, it has to have an impact on your identity. When you see yourself in an organization of elevated status, curtsying and bowing, how can that not affect how you feel about yourself?"

The people Snedeker filmed consistently described their role in these traditions as part of a larger-than-life force, rather than owning their individual agency. She hopes *By Invitation Only* will lead audiences to question that assumption, and to examine how small, personal actions influence a larger cultural consciousness.

"We worked hard to avoid a self-righteous tone," she says. "I know there are many compromises I make in my daily life: who made the clothes I wear or who picked the fruit I eat. I'm not leading such a just life that I can go around pointing my finger and saying, 'You're so wrong for going to this party,' but I wanted to offer up questions about our participation in a system."

Because it is intended for a national PBS audience, *By Invitation Only* doesn't assume knowledge of Mardi Gras or the traditions of debutantes. But the gentleness with which Snedeker raises questions is classically New Orleans. "Sometimes people would want the film to be more angry and confrontational, but that's not how I was raised, and I understand how to speak to these people," she says. By revealing her own ambivalence, Snedeker opened the door for audiences to question their own internal conflicts.

After the film premiered in New Orleans in 2006 at the Canal Place Cinema and the New Orleans Film Festival, Snedeker heard from many people in the community who said that they didn't feel judged. One comment she heard repeatedly was: "You did it like a lady."

This receptivity to her work was not universal. Following the premiere, Snedeker was served a cease and desist letter from the captain of a krewe pictured in the film, who demanded the film's distribution stop. Snedeker had releases signed by the krewe members, but nonetheless, the incident was scary and expensive. "Law is a tool that our families have wielded for many generations to make the world the way they want it," she observes. A famous example of this is the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which the ruling of krewe member Judge John Ferguson solidified Jim Crow segregation in the United States. This knowledge helped Snedeker situate her experience of le-

KOURTNEY KELLER



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gal bullying within the context of something larger. "To be on the other side of that was very scary," she said. "It was very personal."

Snedeker had to contend with other obstacles as well. Two key people in the film—a dressmaker who designs debutantes' gowns and a photographer who worked for the *Times-Picayune* newspaper—agreed to allow their footage to be used only after they'd moved away from New Orleans, out of legiti-

mate fear of jeopardizing their jobs. Also, the New Orleans' PBS station still hasn't aired the film, though more than 30 other PBS stations have shown it, including ones in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Miami, and Philadelphia. (At the New Orleans International Human Rights Film Fest, it won the prize for the best documentary.)

"Some people are angry and I might not be welcome at certain events, but many others appreciate that these questions are raised," she says. There's been a certain poetic symmetry in the responses Snedeker has received. "On the same day I found out that a family member was interested in suing me, I got this handwritten letter from an elder, who loved the film. This woman said, 'It's high time we talk about these things.'"

These outward responses mirrored Snedeker's own appraisal of the project. In the film, she interviews her Great-

Uncle Eli, who talks about the importance of having manners, and how good manners open doors in life. Naturally, she wondered how making *By Invitation Only* would affect her life in New Orleans. "I thought about which doors would close, but I didn't realize how many would open because of a shared desire to address these issues. Now, when I'm moving around the city where I've lived most of my life, I feel so comfortable having spoken my truth to everyone. If there are jobs I'm not getting or parties I'm not getting invited to, I'm so comfortable with that, because that's not where I need to be."

New Orleans is a small city where lives are exceptionally interwoven, and as a result, people tend to shy away from making their opinions too public. Through mak-

watching someone you love who had died."

She questioned what it meant to make the film at a time when the city's flaws had been so overwhelmingly exposed. "I worried about making us look even worse," Snedeker recalls. After all, part of the film's rationale was to bring New Orleans' disparities into debate, but in a way, Katrina had beaten her to the punch.

In late September, Snedeker drove back to New Orleans to throw out the ruins of her life's possessions inside her flooded house. As hard as this was, the moment she drove over the Mississippi River Bridge, she felt an enormous sense of relief. This comfort of returning home is one many people found, and across the city, New Orleanians have turned to their traditions as refuge from personal upheaval. Snedeker likens this post-storm period to that of Reconstruction, when many of her tribe's Mardi Gras traditions were born. "With life completely uprooted, some days you just want to claw to the familiar. But with everything up in the air, there is also openness and possibilities for change."

During these two, post-storm years, Mardi Gras has continued, parades have rolled, and young women of high society—both black and white—have continued to make their debuts. Meanwhile, residents with various backgrounds together are engaging in recovery work and confronting longstanding weaknesses in schools, race relations, and political corruption. In this vein, *By Invitation Only* has been a timely tool for

dialogue throughout the city.

On Snedeker's mother's side, participation in the traditions of her class goes back to Reconstruction. Snedeker didn't initially understand when she undertook her film that it would become one more step in that line. "This film has been a rite of passage; that's so clear to me," she says. "I thought I'd kept my family history at arm's length. It was incredibly humbling and funny to realize that I could not move on without going through this ritual that all the women in my family had gone through. I'm a daughter of this tradition. They might not want me around right now, but this tradition is mine."

[See: www.byinvitationonlythefilm.com]