



Anisa Mehdi,
journalist/
filmmaker

W Inspirational Woman

But it wasn't easy having an opinionated father. Aware of Dr Mohammad's point of view, many of her Jewish friends weren't allowed to come play in the Mehdi household. "It had a huge impact on my sisters and me while growing up and we learnt to be gracious in difficult circumstances and friends with somebody even though we had political differences," says Anisa.

This ability to get into another person's psyche came handy when she was invited to direct *Inside Mecca*, a National Geographic documentary that was screened at DUCTAC in

June. With the distinction of being the only woman to have reported from the inner sanctum of the Hajj in Saudi Arabia in 1998, Anisa was a shoo-in for the role of director, but likes to believe that it was fate that guided her towards the challenge.

"Once I got the assignment, the passion started to grow and develop and I had to get people to trust me, that the intention was good, and that I was going to tell the story of the Hajj through three people."

That proved a breeze in comparison to picking her three protagonists solely on the basis of telephone interviews. Keeping her fingers crossed that they would be photogenic and articulate, Anisa's greatest fear was when she flew to meet them at their homes in the United States, Pretoria and Kuala Lumpur – to begin shooting – they would freeze on camera. "Luckily they didn't and I thank God for that," she laughs. "They say God doesn't challenge anyone beyond their capacity to meet the challenge, so I just think God thinks an awful lot of me, that I would have been able to overcome that."

But that wouldn't be the only insight that Anisa would gain during the creative process.

Although she learnt a lot about herself, the one lesson that stood out was the fact that no matter how good she was at her job, she couldn't control everything. "I realised that at the point where there is nothing more that I can do, I need to step back and let the bigger powers take over," she says. "And when I do, the bigger power always sides with me and gives."

Now used as an introduction to Islam and world religion courses at some universities, *Inside Mecca* also touched many of Anisa's Jewish friends and colleagues who highlighted the fact that the relationship between Muslims and Jews had been one of cooperation and collaboration before it started being tested in recent times. But in a world that's facing terrorism on several levels, Anisa doesn't see herself as the messenger to break down the stereotypes that many Westerners hold about Muslims and their religion.

"I don't know if I can ever set the record straight, because frankly I don't know what straight is," she says. "But, I want to be able to offer another view. I think it's the right thing to do, to allow people to have a variety of views on the buffet of information and this should be one of them."

Although she loves the craft of documentary making, Anisa now sees her future filled with public speaking engagements and teaching opportunities to educate people and maybe even affect public opinion and policy. "It's a growth process," she says. "They say if your job doesn't scare you, you need to find another job. Producing documentaries is hard work, but it's a challenge that's not frightening anymore. Speaking my view instead of someone else's view – that is something a little on the edge." ●



With a resumé that lists flautist, broadcast journalist and documentary filmmaker, it's easy to feel grossly unambitious while speaking with Anisa Mehdi. But as she chats about how her diverse range of interests, honed while living in multicultural New York City, are now her bread and butter, it's pure inspiration to listen to how this Arab-American incorporated her passions of the arts, religion and people into her job.

Born of an Iraqi father and Canadian-American mother, Anisa didn't have to look far from home for role models. She still draws inspiration from her revolutionary father, the late Dr Mohammad T. Mehdi, who fought for the rights of Palestinians in a pro-Zionist New York and her blonde and blue-eyed mother, Beverlee, who stood firmly by her husband's side.