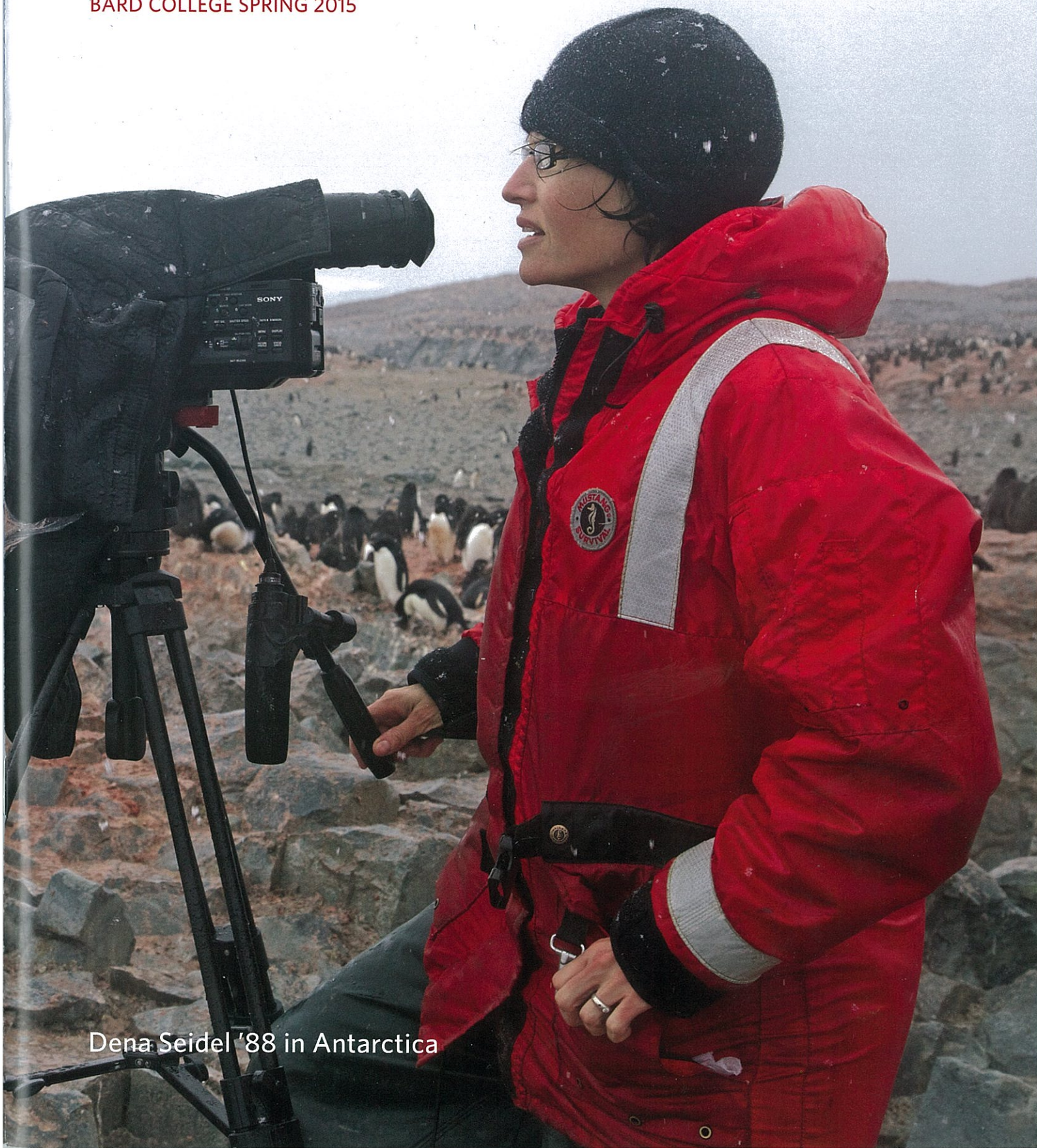


# Bardian

BARD COLLEGE SPRING 2015



Dena Seidel '88 in Antarctica



## Dena Seidel '88: Filming from Antarctica to the Atlantic

The year 2015 is proving to be the most professionally and artistically fulfilling of **Dena (Katzen) Seidel '88's** long career as an innovative educator and award-winning documentary filmmaker. In the fall, the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University starts admitting students into its new bachelor of fine arts program in digital filmmaking. It began as a curriculum proposal designed by Seidel, director of the Rutgers Center for Digital Filmmaking, and it's what she's proudest of professionally—along with starting Rutgers University's digital filmmaking certificate program and the university's professional documentary office. "My identity is as an innovative educator," she says. "I design the curriculum, teach, and work to get grants to make collaborative films with my students. This interdisciplinary model has enabled us to send students all over the world making character-driven, nonfiction films."

What she's proudest of artistically is *Antarctic Edge: 70° South*, a feature-length documentary supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation awarded to Seidel and oceanographer Oscar Schofield. *Antarctic Edge* was two years in the making and began with a six-week film shoot in Antarctica directed by Seidel and featuring Schofield's research. She and former student Steve Holloway spent one-and-a-half years shaping over 400 hours of footage with 14 of her current undergraduate film students. It was the most challenging and ambitious documentary of her career. "There was so much to learn," she says. "I had to work closely with the scientists and then with my nonscience-trained students and staff to shape the film into a compelling narrative that was also scientifically accurate." The film's theatrical release this spring starts at the Quad Cinema in New York City.

Other recent documentaries Seidel and her students have produced include *Generation at Risk: Joining Forces to Fight Childhood Obesity* and *The War After*, about veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2010, they completed the feature-length *Atlantic Crossing: A Robot's Daring Mission*, about the Rutgers-led voyage of the first autonomous robotic glider to cross the Atlantic. The film won numerous film festival awards and aired hundreds of times on PBS stations across the country. Other film subjects have included Rutgers engineering students rebuilding a water purification system in rural Thailand, and young women seeking advice from famous female leaders. All the topics reflect Seidel's own passions. "I'm interested in a filmmaking model that attracts young artists interested in engaging with science, humanities, and social sciences research, as well as those from underrepresented and underserved groups," she says. She has presented her educational model at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University, UCLA, and Bard in a series of talks in which she emphasizes "the importance of developing creative partnerships between filmmakers, scientists, and researchers in the making of artistic film narratives."

Such achievements represent the culmination of what Seidel learned at Bard while studying for her bachelor's degree in film. "I studied under **Peter Hutton, John Pruitt, and Adolfo Mekas**," she says. "The Film Department was experimental and unconventional and certainly pushed boundaries, but it was male dominated back then and I didn't have role models." At the same time, Bard pushed her to think outside the box and provided an environment in which she was encouraged to connect ideas across disciplines. "What I've achieved I think is in large part because of the intellectual training I received at Bard," she says. "The atmosphere was one of constant dialogue and debate." It's an approach she takes with her own students. "I encourage them to mix and explore film languages, collaborate across disciplines, take risks as they develop their own artistic style. I developed that sensibility at Bard, where there really were no silos. While studying film, I took classes in anthropology, music, economics, and poetry, while dancing in performances. At Bard, that was completely normal."



Dena Seidel '88. PHOTO Chris Linder

Pre-Bard, Seidel left home at 17 to travel solo to Europe, Yugoslavia, Israel, and Egypt. "I needed to see the world," she says. "I had a hunger to know what it meant to be human. I grew up with little family structure. My parents were really wild, unconventional artists. I knew most people didn't live like us." That desire for human understanding later led her to pursue an M.A. in anthropology at Hunter College; during that time she spent a month in Papua, New Guinea, which showed her "how varied the human experience can be."

After Bard, Seidel worked as assistant editor in a postproduction house on films for National Geographic and other national broadcasters, a job she got largely because of previous summers' internships. She moved on to edit, write, and coproduce two-hour specials for the Discovery Channel, as well as documentaries for PBS, HBO, and ABC, among others. Along the way, she garnered numerous professional awards, including a New York Emmy and a New York Festivals Award for best editing.

Marriage (to **Douglas Seidel '84**), three kids, and a move from Brooklyn to New Jersey followed; while home with small kids, she wrote and published short stories. In 2007, she learned that the Rutgers English Department was looking for a full-time teacher to develop innovative filmmaking classes. She got the position, even though she'd never taught before. Her assignment: to develop a "filmmaking as creative writing" curriculum using digital cameras as writing instruments. "Teaching made me a better filmmaker, because I had to figure out how to articulate what I intrinsically knew as an artist, writer, and storyteller," she says.

After the making of *Atlantic Crossing*, other Rutgers researchers came up with ideas for documentaries, providing Seidel and her students with access to incredible stories. So far, Seidel has sent student filmmakers to Rome, Zambia, Thailand, Brazil, Spain, Virgin Islands, Alabama, and Nashville. Cognitive scientists at Rutgers became interested in what Seidel was doing and asked her if she wanted to formalize the process and get research support.

Seidel is adamant about finding new ways to engage film students in science- and research-based art projects. "I have seen the power of 'intersections' to inspire innovation—opportunities for people with varied training and skills to come together with a common creative goal," she says. "The power of collaborative filmmaking connects people, breaks down barriers, and allows for the making of something truly new. I hit walls all the time, but luckily I've been given the support at Rutgers to create a space of intersections that I felt was the norm at Bard."