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# Filmmaker from Holden chronicles efforts to bring health care to women via high seas



In a scene from "Vessel," Dr. Rebecca Gomperts lands the ship in Valencia, Spain. (Courtesy of DIANA WHITTEN/"VESSEL")

By Pamela H. Sacks CORRESPONDENT

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Diana Whitten's years of experience in storytelling, photography, production design and filmmaking paid off when her first full-length documentary got a standing ovation at its world premiere last month.

Whitten's film, titled "Vessel," was one of eight out of roughly 900 submissions chosen to compete in the documentary category at the 2014 SXSW film festival in Austin. It focused on a Dutch physician who fights for the right of women to determine their own health care by, among other methods, providing access to non-surgical abortions on a boat in international waters. "Vessel" won SXSW's Audience Award for Best Documentary and the Special Jury Award for Political Courage.

"It was so warmly received," Whitten, who grew up in Holden, said recently by phone from her office in Brooklyn, N.Y. "There was a rally on the day of the premiere."

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The film was shown several times, she said, and the crowds were on their feet applauding at the conclusion.

"We thought it was interesting because of the Draconian laws being put into place in Texas," she added, referring to new laws that have forced the closing of many of the state's abortion clinics.

Whitten was working as a production designer when she decided to move beyond the visual and become a storyteller with a political bent. She entered a graduate program in international studies at the New School in New York City and became interested in the use of offshore spaces for social justice causes, as opposed to personal exploitation, which is more common. She soon learned about Rebecca Gomperts, a physician from the Netherlands, and her organization, Women on Waves.

Dr. Gomperts founded Women on Waves in 2000 to provide comprehensive health care for women, including prevention of unwanted pregnancies and access to early medical abortion by the use of pills. Such services can be provided in international waters, where the laws of the flagship country apply. Dr. Gomperts' boat is registered in the Netherlands, where abortion is legal up to 6½ weeks into pregnancy.

Whitten suspected that the group's work would not only make a fascinating documentary but also serve as potentially a valuable tool in assisting women to "reclaim rights over their own lives."

"That's the main message of the film," she said.

Whitten is the director and producer of "Vessel." She raised the money, wielded the camera, conducted the interviews and shared in the editing process. All in all, the film took seven years to make.

Women on Waves engages in campaigns in countries to which it has been invited by local organizations and activists. It's a collaborative effort. Whitten said that the landing of the boat is a spectacle. The vessel is emblazoned with a banner that has a hot line phone number. Trained volunteers set times when women can board. They are given ultrasounds, and, 12 miles out at sea, a doctor administers the pills. The resulting miscarriage occurs at home.

The organization is inundated by women seeking its services, Whitten said. During its first campaign, in Ireland, more than 300 women called to make appointments. When the boat reaches port, legions of supporters and angry protestors turn out for its arrival. Two Navy warships set up a blockade as the boat approached Portugal in 2004. Whitten traveled with the group to Ecuador, Spain and Tanzania. The film also covers campaigns in Ireland, Poland and Portugal.

Given the intensity of reactions to the mission, it took considerable grit to acquire the footage. Whitten said she discovered that holding a camera in volatile situations can sometimes be protective. "You know something won't actively hurt you if you are filming it," she said.

Dr. Gomperts initially was cautious about Whitten's project.

"She tolerated me, not knowing that I wasn't going to go away for the next seven years," Whitten said, laughing. "I didn't know how long it would take me. It took years to show her I wasn't in it for an exposé of their private lives or to exploit the women they were helping."

Over time, Whitten witnessed the evolution of Women on Waves and made the group's changing strategy the theme of her film. During the first three campaigns, the ship was faced with blockade after blockade. After the incident with the warships in Portugal, Dr. Gomperts went on TV and explained where to find the over-the-counter pills and how to take them. It is a protocol tested and approved by the World Health Organization.



Diana Whitten  
[Enlarge photo](#)

### 'Vessel,' at the Independent Film Festival of Boston

**When:** 3:15 p.m. April 27

**Where:** Somerville Theatre, 55 Davis Square, Somerville, Screen 3

**For tickets:** go to [iffboston.org](http://iffboston.org)

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"Rebecca is charismatic, and something turns on in her when faced with adversity," Whitten said. "I was near her in a lot of these loud, volatile situations. It was frightening."

Whitten returns to the Worcester area when she has a little free time. She recently joined her classmates in

celebrating their 20th reunion at Bancroft School. She has degrees from Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, as well as a master's degree from the New School. She was a Fulbright fellow in Indonesia before founding Sovereignty Productions in 2008.

Now, Whitten is heavily engaged in getting the word out about "Vessel." The documentary was presented earlier this month at the Through Women's Eyes International Film Festival, which partners with the Sarasota Film Festival. "Vessel" will be shown at the Hot Docs Film Festival in Toronto. At 3:15 p.m. Sunday, a screening will take place at the Independent Film Festival of Boston. The showing will be at the Somerville Theatre on Screen 3.

Whitten has her sights set on domestic and international distribution.

"We have a robust outreach plan we are working on — a partner network of groups and individuals that have goals aligned with the film," she said. "They can help with networking, and the film can help them with their message."

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