

Kids behind the camera get to show their work



RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS

Surrounded by posters, Shelby Rachleff, 13, of Portola Valley works on plans for her Windy Hill Kids Film Festival.

TEEN'S FESTIVAL GIVES YOUNG FILMMAKERS A VENUE

By S.L. Wykes
Mercury News

Shelby Rachleff offers a firm handshake, looks you in the eye when she speaks and wants to collect an Academy Award some day for a film she will produce.

Until then, she's decided to organize a film festival. Just for kids. And, because she's 13, chocolate chip cookies — not espressos — fuel her long rounds of phone calls, e-mails and arrangement-making.

ATHERTON

True to other Silicon Valley start-ups, her room is a total disaster and she's working with a business plan mandated by her venture capitalist father.

On April 9, her Windy Hill Kids Film Festival will showcase the work of young Bay Area filmmakers, some of whom might be "the next Steven Spielberg and Rob Reiner," Shelby said. No big prizes here — Shelby wanted kids to have a non-threatening venue to share their work. "The focus will not be on winning."

The Windy Hill festival's participants, with fourth-graders through high-schoolers welcome, are part of a growing number of

young people who are using visuals to tell their stories.

With digital camcorders down in price and movie-making software up in sophistication, kids are making more documentaries, narrative stories and music videos, said Tom Gertsch, writer/producer of the Young Filmmakers Club video instruction series.

"In the '90s, people would say, 'I'm shooting videos,'" he said. "Now people are using the phrase, 'I'm shooting digital.'"

Film festival organizers and film educators say they are seeing a steady increase in the number of films made by children. "It's a way for them to create something of their own instead of being forced to accept this image of them the media portrays," said Kasia Iverson of the Chicago International Children's Film Festival. "They can show they have a voice and that it matters."

In its 23rd year, the Chicago festival draws entrants from all over the world. Almost 25,000 people attended last year — and more than 200 of them were film professionals, media buyers and film distributors there to shop for films, Iverson said.

Shelby's festival, in its first year, will be

FOR YOUNG FILMMAKERS

To enter: The first Windy Hill Kids Film Festival is accepting films in several categories — drama, comedy, documentary, instructional, animation and music video. Films can be no longer than 20 minutes. All entries must be received in DVD format. All films must be PG-13 or below and all entries will be shown. Students in grades four through 12 are eligible.

Where to send films: Entries must be postmarked by March 21 to Windy Hill Kids Film Festival, c/o JoAnn Loulan, 151 Los Trancos Circle, Portola Valley, Calif. 94028

For more info: E-mail windyhillfilmfest@yahoo.com or call (650) 851-5778.

community a better vocabulary to do something besides yell at each other."

— NANCY LIPPE, A COMMUNITY FOUNDATION BOARD MEMBER

Accord sought on charter school

DISTRICT, PARENTS SEEK UNDERSTANDING

By Katherine Corcoran
Mercury News

In Los Altos, a community divided by the formation of a charter elementary school, nearly 70 people gave a sunny afternoon Sunday try to reach some understanding of the contentious issue.

The Los Altos Community Foundation, which sponsored the education forum, led a broad and cordial discussion that didn't dissolve into shouting match over the Bullis Charter School. Parents walked away with ideas on how to bring the Los Altos School District and Bullis

LOS ALTOS

ents and staff back to amicable grounds.

"The charter school and district need to figure a way to work together," Nancy Lippe, a community foundation board member and a former Bullis parent, said. "We want to put what's happened here in a broader context and give the community a better vocabulary to do something besides yell at each other."

The charter school issue exploded after school members voted in 2001 to save money by closing Purissima Elementary School, the district's school in Los Altos. When parents united to form a charter school, the district did not give them the school site, but rather

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held at Menlo School in Atherton, where she is a seventh-grader. Straight A's, volleyball, skiing and tennis are on her list of accomplishments, but film is her great love.

She took a class in Web design a couple of years ago and followed it up with a digital filmmaking class last summer. Learning more about what goes into making a film, she said, "made it more magical."

Then came last year, when the Rachleff family attended the Telluride Film Festival. Family friend JoAnn Loulan and Shelby were the compulsive ones. They strategized about how to see as many films as possible. That meant some 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. days, Loulan said, and some films that Shelby's mother, Debbie Rachleff, wasn't too sure her young daughter should be seeing.

Somewhere along the way, Shelby suddenly said, "I could do a film festival!" her mother recalled. Her father, Benchmark Capital's Andrew Rachleff, provided \$1,000 in seed money. Loulan has helped Shelby contact about 90 schools across the Bay Area. Shelby asked a Menlo School friend to design a logo for the festival poster.

They've received more than a dozen entries so far, with the promise of more. Shelby is eager to have as many as possible. She's hoping to finish her own — a short about a ski trip — and seems to be dreading an entry her little brother and his friends are working on.

Eliot Lash and Neyht Barker,

both 16, sent Shelby a copy of "The Belmont Bridge Project," a film commissioned by the Belmont City Planning Department about the need for a Highway 101 overcrossing for pedestrians.

The two Carlmont High School juniors already have years of filmmaking behind them and they know what they want — they worked on a seven-minute anti-war film called "Expendable" for four years.

Eliot wants to be a film editor; Neyht a director, and their college plans are forming accordingly. But "my mom wants me to minor in something like business so I can support myself," Neyht said.

Another entry came from Sacred Heart Prep School senior Alexander Becker, who traveled to East Los Angeles on a school project to visit Homeboy Industries, a resource and job center for gang members founded by the Rev. Greg Boyle. The film ends with a compelling story of two friends, one who managed to change his life, the other who did not.

What Shelby's festival does, said Gertsch of the Young Filmmakers Club, is offer a very important part of the filmmaking process — an audience. "When you hear the oohs and the ahhs and the uhhs, when you feel what's right and wrong with your film . . . as opposed to a letter grade that's simply arbitrary

FESTIVAL DETAILS

To see the films: The festival is 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. April 9. Menlo School, Middle School Commons, 50 Valparaiso Ave., Atherton. Filmmakers and their parents will be admitted free. Tickets for all others, \$5.

Special guest: Gardner Loulan, who grew up in Portola Valley and, while a student at Fordham University in New York City, made a film that spoofed the MTV awards. A few weeks later, MTV hired him as a veejay for mtvU, programming for college-only broadcast. He will be a judge and will conduct two short workshops (grades 4-7 then grades 8-12) for filmmakers.

Workshops: An additional \$10, but no one will be turned away for lack of funds.

based on a set of requisites, there is real learning potential to that," he said.

Finding an audience is the final piece of that process, Gertsch said. "Everyone worries about getting the movie in the can. The person who makes a movie and gets people to see it is the true filmmaker."

No matter the age.

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