

PARNASSUSWORKS

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**Naturally Obsessed: the making of a scientist
a one-hour documentary film
Produced and Directed by Richard Rifkind and Carole Rifkind**

A true story about the struggle to become a scientist and the satisfactions of discovery.

**Watch a one-minute prelude to the film:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7zIRl0quLw>**

Now available for screenings to educational and professional groups.

(January 16, 2009) "Most films show working scientists as lonely isolates, pathetic nerds, dangerous nuts, or pompous gurus. Viewers of Naturally Obsessed experience the world of research as it really is – a lively community of intensely curious, friendly and hardworking individuals engaged in the fascinating process of scientific discovery," says scientist turned filmmaker, Sloan Kettering Institute Chairman Emeritus, Richard Rifkind.

Mixing humor with heartbreak, NATURALLY OBSESSED: THE MAKING OF A SCIENTIST tells an intensely dramatic story about a trio of irrepressible student scientists who are guided through the emotional ups and downs of a PhD training program by a tough but genial mentor. The film was shot for over three years in the Molecular Biology laboratory of Dr. Lawrence Shapiro at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City.

Graduate students working under Shapiro's supervision are in a race to beat worldwide competition to discover the molecular workings of the protein AMPK. Sensitive to the level of available energy in living cells, AMPK controls whether fat is burned to produce more energy, or is stored as fat. Knowledge of how to regulate the activity of AMPK may contribute to new treatments for pathological obesity and type 2 diabetes. "Like the Olympic swimmer, the prima ballerina or the opera diva, the scientist has to commit to long and hard work, without assurance that it will produce success," says Carole Rifkind, an author and educator. "We chronicled the students as they gradually came to understand themselves, their ambitions, and their limitations. We saw that not everyone has what it takes."

"As a scientist turned filmmaker, I treated the making of the film like the doing of science. We were at a knowledge frontier and didn't know what -- if anything -- we would discover, but the Shapiro lab provided a terrific cast of characters at a pivot point in their lives." Larry Shapiro, the young professor who heads the lab, is an off-beat academic who played hooky from high school so he could work in a research lab. His

students are like family to him and he cares passionately about passing the baton of science on to the next generation. Graduate student Robert, a rebellious perennial dropout, was making his last ditch stand in Larry's lab; Kilpatrick, apparently self confident, was deeply troubled over whether his future lay in academia or in business; Gabrielle, insecure in her own commitment, questioned if she could stay the course.

"We set out to chronicle the life of the lab for as long as it took to find its story. Through patient observation and experimentation, we succeeded in capturing the excitement, the suspense and the ultimate triumph of the journey," says Rifkind. "We witnessed the actual discovery of the molecular mechanism of AMPK as well as the transformative effect on the young scientist who makes the discovery."

"In the incredibly difficult struggle to produce results we saw the human face of doing science," says Carole Rifkind. Larry Shapiro, as lab head and mentor, has to strike a balance between doing grant-worthy research and providing his graduate students with the support they need on the way to the PhD degree. Each student works on a research project that contributes towards Shapiro's overall investigative agenda, which requires that they master an exceedingly challenging technique – x-ray crystallography. By means of x-ray crystallography, either they will produce a convincing three-dimensional atomic model of a protein, or, despite years of effort, they will fail to produce any usable result at all.

Audience comments:

"The feelings captured in Naturally Obsessed mirrored many of the emotions I have felt in others who share this journey we call science. The film accurately portrays the process of science with all the highs, lows, intensity and humor that come with the experience."

John Shanklin, Scientist, Brookhaven National Laboratories

"The film has humor and humanity and most importantly, conveys the creative culture of scientific research to the 'outside world. It is a measure of how hard it is to do, that no one has done it before."

Nancy Baker, award winning filmmaker.

Screenings include: Memorial Sloan Kettering, SUNY Stony Brook, OSI Pharmaceuticals, New York, Academy of Sciences, Hunter College, CUNY Graduate Center, Columbia University, and others. The film will be an opening night event at the D.C. Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capitol on March 11, 2009.

ParnassusWorks, a 501 (c) (3) not-for profit foundation founded in 2000 to produce films in science and the environment, also produced **The Venetian Dilemma (2004)**.