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Moving images: Dena Seidel signs on as director of the new Rutgers Center For Digital Filmmaking

Growing up, Dena Seidel rarely stayed put for very long. All through childhood, she was the new kid in town, as her family picked up and moved from state to state. When Seidel was 17, she traveled solo around Italy, Greece, Turkey and Egypt before earning a bachelor's degree in filmmaking and, eventually, a master's in anthropology.

Seidel says being raised by artistic parents—her mother was an opera singer and a painter; her father was a jazz drummer and an artist—meant always “knowing there is an audience and needing to tell a story.”

Her fervor for storytelling verges on the evangelical.

“Stories take the chaos of the world and shape it into a beginning, middle and end,” says Seidel, an award-winning filmmaker who lives in Highland Park, N.J., with her husband, an artist/musician-turned-engineer, and their three sons. “Looking back, I now know that stories and storytelling provided me with a sense of order and structure during a tumultuous childhood,” in which she communicated for divorced parents who refused to speak to one another.

Now the filmmaker is navigating another challenge, as director of the newly formed [Rutgers Center For Digital Filmmaking](#). The Mason Gross School of the Arts and the School of Arts and Sciences launched the Center earlier this semester. Students may begin applying in November 2011.

The Center features a seven-course certificate program with tracks in fiction and documentary filmmaking, as well as the Rutgers Film Bureau professional documentary filmmaking unit, whose clients come from in and outside the university community. The unit also houses an archive of film shot at Rutgers.

Consider the possibilities, says Seidel, a born pitchwoman: “You could be a biology major and graduate with a certificate in digital filmmaking,” practically an essential tool in a digitized world where even mom-and-pop businesses launch websites. “Rutgers students have stories they want to tell.”

As a documentary filmmaker who has worked on films that have appeared on HBO, ABC, Discovery Channel, National Geographic and The Learning Channel (TLC), Seidel has crisscrossed the globe telling stories on such diverse topics as female matadors and deep-sea expeditions. Since 2007 she has taught digital storytelling and documentary filmmaking for writers at Writers House. The 2010 Writers House documentary *Atlantic Crossing: A Robot's Daring Mission* followed the researchers and students of the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences as they prepared for the voyage of the first robotic glider to cross the Atlantic. The film won a slew of film-festival awards and aired on PBS.

And Seidel says she plans to nudge her Center for Digital Filmmaking students to leap into the mix here at the university.

According to Seidel, the program is production-oriented and meant to be hands-on so that students “will leave feeling confident. We need to push kids to make—to risk making.”

The issue for Seidel, no matter what the topic, remains the same: dramatic tension. She says her background in filmmaking (she worked for 15 years writing, editing and producing TV documentaries) and anthropology has taught her that the three-act story structure is universal—and an ideal communication tool.

Even in a nonfiction work, “you have to be able to hold the audience at every single moment,” she says. “You create a



Dena Seidel filming "Atlantic Crossing."

sense of setting, a character with a want, a need, a goal. What are the risks if that person doesn't get that goal?

"To make someone interesting, you have to make them human," Seidel continues. "The audience has to identify with them. We need to know why we should care."

If anyone can make us care, it's Seidel.

"We have to create opportunities [for student filmmakers]," she says, as driven as ever. "It's about creating an environment in which people can make."

More information about the Rutgers Center For Digital Filmmaking is available by calling 848-932-5273, or by sending an [email](#). Catch Seidel's work on the [Mason Gross YouTube channel](#).

[FAQ's about the Rutgers Center For Digital Filmmaking](#)

Grüße



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