

One 'twisted' balloon artist

By Hinda Mandell

Few people can say that they've made larger-than-life-sized balloon sculptures in the likenesses of Al Roker and Paul McCartney.

In fact, Newton native Naomi Greenfield might be the only person who has accomplished such feats.

For many folks, balloons come with the territory at birthday parties and bar mitzvahs. Outside the realm of celebrations, the pop-able decorations are little more than temporal art. Not so for Greenfield, 28, who submitted a documentary on balloon twisting to the Sundance Film Festival earlier this week.

In "Twisted: A Balloonamentary," Greenfield, along with co-producer Sara Taksler, reveal the little-known world of balloon twisting conventions. Greenfield explained the subculture this way: "You can't not smile when you're with balloons. There's something festive and childlike about it."

Since they began filming in 2003, Greenfield – the force behind the Somerville-based Red Balloon Company – picked up a few twisting tricks of her own, among them her favorite balloon creations of ladybugs and monkeys on palm trees. Today, nothing is off-limits for Greenfield and her balloons: she can create a birthday cake from six different balloons. And how about

a balloon basket filled with balloon fruit? Been there, done that.

At age 13, Greenfield entered the world of twisting with the purchase of the book "Balloon Magic." She began with what she calls the "easy stuff" – small animals and flowers.

Fast-forward to college at Washington University in St. Louis, where Greenfield bonded with Taksler, another ballooning enthusiast. They daydreamed about one day making a film together that would chronicle the hobby in which they were more than casual dabblers.

A simple Google search in 2002 would finally set them on their path to fulfilling this dream. Then working in New York, Greenfield decided on a whim to conduct an online search for balloon animals. What she found was an upcoming bal-

loon twisting convention in Peabody.

"I went there, and there was this whole world of classes and workshops," said Greenfield, who received her own academic training at Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston. She also has an advanced degree in technology and education from Harvard University.

Immediately enchanted, Greenfield contacted Taksler and told her about the raw material that should be the subject for their film.

At the conventions, which Greenfield attended in Burlington, Austin, and St.

Louis, she learned about the idiosyncrasies of the subculture. One such instance is the Christian ministry worship services that use balloon crosses, as well as balloon animals to illustrate biblical stories. "I was like, 'Hey, I'm Jewish. I'm not going to a gospel balloon service.' I still feel that way, that it's isolating to people who are not Christ-

ian," said Greenfield.

While there are not many Jewish families who participate in these conventions, Greenfield said she became close with the Beigels from New Jersey, who she met at a convention in Burlington.

"For years, we've affectionately referred to them as the 'Bagels,'" she said.

On Aug. 3, Greenfield's ballooning skills landed her a coveted spot on NBC's "Today Show."

In preparation for the segment, when co-host Al Roker asked her about her ballooning gigs, Greenfield spent eight hours sculpting Roker's likeness.

When the chauffeur arrived at the hotel in a 14-passenger SUV limo, he saw Greenfield standing solo. She recalled that the driver asked her if she was the only person heading to the studio. "I'm like, 'Yeah, it's just me and the seven

and a half foot tall Al Roker sculpture in the lobby,'" deadpanned Greenfield.

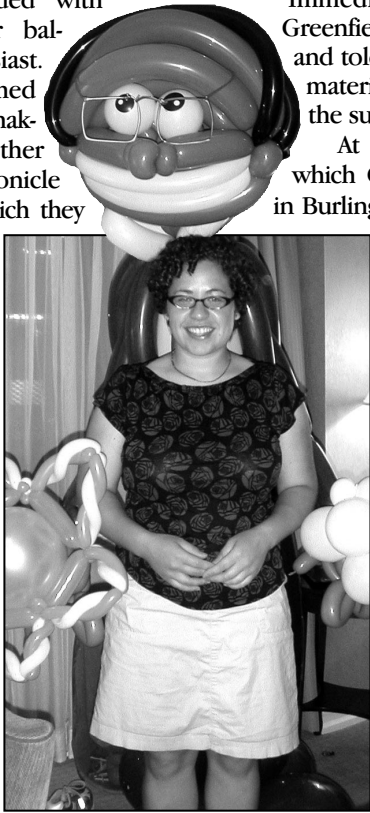
She also once surprised Paul McCartney with a balloon likeness of the musician at last year's Super Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla., where the former Beatle headlined the halftime show. Greenfield was in his trailer when he caught sight of her creation.

"He saw the sculpture, picked it up and said, 'Oh, look at that. It's brilliant,'" said Greenfield, affecting McCartney's brogue.

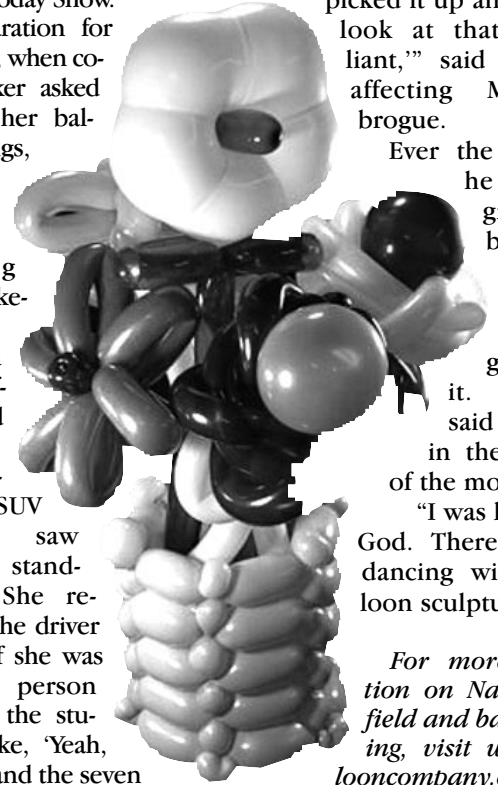
Ever the performer, he then grabbed the balloon sculpture and began playing air guitar with it. Greenfield said she reveled in the grandness of the moment.

"I was like, 'Oh my God. There's a Beatle dancing with my balloon sculpture.'"

For more information on Naomi Greenfield and balloon twisting, visit www.redballooncompany.com.



Naomi Greenfield with "Roker."



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