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SHAPING IN ACTION: CHERIEN DABIS

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The Shaping in Action series is where we get to know inspiring women who are pioneering and shaping what's to come.

Growing up in the Midwest, Cherien Dabis sometimes felt like she was lost between two worlds. Born shortly after her parents immigrated to the U.S., she was, in some ways, an all-American girl. Yet her Arab heritage -- her father is Palestinian, her mother Jordanian -- also set her apart, especially during the Gulf War in 1991, when her family began to experience overt racism.

The injustices the Dabis clan suffered were based on a fear that young Cherien found hard to grasp. "It was absurdity that anyone would be afraid of my family," she says today. But spurred by world events and burgeoning anti-Arab sentiment, then-14-year-old Cherien started paying attention to her Middle Eastern roots. Thus were the seeds planted for her future as a filmmaker.

Cherien's first feature film, the award-winning "Amreeka," is about a family much like her own -- Midwestern, with American-born daughters, immigrant parents and, at its center, a warm-hearted, optimistic aunt fresh from the West Bank. It's a film about the Palestinian experience, but, more than that, it's a film that's relatable to all kinds of immigrant families -- and families in general -- regardless of heritage.

Introducing a story about immigrants so often misunderstood and feared who had such a relatable family dynamic was challenging. The war in Iraq was in full swing as she applied (and re-applied) to every independent film foundation she could find. While the marketplace was ready for films dealing with Middle Eastern topics, "Amreeka" puzzled some potential backers. "They couldn't see why there should be a movie [about the Palestinian experience] that was light and funny," she says. There were other hindrances, too, notes Cherien: "It's a movie about people of color, it stars women, it has no recognizable actors, and a large part of it is not in English."

So, how does a filmmaker succeed in getting a movie made in the face of a perfect storm of perceived strikes against its marketability?

"Sheer will," says Cherien. She also recommends a thick skin. "There is going to be rejection along the way. You learn that 'no' doesn't always mean 'no'; it means 'not now.' You have to show people you're willing to do the work, that you have the determination to be in it for the long haul." After countless rejections, she found Christina Piovesan, a film producer from Toronto. "We teamed up almost three years into it," she

recalls. "We were both first-timers -- but we did it."

The response to the film has been overwhelmingly positive, not only among Arabs but also among American Jews and Israelis. It's a film that, despite its lightness, brings up questions: In the U.S., the use of the word "Palestine" is questioned, while in the West Bank, people question the friendship between a Palestinian woman and a Jewish man. Still others have had knee-jerk reactions to the portrayal of white Americans in the film, despite the inclusion of several positive white characters. "The worst was when I came out of the theater and a woman called it 'propaganda,' " she says. "That was hard to take -- because it's not."

Cherien is currently working on her second feature film in Jordan and is writing a movie for Fox Searchlight. With her first feature under her belt, the future is wide open. "When you accomplish what you set out to do," she says, "there is no limit."

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