

THE MIAMI HERALD

November 7, 2000

Section: Living

Edition: Final

Page: 1E

FILMMAKER HOPES TO BANISH SHAME OF THE ABUSED

ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ, Herald Staff

Film director and producer Sylvie **Rokab** has discovered that her 17-pound Sony Beta SP TV camera provides little protection from the intensity of her subject matter. The lens instead connects artist and topic in a way little else can, for posterity.

“Some of these stories are really shocking,” **Rokab** says. “These people had their sense of self taken away from them, their little bodies violated by people they trusted. So many years later, their tears still pour out.”

In the comfort of her Coral Gables living room, she shudders. **Rokab** is currently directing and producing a documentary that features **Innemotion**, a group of incest survivors who have found healing by performing. It also includes individual interviews with victims who talk about coming to terms with their past.

In the process of creating, she has heard the voices and the stories of Caris, who was sexually abused by her stepfather from the age of 3. And Robyn, who was orally raped by her neighbor. And Janice, abused by her father and grandfather. And Jim, molested nightly by a teenage cousin. And, of course, Sharon Daugherty, founder of **Innemotion**, who was sexually abused by her father and older brother.

“People come up to me and say, ‘Why did you pick such a depressing subject?’” **Rokab** says. “But it isn’t depressing. It’s really uplifting. These people had horrible experiences, but look what they’ve done with their lives.”

It seems to me that the subject picked **Rokab**, not the other way around. Two years ago, a friend told her about Daugherty’s **Innemotion** group and when she attended a performance, “I was in tears. It was so painful to watch, especially in the beginning.”

The two women, filmmaker and incest survivor, immediately bonded. They began working together on a documentary. For Daugherty, it was a way of getting the message out. For **Rokab**, it became a learning experience and a mission. She wanted to lift the veil of secrecy and the shadow of shame that so often accompanies child sexual abuse. And she also wanted to appeal to an audience beyond victims and mental health specialists.

“This is more than about sexual abuse,” **Rokab** adds. “It’s about emotional healing. It’s about anything that holds you back and what you can do to cross over that. To become healthy we must address some issues that are painful, and that’s what you see here.”

The hour-long documentary will be released next summer, but **Rokab** has already started to shop it around. She recently took a 10-minute trailer to the Independent Feature Film Market in New York in September, the top market for independent filmmakers. There, several distributors - including public broadcasting stations and film festivals - expressed an interest, a seal of validation for **Rokab**.

I screened the trailer in **Rokab**’s editing room with a heaviness in the pit of my stomach. I was pained for the lost childhood of these adults and angry with the perpetrators of such horror. I was also shocked at a

short interview with renown sexologist Marilyn Volker as she quoted shocking statistics: One in three or four girls are abused, as are one in six to eight boys. Later, though, I felt a strange sense of victory in watching how these men and women have turned their lives around.

This - the outrage leading to triumph - is precisely the reaction **Rokab** seeks in her work. "They've been my teachers in this," she says of the victims she has interviewed. "I really admire their courage."

Rokab, 36, is not new to documentaries on social issues, films that force us to take a good look at ourselves and ask questions about our behavior. Born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, she left a successful career in the import/export business to pursue her love of photography. While working toward a master's degree at Barry University, her video *Healing: A Holistic Approach*, won the university's first place documentary award in 1996. Her master's thesis, *Opening Young Minds*, a documentary video on multicultural education, was broadcast on a cable channel.

Since then, she has produced, directed and shot *Reaching Out*, a video on gay teens in the public-school system; a short film comedy titled *Making Up*, which earned an honorable mention in the 1997 Fort Lauderdale Film Festival; and a documentary on the sailing organization for people with disabilities, *Shake a Leg*.

In the coming weeks, viewers of local English and Spanish-language TV stations will also see some of **Rokab's** work: four public service announcements for the Miami Alliance Against Domestic Violence. Last year, she directed and co-produced a video series on our environmental gems, *Alaskan Dreams* and *Eco-Florida*. Some of her work is commercial; much is pro bono.

"I feel very connected to these issues," **Rokab** explains. "I want to tell stories that empower and enlighten people. I want to stimulate discussion and get things out in the open."

In the open, and on film, for posterity.