My room is an “artist’s room”—which is just a nice way of saying it’s a big mess. There are always scraps of paper, inkless pens, and bent staples waiting to be twisted and constructed into a sculpture of sorts. A whale, maybe, or perhaps a sheep? All these useless items can spark a creative flame.

That’s how I began experimenting with stop-motion animation. On a boring Saturday morning in March 2009, I looked around my extremely artistic room, picked up a camera and an eraser, and brought to life the next chapter in my life.
Objects on the Move

Stop-motion animation is a niche of traditional animation in which you take individual pictures of any objects you choose, moving the objects in tiny increments after each picture. Once the hundreds of pictures are strung together and played through at the speed of a normal film reel, the illusion of movement is created. These are the basics of animation, which you can easily find on Wikipedia, in several tutorials on YouTube, or in articles by other animators.

I didn’t start by studying the basics—although that might have been much simpler.

Instead, I looked to the morning newspaper’s comics, noticing how, if you shoot your eyes back and forth rapidly between the squares of a strip, the characters seem to move. I thought of a recent physics lesson in school about the laws of acceleration and velocity; I thought about a diagram in my textbook in which pictures of a golf ball falling, taken at even increments of time, were superimposed into one diagram to show the distance covered at each time interval as the velocity increased. All this science and math jumped from the left hemisphere of my brain to the right and guided me through my first animation.

I used my rudimentary digital camera, balanced perilously on a makeshift tripod on my desk, and my kneadable eraser, an arts-and-crafts tool with the malleability of clay and generally used to get into the tight details of a drawing. I decided to document the individual steps of how I molded this eraser into a turtle, of the turtle interacting with a small toy palm tree, and of the turtle transforming into other creatures. I never thought to myself, “I am animating.” I just did it. This was new for me, a perfectionist who would stare for hours at a blank canvas thinking about what my artwork would look like and what it would mean in the end. With this first animated short, Eraser Critters, I thought nothing of the final product, of its implications for my life, of whether other 16-year-olds did this with their time when homework was done and the weekend was free.

After three months of alternating episodes of motivation and impatience, I thought of the idea that the eraser was actually transforming into the things it was erasing. I used Windows Movie Maker, a program not generally used for animations, to piece together my very choppy, 4 fps (frames per second) film and saved it to a Bon Iver song with a similar rhythm and duration. When I watched this first animation with my family by my side, I thought, “I’ve created something much bigger than a Lego castle this time.” I was looking into my future.
Getting Noticed

Animation took over my life. I upgraded to a fancier camera, a real tripod, and a smoother 10 fps frame rate thanks to an updated version of Windows Movie Maker. I completed my second short, Obsessive Compulsive, a year after I’d begun animating. This film was sparked by the discovery of a Belgian stop-motion film called A Town Called Panic ... and an advertisement on the film’s website for a stop-motion contest. I worked on my animation for about a hundred hours in one week to meet the contest deadline. Two weeks later I received the e-mail notifying me that the filmmakers of A Town Called Panic had picked my animation as the Grand Prize winner.

For my next project, I tried a new style of animating, just to switch things up: I turned to cut-out animation for a YouTube competition for musician Kate Nash. I used staples as joints for my paper characters and colored everything with Sharpies and colored pencils as though I was in elementary school again. My resulting music video, Kiss That Grrrl, was chosen as the winner, and suddenly countries like Germany and Croatia and Thailand showed up in the details of my YouTube video counts. Any insecurity I had about my homemade videos not being professional enough was replaced by an eagerness to tackle stop-motion animation in new ways.

Soon after, I finished Being, a reworking of Eraser Critters with original music composed by my friend Sydney Everatt and with more elaborate animating techniques, including a difficult-to-orchestrate interaction between clay-mation and drawn animation. Wanting to say something deeper with this film, I expanded on the idea of the eraser absorbing and transforming into the drawings. I realized that the eraser’s journey was a parallel to the human experience with external influences, as we take in what we see and encounter around us; it also illustrates the difficulty of understanding what and how to be in life when all these thoughts and ways of life reside inside us.

Being took about 200 hours distributed over a very stressful month to complete. When it was finished, I thought I could’ve made the theme clearer. I worried that the visuals were boring and that it was more cute than impactful. When I entered it into a scholarship competition, I was not ranked even in the top 20. Although I hadn’t been fully satisfied with the film, this was a real blow to my confidence. But I had also submitted Being to some other programs—The National Film Festival for Talented Youth (NFFTY), NFAA’s YoungArts program, and the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards—and they have given me recognition beyond anything I could have hoped for. They encouraged me to keep trying.

The Irresistible Challenge

Sometimes there just isn’t enough time between school and clubs and college preparations to stop and animate. And sometimes animating itself gets tough. When you work with such tiny objects and sets, your eyes hurt from squinting at little characters in the limited lighting, your back hurts from hunching over sets, and then...
things fall over every time you move your monstrous hand. Patience wanes as the pictures reach the thousands and sleep becomes a foreign concept. There’s a lot of pacing around the room shouting angrily at the camera, “Why won’t you focus?!” And worse than that: sometimes, after days of work on a few seconds of animation, you notice one place where something went wrong—whether a messed-up frame, a nudge to the tripod, or a loss of direction with the story—and everything must begin all over again.

But the wonderment of holding that playback button on the camera and watching the objects in front of you come to life completely outweighs the difficulties. It’s all worth it when you see the final product and realize that you’ve created art. From the story within you, you have created something magical.

On a whim, I spent hours on a trek through Wikipedia the other day, learning the history of animation, the different styles and techniques, the top contributions to this art form. When I start college this fall, I’ll major in animation and take courses on all these topics. Until then, my makeshift lighting rig, unprofessional equipment, and limited editing skills offer plenty of chances to learn. When things go wrong, when I’m clueless, when I don’t have the tools I need, I have the chance to be creative and find solutions. I get to discover the physics of animation on my own and understand the art form that much more.

I used to have daydreams of being a movie star, as every child does. But the power of dreaming is not that everything you wish for will magically come true; the real power lies in shaping your dreams to fit your strengths and your passions. I was never going to come close to being a movie star. I wasn’t going to be a musician. I tried to be a writer in middle school, and then a filmmaker. Above all, I wanted to do something more with my childhood than get straight As and hang out at the shopping center every weekend. And I managed to, in the end. By following my curiosity—by making something of my “artistic” room and absentmindedly trying animating—I found the very door I was looking for.

Isabela Dos Santos was born in Brazil, moved to Mexico at the age of five, and now resides in South Florida. Since falling in love with animation when she was 16, Isabela has received a Silver Award in Cinematic Arts from NFAA’s YoungArts program, a National Gold Medal from the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, and official selection for NFFTY 2011, and she was recently named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts. Meanwhile, she continues to study, take dance classes, soak up movies and music, and ponder the meaning of life. Isabela will attend the California Institute of the Arts in the fall to study Experimental Animation.

See some of Isabela’s animations at http://vimeo.com/beladossantos.

Isabela’s short film Obsessive Compulsive tells the story of a llama with OCD. She created this film for a stop-motion contest for the film A Town Called Panic. The grand prize winner, Obsessive Compulsive is included on the DVD of that film.