Making Movies,

Telling Stories, No Matter What

Anne Makepeace has a California license plate wedged into her screen door in Salisbury, where she lives some of the time.

It reads "makepix."

And that's what she does. Makes movies. Two recent ones have been about photographers — Robert Capa and Edward S. Curtis — artists hellbent on revealing new worlds to us.

Makepeace does that, too.

"I am a restless soul," she says. And, like Capa and Curtis, she does whatever it takes to tell the story. Her latest film, "Rain in a Dry Land," which will be shown in Millerton, Sunday, is about two Bantu families who escaped an unspeakably

vicious civil war in Somalia, and, after 13 years in a United Nations refugee camp in Kenya, came to America.

She opened The New York Times one day in 2003 and read of the 12,000 Somali refugees headed for the United States. An oppressed minority in their homeland, these Muslims had no schooling at all, and no idea of urban life. All they had were bad memories, a lot of hope and each other.

"They had never seen TV, or stairs," Makepeace said in an interview earlier this year. "They got stuck in a room because they did not know how to work the door knob. And here they were, coming to the U.S. What would that be like, I wondered."

Without backing, she hit her savings and flew to Kenya with a crew of three to find out and started filming in "barren dangerous territory" where temperatures soared to 120 degrees and malarial mosquitos thrived — home for nearly a generation of refugees.

The first thing she did was hire an interpreter. But in a camp where enmities outlive people, Makepeace had accidentally hired someone her subjects hated and mistrusted. A very bad first step, she said.

"So I fired him and hired another. He was beloved and respected by the people. His presence encouraged families to open up right away."

They talked about watching their parents murdered, about rapes, about separation and desertion, about being driven from their green land. Now they were going to America, a place with escalators and tall buildings and new rules and different words.

She flew back to the United States with two of the families. One went to Springfield, MA, the other, Atlanta, GA. And in those places she watched their falling apart.

And their prevailing.

One of the toughest scenes to watch took place in a grocery store, where the Springfield family ran out of cash.

"You want to just give them the $5. But you can't. It was excruciating. If you give them money you change your relationship with them. Then they want to please you."

She did intervene, however, when no one in the family could open a prescription medicine for a wailing youngster. She just stopped filming and opened the child-proof bottle.

Now after two years of traveling, filming, raising money, raising interest and editing, "Rain in a Dry Land" is being screened in moviehouses, film festivals and is scheduled for public television. But it was a struggle, Makepeace said.

"Sometimes I was in the dark night of the soul, anxious that I didn't have a story."

But she did have a story. And it worked. And she is relieved.

"I feel blessed that I'm able to do work I really want to do. That's what carries me. It's worth the financial insecurity, the anxiety, the 18-hour days. I'm thrilled with the result.

"Especially when it works."

Struggling in America

Once again, Jenny Hansell and her mate, Fred Baumgarten, write their movie review by instant messaging.

This Sunday, March 26, at 11:30 a.m., the Moviehouse in Millerton, NY, is hosting a special screening, presented by FilmWorks Forum, of Anne Makepeace's new film, "Rain in a Dry Land," with the filmmaker in attendance. This documentary follows two Somalian families, forced out of their homeland by civil war in 1991, from a refugee camp in Kenya, where they have spent more than a decade, to new lives in the United States. Madina, who watched as her mother was shot and killed in the war, her husband, Aden, and her children struggle to eke out an existence in Springfield, MA, while Arbai – who had to leave her two oldest daughters behind in Somalia – and her brood barely hold their own in Atlanta.

Matt Schwab

JH: I have a feeling we're in agreement about this movie. It was extraordinarily moving and

powerful.

FB: A revelation! I hope no one reading this misses the special screening at the Moviehouse.

JH: It really opened my eyes. What a culture shock it is for these families to arrive in the United States. The scene that summed it up best was when Madina, newly arrived in Springfield, went food shopping with her children. She was trying to buy chicken. First they stop at a fast-food place, but she won't pay unless she sees it first – quite reasonable when you think about it, but not how we do things here. Then they go to a supermarket and find some frozen fried chicken nuggets. "How do you know it's chicken in there? And why is it so cold?" she asks. A Hollywood film would play this for laughs – but the filmmakers treat this scene, and every scene, with gentle respect.

FB: Though they were barely surviving in Africa, you see a real struggle in America as well. It's truly appalling to realize the nearly insurmountable obstacles faced not only by these immigrant families, but millions of other impoverished Americans.

JH: In the refugee camp in Kenya, as they learn about strange things like stoves, they are so excited and optimistic about coming to America – they think all their problems will be solved.

Somehow I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

After they arrive in Atlanta, when Arbai's daughter says, "I don't need my culture in America," I was even more worried about their well-being.

FB: There is so much they need to hold onto, things most of us take for granted – their culture, new information and experiences, their families, their meager funds, and above all their pride. It's a miracle they can pull it off, but ironically it is also their deep-rooted African culture, centered on family and community, that saves them.

JH: They were also helped by so many ordinary people who cared about these complete strangers: teachers, classmates, friendly neighbors. This sounds totally corny, but it made me realize how each of us can make a real difference to someone in our daily lives. When Madina, in Springfield, overwhelmed by cold and bureaucratic pressure and financial difficulties, sinks into depression, her social worker completely understood and helped her get medical help. Meanwhile, Arbai, who has to learn a difficult job, kept smiling throughout the movie. It was fascinating to see how differently they reacted.

FB: Despite their difficulties, the movie was full of beauty: the most drop-dead gorgeous clothing from Somalia; poetry and song, and even an uplifting ending.

JH: Yes, you couldn't invent a more perfect tale of triumph over hardship. Who would have thought that it would seem like a fairy tale ending for the heroine to get a job waxing floors in a big box store!

For information, call the Moviehouse at 518-789-4802.