

Nancy goes above & beyond

During her visit to Sydney last week to address the UIA Women's Division, filmmaker Nancy Spielberg spoke with **Yael Brender** about her work, her brother Steven and her Jewish identity.

“YES, I'm one of *those* Spielbergs,” Nancy always says to people who enquire about her famous surname. She may be Steven Spielberg's little sister, but she is also an intelligent, brilliant filmmaker in her own right, with a variety of diverse projects under her belt and more in the pipeline.

Speaking publicly for the first time since her mother, Leah Adler, passed away last month aged 97, it is clear that the Spielberg siblings – Steve, Nancy and their sisters Anne and Sue – benefited from the guidance of a strong female presence.

“She was an adventurous soul, and she loved us and she let us thrive in whatever way we felt ourselves pulled,” Nancy said. “My dream was to be a storyteller. My mother figured if you want something, go after it. Get your dream.”

And the Spielberg siblings did just that. Steven became the highest-grossing director in history, Anne became a screenwriter who was nominated for an Academy Award for her work on the Tom Hanks film *Big*, Sue became a successful businesswoman, and Nancy is rising fast in the film industry.

“We all grew up naked and barefoot,” Nancy said of her childhood in Arizona. “We didn't have a rule book, which made life an adventure.”

One of their projects was to provide entertainment for the neighbourhood children. Steven would go to the local library and borrow films in a can, Nancy would string their parents' bed-sheet up on the washing line and the siblings would charge the children of the neighbourhood for tickets to their “cinema”.

When they weren't showing movies, they were making them, directed by Steven and starring his sisters and occasionally his mother, who also doubled as a crew member and allowed him to turn their house into a film set for weeks on end.

“Nobody said ‘no’ to Steven. I died a thousand deaths in his early films,” Nancy said. “It's every big brother's dream to kill his sister, and I just wanted to make him happy. Anything he's scared you with, he scared me with first. In one film, I think I was abducted by aliens.”

The neighbourhood where the Spielbergs grew up was hostile to them, with other children stealing their toys and taunting them,



From left: Sue, Anne, Nancy and Steven Spielberg with their father Arnold Spielberg (front).
Photo: Kim Fox

even though they weren't religious and didn't understand why they were being picked on.

“We were out the back frying bacon and cooking lobsters,” Nancy said. “The only time we remembered we were Jewish was when the neighbours reminded us, and called us dirty Jews ... It took me a long time to feel comfortable in my Jewish skin.”

But the Spielbergs didn't always take the abuse lying down. One night, Steven snuck out of the house and spread peanut butter on the windows of all the houses of families who had taunted them. In the 45-degree heat, it caked onto the glass and couldn't be removed. When one family came complaining, their mother said that none of the children were to blame, and then patted Steven on the shoulder and said quietly, “Way to go.”

Aged 18, Nancy moved to Los Angeles to attend UCLA (often called Jew-CLA), and it was “the beginning of the beginning” for her slowly evolving Jewish identity. She soon dropped out of college to live on Kibbutz Be'erot Yitzhak with her sister Sue, and later married Shimon Katz, a “nice Jewish boy” and the son of a rabbi.

“I raised two children and made sure that they had a Jewish education and they wouldn't suffer without a community the way I did. Thank God for that.”

ALONG with her connection to Judaism, Nancy's career was evolving, but she never stopped writing stories.

“I never wanted to be a filmmaker,” she said. “The bigger and more famous my brother became, the more frightened I got ... I was afraid of failing publicly. When your name is Spielberg, people are going to hold you up to that standard. And it kept me from going after my dream.”

She had plenty of experience working on films and scripts, but always from “a safe, dark corner” where nobody was going to point and say, “That's a Spielberg!”

But one morning, a stranger emailed her the obituary of Al Schwimmer, “the father of the Israeli air force”, and she was stunned to discover that an American pilot was credited with laying the groundwork for the Israeli air force.

“The story grabbed me by the kishkes and wouldn't let go,” Nancy said. After checking with Steve that he didn't have any similar projects planned – “it would be really stupid for me to go up against him!” – she reached out to director Roberta Grossman.

Grossman had recently won numerous awards in film festivals in the US, and was apparently feeling rather smug about it. She joked, “If Spielberg calls for me, tell him I'm busy.” So when Nancy called, Grossman assumed her staff were playing a joke on her. They finally connected, and became locked in a race against time to document the testimonies of the surviving pilots on camera.

“These were endangered interviews,” Nancy said. “They were in their 90s and we needed to get them on camera immediately. It [was] the most incredible experience. Meeting them and taking their stories to the public was the most gratifying thing I could do.”

Above and Beyond is required viewing for



Nancy Spielberg.



Nancy Spielberg (left) with Shimon Peres and Roberta Grossman. Photo: courtesy Nancy Spielberg

every Israeli air force pilot now and in the future. Steven called her to tell her the film had brought him to tears. Its success opened doors and thrust Nancy into a film career whether she wanted one or not.

Her next project *On The Map* followed quickly, a feel-good story about the 1977 Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball team that prevailed against a number of European teams, including a Russian outfit who refused to recognise Israel's right to exist and repeatedly refused to compete against Israeli teams.

“This is the perfect film to share with our younger generation,” Nancy said. “Children don't really like to read books anymore. They need visual aids, and they need stories like these.”

Nancy's current project, *Who Will Write Our History*, focuses on the “Oyneg Shabes”, the secret, buried archives of the Warsaw Ghetto. When the residents of the ghetto realised they probably wouldn't survive the war, Emanuel Ringelblum collected and buried 30,000 pages of testimony in milk cans and tin boxes.

“They wanted someone to dig up the buried treasure and shout the truth to the world, so that the Germans would not be rewriting the history and so that these peoples' lives would not have been in vain,” explained Nancy, who is once again working with Grossman.

She recently returned from filming in Poland, with a complete re-creation of the Warsaw Ghetto and 150 actors and extras. One day, she was approached by a woman holding her daughter's hand.

“We're Jewish,” the mother said to me. ‘And my mother lived in the Warsaw Ghetto. And now here is her granddaughter in your film.’ That that really did me in,” Nancy was almost in tears as she recalled the story. “These are the



Screenshot from *Above and Beyond*. Photo: YouTube

kinds of films we want to get into schools and universities. I want to tell stories so that they cannot be lost.”

If you've noticed a theme running through Nancy's films, then there's a good reason – she has absolutely no time for people pushing an anti-Israel agenda.

“I flip my middle finger at them,” she said. “We need to figure out how to battle [anti-Israel propaganda] properly, and the films and documentaries I'm doing now are a part of that ... We should be there for Israel and support Israel because it is our homeland.”

After a whirlwind first-time trip Down Under, Nancy leaves Australia next week to return to post-production work on *Who Will Write Our History*, which is slated for release in January 2018. Her only regret is not having enough time to take a selfie with a quokka.

For more information on Nancy Spielberg's work visit www.playmountproductions.com.

Watch the *On The Map* trailer
Available on the iPad & desktop apps